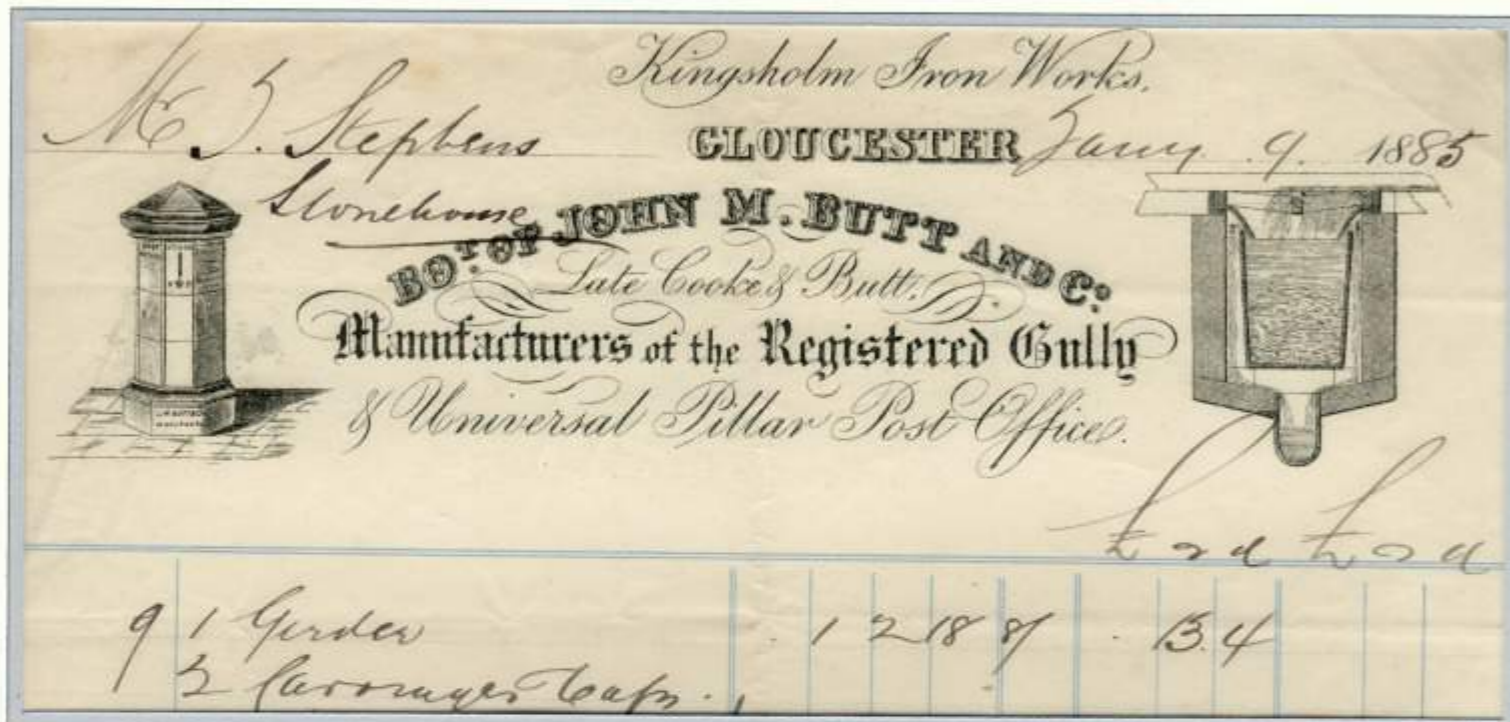


PILLARS OF THE COMMUNITY

The evolution of the British pillar box in the reign of Queen Victoria

INTRODUCTION

For over a century and a half, the pillar box has been a distinctive, practical and extremely popular feature on the streets of Great Britain. This exhibit explores how the first pillar boxes came to be introduced, then follows their evolution until the ideal designs were arrived at towards the end of Queen Victoria's reign. These designs have remained standard up to the present day, and have also been used in locations across the globe.



PLAN

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Invoice, dated 9th January 1885, featuring an illustration of a stylised octagonal pillar box and the words 'Manufacturers of the Registered Gully & Universal Pillar Post Office'. Though the firm had lost the contract 28 years earlier, John M Butt & Company were still proud of the fact that they used to supply pillar boxes for the Gloucester, Western and Southern Districts.

Key references

- The Letter Box*
Jean Farrugia
Centaur Press 1969
- Pillar Boxes*
Jonathan Glancey
Chatto & Windus Ltd 1989
- The Guide to British Letter Boxes*
Section One: Victoria Pillar Boxes
W E Cox, C J Williams, A W Young
The Letter Box Study Group 2007-2011

Font used

Thematic information is in regular font, 11 point.
Philatelic information is in italic font, 10 point.

1. BEFORE THE PILLAR BOX

1.1 Reasons behind the lack of pillar boxes

Before 1839 postage was usually paid on the delivery of a letter. Items were therefore unpaid freight, which the Post Office wanted to keep as secure as possible. With mail volumes low due to the high prices charged, and no budget for staff to clear the boxes, the postal authorities were reluctant to install letter boxes away from post offices.



From 1814 every post office was obliged to have a letter box on the outside for posting unpaid letters, though some were installed before this date.



Entire posted unpaid from Belfast to Glenarm on 4th January 1819, charged 5d., the rate for a distance of between 25 and 35 Irish miles. The cover bears a Belfast mileage date-stamp and 'Too Late' handstamp, as it missed the evening mail despatch.



Some post offices and receiving houses in London had letter boxes where a lion's mouth was carved as the posting aperture.



The closest thing to roadside letter boxes were the Bellmen, who walked the streets of London for one hour each evening, ringing a bell and accepting letters into a locked bag for a fee of one penny. Letters were then carried to the General Post Office in mail carts.



Outside London, equipment was changed to meet local needs: e.g. using a basket instead of a bag in Ware, and blowing a horn in Morley instead of ringing a bell.



Normal



Error: overprint offset

1.2 Creating the need for pillar boxes



Rowland Hill's postal reforms culminated in the adoption of the Universal Penny Post on 10th January 1840. The low postage rates meant that everyone could now afford to send a letter, and usage soared.



To obtain the penny rate, postage had to be pre-paid by the sender. The only way to do this was by taking the letter to a post office, meaning pillar boxes sited away from post offices were still not a viable proposition.



Wrapper sent from Derry to Dublin on 24th March 1840, with a 'Paid at Derry / 1d' handstamp on the front and an additional square 'Paid' mark of Dublin dated 25th March.

This changed when stamps and postal stationery were introduced from 6th May 1840. The public could now buy these items in advance, meaning only one visit to a post office was now required. Pillar boxes sited away from post offices for the public to post their letters were now something worth considering.



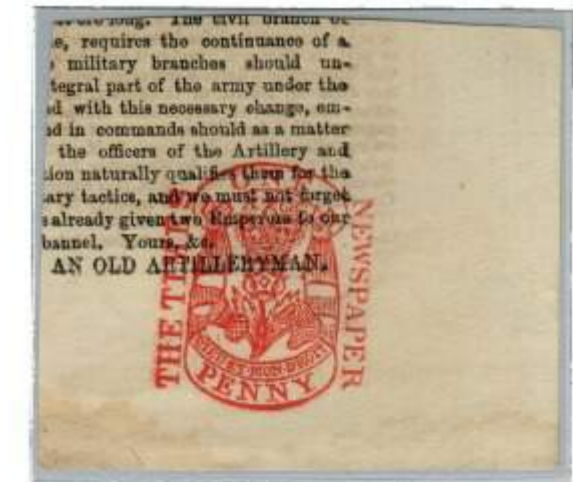
Mulready letter sheet sent from Grimsby on 6th July 1840, with a London backstamp of 7th July.



In late 1849, after seeing a letter in The Times, Rowland Hill proposed an experiment with a view to placing boxes throughout London. However, Hill's huge workload associated with the new postal system meant no further action was taken.



1.3 Originator of the pillar box



Newspaper Duty stamp applied to The Times. The stamp qualified the newspaper for free postage.



Several members of the public suggested the introduction of pillar boxes, based on their travels in mainland Europe: some European countries had roadside letter boxes long before they were introduced to Britain, for example, France erected its first boxes as early as 1653.



'L' mark applied to a wrapper sent from Sains to Vermins on 20th March 1852. Letter boxes in France contained an identification stamp, applied by the collecting postman.

However, the person universally credited as the originator of the pillar box in Great Britain is Anthony Trollope, better known as a novelist, but who also worked for the Post Office for 32 years.



2. THE TRIAL IN THE CHANNEL ISLANDS

2.1 Trollope's plan



Bottom sheet margin with descriptive text

In his role as a Western District Surveyor's Clerk, Anthony Trollope was sent to Jersey for twenty days in November 1851 to improve postal services there. Trollope suggested the use of pillar boxes to save the public walking to the main post office to post a letter.



Trollope was aware of pillar boxes being in use in France and obtained permission from the Jersey authorities for four pillar boxes to be erected in St Helier.



Trollope also proposed pillar boxes for Guernsey.



A drawing was produced and John Vaudin, a local iron founder and blacksmith, was commissioned to make the pillar boxes.



The three rear panels each carried a cast cipher and royal arms. The arms are not those of Queen Victoria; they date from the reign of George III.



2.2 Introduction in Jersey and Guernsey



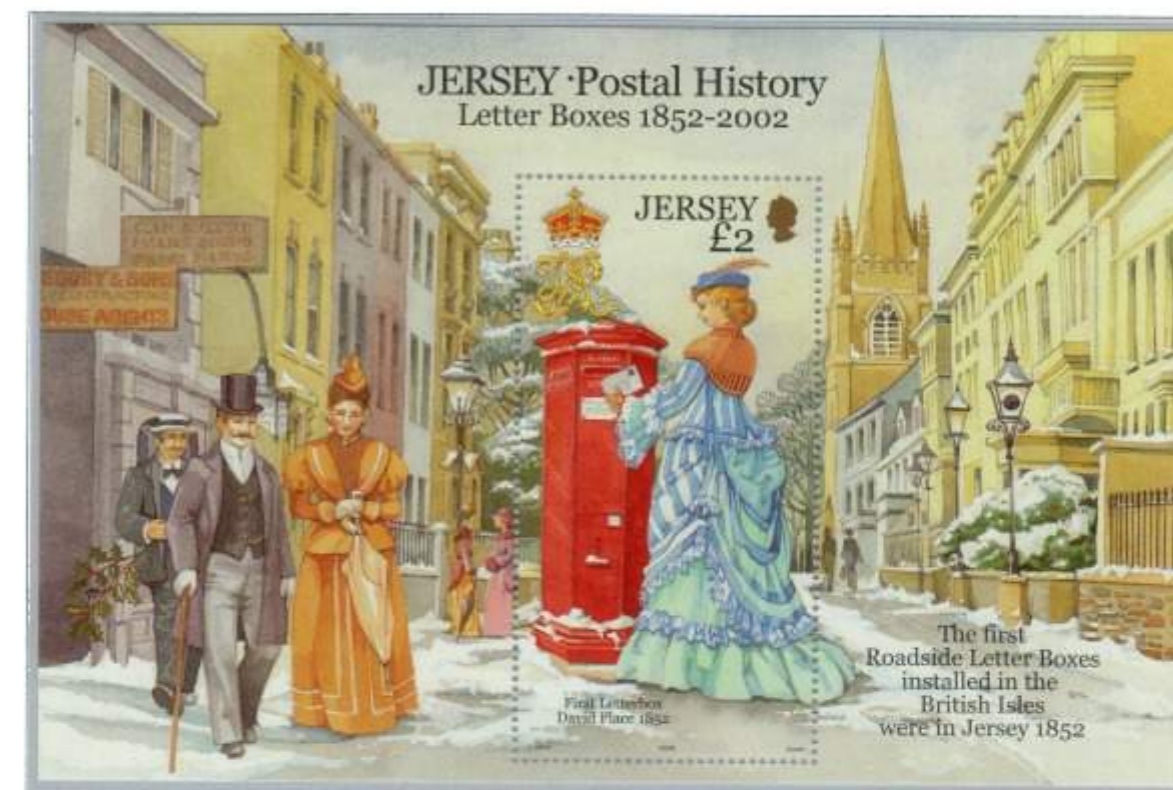
Reverse: granite paper (marginal pair)



Front

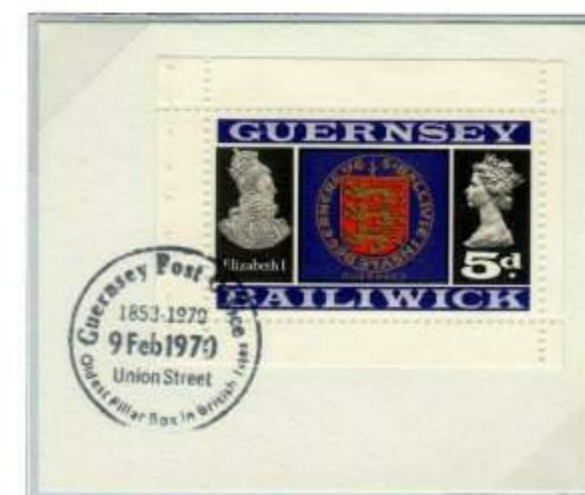
In October 1852 blocks of granite were installed to act as bases for the new pillar boxes.

Painted red, the pillar boxes were opened to the public at four sites in St Helier in November 1852.



Guernsey opened six pillar boxes on 8th February 1853, including 'No. 1' at Union Street and others at Hauteville and Elm Grove.

Whilst none of the original Jersey boxes survive, the one in Union Street, Guernsey is still in use at its original site, the oldest working pillar box in the British Isles. It has become a tourist attraction on the island!



8 stamps
£1.92
UK rate

3. NON-STANDARD PILLAR BOXES

The Postmaster of Jersey reported to London that the experiment had been a success. It was decided therefore to extend pillar boxes to the mainland.



In 1854 Square boxes by Ashworth of Burnley were used in the Northern District and also by Trollope when he became a Surveyor in the north of Ireland.



3.1 Extension of the scheme to the mainland

The first pillar box on the mainland, made by Abbott & Co., was opened at Botchergate, Carlisle in September 1853.



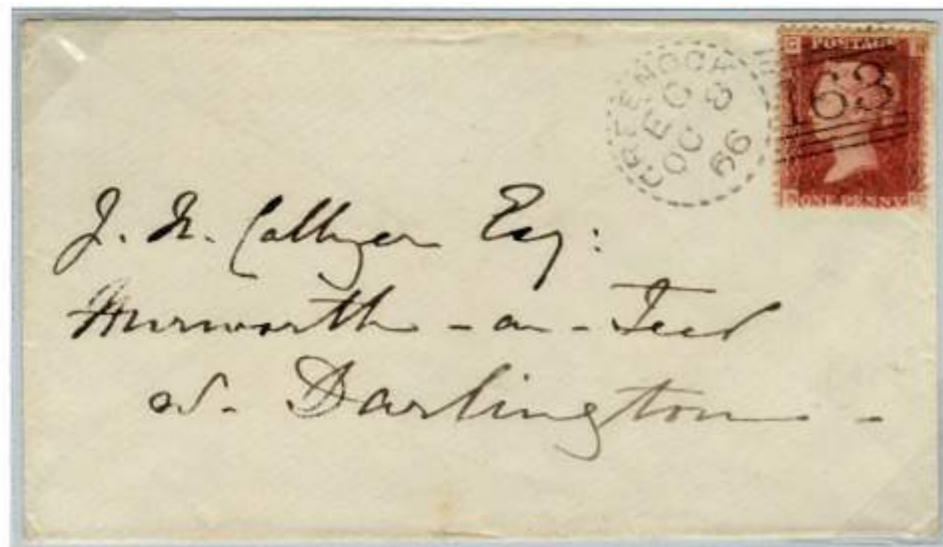
The Gloucester, Western and Southern Districts used octagonal boxes cast by John M Butt of Gloucester from December 1853.



Liverpool's first pillar boxes, with gas lamps on top, were supplied locally by Bennett's Foundry in 1854.



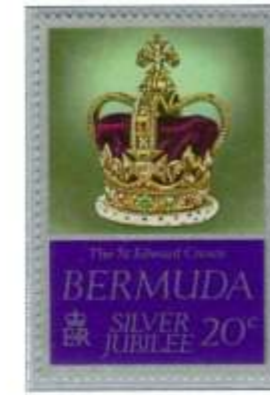
Christmas day postmark



Cover posted in Greenock bearing a dotted circle duplex postmark. These postmarks were only applied to letters posted in pillar boxes.

The first boxes in Scotland were supplied by Suttie & Co. of Greenock in 1856; they were later exported to India.

3.2 Fluted pillar boxes



In 1855 the Birmingham District Surveyor ordered three pillar boxes in a fluted design from Smith & Hawkes, a local foundry. Due to an error, the boxes were cast eight feet tall, with a vertical aperture and a large crown on top.



One box was sent to London to be viewed by the Postmaster General. It was erected at London Bridge.



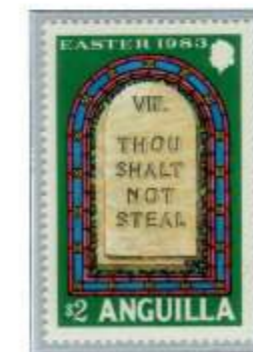
In 1856 the design was corrected, now forming a doric column with a simple cone replacing the former large crown. A distinctive gothic 'VR' cipher was placed between the two bands above the aperture.



The Southern District Surveyor began to use Fluted boxes in his area; one example is still in use at Eton.



In 1857 the aperture was changed from horizontal to vertical as it was believed this made it harder for thieves to steal items from the boxes.



London had a large network of receiving houses, dating back to the London Penny Post. This negated the need for pillar boxes in the capital.



London Twopenny Post cover posted at the Aylesbury Street receiving house on 4th March 1839, with '3' charge mark, as the destination was Isleworth in the 'country' area, which cost 1d. more.



In 1854 Rowland Hill, the newly appointed Secretary to the Post Office, proposed pillar boxes to reduce the cost of receiving houses in London. Hill asked about the design of boxes in Paris, but preferred a rectangular design.

In April 1855 six pillar boxes, cast by H & M D Grissell of Hoxton, were opened at six locations in central London; 'No. 1' was located in Fleet Street. The boxes had a sloping roof with a large ball on the top.



Normal



Error: miscut



The Postmaster General directed Hill to include the distance from the General Post Office in St Martins-le-Grand on each box.



3.3 London's first pillar boxes

4. NATIONAL STANDARDISATION

Londoners hated the new pillar boxes; the press lampooned the boxes, likening them to stoves. In 1856 the Department of Science & Art, created after the 1851 Great Exhibition, was asked to produce a new design.



The design was cylindrical with a hexagonal base, and featured elaborate mouldings of lions' heads, thistles, daffodils, shamrocks and roses (the flowers of the home nations). The boxes were made by Smith & Hawkes and painted bronze.



Coil strip with plate number 1122 on middle stamp



Other innovative features included a compass tile set into the cap and a separate frame, holding the collection plate, attached to the nearest lamp post.



For the rest of the country, the 'Ornate' box, but without the ornamentation, was introduced. Only one example remains in use, at Kent Railway Station in Cork.



The new boxes opened in 1857. Although primarily for London use, some 'Ornate' pillar boxes were deployed in large cities like Manchester. This was the beginning of the move towards full national standardisation. The standard colour became green.

4.2 First national standard and objections

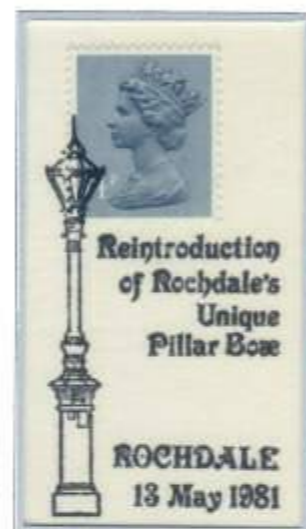
The 'Ornate' and 'Economy Ornate' pillar boxes were too small for large cities like Liverpool, where, unlike London, newspapers as well as letters could be posted. Policemen had to be deployed to stand by overflowing boxes.



A new style box was trialled in the city in 1858, but local children stole items from it so it was swiftly removed.



In 1859 an improved design, cast by Cochrane & Co. of Dudley was introduced, to be used across the country and available in large and small sizes, for city and provincial use. The small version in use in Rochdale was surmounted by a lamp post.



Even the large version of the new box was not big enough for the Postmaster of Liverpool. In 1863, after a long battle with the postal authorities, seven extra-large pillar boxes were made by Cochrane for use in the city.



The handstamp on the left was intended to be used as a special cancellation. The correct notice period was not given to the public however, so it could only be used as a cachet.

The 'Liverpool Specials' featured rope bands and a large crown on top.



Specimen

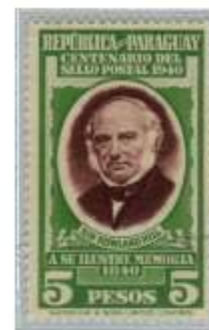


Proof



4.3 Penfold pillar boxes

Sir Rowland Hill retired in 1864 and was replaced as Secretary by John Tilley.



Tilley favoured a hexagonal shape for future pillar boxes.



J W Penfold, an architect, was asked to prepare some designs. He was inspired by the classical Tower of the Winds in Athens, a water tower adorned with the wind deities, and the Temple of the Winds at Mount Stewart, in northern Ireland.



Penfold's design included the royal arms and a cap decorated with acanthus leaves, surmounted by an acanthus bud.

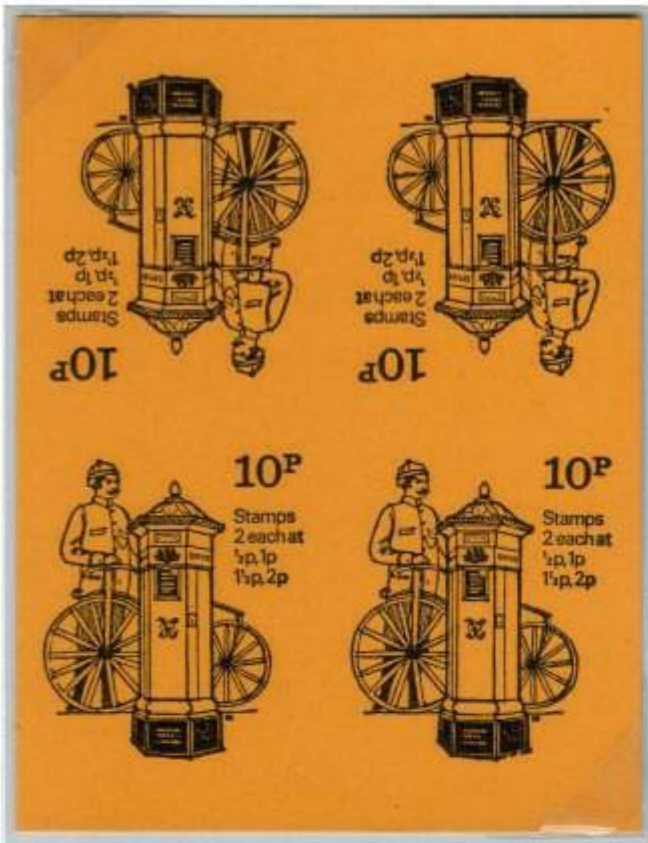


In an effort to please everyone, three sizes were cast by Cochrane & Co.: Type A, large; Type B, small; and Type C, medium.



Royal Mail 'SmartStamp' 2nd class postage paid imprint

4.3 Penfold pillar boxes



Printer's proof of front cover (lête-bêche block of four).



Issued booklet

The Penfold pillar box underwent some design changes during its 13 year production run from 1866 to 1879: the original specification had the aperture above the coat-of-arms.



Because letters were becoming trapped, it was decided to lower the aperture, changing places with the royal arms. In 1874 the colour was changed from green to red.



The final design change saw the cipher moved up the box, changing places with the notice holder. The public had to stoop to view the collection times!



Original Penfold pillar boxes are still in use today, but since 1988 a modern cast-iron reproduction has also been produced for conservation areas and tourist attractions.

Booklet pane from GB 2009 'Treasures of the Archive' prestige stamp booklet. The stamps show wall and lamp boxes, but that is another story!

5. LATE VICTORIAN PILLAR BOXES

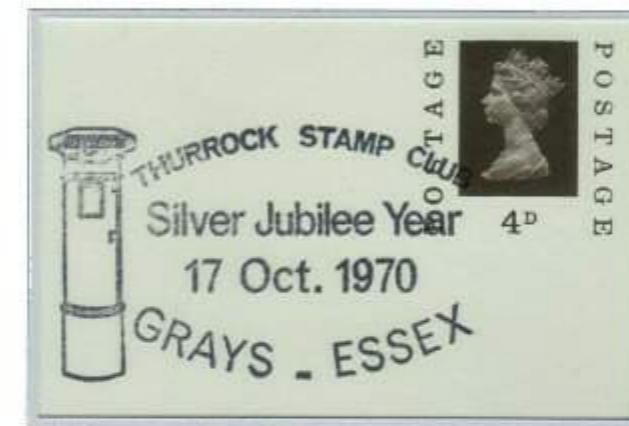


'O.W.' = Office of Works

In 1874 the lower price of coal and the improved iron trade led John Tilley to ask the Office of Works, a government body, to seek fresh tenders for the manufacture of pillar boxes.



The Office of Works reverted to a plain, cylindrical design, as it was much cheaper to make. In 1879 the firm of Andrew Handyside produced two sizes. The aperture was placed under the cap to keep the elements at bay.



In 1883 the aperture position was lowered because letters were becoming trapped in the top of the boxes.



In 1887 the Secretary was asked if the omission of a cipher or the words 'Post Office' was intentional.



It was an oversight, so the Secretary ordered the cipher, etc. should appear on all future castings.

The 'VR' pillar boxes, in two sizes, remained in use until the end of Victoria's reign in 1901.

As letters were getting larger it was decided to enlarge the design of the aperture in 1900.



5.2 Introduction of dual aperture pillar boxes

The idea of a multi-aperture pillar box was first submitted in 1857, when Rowland Hill divided the capital into ten separate postal districts. The box, based on the 'Ornate', had a slot for each district. It was never adopted.



Entire sent within the Western Central District on 19th January 1859; the stamp has been cancelled by a 'WC 1' obliterator. The sender has included the postal district in the address.



Years later, in 1896, a postal official of the EC District suggested dual aperture pillars with compartments for 'London' and 'Country' letters.

A successful experiment was conducted with two wall-mounted boxes placed side by side in Telegraph Street.



Oval boxes, cast by Handyside's, with the 'VR' cipher on both ends, were distributed from 1899.

Anthony Trollope, the novelist, suggested the introduction of pillar boxes for mail collection. Two types shown here date from 1866 and 1899 respectively.

Selection from the three series of definitive stamps used in Ireland 1922 to date.

Interleaf from 1990 'Ireland's Postage: a History' prestige booklet.

only issued in 1937 and the British overprints were no longer required. This first series of definitive stamps remained in use until 1968. It was replaced by a set of stamps featuring four designs based on motifs from early Irish Christian Art. This series spanned the decimalisation of Irish currency with only one minor change. The designation "P" for (pighin or penny) was removed from the stamps.

In 1982 the third series on a theme of Irish Architecture through the Ages was launched and the 9 designs in this set featured some of the best known buildings of Ireland from St. MacDara's Church to Busaras in Dublin.

In 1990 the 150th Anniversary of the Penny Black stamp, the fourth set of definitive stamps, was issued. This set treats the theme Irish Heritage and Treasures. The majority of the items featured are from the Collections in the National Museum of Ireland. Many beautiful and delicate pieces from various periods are shown, such as the Brighter Collar, Ardagh Chalice, and Lismore Crozier.

Stamps designed as simple prepaid receipts for postage first became symbols of nationhood and then developed other uses such as recognising famous events and persons. In 1929 the Irish State issued their first Commemorative stamps on the centenary of Catholic Emancipation. The stamp showed a portrait of Daniel O'Connell, the man

6. LEGACY OF THE VICTORIAN PILLAR BOX



The three sizes of pillar box in use at the end of Queen Victoria's reign have remained standard through subsequent reigns, to the present day. They have been exported to areas of British influence across the world.



Some foreign countries with no links to Britain have also adopted the British style of pillar box, sometimes even copying the red colour scheme.

The cylindrical pillar box has become such an iconic item, asked to imagine or draw a pillar box, most people would come up with an identical response: a black base with a red body, topped off by a cap.

25x2ND Children's Christmas Royal Mail

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240mm Long; 165mm Wide;
5mm Thick; 100g Weight.

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Great Britain 2013 25 x 2nd class Christmas stamp sheet; the only way these stamps were sold to the public.