

Royal Mail Post Boxes: A Joint Policy Statement by Royal Mail and Department for Communities

Historic Environment Division





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**FRONT COVER IMAGE:** Grade 'A' listed 'VR' pillar box, Derryvolgie Avenue, Belfast

## Contents

1.	Introduction	4
	Post Boxes – A brief history	
3.	Policy Guidance	15
4.	Listing	16
5.	DfC HED and Royal Mail memorandum of Understanding	20
6.	Further Reading	29
7.	Online Resources	30
8.	Further Information	31

## Introduction

Royal Mail post boxes are a cherished feature of Northern Ireland's streetscape. As well as being in daily operational use for an essential public service, they are national treasures.

Currently there are nearly two and half thousand post boxes in Northern Ireland and 115,500 across the UK as a whole. In Northern Ireland, a small number are listed. Post boxes make a significant contribution to the character and appearance of the areas in which they are located. After consultation with the Letter Box Study Group (LBSG), Department for Communities Historic Environment Division (DfC HED) and Royal Mail have decided to agree a joint policy for the retention and conservation of post boxes which may be of special architectural or historic interest and merit listing. Many post boxes are now regarded as 'undesignated heritage assets' and a small number of the oldest and rarest have been listed as structures of special architectural and historic interest.

The Government's Strategic Planning Policy Statement for Northern Ireland, stresses the desirability of retaining undesignated heritage assets where appropriate. The intention of this document is to move towards managing undesignated heritage assets by agreement between Royal Mail and DFC Historic Environment Division. This document sets out how Royal Mail and the Department intend to do this.



Iconic 'piecrust' flutes feature at the top of pillar boxes to aid water run-off

# 2

## Post Boxes - A brief history

The roadside post box was introduced in Britain following the 1840 postal reform which provided for universal affordable postage. New adhesive stamps made pre-payment of postage easy. However, letters usually had to be taken to the nearest letter-receiving office which could have been miles away. This, together with the growth in demand for postal services linked to industrialisation and urbanisation, led to the need for many more convenient places where stamped letters could be deposited. The novelist Anthony Trollope, a General Post Office (GPO) official sent to Jersey to make recommendations, provided a solution.

He adopted a system, pioneered on the Continent, of placing locked cast-iron pillar boxes at the roadside and the provisionof regular collection times. His scheme began in the Channel Islands in 1852 and was extended to England in 1853.

Ireland followed in 1855 when boxes were erected in Dublin, Belfast and Ballymena, with others appearing in other major towns in 1857. Wall boxes, which had existed in some post offices prior to the 1850s were introduced on a more systematic basis at this time also as a more cost-effective alternative to pillar boxes - particularly in rural areas, and 'lamp' boxes, small receptacles attached to lamp posts or pedestals, in areas where the amount of post was small, began to be used in the 1890s. And so,by the end of the 19th century the postal network throughout the United Kingdom had been transformed with the installation of 33,500 boxes throughout urban centres and smaller towns and villages alike. Thus, J. Wilson Hyde, Superintendent of Edinburgh's General Post Office, remarked in 1889 that, 'so much has it become the custom in these later times for the Post Office to afford facilities to the public in whatever will tend to increase the business of the Department, that in all large towns pillar boxes or branch offices are dotted about everywhere at short distances, thus altering the conditions which formerly obtained, when the chief office was the great central point where correspondence had to be deposited for dispatch'.

The earliest pillar boxes did not follow a uniform design, as they were ordered by district surveyors from local foundries.

The 1856 box at Dublin for instance, (the 'Ashworth Box' now preserved in the National Museum), was rectangular and similar to London's first box of the same year, but other areas had a mixture of cylindrical, hexagonal and octagonal versions. In 1859 a standardised cylindrical model – the 'National Standard'– was brought into use. This had

Now and Then – George V post box in Donegall Square, Belfast

II.S.



Postman clearing the same post-box in Donegall Square, 1940 Belfast Telegraph © National Museums NI Collection Ulster Folk & Transport Museum

it posting aperture positioned beneath a hexagonal cap for greater protection from rainwater. In 1866 this was succeeded by the wholly six-sided 'Penfold' (named after its designer, John Penfold), which began to be painted red from 1874 onwards. The faceted form of the Penfolds meant that letters could easily get stuck and it was discontinued in 1879, in favour of a cylindrical version once again. Similar, but not identical to the earlier 'National Standard' boxes, this updated form came in two sizes 'A' and 'B', the former, having a smaller 15<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in diameter shaft, being the more common. Early versions of these had no royal cipher, (consequently known as 'anonymous boxes'), but this was added from 1887 onwards along with the words 'POST OFFICE' either side of the aperture. In 1899 a broader oval type with double

slots (for town and country mail) began to be introduced, and c.1930, the aperture on the 'normal' cylindrical boxes was moved to the door (once again to avoid letters getting stuck). The 1879 design and its variants remained unchallenged until 1968 when plainer, square, 'Type F' boxes, were trialled. These were manufactured from sheet steel, but lacking durability, they were superseded by cast iron 'Type G' versions soon afterwards. In 1979 the 'Type K', a new modern cylindrical design of pared-down form and minus any kind of cap, was launched, and in more recent years, plastic boxes for use inside shopping centres and airports have become common sights. In all, the LBSG has identified, described and catalogued around 800 different types of post box.

More than 60% of current British boxes carry the 'EIIR' mark of Queen Elizabeth II or a Scottish crown. Boxes from the reign of George V account for about 15% of the total. There are smaller numbers, in descending order, of boxes from the reigns of George VI, Victoria, and Edward VII. The Letter Box Study Group has identified 171 boxes surviving from the short 1936 reign of Edward VIII. About two dozen contractors have been engaged to make post boxes since 1852. The names – including Carron, WT Allen, Cochrane, Handyside and McDowall Steven – can be seen embossed or otherwise credited on boxes.



### Post Boxes in Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, the majority of post boxes have the royal cypher of Queen Elizabeth II – 'EIIR'.



Double aperture EIIR Pillar Box

**FACT:** When the first of Queen Elizabeth's boxes were erected in Scotland, in 1952, some objected to the EIIR cipher, arguing that Scotland had never had an Elizabeth I. Several boxes in Scotland were vandalised.

The problem went as far as the prime minister; eventually it was decided that Scottish boxes would bear a Scottish Crown in place of the EIIR cipher

However the Letter Box Study Group has identified around 500 others which pre-date the current monarch.



The words 'Post Office' as found on GVI pillar box

### Queen Victoria 1837 - 1901

There are 87 post boxes dating from the reign of Queen Victoria and bearing the insignia 'VR'

Wall boxes were introduced in 1857. Pillar boxes (introduced in 1852) had proved to be reliable and popular, everyone wanted their own local post box, but pillar boxes were expensive to produce. For other than city and town locations a cheaper way of providing remote collection facilities was needed and the obvious answer lay in providing a cast iron box that could be installed into an existing wall where such a location conveniently existed





The VR (Victoria Regina) Cipher from the reign of Queen Victoria on a pillar box and wall mounted box

## King Edward VII 1901 - 1910

There are 79 Post Boxes from the reign of King Edward VII in Northern Ireland.

The ERVII Cipher from the reign of King Edward VII, known as 'The Curly E'

### King George V 1910 – 1936

There are 166 post boxes in Northern Ireland dating from the reign of King George V, and bearing the insignia 'GR'.



Often seen in historic city or town centres or Conservation Areas, post and pillar boxes of this era bear the insignia 'GR'. Above is one within the Malone Conservation Area, in Myrtlefield Park, Belfast.

### King Edward VIII 1936

King Edward VIII only reigned in 1936, and no EVIII post boxes exist in situ in Northern Ireland. A single post box was

formerly on display at the Main Post Office in Tomb Street, Belfast, but it has now been removed into storage.

### King George VI 1936 – 1952

In Northern Ireland, 96 post boxes bear King George VI's royal cipher – 'GVIR'.



The Curly 'GVIR' cipher is similar in style to that of King Edward VIII. After this date, all post boxes in Northern Ireland bear the familiar and much more commonly found insignia of Queen Elizabeth II – 'EIIR'.

### **FACT:** In Northern Ireland, 96 post boxes bear King George VI's royal cipher - 'GVIR'.

**FACT: Flutes** The name given to the "pie crust" indentations around the cap of pillar boxes; a design feature said to facilitate rainwater run-off. Different foundries have different styles of flutes. manal dal a a a ma

Monday to Friday 4,00pm

Saturday 12 noon **FACT:** The British Postal Museum states that the 1879-1968 cyclindrical red pillar box 'continues to be one of Britain's most recognisable symbols.'

## Policy Guidance

#### **Statutory Requirements**

Royal Mail has a statutory right to place and retain post boxes in the street under paragraph 1, Schedule 6 of the Postal Services Act 2000. Ownership remains with Royal Mail. The consent of the Department for Infrastructure is not required for the installation of a post box on the public highway, but in practice Royal Mail will always liaise with the Department for Infrastructure and obtain its clearance for the proposed post box prior to installation.

 Planning permission is not normally required for the installation of a post box. Post boxes have deemed planning permission by virtue of the, The Planning (General Permitted

Development) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015. Class G 'Universal Service Providers' of Part 14 of the schedule covers Development by Statutory and Other Undertakers covers the Permitted Development rights of Royal Mail.

 A Street Works License is not usually required for the installation of a post box as Royal Mail is a statutory undertaker.

- On private property, the consent of the site owner is always required for the installation of a post box. In the absence of any agreement, post boxes installed on private property will remain in Royal Mail ownership under the terms of a deemed contractual licence. Royal Mail can be required, upon reasonable notice, to remove the post box and make good the site.
- Under the provisions of the Postal Services Act 2011, the postal services regulator Ofcom has decided to place specific requirements on Royal Mail in regards to its provision of post boxes. Under Designated Universal Service Provision 1.8, Royal Mail is required to provide a post box within half a mile of at least 98% of addresses in the UK. Royal Mail's post box network meets these requirements.
- Note: Listed post boxes will only be altered or removed in exceptional circumstances, and this will require Listed Building Consent to be made through the Local Authority. Like for like repairs will not require Listed Building Consent.

# 4 Listing

**FACT:** The earliest listed post box in Norther Ireland is a Victorian 'VR' former wall box, now freestanding, outside the Mechanics Institute, Lurgan. (Seen below)



In 1972 the Department of the Environment in England recognised that some rare early examples of pillar- type post boxes dating from the period 1852– 79, such as hexagonal Penfold post boxes, were of special architectural or historic interest.

The first post box protected by listing in Northern Ireland was in 1977; a wall mounted EIIR box was included in the listing of Lenaderg Post Office (HB17/02/003A). (Seen below)

Since then, only a small number of pillar boxes have been protected through listing in Northern Ireland. In addition some wall boxes have been included as a result of being part of a listed structure in which they are set or within the curtilage. Many more post boxes are included in conservation areas.



Lenaderg Post Office (above) and its wall-mounted EIIR post box.

**FACT:** The first listing of a pillar box in Northern Ireland was in 2004, an Edward VII box on the Rathlin Road, Ballycastle. Pillar boxes are freestanding can be listed in their own right.



Wall mounted post boxes are not listed in themselves, but are protected as they sit within the walls of a listed building.

# DERRYKEVAN POST OFFICE

Signage from the B1 Listed Former Derrykeevan Post Office, The Birches, Craigavon – as with many local examples this post office was thatched – the thatch roof is no longer visible from the outside as it is preserved under tin. The opening for the wall mounted post-box can be seen to the right of the window in the image above. The post box was removed many years prior to listing

### 5 DfC HED and Royal Mail memorandum of Understanding

DfC HED intend to carry out a thematic survey of Post Boxes on completion of the main area-based Second Survey of listed buildings in Northern Ireland. In the intervening period, Royal Mail has renewed its policy, which DFC HED supports, for the retention of all post boxes in operational service at their existing locations, unless certain exceptional circumstances or operational need necessitates their relocation or removal. While the current Royal Mail policy remains in place, DfC HED will be notified in writing with accompanying images in the event of any proposed removal or relocation of any free standing pillar box post boxes, or wall mounted boxes within the curtilage of or fixed to a listed building.

### The Importance of Heritage

Royal Mail and DfC HED are aware that some post boxes have greater historic importance than others. Three main factors determine the heritage credentials: age, rarity and local interest. The earliest boxes deserve special protection as do boxes which are either unique or are known to exist in small numbers. Some boxes are historically important because of the significant part played in the development of post box provision. It is the intention of DfC HED and Royal Mail to use the resources provided by The Postal Museum the Letter Box Study Group in determining the level of special interest of the various types of Post Boxes.



A Grade 'A' Listed Victorian Pillar Box on Agincourt Avenue, Belfast, damaged, probably by impact from a car

#### **Relocation or Removal**

Royal Mail policy is for the retention of all post boxes in operational service in their existing positions, unless circumstances or operational need necessitates their relocation, or removal. Listed post boxes will only be altered or removed in exceptional circumstances, and this will require Listed Building Consent. Likefor like repairs will not require Listed Building Consent.

- The relocation of post boxes will normally only be agreed if reasonably required by the Department for Infrastructure or other site owner, or if relocation is needed for an important operational reason. Operational grounds justifying the relocation of a post box may include cases where changes in the street make it no longer convenient or safe for the public to use the post box, or where servicing the box is not lawful or safe due to new traffic regulations or road safety considerations. The closure and relocation of a post office can also sometimes give rise to an operational need to relocate a post box.
- In the case of post boxes which are already listed, Listed Building Consent will be required for any works of alteration or relocation. However, where there are sound reasons for relocating a post box for its physical protection and an appropriate new site has been identified, listed building consent may be approved for 'demolition' of a listed structure if a sound case has been made. Once a

Post Box has been moved from its original location HED consider that it has lost its special interest.

- If an unlisted post box of historic interest is removed from its original site it will, so far as is practicable, be reinstated within the same locality, but will not be considered for listing. DfC HED may in this instance inform the Local Council, who may consider alternative protection through 'local listing' or by suggesting the relocated Post Box should be located within a Conservation Area. If it is no longer fit for operational use, it will be offered to a local Registered/Accredited museum or other appropriate local institution, exhibited at local Royal Mail premises, offered to The Postal Museum; or offered as a source of spare parts to Royal Mail engineers. In all cases the keys should be retained with the box so wherever possible the lock, as fitted, is retained in operational use. In all cases Royal Mail should prepare appropriate paperwork which identifies the provenance of the box and verifies the legitimate nature of its decommissioning.
- Where permanent relocation of an historic post box is proposed, prior written notification should always be made to the conservation officer in the planning department of the relevant Local Council and to DFC HED. Even if the Post Box is not listed, DfC HED should also be alerted, as any Post Box may meet the statutory tests for listing. The department of Infrastructure will also be notified.

This should ensure that careful consideration is given to the need to relocate the box and assist in identifying an appropriate new site.

The removal of all post boxes will be carried out by contractors appointed by Royal Mail, and not by any other contractor. Special care is to be used in removing cast-iron boxes, which can be brittle and prone to shatter, to avoid damage.

- Wherever practicable, a post box of any type that has been removed and not immediately relocated will be retained for future operational use, following any necessary refurbishment.
- A post box will not be disposed of if it can be repaired and refurbished so it is fit for future operational service. If the condition of the post box is such that repair is not practicable and it is not of historic interest, serviceable parts will be salvaged for the future repair of operational post boxes where possible.
- Sometimes requests are made to Royal Mail from the owners of private property for the removal of wall boxes installed at their premises. If the wall box concerned is not in a listed

building nor of local historical interest (i.e. not on the local authority's local list and not in a conservation area or World Heritage Site), Royal Mail has a legal responsibility to carry out its removal within a reasonable period. If the wall box is attached to a listed building or structure, listed building consent is required for its removal. If the wall box is a local feature or of local historical interest, it is Royal Mail policy to leave it in situ subject to consent of the landowner. Royal Mail will arrange for the aperture to be sealed, for the box to be painted in a colour other than red (normally black); and make local arrangements for ongoing maintenance. These conditions will usually require agreement by site owners. Royal Mail will ensure that the required consents are obtained, in writing, or retain the responsibility itself.

- Pouch boxes will no longer be attached to the exterior of post boxes; where this has occurred in the past, they will be removed as soon as practicable.
- If any problems arise in regard to individual examples, those concerned should contact postbox.appearance@ royalmail.com.



#### Unlawful Removal and Damage

The unlawful removal or damage of a post box from a community can result in the interruption in an essential public service and the permanent and irreversible loss of an object that is intrinsically linked to the cultural heritage of the host community. Heritage and Cultural Property Crime poses a significant threat both to the historic environment and to the security of cultural property, including post boxes.

The majority of losses can be attributed to road traffic collisions and vandalism. The remainder can be attributed to unregulated removal and theft. In this regard, post boxes can be particularly vulnerable to criminal activity where they are located within remote or isolated rural localities. Given the changing profile of this type of crime, we must be vigilant and find innovative ways together to respond to the challenges we face.

#### Crime Prevention Measures and Enforcement

The prevention of crime will always be the primary objective and every opportunity should be taken to identify potential high-risk crime locations and to deploy appropriate preventative measures and technologies. These will include forensic tags, permanent metal marking systems and electronic tracking. In the event that a crime is committed such measures will also assist investigators to identify and trace stolen property and potential offenders. Those individuals and organisations involved in the trade of

cultural property should be encouraged of the need to undertake all reasonable checks to establish provenance and rightful ownership of property that has come into their possession and control. These activities should be complemented by highlighting high risk locations to local policing teams, crime investigators and the wider community, in particular local Neighbourhood Watch Schemes. The delivery of intelligent and efficient law enforcement activity in challenging times must focus on 'collective efficacy' - law enforcement professionals working with local people and partner agencies to protect post boxes from the impact of theft and criminal damage.

#### **Decoration and Maintenance**

Royal Mail practice remains the same:

- All Royal Mail post boxes will be painted in standard red and black livery (see BS for colours below). No variation is allowed, except in very exceptional circumstances where there are genuine historical reasons, such as the use of bronze-green livery for some early boxes, light blue for some airmail boxes, and the 110 boxes painted gold in celebration of the London 2012 British Olympic and Paralympic champions.
- Royal Mail will on occasion also apply a temporary decoration to some boxes to commemorate specific anniversaries or events subject to relevant consents and permits being granted.



A 'GR' post box on the Falls Road, Belfast, made the newspapers when it was painted blue in support of the NHS during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020.

Post boxes will be repainted on a rolling cycle. Each post box will be fully repainted to a high specification.

This process will be audited to ensure quality compliance. Queries, comments and complaints may be addressed to **postbox.appearance@royalmail.com**.

- Local circumstances may require some post boxes to be painted more frequently (e.g. locations – such as coastal sites – where abnormal levels of deterioration occur). This provision also applies to boxes in particularly visible locations, such as outside major tourist attractions and Royal Mail premises.
- All paint must be lead-free and of the correct specification (Royal Mail red, colour ref no. 538BS381C and Black, colour ref no. 00E53, BS4800).
- A number of local authorities have attempted to apply unsuitable antigraffiti finishes to post boxes. These anti-graffiti coatings are wholly inappropriate for post boxes and are not permitted. Royal Mail has developed its own high-quality antigraffiti finish, but this is only suitable for pouch boxes and new post boxes. All other post boxes will be painted using lead-free gloss paint unless the materials preclude the use of paint or renders it unnecessary.
- The highlighting of specific features on post boxes, such as the Royal cipher and crown in gold, is not normally allowed other than in exceptional circumstances on some pillar boxes where there is historical precedence.

Where gold highlighting is used, it should be applied to the Royal cipher and crown only. No other graphic elements or wording on the box (e.g. Royal Mail or the manufacturer's name) should be treated in this way. Lettering enamel should be used and covered with a varnish to minimise weathering. An exception is to be made in regard to post boxes officially painted gold during the Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2012. Many of these have become tourist attractions in their own right. In recognition of the positive public reaction to the gold post box initiative, these will be kept gold permanently.

Royal Mail has decided to give gold post boxes a plaque, noting the achievement of the athlete commemorated.

- Surviving oval enamel Post Office directions signs and Airmail signs on the caps of some pillar boxes are increasingly rare and normally should be repaired and, where practically possible, restored rather than removed. If a specimen is no longer fit for operational use, it should be offered to a local museum or other appropriate local institution, exhibited at local Royal Mail premises, or offered to The Postal Museum
- Also of increasing rarity are enamelplated Ludlow type boxes originally often sited at sub-post offices and Town Sub Offices. These boxes, and other similar examples including so-called carpenters' boxes, have a wooden carcass which are particularly vulnerable when disturbed. Special care

should be taken of all Ludlow boxes if they have to be removed or taken out of service.

- Robust fault reporting systems must be put in place to ensure the speedy repair and maintenance of post boxes.
- In exceptional circumstances, special local arrangements may be necessary for post boxes that are sited on busy roads where dirt can accumulate quickly to be washed regularly to ensure a smart appearance. These post boxes have a high visibility and must be kept as clean as possible.
- Flyposting and graffiti should be removed as soon as possible. Royal Mail will prosecute any person apprehended defacing, vandalising or otherwise damaging post boxes.

This joint policy statement will serve as a code and guide for Royal Mail staff responsible for the management and maintenance of the national stock of post boxes. It will serve as guidance for local authority planning, conservation and infrastructure staff; for those involved in managing change for the local amenity



Remnants of timber box at Post Office, Sixmilecross, Omagh



Victorian Post Box built into bridge over Cappagh Burn, Tirmurty Road, Omagh, Co. Tyrone

societies; for interest groups; and for the general public. Royal Mail will ensure that all those within its organisation who have responsibilities in connection with the post box estate are aware of this document and that it forms official Royal Mail policy. It will be given a permanent home on the Royal Mail website and drawn to the attention of any contractors or sub- contractors undertaking post box work as part of the contract. Third parties - such as local authority planning departments – will also be apprised. Royal Mail also undertakes to ensure that the policy is brought to the attention of those who need to be aware of it on a regular basis. Royal Mail post boxes add richness, colour and historical depth to the street scene and are so highly regarded that they have become part of the national image. This statement guarantees a secure long-term future for Royal Mail post boxes of all types.

# 6 Further Reading

The extensive records maintained within The Royal Mail Archive and by The Postal Museum, together with The Directory compiled by the Letter Box Study Group, mean that post boxes are well documented. Useful further reference works include:

History The Letter Box: A History of Post Office Pillar and Wallboxes by Jean Farrugia (Centaur Press, 1969)

Old Letter Boxes by Martin Robinson (Shire, 2000)

The Directory by The Letter Box Study Group

The Guide to British Letter Boxes by The Letter Box Study Group

Pillar Boxes by Jonathan Glancey (Chatto&Windus, 1990)

Street Furniture by Henry Aaron (Shire, 1987)

Britain's Post Office: A History of Development from the Beginnings to the Present Day by H Robinson (Oxford University Press, 1953)

Streets for All: Regional Streetscape Manuals English Heritage, 2000& 2005

1 Hyde, J. W., 'The Royal Mail: Its curiosities and romance' London: Simpkin, Marshall & Co., 1889.

2 Wicks, P., 'History of the British Post Box' (Pamphlet replicated on author's website - **www.wicks.org/pulp/part1.html)** 

# 7 Online Resources

1 The British Postal Museum & Archive website - www.postalheritage.org.uk/page/letterboxes

2 The Letter Box Study Group website - www.lbsg.org/

3 Falkirk Local History Society website - www.falkirklocalhistorysociety.co.uk/home/index.php?id=107

4 Grace's Guide to British Industrial History www.gracesguide.co.uk/McDowall\_Steven\_and\_Co

5. Northern Ireland Buildings Database - www.communities-ni.gov.uk/services/buildings-database

# 8

## **Further Information**

Further information on Royal Mail post boxes manufactured and installed from 1852 to the present can be obtained from:

#### postbox.appearance@royalmail.com

British Postal Museum & Archive Freeling House, Phoenix Place Mount Pleasant London WC1X ODL

#### Tel: 020 7239 2570

**Web: www.postalheritage.org.uk** Search room open Mon to Fri 9.00am to 4.15pm (except Bank Holidays and Christmas week) The Postal Museum in London is a new, national attraction revealing five centuries of Britain's social and communications history through an iconic service. To find out more visit www.postalmuseum.org.

#### The Letter Box Study Group

38 Leopold Avenue Handsworth Wood Birmingham B20 1ES

Email: enquiry0501@lbsg.org Web: www.lbsg.org



The unlisted Aghanloo post office







### "Helping communities to enjoy and realise the value of our historic environment"

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