

# UK Phone Boxes

## Introduction

I have condensed the information shown here from the publications listed in the 'references' at the end and am indebted to their authors for doing the ground work.

## Early days

There were about three kiosk designs in the early days of telecommunications set up by various telephone companies. With the nationalization of telecommunications in 1912, all except a few local authorities run systems came under the control of the GPO<sup>A</sup>.

The private companies had taken the view that they wanted subscribers to their system, they did not charge for individual calls, the cost of subscription covered all the use the subscriber made of the system. The simplest way to operate phone boxes was to either:

- Give the subscribers tokens to give to a phone box attendant.
- Use a coin collecting box on the door of the phone box (like a public convenience!).

Apart from museums you will not find any early phone boxes in existence. There were not many of them because providing telephone access for casual users was not a priority for telephone companies or the GPO in its early days.

## K is for Kiosk

First of all, why 'kiosk'; after all everyone calls them phone boxes<sup>B</sup> don't they? In the more formal days when public call offices were set up a kiosk was a:

- A small enclosed structure, often freestanding, open on one side or with a window, used as a booth to sell newspapers, cigarettes, etc.
- A similar unattended stand for the automatic dispensing of tickets, etc.
- A Turkish garden pavilion.

Wiktionary (1) has this description and it pretty much describes the design and shape of the Phone Box, and also tells us that the word is Persian or Turkish in origin.

## Kiosk general features

Most phone boxes are square in floor plan, with the telephone and coin collecting on one wall, there are often notices and instructions for using the phone box as well as telephone directories. The door forms one wall and is often glazed. For wheel-chair access the door is omitted. The other remaining walls are also often glazed. On many phone boxes the door could be positioned opposite the phone side or to its left or right. This allowed them to be grouped together in threes or fours. The service years shown in the tables is the year of its introduction to when it ceased production, usually on the introduction of the next model that made them obsolete. However, they remained in service for many years after the design became obsolescent.

The phone and coin collecting mechanism, notices, directories and layout of the 'back board' on which they are mounted, do give away the period of the phone box, however, they are not covered here. This article covers the K series produced by the GPO, Post Office Telecommunications and BT. Phone

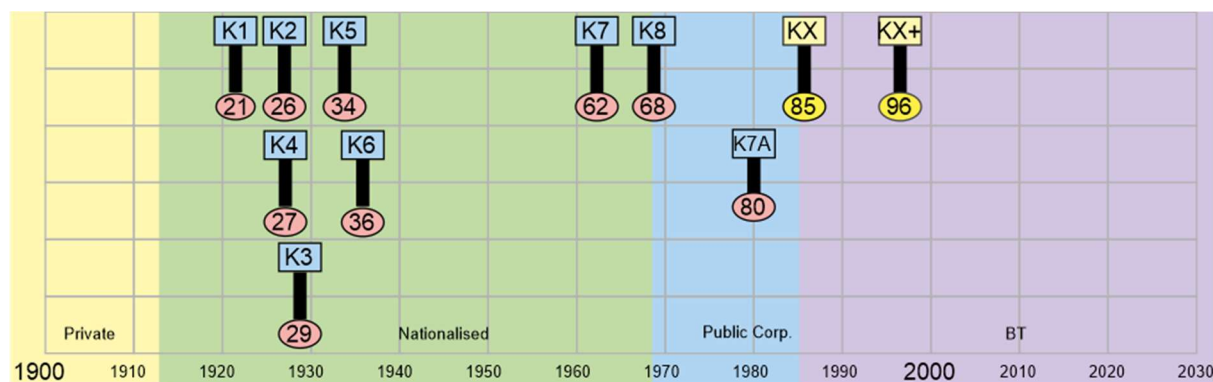
boxes existed before the K series, provided by the companies that formed the nucleus of the GPO's Telephone business, but these are not covered here. Neither does this article cover the phone boxes introduced by 'other licensed operators (OLO).

## GPO K series

Ranging in date from 1921 to the current day the K series (K1 to K8) are the mainstay of public phone boxes in the UK.


### Timeline

A simplified time line for the K series of kiosks is shown below.





There was a flurry of activity and new designs in the 1930s a lull there after until the 1980s/90's when new designs were introduced.

## K1

Service years	1921 continued in use after the K2 was introduced, particularly in the provinces.		Figure 1—K1 Kiosk. Reproduced by permission of BT Heritage and Archive TCB 417 E03564.
Made from	Pre cast concrete, wood door. Wood and later metal window frames.		
Designer	In house design.		
Estimate of number installed/remaining.	6,300/8		
Distinguishing features	No colour scheme adopted for the K1, often placed on private land and painted to the landowner's choice.		

## K2

Service years	1926 to 1936.		Figure 2—K2 Kiosk. Reproduced by permission of BT Heritage and Archive TCB 417 E09439.
Made from	Cast iron.		
Designer	Giles Gilbert Scott.		
Estimate of number installed/remaining.	1,700/472		Figure 3—Sir John Soane's grave (© R J Truscott).
Distinguishing features	The 'crown' is a cut-out and acts as a ventilator.		
This kiosk was tall and was mainly used in London where most examples are found. It has six by three windows in the door and on the other two sides.  The shape of the top (and of later phone boxes) is said to be inspired by the design of Sir John Soane's grave <sup>c</sup> or the roof of Soane's Dulwich picture gallery.			



## K3

Service years	1929 to 1936.
Made from	Concrete painted cream, with a teak-wood door, the glazing bars are painted red.
Designer	Sir Giles Gilbert Scott.
Estimate of number installed/remaining.	12,000/2
Distinguishing features	Replaced the K1 and in its turn was replaced by the K6, very few survive, they were hard to maintain (needed regular painting). Also, difficult to transport because the concrete broke.
A Mark 2 version was introduced in 1934 that was made from thicker concrete to make it stronger.	




Figure 4—K3 Kiosk, this is a Mk2 (Reproduced by permission of BT Heritage and Archive TCB 417 E08842).

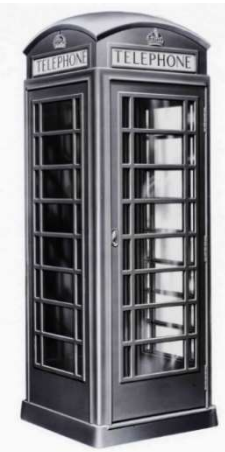




K4

Service years	1927 to present day. However, because of operational difficulties only 50 were made.		Figure 5—K4 Kiosk at Whitley Bay (© R J Truscott).
Made from	Cast Iron, very large.		
Designer	In house design.		
Estimate of number installed/remaining.	50/5		Figure 6—K4 Kiosk at Whitley Bay (© R J Truscott).
Distinguishing features	They have a stamp vending machine and posting box on the rear (telephone side). Very rare; only four remaining in service in the UK. The stamp vending is not operational any more though the collecting box is.		
Because it was so large the K4 was difficult to fit in on the streets there were also complaints about the noise of the vending mechanism, and the noise made by Postmen emptying the mail box. The kiosk had an internal wall that had the phone on one side and the post box/stamp vending on the other. Unlike other kiosks in this type the door could only be opposite the internal wall.			

K5

Service years	1934 to 1936.		<p>Figure 7—K5 Kiosk. Reproduced by permission of BT Heritage and Archive TCB 417 E08471.</p>
Made from	Metal faced plywood.		
Designer	In house design.		
Estimate of number installed/remaining.	Not known.		
Distinguishing features	A temporary kiosk for exhibitions etc, could be easily assembled and disassembled and came flat packed.		

K6

Service years	1936 to 1962.			 <p>Figure 8—K6 Kiosk. Reproduced by permission of BT Heritage and Archive TCB 417 E9438.</p>
Made from	Cast iron painted red with a wood door. Other paint schemes in special circumstances.			
Designer	Giles Gilbert Scott.			
Estimate of number installed/remaining.	60,000/2,788 are listed.			 <p>Figure 9—K6 inside Giles Gilbert Scott's Liverpool Cathedral [Cathedral Church of Christ in Liverpool] (© R J Truscott).</p>
Distinguishing features	Used throughout the UK. This design was shorter than the K2 and has three by eight panes of glass in the door and non-telephone sides, however the centre pane of glass is much wider than the outer two <sup>D</sup> .			
1936-1953 King GeorgeVI crown 	1953-1962 Queens crown (St Edwards) 	1953-1962 Scottish crown 	Also used by Kingston upon Hull corporation for its public telephones, but they were painted cream (still are) and did not have the crown.	



From 1953 the design of the crown changed to a 'King Edward crown' for England Wales and Northern Ireland, and Scottish K6s had a 'Queen of Scotland' crown. After 1955 the crown was an interchangeable piece and a moulding mark is often visible surrounding the crown (2).

The K6 is the most frequently seen of the kiosks, even over the more modern ones. There are two reasons for this.

- After being hard to get, the jubilee of George V in 1936 increased the number of phone boxes available because one was installed in every town or village that had a post office, eight thousand were installed under this scheme.
- The GPO had its 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1937 and in celebration made it easier for communities to request a phone box if they paid a £4.00 installation fee. One thousand were installed until the scheme ended in 1949.

Theft of the coinbox and the glass was a problem until the Mark 2<sup>E</sup> came along in 1939 necessitating changes to the design. The predominant colour was red, with a black back-board on which the 'phone, coin collecting box, directories etc were mounted. The base was black and filled with concrete. The crown was never picked out in gold as it is often seen today. For some applications such as National Parks, an alternative colour scheme was used where the box was dark grey except for the glazing bars that were red.

## K7

Service years	1962.		<p>Figure 10— K7 Kiosk Aluminium version. Reproduced by permission of BT Heritage and Archive TCB 417 E29713.</p>
Made from	Aluminium and large glass windows.		
Designer	Neville Conder <sup>F</sup> winner of a 1958 design competition <sup>G</sup> .		
Estimate of number installed/remaining.	12/0		<p>Figure 11—K7 Kiosk Cast iron version. Reproduced by permission of BT Heritage and Archive TCB 417 E29545.</p>
Distinguishing features	The trial version was not a success because of corrosion of the aluminium due to not being finished as the designer intended <sup>H</sup> , also the GPO was unwilling to adopt an untried material. Without the designer's involvement the GPO engineered a cast iron version with an aluminium door; it never saw the light of day for unknown reasons. The design allowed the linking together in groups or for use singly.		

## K7A

Service years	1980.
Made from	Steel.
Designer	In house design.
Estimate of number installed/remaining.	Not known.
Distinguishing features	Colloquially known as the 'Oakham' after a band of tinned meat.



Figure 12—K7A Kiosk. (Reproduced by permission of BT Heritage and Archive TCB 473 PO9889).

## K8

Service years	1968 to 1985.
Made from	Cast iron sides and aluminium door with large single pane windows taking up about two thirds of the side. Black base.
Designer	Douglas Scott, winner of a 1965 design competition.
Estimate of number installed/remaining.	1,100/12
Distinguishing features	Not many of these survive because they were replaced by one of the KX series and did not have the protection of being 'listed' like the K2 and K6. The top design was in cast iron of two different designs. Pre 1976 the top was thinner and causing problems with fixing in the telephone sign, post 1976 the lower part of the top is thicker with a noticeable curve up and over the telephone sign.



Figure 13—K8 Kiosk. (Reproduced by permission of BT Heritage and Archive TCB 473 PO9889).

Most were painted red, but a short-lived scheme saw some in Post Office Telecommunications yellow.
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## Other design studies before privatization

In 1979 a study of the GPOs phone box needs was carried out and a number of prototypes were designed and trialled. The privatisation of Post Office Telecommunications to British Telecom was looming, none of the designs tried would be economic to produce given the constraints that the business expected to operate under meant that the designs were never used.

## KX Series

1985 brought on another review of BTs phone box requirements and this time the KX series of related designs was the result. As technology advanced, coin payment, card non-cash payment methods (pre-paid and credit/debit) were incorporated.

### KX100

Service years	1985.
Made from	Stainless steel, aluminium and glass. Gap under the sides to avoid problems with rubbish accumulating in the phone box.
Estimate of number installed/remaining.	1,100/12
Designer	In house design.
Estimate of number installed/remaining.	Not known
Distinguishing features	Could be fitted with a door






Figure 14—KX100 Kiosk. Reproduced by permission of Mike Fletcher, [telephonesuk.org.uk](http://telephonesuk.org.uk).

## KX200

Service years	1985.		Figure 15—KX 200 Kiosk. Reproduced by permission of Mike Fletcher, <a href="http://telephonesuk.org.uk">telephonesuk.org.uk</a> .
Made from	Stainless steel, aluminium and glass.		
Designer	In house design.		
Estimate of number installed/remaining.	Not known		
Distinguishing features	Pedestal design for ease of use by wheelchair users.		

## KX300

Service years	1985.		Figure 16—KX300 Kiosk. Reproduced by permission of Mike Fletcher, <a href="http://telephonesuk.org.uk">telephonesuk.org.uk</a> .
Made from	Stainless steel, aluminium and glass.		
Designer	In house design.		
Estimate of number installed/remaining.	Not known		
Distinguishing features	Triangular shape, no door, suitable for wheelchair access.		

## KX410/420

Service years	1985.
Made from	Stainless steel.
Designer	In house design.
Estimate of number installed/remaining.	Not known
Distinguishing features	A pedestal design for use in areas prone to vandalism.



Figure 17—KX410. Reproduced by permission of Mike Fletcher, [telephonesuk.org.uk](http://telephonesuk.org.uk).

## KX Plus

Service years	1996.
Made from	Stainless steel and glass.
Designer	Design agency DCA <sup>1</sup> and the maker GKN <sup>1</sup> .
Estimate of number installed/remaining.	Not known
Distinguishing features	This kiosk saw the return of the domed roof, lower door handles and an internal seat. KX100s could be retrofitted with the new domed roof. It will house all type of telephone (coin, card etc.). Can also be fitted as a WIFI hotspot.



Figure 18—KX Plus. Reproduced by permission Mike Fletcher, [telephonesuk.org.uk](http://telephonesuk.org.uk).

## Where to see UK phone boxes




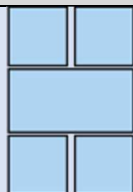
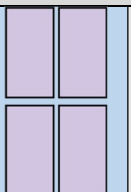
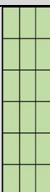
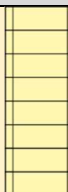
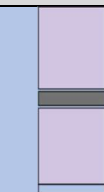
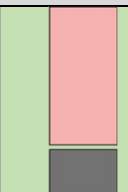



Well, the first place is on the street and other public places like railway stations and so on. Some will not be public telephones any longer and contain information-centers, libraries, defibrillators, coffee bars, food outlets and many other uses. Also, some will actually have phones in them but may not be BT owned and operated.

The following all have examples of telephone kiosks and other telecommunications exhibits.

- Avoncroft Museum, Bromsgrove, Worcestershire, for the national collection of telephone kiosks.
- Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire, for their communications exhibition.
- Amberly, West Sussex for their communications exhibition.

## Identify a kiosk

To identify a particular kiosk (3), follow the chart from the top left-hand corner, moving down through each **question** and answer.

Does it have doors?															
No				Yes.											
Standing on pillar				Is there a stamp vending machine and post box?											
No		Yes		Yes	No.										
					What is the top shape?										
															
Distinguishing features.					What do the windows look like?										
Square floor plan.	Triangular floor plan.	Narrow pillar.	Full width pillar.												
				Distinguishing features.											
				Cast iron, iron glazing bars. Cut out 'crown' ventilator.		Concrete cream painted, red iron glazing bars. No crown		Cast iron. Cable entry holes in back panel. Moulded 'crown'.		Panel part way up the side.		Panel at floor.		Panel mid-way from floor and at floor level.	
KX200	KX300	KX410	KX420	K4	K1	K5	K2	K3	K6	KX100	K8	K7			
								Crowns on K6 only							
															
								Whole of UK to 1953		England, Wales, NI 1953 on.		Scotland 1953 on.			

## References

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<sup>A</sup> GPO is used as a 'generic' term. Originally the General Post Office, then Post Office Telecommunications, British Telecommunications and finally BT.

<sup>B</sup> Phone Booth in the USA.

<sup>C</sup> St Pancras Old Church.

<sup>D</sup> A common feature of Gilbert Scott's architecture.

<sup>E</sup> Mk. 1s have symmetrical cable entry holes in the back; Mk. 2s have offset cable entries.

<sup>F</sup> Condor Kiosk (K7) BT Heritage and Archive ref TCB 2/166.

<sup>G</sup> Design competition held in 1958.

<sup>H</sup> [Authors note] The aluminium was probably not 'anodized'. Untreated it turned black and grey with streaks and blisters.

<sup>I</sup> Originally David Carter Associates.

<sup>J</sup> Originally Guest, Keen and Nettlefolds.