

Kiosk No. 6

When we think of Britain and what makes us British, we think of The Royal Family, black cabs, or the quintessentially British red double-decker buses. These are among some of the few objects that make Britain British, but this isn't the exhaustive list. I think we could go as far as to include Pimm's, fish and chips, cream tea and quite surprisingly prawn mayonnaise sandwiches, as suggested by a member of the public. The nation has spoken. What makes us British is a bunch of decent food. But have we forgotten iconic bands and landmarks like the London Eye and Westminster, or Paddington Bear and James Bond? Do these play a part in the identity that is the UK?

It must be said that all these examples make Britain more British in their own way. There is, however, still one piece of history we haven't mentioned but have encountered in one form or another since their inception in 1926. Kiosk No. 6, or a red phone box to you and me. Although we can now WhatsApp, Instagram and TikTok with the world at all times of the day and night, in days of yore, there were only red pay phone boxes on street corners. And at some point, carrier pigeons. Gone are the days when fancy pigeons delivered our messages, but even more sadly, gone are the trill ring tones of public phone boxes as we knew them. And although very few are still connected, those that aren't have been replaced with ultra-modern and architecturally insignificant Wi-Fi Hubs.

Although you can still call from these hubs on the streets, they now also come with charging points, built-in maps, and tourist information. According to BT, these latest road additions are the next evolution of public payphones, which are set to bring digital innovation to the UK. While this technological advancement is unavoidable, as that drives the world, what does this mean for iconic British design? Are we going to be less British because technology is diluting the essence of what Britain is famous for?

This may sound a little exaggerated. After all, we still have The Royal Family, Paddington Bear, Fish and Chips, and the last time I checked, prawn mayonnaise sandwiches too. But these have also changed over the years. The need for a Royal Family has been questioned recently, and the beloved Queen has passed away. Paddington Bear now likes Marmite sandwiches, and the national dish of Britain is Chicken Tikka Masala. Not to mention, prawn mayonnaise sandwiches come in an array of bread flavours and textures. And while some of these changes have gone unnoticed, what does gentrification mean for design in this country?

As a society, we need faster connectivity, Wi-Fi everywhere, including underground, and phone signals, even at the most rural location on an island off the coast of Scotland. Quicker and easier connectivity is both a necessity and a desire. To stay on this trajectory, we need to be powered enough to do so, and if the internet goes down, God forbid, we will simply fall off this earth and end up who knows where doing who knows what. Or at least that's how we act. So, do we need these fancy new hubs to replace one of the vital ingredients that makes us who we are? I don't think so.

The Wi-Fi would still work in our old phone boxes, and we could still use the phones, so long as the technology was updated, and they remained connected. In my opinion, if the design is not broken, then why fix it? Although some could argue this goes against the very nature of design as we know it. To understand this, we must look back at the evolution of public payphones and learn why their design is essential to our identity.

A quick Google (see what I mean) search will show us that it was a process of trial and error to get the right balance between design and usability. Let's consider Kiosk No. 6 again. We've established that it's

iconic, and something must be said about the vivid red colour – a genius move in branding by the Post Office or the colour of Britishness, that's for you to decide. But the prominently emblazoned crowns representing the British Monarchy have also made them a cultural icon recognised worldwide.

Although they're more associated these days with the smell of human excrement and drug paraphernalia, why continue revolutionising the design? Will faster Wi-Fi make someone want to use it as a toilet much less? Or will more glass perturb even the most desperate? Probably not. They'll be better entertained as they relieve themselves, making it a more enjoyable experience. It's our attitude towards these objects that needs to change. Or we just build more toilets, so we won't feel the need to defecate anywhere we deem suitable.

What surprised me the most, and even the members of the public I spoke to, was not that Kiosk No. 6 was heritage grade II listed but that it's the sixth type of phone box design. It took six attempts to perfect this design, and this evolution didn't stop there either. If nothing says British like this kind of tenacity and determination, then I don't know what does. You only need to look at our willingness to queue for days and nights to see the Queen lying in State to get a sense of our determination and patriotism.

According to one website, there are 13 kiosk types in the history books of the UK. So, what is it about Kiosk No. 6, or K6 as it's more commonly known, that makes it worth saving? To understand this, we first need to consider its predecessors. Kiosks one to five, although technically it's six as Kiosk No. 1 had two versions – the Mk 234 and the Mk 236. How British is that?

The Post Office, also known as the GPO, another icon we've failed to mention, introduced these phone kiosks when public telephone companies unified under their control. The original phone box, Kiosk No. 1, or Mk 234, derived from the wooden 'Birmingham' kiosk, arrived in 1921, stalled by the outbreak of World War I. This design attempted to bring together the different systems inherited by the GPO at the time. But before the production of these types ceased in 1926, this design was already considered outdated in 1920s Britain. It was unpopular in the Metropolitan boroughs of London and with local authorities who wanted a more suitable national kiosk design. A competition was, therefore, devised to find an innovative design and designer for Kiosk No. 2. What better British way to solve problems than creating competition? We are the 9th most competitive nation in the world.

Kiosk No.2, or what we could call the London phone box, was the winning design and first red phone box created by British architect Sir Giles Gilbert Scott. It was introduced in 1926 but only to the streets of London as it was too expensive to build and roll out nationwide. Rather than solving the problem for the entire UK, they forged on with production, installing 1700 over the next nine years.

To tackle the lack of phone boxes outside London, the GPO created a sister design of the K1, or Mk236, to be rolled out to the rural areas of Britain. This new design was more cost-effective, with one of the leading design changes being larger windows. Those in rural areas were now very obviously segregated from London's elite by this move, but at least they could see their views better.

With just over 208 separate listings of K2s with English Heritage, it could be argued that these are British history's most influential design pieces. They are, after all, the blueprint for the more familiar K6. But with so few still in existence and rarely seen outside of London, the lack of them means they're hardly worth mentioning in the history books.

Needing to address uniformity issues, the GPO turned to Sir Scott again. They tasked him with creating a cheaper, more economical to produce kiosk known as the K3, intending to install it nationwide. It was

an evolution of his earlier design, but it was said to have less classical architectural styling. Made from concrete, however, the K3 didn't age well in British weather and was often damaged in transit and installation. If this wasn't problematic enough, the GPO faced backlash from the public, who claimed the red colour was an eye sore and demanded that the boxes be less obtrusive. A cream replaced the vivid red, and 12,000 were installed throughout the UK. With only one said to be surviving. Apparently, it can be found in the parrot house at London Zoo. There is something quite poetically British about subpar design being covered in parrot excrement.

Moving away from the designs and expertise of Sir Scott, a bold move itself, the Post Office engineering department created the K4 to solve all these problems. Who needs the expertise of an architect when you have the know-how of an engineering department? Taking some inspiration from the design of the K2, their first error, they added extras such as a post box and a stamp machine. The idea was that these were to be mini post offices. As the K2 was already considered too large to install outside of London, it begs the question, why bother with this one?

Although plans for these dates to April 1925, it took another five years before this design was put into production. No doubt due to the issues of using an already failed K2 design as the blueprint for this one. Becoming known as the 'Vermillion Giant,' this kiosk angered pedestrians and motorists even more than their red predecessors, as the stamp machines were excessively noisy during phone calls. Not only that, but the stamps were also often damaged as the machines weren't made watertight. Unsurprisingly their production ceased within five years, and only 50 were installed in Britain. Very few exist today, and these surviving examples, interestingly, are found outside of London, in Bewdley, Roos, Frodsham and Warrington.

Not wanting to give up in the face of adversity, the GPO forged on with its expanding phone kiosk empire, and the K5 was born, or not as it seems. Rumour has it that this design was never intended to be a phone kiosk on the street but rather a temporary kiosk to use at fairs and exhibitions. The K5 never entered full-scale production, and only a few were completed. Although no one knows the whole story as to why these were never produced, there has been one mock-up made from original drawings and contemporary photographs. This can be found in the National Telephone Kiosk Collection at the Avoncroft Museum of Historic Buildings. If you ever care to visit it, one day.

Digging into the British sense of determination once more, the GPO looked to Sir Scott again to finally show the people of Britain what great British design really was. Perhaps spurred on by the demise of the K5, Sir Scott was tasked to design a kiosk for commemorating the Silver Jubilee of the coronation of King George V in 1935. As part of the Jubilee Concession, towns and villages could apply for a kiosk with the Post Office. This meant that these iconic British marvels were no longer bound to London. Anyone could enjoy one because we Brits like nothing more than pompous affairs and peacocking. As part of the Post Office celebrating its 300th anniversary, a further 1000 kiosks were installed over the following 12 years. These were given to local authorities who agreed to pay a five-year subscription of £4, a lot in terms of old-school money.

A total of 60,000 K6 kiosks were installed across Britain over 32 years, which is why this has become the most iconic type of phone box. Inspired by the tomb of Eliza Soane, wife of British architect Sir John Soane, and constructed from cast iron and numerous glass panels, this design stood the test of time. It was also much more economical to produce and distribute nationwide. And although many people were in an uproar about the vermilion colour, a policy endorsed by the Royal Fine Art Commission stated all kiosks needed to be painted red in all locations.

There were, however, a few exceptions. Those living in areas of outstanding natural beauty were allowed to tone down the red because we also hate eye sores. Subsequently, many kiosks emerged painted in assorted colours, from green to battleship grey. Interestingly, I've been told that many of these areas have since repainted their phone boxes back to red. No doubt because of the part they play in British identity.

As the mindless destruction of property by "yobs" is a predictable feature of life in the UK, Kiosk No. 6 soon became a vandal target. Many of their windows were stolen to make cold frames for growing vegetables, and the cashboxes were prised off the countertops. In 1939, a more vandal-proof version, known as the MkII, was introduced. They were manufactured with more secure window fittings and coin box mounting points. If you care to know, an effortless way of identifying a MkI or a MkII is to look at the two cable entry holes at the bottom of the rear panel. The MkI has symmetrical holes, whilst the holes on the MkII are asymmetrical.

To drive the Britishness of this piece of engineering, the K6 was also designed to have the Tudor Crown of George V, or George VI, placed above the illuminated Telephone sign. The very thing that has made them a cultural icon recognised worldwide. In 1955 however, this design was changed. A new slot was introduced above the Telephone sign so the crowns could be interchanged depending on the final location of the phone box. The St Edwards Crown was used on England phone boxes, and the Royal Crown of Scotland for those boxes across the border.

It's easy to see that Kiosk No. 6 has seen some slight alterations over its lifetime. Although these aren't the original red phone boxes, they have become synonymous with British identity. So much so that we've taken this iconic piece of British design and recreated it in key rings, cushions, miniature models, pendants, magnets and much more. You'd also be pushed to find a postcard encompassing Great Britain without seeing the Royal Family, black cabs and double-decker buses pictured alongside the K6.

Although communication has moved on thanks to technological development, the British public would be sad to lose these identity pieces. People have said that although they never see any in places like Birmingham anymore, they'd be disappointed if they were gone completely. And although they aren't essential to us these days, they are iconic and well-loved, so it would be a real shame to see all these kiosk types succumb to the same fate as the K5 or K3, for that matter. They're an integral part of British history, and if we were to lose them, we would lose a tiny part of what makes Britain British.

However, thanks to their heritage grade II listing and the £1 adoption scheme created by the GPO, these red phone boxes will hopefully grace their presence in our countryside for years to come. Although their use has diversified from a payphone, many have been lovingly restored to survive another lifetime. As it transpires, their design has no limits, from mini libraries to a gallery space, garden, art installation, and even a fish tank. Their possibilities are endless.

Stratford, where I live, is lucky enough to be home to three K6s. But as we also don't have much respect for history, these are now behind a barrier chained to the nearby buildings as many members of the public have opted to use them as public toilets, for drug taking or as a place to have sex. What was once a well-used and integral piece of design and engineering is now hidden away from opportunists needing to relieve themselves or find their next high.

Thankfully, some people treasure these British marvels, with many refurbished red boxes living in aristocratic gardens near you. Many British Lords, wealthy pop stars and even Middle Eastern Royalty have paid over £2000 to have one in their garden to indulge in nostalgia or jog down memory lane.

Some regular folks have also saved one because of their love for British design or as a memory keepsake, with many examples now existing outside the UK.

There's even one at the Epcot centre at Disney World, which says a lot about its importance in technological innovation and British culture. And although I am told that these were once working phone booths, they've since been shut down as people would call and curse at the little kids who would answer. Yet another glorious moment of how we continue defecating on anything important.

I doubt that when Sir Scott first drew up his grand plans all those years ago, he foresaw their future uses. I can't help but feel sad that aside from a few, the majority have become dumping grounds or public bogs. Surely, society could do better, and I suppose this is why I thought of creating this book in the first place. I wanted to show that although we don't use them as phone boxes per se, they're still important. If we are as proud to be British as we think we are, we must do better and protect what makes us British. This includes prawn mayonnaise sandwiches, Paddington Bear, and the red phone box.

Although the designs continued developing, they've never been the same. We now have the K7 and K8 created by the GPO and the K KX100 and K KX100+ created by BT when they were privatised. Each with its own successes and failures, but most importantly, architectural insignificance.

It's hard to say where this leaves the new Wi-Fi hubs as they certainly have a place in this technologically driven world, but where will they find themselves in our history? Will they be pioneering pieces of design? Probably not. But will they be the beginning of an extensive evolution of pay phones in today's world? Most likely. One thing for sure is that Kiosk No. 6 has earned its place in our history books with its colourful past and iconic design. And it really does deserve a spot amongst the lush green landscapes, or busy streets of Great Britain for what I hope is many more years to come.