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Heritage Newsletter



Issue 76

Royal Mail post boxes - an endangered species?

by Dr Peter Wilson

When was the last time you used a Royal Mail post box? For many people it was probably a week or two before Christmas, when a hand full of envelopes containing greetings cards was consigned to the bright red metal box just along the road. Most of us still engage in that annual task, along with birthday cards for friends and family, and for some the HMRC tax return requires a trip to the post box. But communication by hand-written or typed letter via Her Majesty's mail is on the decline.

You can blame it on e-mail and mobile phones: cheaper (?), certainly faster and much easier – so altogether more convenient. This Newsletter comes to you by e-mail and most members will receive it on their phone. It is possible to send electronic greetings cards, and the tax return can also be done on-line, if you wish. Are we at a transition – will Royal Mail post boxes survive? The mobile phone has done away with the need for many BT phone boxes, will post boxes be next to disappear from our streets?

In spite of the decline in usage it is unlikely that post boxes will disappear entirely. Royal Mail announced some 280 new post boxes for Northern Ireland in 2017, with most of these being located in rural areas and new housing developments. A joint policy for the retention and conservation of some post boxes was agreed by the Department for Communities Historic Environment Division and Royal Mail in 2020. Many post boxes are regarded as 'undesigned heritage assets' and a small number have been listed as being of special architectural and/or historic interest.

Post boxes began to appear on the streets of Britain and Ireland following the postal reforms of 1840 which introduced the Penny Post and enabled almost every inhabitant to avail of affordable postage. Prior to that time, letters had to be taken in person to a Receiving House, some of which were many miles away, or you waited for the Bellman to come down your street and collect your letters. He rang a bell (hence the name) to inform of his presence.

The novelist Anthony Trollope, an official of the General Post Office, proposed the installation of roadside collecting boxes. He had seen them in use in Europe during travels connected with his work. Post boxes were initially installed on the island of Jersey in 1852. The scheme was extended to England in 1853 and to Ireland in 1855. The first boxes were erected in Dublin, Belfast and Ballymena. Other major towns followed in 1857. Unfortunately, I have not been able to discover when the first post box was installed in Portrush, but it was undoubtedly in Victorian times and was probably associated with the first Post Office.

Images from the eras of Edward VII and George V clearly show that boxes were in use in the early 20th century and these may have been of Victorian vintage. The rather grand-looking Post Office, as it was, in Causeway Street is shown as having a wall-type post box in a photo from c.1911-12, and in an image of the Northern Counties Hotel from c.1906 a pillar-type post box is shown on the corner of Main Street and Causeway View.



The imposing Post Office building in Causeway Street (c. 1911-12) showing the wall-type post box (circled) and a view of the Northern Counties Hotel (c. 1906) with pillar-type post box on corner of Main Street and Causeway View (circled).

Neither box is present today but a box does exist directly opposite the latter, on the west-side pavement of Causeway View. Today there are, I think, 12 post boxes at various places across the town.

Since the beginning, post boxes have carried the insignia or cipher of the reigning monarch. So, Victoria (VR until 1901), Edward VII (EVIIR 1901-10), George V (GR 1910-36), the uncrowned Edward VIII (EVIIR 1936), George VI (GVIR 1936-1952) and Elizabeth II (EIIR 1952 to present). The George V cipher consists only of the initials GR, the regnal number (V) was omitted.



A – the pre-1991 EIIR pillar-type post box on Main Street, embossed with POST OFFICE.
 B – the post-1991 EIIR pillar-type post box at Dhu Varren, Portstewart Road, embossed with ROYAL MAIL.
 C – the Type K box on Dunluce Street.

All but two post boxes in Portrush carry the insignia of Elizabeth II. The two that do not are from the reign of George VI. These GVIR boxes are situated at the north end of Ballywillan Road and on Hopefield Avenue.



A – the G VIR pillar-type post box on Hopefield Avenue.
B – the G VIR pillar-type post box at the north end of Ballywillan Road,
C – the G VIR cipher on the Ballywillan Road box.

As a result of organisational changes within the Post Office the name ROYAL MAIL began to appear on post boxes from 1991. Prior to that they were embossed with POST OFFICE. So, on EIIR boxes it is usually easy to tell whether the box pre-dates or post-dates that year.

Two of the Portrush boxes post-date 1991 – at Dhu Varren, Portstewart Road; and outside the Hillcrest Post Office. Another more modern looking design can be seen on Dunluce Street. This box does not carry either the name ROYAL MAIL or POST OFFICE. It is a type of box that was in production from the early 1980s until 2000 and is known as a Type K box. Although the box had a much smoother look and a recessed aperture within the door, it did not prove to be a popular design and was discontinued. It also lacked the distinctive domed top with the fluted ‘pie crust’ edge, said to facilitate rainwater run-off.

The tall and cylindrical free-standing post box (generally known as a Pillar Box) is the most numerous type of box and Portrush has eight of these, although with design/age differences as noted above. Other styles of post box are also in use. There are three so-called Lamp Boxes and one Wall Box in Portrush. The former type derives its name from the fact that it was designed to be fixed to lamp posts.



Three lamp-type post boxes: **A** - Carrick Dhu caravan park, Ballyreagh Road, **B** – south end of Ballywillan Road, near the cemetery, **C** – at the Harbour. Each box carries the modern EIIR cipher. On **A** and **C** a detachable metal plate above the aperture states ROYAL MAIL the plate is missing from the box labelled **B**. Far right- the only wall-type post box in Portrush is on the gatepost at the entrance to the former Strandmore House on Causeway Street. The name POST OFFICE is embossed on the aperture protector.



The Lamp Boxes on Ballyreagh Road and at the harbour are mounted on the top of short poles, while that on Ballywillan Road is fixed to a concrete fence post. All three are of the same design and two carry a detachable metal plate bearing the name ROYAL MAIL – suggesting that they probably post-date 1991. The single Wall Box is to be found on Causeway Street at the entrance to the former Strandmore House. This box is embossed with the name POST OFFICE and thus pre-dates 1991. Production of wall boxes ceased in 1980, so that style of box never had the ROYAL MAIL branding.

Irrespective of their age or style post boxes are iconic items of street furniture. Some would say that Pillar Boxes in particular are one of the most recognisable symbols of the nation, but all post boxes enhance the character and appearance of their local area. Post boxes of one type or another have been serving the public for over 150 years and, hopefully, will continue to do so for many years to come. We all probably take post boxes for granted, but next time you use a box spend a few moments looking at the bright red receptacle and consider its place in the history and heritage of the town.

Some Post Box facts

- In Northern Ireland there are 87 post boxes dating from the reign of Queen Victoria, 79 date from the reign of Edward VII, 166 date from the reign of George V, 1 dates from the reign of Edward VIII (this box is now in safe storage), 96 date from the reign of George VI and approximately 2000 carry the insignia of the present Queen.
- The earliest post boxes were painted red, but in 1859 this was changed to a bronze-green livery. These boxes were unobtrusive and consequently difficult to see. As a result of complaints from the public it was specified, in 1874, that all boxes should be repainted red, but it took ten years to complete the task.
- The red colour is known as Royal Mail red and is colour reference no. 538BS381C. Black is used for the base of pillar-type boxes and is colour reference no. 00E53, BS4800.
- To celebrate the success of GB and NI gold medallists at the 2012 London Olympics and Paralympics a post box in the home town of each was painted gold. These remain gold in recognition of the positive public reaction. Northern Ireland has gold boxes - in Eglington, Seaforde and Glengormley.
- During 2020 a post box on the Falls Road, Belfast, was painted blue in support of the NHS during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Across the UK there are 115,000 post boxes and Royal Mail claim that 98% of addresses are within half a mile of one.
- The Victorian era witnessed a great variety of post-box designs. This has been matched in the Elizabethan era and includes use of materials other than cast iron.

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