

Post Boxes Martin Robinson on the process

IN JUNE 2008 Royal Mail approached me to act as a consultant on a proposed issue of post boxes stamps to be issued in August 2009. Quite what this would involve wasn't clear at first, but within a short time it emerged that it would mean coming up with a range of ideas and supplying images and text for the stamps and associated products: miniature sheet, presentation pack, generic sheet, first day cover and filler. In the end this took eight months from first ideas to finished articles, and I was surprised by the complexity of the process, which involved exchanging countless phone calls, emails, paper documents and CDs, not to mention wracking the brain for ideas and hunting for suitable images.

I am not sure who first suggested the idea of this set of stamps, but someone proposed 2009 as the bicentenary of the introduction of the post box, using as evidence the Wakefield letter box, which bears the date 1809. Of course it's not quite as simple as that, and although we know that posting apertures of various kinds began to appear at post offices in the early 19th century, and very probably before, it is impossible to say which is the earliest. However we agreed in the end that the Wakefield box was the earliest dated survivor.

The stamps were originally to feature wall letter boxes, pillar boxes having been the subject of a special issue in 2002, but this was thought to be too restrictive a title, and 'post boxes' was eventually chosen, although a purist might argue that 'post' and 'pillar' are synonymous. I pointed out that the Letter Box Study Group's classification of letter boxes consists of pillar boxes, wall boxes, Ludlow wall boxes and lamp boxes; bracket boxes are included in the wall box category. Other wall boxes include locally-made carpenter's boxes and non-standard ones made to fit into the façade of particular post office buildings. In the end all of these have been included, if not on the stamps then in the presentation pack or generic sheet.

The first main problem was that of narrowing down the choice, and the answer involved some compromises. I suggested a number of possible criteria, eg: one from each region; one from each reign; representative types; important developments; picturesque settings; rare Victorian survivals.

If we assumed that the Wakefield box was to be included, this left three others to be chosen. I thought a regional choice would be difficult and that it was much more important to include representative types. My own preference would have been to include a First National Standard box, a Ludlow box and one other. The best known surviving First National Standard is the one at the Old Post Office, Tintagel. There are several good-looking Ludlows: an original Victorian one in Sherborne (it still has its VR enamel plate, whilst others have been replaced with later ciphers); a fine EVIIR one in Ledbury; and a unique EVIIR one in Bawdsey (but perhaps Her Majesty would not look upon that one with favour). The last choice was the most difficult, but should perhaps go to a more modern example to redress the balance. Perhaps a GVR box, an EIIIR with 10in aperture, one with a Scottish crown, or a bracket box.



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behind this new special issue

My initial choice was the Wakefield box (pre-Victorian); a First National Standard (Victorian); a Ludlow (EVIIIR) and a GVR box (representative of commoner types). I submitted a CD with a number of photos for consideration, listed opposite.

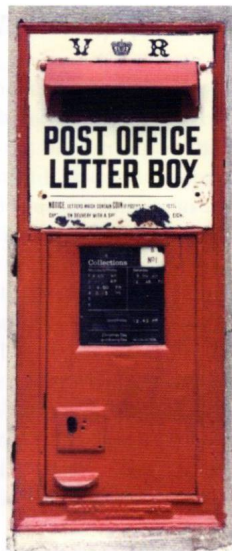
It was agreed that all the boxes chosen should be good-looking, and I regret that the lamp box chosen is in dire need of a paint job, but perhaps rust adds to its picturesqueness. (Marcus James, Royal Mail's Head of Design, comments: 'The rust on the box was left in the image as it was felt that the images should be authentic and true to how the boxes are. We all felt this gave the boxes a certain amount of character, and made them seem real.'). Being primarily interested in different kinds of letter boxes, most of the photos I was able to supply concentrate on the box in question, and I liked the approach used for the 2002 pillar box stamps, beautifully engraved by Czeslaw Slania, an outline of the box on a white background with a close-up of a detail. Design consultants Elmwood produced a series of different designs – some focused purely on the box, with no background, some showing the box with technical illustration and others showing the box smaller, in a broader shot of the surroundings. When these were presented to the Stamp Advisory Committee they felt that showing the box in its immediate surroundings was the most engaging route, and it was agreed that the image should be as close as possible, to ensure that detail on the box would be visible, but still retain enough of its surroundings to put the box in context. This was the right decision, I suppose, given that the stamps need to appeal to as wide an audience as possible. Most of my photos show (a) a close-up and (b) a general view. What Royal Mail wanted was something in between, with more background than was visible on most of my photos, so the boxes chosen would need to be re-photographed bearing this in mind.

It was also agreed after this first submission that the stamps should show boxes of different reigns, have a variety of backgrounds (brick, greenery, stone, etc) which were interesting but not too distracting (leaving the box as the 'hero', was the word used) and not interfering with the overlaid text. They should be good examples, not damaged, redundant or deficient; they should make a set of four but not be too similar; and they should still be in situ. I was now asked to suggest four boxes of each type, and provide exact directions for a professional photographer, Peter Marlow (who was also responsible for the stamps issued in 2008 for the tercentenary of St Paul's



First suggestions First National Standard, Old Post Office, Tintagel • Standard Victorian wall box • Ditto, with modified aperture • Edward VII with full-length door • George V medium box, large cipher, York • Elizabeth II box, roin aperture • Elizabeth II box, Scottish crown • VR Ludlow box, Sherborne • Edward VII Ludlow, Ledbury • Unique Edward VIII Ludlow, Bawdsley (above left) • Bracket box, Llandrindod Wells • Wall-mounted lamp box near Bethlehem, Llandeilo • Wakefield receiving house box • Early receiving house box, Lyme Regis • Carpenter's box, Blanchland • Carpenter's box, Lowsonford (above right) • VR box in 'wayside shrine', Rous Lench

From left: a small Victorian wall box at Cruckmeole, Shrewsbury; E11R wall box with Scottish crown, Kelso; and 1887 Eagle Range & Foundry Co sub post office box, Sherborne, Dorset.



Compromise list: VR Old Post Office, Tintagel (First national standard. WB72, 1857) • Rock of Gibraltar Inn, Enslow, Woodstock (WB75, 1861) • Cruckmeole, Shrewsbury (WB87, 1882) (above, left) • Burmarsh Road, Hythe (First lamp box. LB201, 1896) • Farmers, Bethlehem, Llandeilo (Ditto, plainer background)

Later Trewarmett, Tintagel (WB90, 1901) • Windsor Castle (WB92, 1905) • Wellington Road/Greek Street, Stockport (Same type box as previous) • Weedon, Northants (WB93, 1905)

E2R Slaithwaite PSO (WB114, 1957) • Forestfield, Kelso (Scottish crown, above centre) (WB115S, 1952) • North Road/Crossgate, Durham (WB116, 1957) • East Chinnock PO (Ludlow box, but E2R version looks different from earlier ones)

Ludlow Long Street, Sherborne (LWB152, 1887) (above at right) • St Mary's TSO, Bedford (LWB153, 1885) • Burton Overy PO, Leicester (LWB170, 1937) • Bodiam PO (LWB164, 1901)

Cathedral; this must have been a different sort of assignment!), who would appreciate their being conveniently grouped. Now you can understand how ideal choices are subject to compromise, and how many attractive boxes ruled themselves out for one reason or another.

Of our 100,000 letter boxes, ROME C removes or replaces 3,000 a year, repaints 38,000 and repairs 11,000 so there was no guarantee that boxes nominated were still the same as on my photos – some dating back 30 years or more – or even still be there. Trying to bear in mind as much of the above as possible, I offered a compromise list (see left), and did not express any preferences.

Using these suggestions, and other boxes suggested by Elmwood, Peter Marlow took a series of recce photos of lots of different boxes. These were then assessed for their visual merit and appropriateness before he went ahead and took the final shots. And so we come to the four boxes that were finally chosen. Early on it had been decided

that the Wakefield box would not be featured on any of the stamps, even though it had been the inspiration for the set. (Marcus James comments: 'It was moved to the border of the miniature sheet as the set worked better by having boxes of a similar format that were still in use.' Philip Parker, Head of Stamp Policy, comments: 'It was deemed more appropriate to use working boxes on the stamps, rather than the posting slot which is no longer in use.')

POST BOXES

The earliest known surviving posting slot was placed in the wall of Wakefield Post Office in 1809. Britain's first roadside pillar boxes appeared in the early 1850s but, in more remote and less populated areas, a cheaper and more practical alternative was needed, resulting in the development of smaller post boxes. Initially, they were installed in walls, buildings or brick pillars; later designs were also attached to lamp posts.

EARLY POSTING SLOT
WAKEFIELD



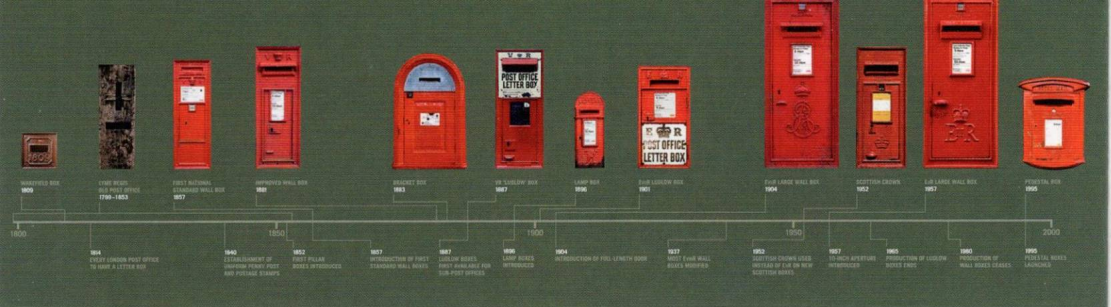
1st George v Type B (medium) wall letter box manufactured by W T Allen & Co Ltd, London, 1933-36. In the reign of George v (1910-36) wall boxes were manufactured by Allen; McDowell, Steven & Co, Glasgow; and Andrew Handyside & Co, Derby; later Derby Castings Ltd. They bear the maker's name at the bottom and can be distinguished by various details including the size of the royal cipher. There are three sizes: large, medium and small (A, B and C) and the same without collection plates (D, E and F).

56p Edward VII small Ludlow letter box manufactured by James Ludlow & Co, Birmingham, 1901-10. These boxes with distinctive enamel plates were made specifically for use at sub post offices. The same firm made the boxes in large and small sizes from 1885 to 1965. In the reign of Edward VII (1901-10) they were made with or without the recessed collection plate.

81p Victorian lamp letter box manufactured by Andrew Handyside & Co, Derby, 1896. Lamp boxes were made originally to be hung on street lamp posts, but were also built into walls. The original box of 1896 bears the word **LETTERS**, but from later that year this was changed to **LETTERS ONLY**.

90p Elizabeth II large (Type A) wall letter box, manufacturer unknown, 1962/63. From 1952 wall letter boxes were manufactured in large and small sizes, with and without collection plates, and with the **EIR** cipher or Scottish crown. From 1957 the aperture was increased from 8 to 10 inches. Manufacturers were McDowell, Steven; W T Allen, Allied Ironfounders, Falkirk; Lion Foundry, Kirkintilloch; and Carron Co, Falkirk. This particular box is a bit of a mystery: unusually it bears no manufacturer's name and is almost certainly an experimental version made of fibreglass in 1962/63, when the Post Office was investigating possible new materials. ▶

The Post Boxes miniature sheet issued 18 August. The four boxes featured are to be found at (from left): Cookham Rise; Bodiam former PO; Burmarsh Road, Hythe; and Slaitwhaite PSO.



Featured in the presentation pack are a timeline showing key boxes (top), and a panel of photographs old and new, including one of Ringwood Post Office in Hampshire, in Edwardian days.

Presentation pack and generic sheet These next items to be considered would both need lots more images. For the pack, I suggested a general introduction covering the whole range of letter boxes; the development of the Victorian wall box and its various improvements; boxes from Edward VII to Elizabeth II, including Edward VIII; different sizes and manufacturers; with/without collection plates; introduction of the full-length door; modified apertures; Scottish crowns; 10in apertures; Ludlow boxes; lamp boxes and eventually pedestal boxes. In the end the sections were: the first letter boxes, Ludlow boxes, roadside boxes, developing the standard wall box, and wall boxes from Edward VII to Elizabeth II.

An edited version of this text was used for the first day cover's filler card. There were very lengthy discussions about captions and text, even the little bit which appears on the miniature sheet, which is to my mind still unsatisfactory, but in the end compromise was again the order of the day.

In addition there is a timeline illustrating key boxes from the 1809 Wakefield box to the pedestal box of 1995, and a panel consisting of images of a whole variety of boxes old and new. It would have been nice to involve the Letter Box Study Group in the choice of these, as well as at other points in the process, but in the event the urgent requirements of successive deadlines made this impractical. However I did ask the Group for approval to use a few images based on its long-running series of postcard reprints, some of which add a social dimension to mere letter box images.

A further 20 images were required for the generic sheet, and these are a mixture of key boxes, rarities, typical and picturesque locations, famous settings (Land's End, Windsor Castle, Tintagel, the summit of Snowdon), details such as royal ciphers, and old postcards. Between the generic sheet, the presentation pack and the first day cover there are 50 images of as wide a range of boxes as you could wish to see. The aim of the exercise was to present the iconic quality of British post boxes, in a way likely to appeal to specialist and non-specialist, and I hope that collectors will be pleased with the results, as well as enjoying some insight into the making of a stamp issue. I am grateful to Royal Mail for the chance to be involved in the process and for contributing to this article, which first appeared in the Spring edition of the Letter Box Study Group's Newsletter •

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