



Royal Mail Letter Boxes

A Joint Policy Statement by Royal Mail and English Heritage



Royal Mail



ENGLISH HERITAGE



This pillar box is as stylish now as it was in 1938. Such boxes will continue to add richness, colour and historical depth to the national street scene. © Consignia plc. Image courtesy of Heritage Services.

ROYAL MAIL LETTER BOXES

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Royal Mail letter boxes are a cherished feature of the British street scene. As well as being in daily operational use for an essential public service, they are national icons and a highly distinctive part of our environment. Currently there are over 85,000 in England alone. The vast majority make a very significant contribution to the character and appearance of the areas in which they are located. In recognition of this and to mark the 150th anniversary of Britain's first letter box, English Heritage and Royal Mail, with the approval of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), have agreed a joint policy for the retention and conservation of all Royal Mail letter boxes. This policy follows the recommendation set out in *Power of Place: The future of the historic environment* (English Heritage 2000) that wherever possible historic buildings and structures should be retained by agreement with their owners rather than relying solely on statutory designation and this advice is endorsed in *A Force for Our Future* (DCMS 2001).

LETTER BOXES – A BRIEF HISTORY

The Royal Mail letter box was introduced following the 1840 postal reform, which provided for a universal affordable postage rate. This was easily pre-payable by means of the new

adhesive stamps. However, letters still had to be taken to the nearest letter receiving office, which could be miles away. This led to the need for many more convenient places where stamped letters could be posted. The novelist Anthony Trollope, who was a General Post Office (GPO) official, provided



This illustration from the *Illustrated London News* shows London's first pillar box on the corner of Fleet Street and Farringdon Street in 1855. © Consignia plc. Image courtesy of Heritage Services.



Small lamp-post boxes – first introduced in 1896 – are especially common in rural locations.
© Letter Box Study Group

the solution: the adoption of the continental system of placing locked cast-iron pillar boxes at the roadside and the provision of regular collection times. His scheme began in the Channel Islands in 1852 and was extended to the mainland in 1853.

The first letter boxes were hexagonal in form, but a wide variety of other designs quickly appeared. In 1859 an improved cylindrical design was created for standard use nationwide. This design had its posting aperture positioned beneath a cap for greater protection from rainwater. This standardised design of 1859 was itself soon followed by a variety of new designs: the elegant hexagonal Penfold box with a cap decorated with acanthus leaves (1866); a simple pillar surmounted by a cap with a dentil frieze around its edge (1879); and a large oval version of the simple pillar box form with separate apertures for town and country letters (1899).

From 1857 wall box-type letter boxes came into use for fixing into existing walls. Small lamp-post boxes were first introduced in 1896 for use in London squares and later in other areas, particularly rural locations. By 1860 over 2,000 roadside letter boxes had been set up in all parts of the United Kingdom; by the end of the century there were over 33,500, with many more found throughout the British Empire.

Since 1852 the main changes have been those of design and manufacture. Experimental designs have included a rectangular shape of 1968 and a radically different cylindrical design of 1980. However, new pillar-type letter boxes presently being produced reflect the same design and patterns that have served so well for 123 years: a simple cast-iron pillar with a cap and a double aperture oval box for town and city centre use.

POLICY GUIDANCE

Statutory Requirements

- Royal Mail has a statutory right to place and retain letter boxes in the street under paragraph 1, Schedule 6 of the *Postal Services Act 2000*. Ownership remains with Royal Mail. The consent of the Highway Authority is not required for the installation of a letter box on the public highway, but in practice Royal Mail will always liaise with the Highway Authority and obtain its clearance for the proposed box prior to installation.
- Planning permission is not normally required for the installation of a letter box. Letter boxes have deemed planning permission by virtue of the *Town & Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995*, as amended.
- A Street Works Licence is not required for the installation of a letter 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 letter box. In the absence

of any agreement, letter 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 letter box and make good the site.

Listing

In 1972 the Department of the Environment – the government department then dealing with the listing process – recognised that some rare early examples of pillar-type letter boxes dating from the period 1852–79, such as hexagonal Penfold letter boxes, were of special architectural or historic interest. Since then probably all of these surviving early examples have been listed. In addition some wall boxes have been included as a result of being part of the listed structure in which they are set. A total of 198 boxes of various different types are listed at present in England. However, following discussions between English Heritage and Royal Mail, a policy has been agreed for the retention of all letter boxes in operational service at their existing locations, unless certain exceptional circumstances necessitate their relocation. This therefore reduces very considerably the need to add boxes to the statutory list. Thus, while the current Royal Mail policy remains in place, as a general rule the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport sees no reason to revise the current criteria for listing letter boxes and will no longer add further letter boxes to the list unless exceptional circumstances apply.

Relocation or Removal

- Royal Mail policy is for the retention of all letter boxes in operational service in their existing positions.
- If any problems arise with regard to individual examples, those concerned should approach the Royal Mail Collection Manager for the relevant postal district in the first instance. In the event of continuing uncertainty or an unresolved disagreement, the conservation officer of the local planning authority should be consulted for advice. The matter should then also be drawn to the attention of the National Street Furniture Manager, Royal Mail.
- The relocation of letter boxes will normally only be agreed if reasonably required by a highway authority or other site owner, or if relocation is needed for an important operational reason. Operational grounds justifying the relocation of a letter box may include cases where changes in the street make it no longer convenient or safe for the public to use the letter 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 letter box.
- In the case of letter 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 letter box for its physical protection and an appropriate new site has been identified, listed building consent should not normally be withheld.
- Whether listed or not, if a letter box of historic interest is removed from its original site it should, so far as is practicable, be reinstated within the same locality. If it is no longer fit for operational use, it should be offered to a local museum or other appropriate local institution as an exhibit, exhibited at local Royal Mail premises or placed with the Royal Mail Heritage Collection.
- Where relocation is proposed, prior written notification should always be made to the conservation officer in the planning department or the appropriate contact in the highways department of the relevant local authority. This should ensure that careful consideration is given to the need to relocate the box and assist in identifying an appropriate new site.



This letter box in Swinstead, South Kesteven, Lincolnshire, has the added protection of being installed on a listed building. Photograph taken from English Heritage's Images of England website, UID 194195; © Mr David H Schofield LRPS



Careful provision is made for the maintenance of letter boxes installed in privately owned properties. © Philip Davies

a colour other than red. These conditions are frequently agreed to by site owners, where their main objection is loss of privacy resulting from the operational use of the box.

- Pouch boxes will no longer be attached to letter boxes; where this has occurred in the past, they will be progressively removed.

Decoration and Maintenance

- All Royal Mail letter boxes will be painted in standard red and black livery. No variation is allowed, except in very exceptional circumstances where there are genuine historical reasons, such as the use of green and black livery for some early boxes or Air Force blue for surviving George VI airmail boxes.

- Letter boxes are painted every three years. Local circumstances may require

some boxes to be painted more frequently (eg locations – such as coastal sites – where abnormal levels of deterioration occur). All paint must be lead-free and of the correct specification (Royal Mail red, colour ref no. 538 BS381C and Black, colour ref no. 00E 53, BS4800).

- A number of local authorities have attempted to apply unsuitable anti-graffiti finishes to letter boxes. These anti-graffiti coatings are wholly inappropriate for letter boxes and are not permitted. Royal Mail has developed its own high-quality anti-graffiti finish, but this is only suitable for pouch boxes and new letter boxes. All other letter boxes will be painted using lead-free gloss paint.

- The highlighting of specific features on letter boxes, such as the Royal

- The removal of all letter boxes should be carried out by Royal Mail technicians or by contractors appointed and supervised by them and not by any other contractor. (Special care and techniques have to be used in removing cast-iron boxes to avoid damage because they are often quite brittle and prone to shatter.)

- Wherever practicable, a letter box of any type that has been removed and not immediately relocated will be retained for future operational use, following any necessary refurbishment.

- A letter 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 letter 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 letter boxes where possible.

- In recent years Royal Mail has received an increasing number of requests from the owners of private property for the removal of wall boxes installed at their premises. If the wall box concerned is not listed nor of local historical interest, Royal Mail have 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*. Royal Mail will arrange for the aperture to be sealed and usually for the box to be painted in



The letter box on the right is a rare George VI airmail box painted in the correct Air Force blue. These letter boxes are located outside Windsor Castle. © Philip Davies



Letter boxes are a cherished feature of the British street scene. Gold highlighting, as seen on this letter box in Liverpool, is only allowed where there is historic justification. © Rosalind J Wicks

cypher and crown in gold, is not normally allowed other than in exceptional circumstances on some pillar boxes where there is historic justification. Where gold highlighting is used, it should be applied to the Royal cypher and crown only. No other graphic elements or wording on the box (eg 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. The use of gold paint is not permitted.

- Surviving oval enamel Post Office directions signs on the caps of some pillar boxes are increasingly rare and normally should be repaired and restored rather than removed.
- Robust fault reporting systems must be put in place to ensure the speedy repair and maintenance of letter boxes.
- Letter boxes should be washed regularly to ensure a smart appearance. Special arrangements may be necessary for boxes that are sited on busy roads where dirt can accumulate quickly. These 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 a letter box.

CONCLUSION

This joint policy statement will be particularly useful for Royal Mail staff responsible for the management and maintenance of the national stock of letter boxes; for local authority planning, conservation and highways staff; for those involved in managing change for the local amenity societies; for interest groups; and for the general public. Royal Mail letter 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 letter boxes of all types.



Rare enamel signs, such as this Post Office sign, are normally repaired and restored rather than removed. © Consignia plc. Image courtesy of Heritage Services.

FURTHER READING

The extensive records maintained within the Royal Mail group archives and by Royal Mail Heritage Services, together with the *grand catalogues* compiled by the Letter Box Study Group, mean that letter boxes are well documented. Useful further references include:

History

Aaron, H 1987. *Street Furniture*, 2 edn.

Princes Risborough: Shire

Farrugia, JY 1969. *The Letter Box: A history of Post Office pillar and wall boxes*. Fontwell: Centaur Press

Glancey, J 1989. *Pillar Boxes*. Chatto & Windus

Letter Box Study Group. *Grand Catalogues 2002*

Robinson, H 1953. *Britain's Post Office: A history of development from the beginnings to the present day*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Robinson, M 2000. *Old Letter Boxes*, 2 edn. Princes Risborough: Shire
— 1988. *A Guide to Rare British Letter Boxes*. Letter Box Study Group

Policy

Department of the Environment /
Department of National Heritage
1994. *Planning Policy Guidance: Planning and the historic environment (PPG 15)*. London: HMSO

English Heritage 2000. *Streets for All: A guide to the management of London's streets*. London: English Heritage

FURTHER INFORMATION

Further information on Royal Mail letter boxes manufactured and installed from 1853–1974 can be obtained from:

The Letter Box Study Group
c/o The Membership Secretary
38 Leopold Avenue
Handsworth Wood
Birmingham B20 1ES
Email: enquiry@lbsg.org
Web: www.lbsg.org

Other relevant information can be obtained from:

Royal Mail Group Heritage Services
Freeling House
Phoenix Place
Mount Pleasant
London WC1X 0DL
Tel: 020 7239 2570
Search room open Mon to Fri 9.00 am to 4.15 pm (except Bank Holidays and Christmas week)

USEFUL CONTACTS

The National Street Furniture Manager
Royal Mail Service Delivery
South East Anglia Mail Centre
Winsford Way
Chelmsford CM2 5AA
Tel: 01245 234835

Royal Mail Environment Group
11th Floor
Impact House
2 Edridge Road
Croydon CR9 1PJ
Tel: 020 8681 9041
Fax: 020 8681 9148

Images of England
National Monuments Record Centre
Kemble Drive
Swindon SN2 2GZ
Tel: 01793 414779
Email: ioenquiry@english-heritage.org.uk
Web: www.imagesofengland.org.uk

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*Cover image: Letter boxes are national icons and a highly distinctive part of our environment. This fluted pillar box of 1856 is Grade II Listed and found in the Malvern Hills, Worcestershire. Photograph taken from English Heritage's Images of England website, UID 152138;
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