

THE RED TELEPHONE BOX – A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

By David Gafney, Chapmanslade History Group

A Village Landmark

With regard to recent discussions in the Parish Council about possible removal of our red telephone box which is located at the east end of the village, I thought it might be of interest to look into the history of an object which has been part of the British landscape for most of our lives.



The telephone was invented in 1876 and, remarkably, the first public telephone kiosks appeared only eight years later. Some of these were quite flimsy, being constructed in wood. Different areas of the country were served by a number of private companies and designs and standards varied. In 1924 The General Post Office asked the Royal Fine Arts Commission to run a limited-entry competition for the design of a new box, to be installed nationwide. Three architects were invited to take part and the winner was **Giles Gilbert Scott** (1880-1960), grandson of Sir George Gilbert Scott, the designer of the Albert Memorial and St Pancras Station Hotel. Although only 44 Giles Gilbert Scott was already a successful architect, an early commission being the Liverpool Anglican Cathedral which he also won in competition. He later designed Battersea power station. His grandfather was a great exponent of the high gothic revival style but Giles worked in a more eclectic range of styles with some gothic, classical and a formalised modern. The closest example of his work to Chapmanslade is the catholic church of Our Lady & St Alphege in Bath built in 1927 and described by the Bath architectural historian, Michael Forsyth, in the Pevsner Architectural Guide to Bath, as a building that “cannot fail to astonish and delight”. It was one of Scott's favourite works.

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A Winning Design

With regard to his competition entry Scott chose a classical design. The competition invitation arrived at the time when Scott had been made a trustee of the Sir John Soane museum. Soane (1753-1837) was an architect practising a century before Scott, an eminent architect of his time but also one who exerted a long lasting influence due to his adoption of a thoughtful pared-down classical style which was later much copied by others. In passing, I should add that the Soane museum still exists in Lincoln's Inn Field and it is well worth a visit. It was Soane's home, designed and extended by himself. He was discerning collector, although many exhibits reflect the Victorian obsession with death and mourning. The collection includes a number of fine paintings, Piranesi engravings and Hogarth's Rakes Progress. The latter being behind folding screens.

Architecture can be a cut-throat business at times with architects vying for preferment. Fashions also change quickly. At the peak of Soane's career in 1815 Soane returned to London from Somerset where he had been checking the progress of works he had designed for Thomas Horner at Mells Park to find his wife Eliza, unwell and distraught from reading a published article titled *The present low state of the arts in England and more particularly of Architecture*, which was a veiled attack on Soane. This was made worse by the suspicion that it was written by their younger son George, and the publisher later confirmed this. Within days Eliza died and Soane was convinced that their son's article contributed to her death, and he never forgave him. Soane designed her tomb, located in what is now St Pancras Gardens and it is this tomb that many believe was Scott's inspiration for the telephone box; as can perhaps be seen from the photograph.



The winning design went through a number of versions, including some made of concrete, but eventually the design known as the Jubilee Kiosk, or more prosaically, the K2, became the fixture in almost every town and village in the UK plus overseas in Malta, Bermuda and Gibraltar. It is regarded as a British cultural icon throughout the world and, in 2006, it was voted one of Britain's top 10 design icons alongside the mini, supermarine spitfire, London tube map, world wide web, Concorde and the routemaster bus. Note that it is the only one of the examples that is fixed in place. Scott originally intended that the box should be coloured silver externally and greenish-blue internally but Post Office red was chosen "for its visibility and compatibility with dirt". This raised controversy in rural areas, especially the Cotswolds, where locals felt that the bright colour was alien to the muted pastoral tints of the countryside and here softer colours such as cream were adopted. Cream was also used in Kingston upon Hull where the telephone system remained in private hands and in historically, sensitive, urban areas more subtle colour schemes appeared and this is still the case in the City of Bath.



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A Familiar Landmark

A number of urban features of the landscape have disappeared over the last century such as tram tracks, overhead cables for trolley buses, cobbled streets, factory chimneys, pit stacks and many others, mostly in the cause of progress, but the general appearance of villages such as Chapmanslade has changed little. The telephone box is a familiar landmark and, although not having the significance of a listed building or monument it still provides a tangible heritage asset, mainly due to its historical relevance as set out above plus its emotive value in the memories of people who depended on it in the past as shown in the following two reminiscences.

Brian Macken, a member of Chapmanslade History Group, told Terry Rose that, before and after the war, motorists driving through the village along the B3098 would stop along the road from the (cream coloured) 'phone box to buy a newspaper and cigarettes from his grandfather's Bottom Shop, which was located where no. 52 is now. They would study the racing pages then use the telephone to place their bets. Brian said, that when he was a boy it was his job to rush out of the shop if the telephone rang then locate the person who was being called. When he was older, in the mid 1950's he would use it to ring his girlfriend (his wife to be) on her village phone in Cranmore to arrange dates. It should be noted that Brian was referring to the first telephone box in Chapmanslade, probably a rural K1 design, which was installed in the early 1930's with a telephone number of *Chapmanslade 35*.

Adam Oakley maintains that the first ever user of the new box was his Father who used it to announce the birth of his son. This would date the installation of our red box to the mid 60's. Variants of the original K2 design having taken many years to reach rural districts.

Alternative Uses - Iconic Street Furniture

In recent years unused red boxes – unlike the box in Chapmanslade which at the time of writing is still in working order using a pre-paid phone card - have been used for various forms of street furniture and even as art installations. Some alternative uses are: public access defibrillator, miniature coffee shop, card machine, mini library / book swop, vending machine.



Phone box examples: A library and an Art installation (Kingston upon Thames)

Refer also to page 84 of 'A History of Chapmanslade' by Chapmanslade History Group 2019, edited by Joyce Jefferson.