

Oswaldkirk Telephone box — it's history and restoration

Before



After



Our telephone box has stood just outside The Old Post Office on the main street of Oswaldkirk for many years, and by 2010 time had taken its toll. It was displaying the usual badges of neglect - the sun-faded and heavily peeling paintwork, creeping corrosion of the ironwork and a selection of opaque plastic windows that had been used to replace the original broken glass. It had one further problem: it was leaning at rather a dramatic angle, and some said that it was too far gone to bother with.

So, when British Telecom offered it to the Village for £1, we had to find out exactly what we would be buying if, that is, we bought it at all.

Initial research revealed that we had a 'K6' (Kiosk number six) designed in 1936 by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott to commemorate the silver jubilee of King George V. The K6 was the first red telephone kiosk to be extensively used outside London, and many thousands (19,000 in 1936) were deployed in virtually every town and city, replacing most of the existing kiosks and establishing thousands of new sites. Over 40,000 more were to follow over the next 35 years. So when did ours arrive? Time to bring in Oswaldkirk's 'Time Team'.

The most obvious clue was the crown cast on the top of each face for, when Queen Elizabeth came to the throne in 1952, it was changed



from the Tudor Crown of George V to either the Scottish Crown or St Edward's Crown. And from 1955 to 1965 the crown was on a removable slotted tablet. Proudly sporting the Tudor Crown and with no removable tablet, ours must therefore be pre-1952.

Several sources of information suggested that we had a pre-war version, probably one of the earliest production runs for, as part of the 1936 'Jubilee Concession', towns and villages with a Post Office were allowed to apply for a kiosk. The

8,000 boxes from this programme have the entry and exit holes for the cable runs on opposite sides of the rear base of the box. Just like ours. Final confirmation came when our wonderful village historian produced a post card from 1937 showing the Post Office andthe telephone box!

The next set of information came as quite a surprise. It was when we started scraping off the many layers of paint back down to the cast iron surface that we started to expose traces of white paint which seemed to

be 'etched' into the surface. As the paint fell away, it gradually revealed a complete reference number, reading; '4 D171' in



figures about 4 cm high.

In true archaeologist style we took photographs and, still not realising what we were seeing, continued on to the panel to its right, only to

reveal another set of figures, '5 D171'. Ah ha! It started to make sense.



This is telephone box 'D171' and the first number is the panel number to help in the construction. It was very satisfying when the panel to the left of where we had started revealed '2 D171'. We have subsequently found and recorded the serial number of every panel.

So what is the significance of 'D171'? If you think that the above is technical, just wait for this next bit.....

We learned that in the construction of K6 telephone kiosks the 'D' refers to the location of the door, as follows:

Kiosks No 6A - door fitted opposite back panel and hinged left;
Kiosks No 6B - door fitted opposite back panel and hinged right;
Kiosks No 6C - door fitted on the left hand panel and hinged left;
Kiosks No 6D - door fitted on the right hand panel and hinged right.

Since our kiosk stands very close to the kerb, an A or B type would open straight onto the road, so it made sense that our kiosk should be a D type with the door fitting on the right and hinged on the right.

So all we are left with is the '171'. It could confirm that this is one of the early ones (171 of 8,000 ?) but more research is still needed on this.

The only other piece of information on the box is the foundry plate at the bottom of the back panel



which reads "Lion Foundry Co. Ltd., Kirkintilloch". This company began in 1884 and was one of five manufacturers contracted to build the K6, but the abandonment of cast iron kiosks by British Telecom when it was privatised in 1984 signalled the end of the foundry's existence. Perhaps the '171' is a reference used by them.

One more identification clue was discovered towards the end of the restoration when we removed the inside back board to reveal 'No 6 GPO LF36/1'.

Current thinking is that 'No 6 GPO' is self explanatory; 'LF' refers to Lion Foundry and '36/ 1' means January 1936.

So WHY did the village unite to save our telephone box, even though it had been de-commissioned because of low utilisation?

For many people born before 1960, the K6 telephone box has become an icon. The nation's strength of feeling is demonstrated by the fact that some 2,500 of the remaining 14,000 or so have been granted Grade II listing. Furthermore, a quick trawl of the Internet also reveals the enthusiasm for the K6, including a number of companies supplying not just new parts for every single component, but completely refurbished boxes for the collector at £3,000-£5,000.

From the very beginning of the Village's discussions about whether we should save it, personal stories had been emerging about the central part our kiosk played in individual lives over the past 76 years. Even while we were working on it, more stories were told to us and so, as it was the 60th Jubilee Year of Queen Elizabeth II, it was felt to be highly appropriate that we mark such an event by restoring something that had formed such a central part, both geographically and sociologically, in our village community - specially when that 'something' was created to commemorate the Jubilee of Her Majesty's grandfather.

However, there was one further quite amazing 'local' link that we discovered. It goes back to the designer of the K6 in 1935. As already noted, the person who was given the task was Sir Giles Gilbert Scott (1880 - 1960). Apart from his design of the K6, this architect is perhaps best known for his work on such structures as Liverpool Cathedral, Waterloo Bridge and Battersea Power Station. However, he was also responsible for some projects only a couple of miles away from Oswaldkirk, notably the new church at Ampleforth Abbey and the extensions to Junior House at Ampleforth College.

How did we do it??

The view of the volunteer team was that if we were going to keep the K6 as an important and prominent piece of street furniture it deserved to be restored to the highest standard we could achieve.



The first task was to contact The North Yorkshire Moors National Park Authority to find out if any grant was available and, luckily, there was.



Once the decision had been made to give the box the recognition it deserved, the first task was to address the alarming tilt it had acquired – rumour has it that at some time reversing truck had collided with it. The floor of the box is a heavy thick concrete slab, so the ground around was excavated, particularly at the rear to some 600mm in depth, then hydraulic jacks were used to elevate the box. The worry was that the very old, brittle and thin cast iron structure would not withstand this unusual but necessary procedure. However, gradually K6 was coaxed into a plumb upright stance and large

amounts of concrete were poured into the excavations to support the weight. Later the surrounding tarmac surround was re-laid.

'The Team' were only too aware that the best final results would be achieved if the box could be deglazed and then sand-blasted down to bare metal. Clearly, as ours was to be renovated 'in situ' this option was out so we had to do it the hard way.

The first step was to remove the unsightly plastic (polycarbonate) windows that had been used to replace some of the previously damaged original glass. They came out relatively easily and provided early lessons about how the glazing had been done and therefore would need to be done again during the restoration. The 'Telephone' sign panels that sit just beneath the crown on the top of each side were also looked at and it was found that two were replacement plastic ones that could be removed fairly easily and without damage. One was an original glass one which, because of fear of damage whilst removing the putty, was protected by specially fitted plastic 'blanks', taped over the glass, both inside and out. The fourth one (at the back of the kiosk) was a plastic label stuck over the original pane, with white letters against a black background. Unsure about the originality of this one, it too was masked over with protective plastic panels.



The next job was to tackle the much faded and peeling exterior and interior paintwork, as yet another quick rub down and a quick coat of red paint were not an option – it had to be done properly. We removed endless coats of thick lead-based GPO paint finally getting down to the bare metal – we must have appeared as alien creatures covered in red dust with our faces adorned with heavy duty particulate dust masks and protective goggles.

Suitably sporting masks and eye protection, one of us attacked the door frame with a hot air gun, having learned that it was made of teak rather than cast iron – presumably to make it lighter to open

and close. Another set about the opposite side, and the third went up the ladder to start on the top. At this stage we were all exploring the best way to remove the multi-layers (at least 6) of paint.

Experiments with hot air guns, electric wire brushes, chisels and pure elbow grease gradually evolved the optimum method, although this had to be varied to suit each surface.

Generally, we found that a sharp chisel (regularly re-sharpened) and a lot of strength was the most effective method of removing the bulk of the paint, albeit a really slow process. This was then followed up by the electric wire brush to take off the final more stubborn patches, eventually leaving a clean paintless surface that, once cleaned off with some white spirit, took the red lead primer very well. The window frames were more problematical, especially where the glass was still present, for the paint and rust had to be removed without scratching the original glazing. Diligent use of masking tape, careful chiselling, followed by a smaller circular wire brush on a power drill seemed to offer the best solution. The painstaking application of the masking tape to 24 panes of glass per side was very time consuming, but proved to be really necessary.

After Day One we understood the enormity of the task, but were sufficiently inspired by the results of our efforts to keep going to the same high standards that we knew would show off our box to the level it deserved. In the words of one of the websites dedicated to restoration of K6s; 'For most, hand-stripping is the only option. Chisels, scrapers, and sandpaper....don't expect to do it all in a day. In honesty it is a hard job, but it really does show on the finished kiosk. Remember: you are only doing it once and, once completed, you will have broken the back of your restoration'.

It took four of us nearly three weeks to 'break the back' of just the outside of our restoration, but, given the appallingly wet weather and the other commitments of the team, it was quite an achievement. None of this would have been possible however, without a ready supply of electricity. Once again, the village community came to the rescue in the form of a 30 m extension cable from the Catholic Church which was the nearest dwelling to the box. Huge thanks to the generosity of all those concerned.

Once the big scrape was completed two coats of red oxide primer, two coats of undercoat and two coats of ultra violet screening top coat, to the correct colour specification, were applied. All the new glass panels were refitted with new retention frames and silicone

sealed to make the kiosk watertight. During this process it was also discovered that the door frame manufactured in mahogany was



severely rotted on the hinge side – a potential danger to the public. We took the decision to dismantle the door frame, taking care to preserve the delicate, one piece, cast iron, window matrix. A new hinge stile was made with all the correct dowels and rebates, refitted and the whole door repainted and re-glazed and eventually re-hung.

The next consideration was the style and sourcing of the internal components. This took many months but, eventually, everything was sourced, refurbished and installed exactly as they would have been in 1937.

A thorough clean and polish by the team of ladies from the village, and new lighting strips resulted in the gleaming K6 as it is today. Over 260 hours of volunteer time by many village people reinvigorated this piece of living history in Oswaldkirk.

Finally, in November 2013, after many months of effort by so many members of the Village, the renovated telephone box was reopened in all its original glory to the accompaniment of flags, wine and a brass band.

