

Nottingham's Victorian Post Office Letter Boxes.

There are over 115,000 Post Office (Royal Mail) letter boxes in use in the UK. Nottingham has about 425 boxes but in 1862 the city only had 11. The oldest pillar box in the city dates from 1879.

Road-side letter boxes were first introduced into the British Isles in 1852, in St Helier, Jersey, the Channel Islands. They were hexagonal shaped boxes made of cast-metal sections. Before their installation you had to take your mail to the post office or a receiving house. The oldest pillar box still in use in the British Isles is at St Peter Port, Guernsey, erected in 1853, and the oldest pillar box still in use on the UK mainland is at Barnes Cross, Dorset, erected between 1856 and 1859. Early UK pillar boxes were painted green, but red was adopted in the 1860s.

Some early pillar boxes had vertical apertures, but later boxes adopted a horizontal slot to prevent rainwater entering the box. In 1856 a new style was introduced, cast in the shape of a fluted column. In London, the Post Office tried some square boxes, but then switched to an ornate cylindrical design that cost a fortune to cast. Wall mounted boxes were introduced in 1857, mainly in rural areas, and Nottingham has four from Victoria's reign. In 1866 a new design of pillar box called the Penfold was introduced, which remained in production until 1879 when it was replaced by a plain cylindrical design, a shape that is still in production today. In 1896 Lamp Letterboxes were introduced. These were small boxes attached to the side of a lamp post, designed for low capacity sites.

The first mass produced pillar box is affectionately known as an Anonymous Cylindrical because it does not show any Royal cipher, crown or Post Office decal. They were produced from 1879-1887. Nottingham has three of these boxes still in use. From 1887 the Royal cipher of each monarch was added to the door: VR for Victoria; ER for Edward seventh; GR for George fifth; EVIII R for Edward eighth, GVIR for George sixth and EII R for Elizabeth second. Also, the location of the aperture was moved into the door to stop letters getting caught in the top of the box.

The oldest pillar box in daily use in Nottingham is at Broadway in the Lace Market. It dates from 1879 and is an anonymous model. The box replaced an older box (1862) on the same site, mentioned in Wright's 1862 Directory and shown on the OS Map. The oldest wall box (1881) is on Park Row but is no longer in use.

Every box has a unique number that tells the Post Office where it is; it is a sort of Post-code. A typical example is *NG1-100*. The NG is for Notts, the 1 is the district, and the other numbers are the box number. Very few boxes nationwide are listed 'buildings' but more should be, as they are a part of our national heritage and along with the red telephone kiosk are a British cultural icon.



1853 early box at St Peter Port, Guernsey.



1856 Fluted style box at Malvern.



1857 London Ornate box at P.O. Museum.



1866 Penfold box

The next page shows all the letter boxes in the City of Nottingham from Queen Victoria's reign.



1. Broadway, Lace Market (1879)



2. Newcastle Circus, The Park Estate (1880)



3. Lenton Road, The Park Estate (1880)



4. High Pavement, Lace Market (1887)



5. Woodborough Road & Magdala Road (1887-92)



6. Stockhill Circus, Basford (1893-1900)



7. Duke Street, Basford (1887-92)



8. Lenton Boulevard & Arthur Avenue (1887-92)



9. Chaucer Street (1893-1900)



10. Trinity Avenue, Lenton (1901)



11. Burns Street, Arboretum (1893-1900)



12. Forest Road West, Arboretum (1893-1900)



13. Nottingham Road & Egypt Road, Basford, (1893-1900)



14. VR large size wall box, Park Row, (1881-85)



15. VR large size wall box, Sherwood Rise (1886-93)



16. VR small size wall box, Nottingham Road (1901)



17. VR wall box, Forest Road East (1890-1901).

All the VR pillar boxes shown here were cast by Andrew Handyside & Co. of Derby. The wall boxes were cast by W.T.Allen & Co, London, except box No.17 which was supplied by Eagle Range & Foundry Co. (ERF), Birmingham. The ERF box has a white enamel plate at the top bearing the crown and VR cipher, but it has been painted over.