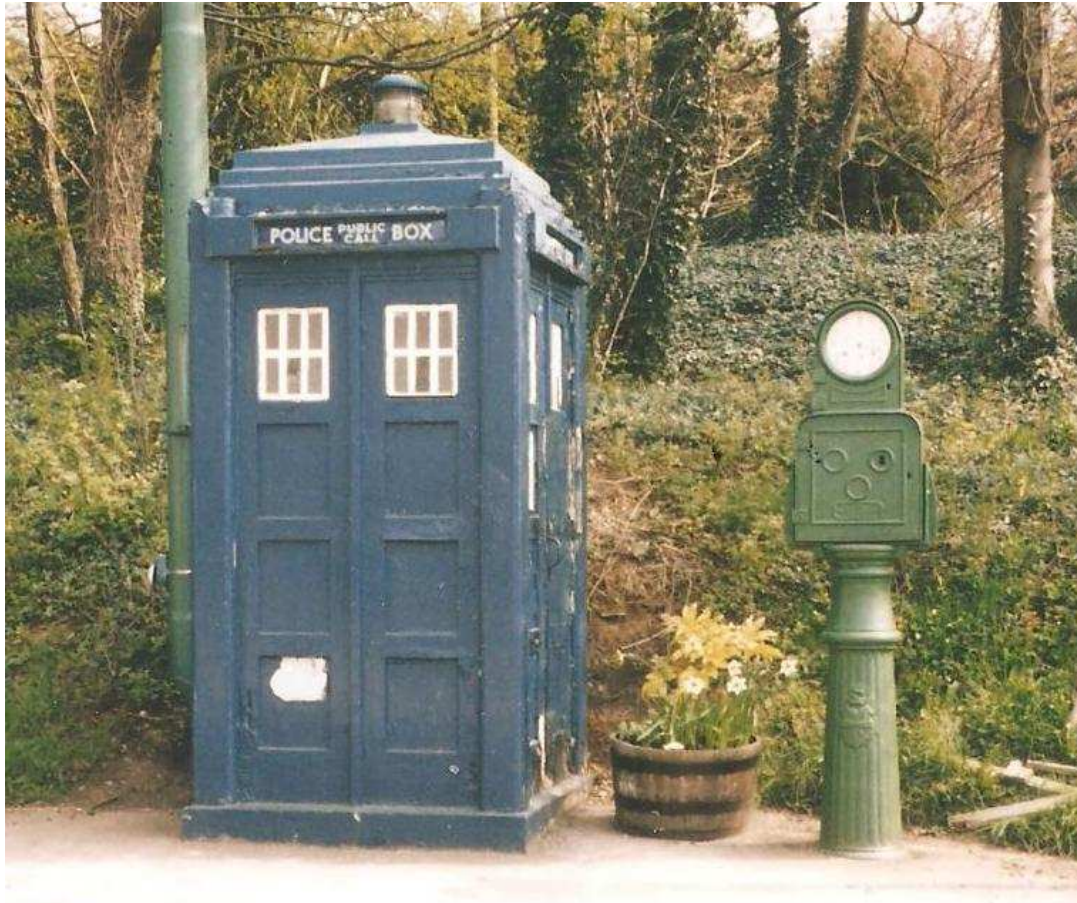


WHERE DID THE TARDIS COME FROM?

by

John Bunker

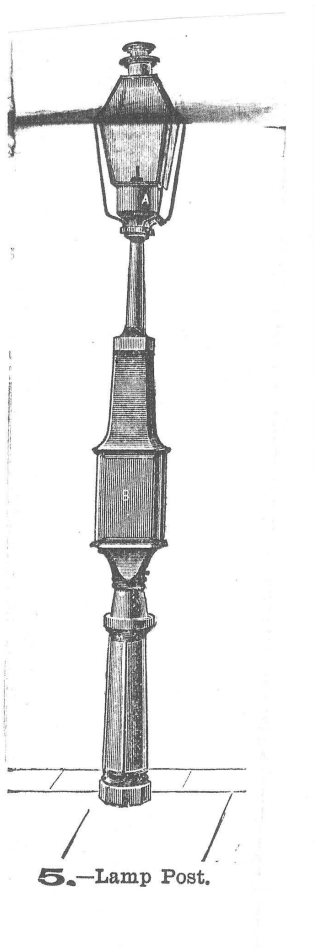


The only surviving Metropolitan Police kiosk, now at the National Tramway Museum, Crich, Derbyshire

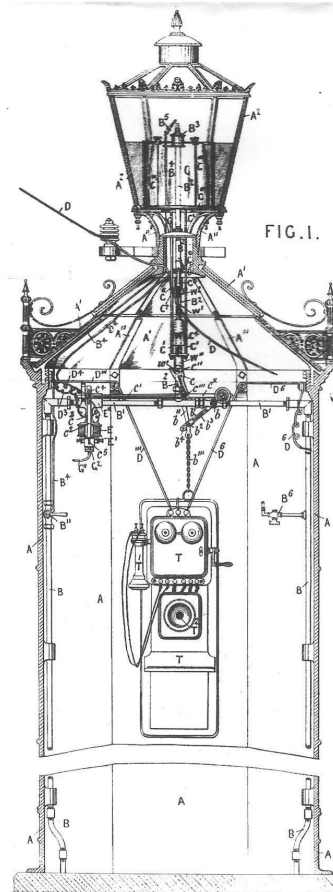
Saturday 23 November 2013 marked the exact fiftieth anniversary of the BBC television series, *Doctor Who*. A replica police box has appeared on our screens many times recently, in the form of the Doctor's 'Tardis', drawing attention to the anniversary. It is, of course, a copy of the police box used for many years by the Metropolitan Police. By the end of the 1930s there were about 680 of these kiosks used by the police in London. The history of the police box and pillar, however, goes back to the nineteenth century.

In 1870 the Post Office had taken over the electric telegraph network from the various private telegraph companies existing at the time and, as early as 1871, were requested by the Metropolitan Police to provide an estimate, 'For a System of Wires Connecting Police Stations to Fixed Points by means of Magnetos and Bells'.

The Metropolitan Police had introduced an internal telegraph network in 1867 connecting divisional stations to Scotland Yard. An extension of the system to include the 207 fixed points on the streets of the capital would have no doubt improved efficiency, these being located in places where a police officer would be stationed at all, or particular times, of the day. The proposal was that Sir Charles Wheatstone would supply the telegraph instruments, through the Post Office. In the event, however, the cost proved to be too great and a contract did not materialise, and the idea was abandoned.



The Metropolitan Police street call point, in the form of a lamp-post. This is the one in Brixton



The Glasgow City Police hexagonal shaped cast-iron boxes

Many years later, at the end of the 1880s and early 1890s, the Metropolitan Police experimented with two street call point systems; one in Islington and the other in Brixton. The former consisted of a series of small cupboard style boxes supported on wooden platforms and the latter appeared on the streets in the form of lamp-posts. The rather complex communication equipment, connected to the local police station, was supplied and maintained by the private companies.

The trials were relatively short-lived and ceased after a few years. The force did, however, gradually introduce some wooden telephone boxes from 1897.

At the end of the nineteenth century the Glasgow City Police introduced a number of hexagonal shaped cast iron kiosks with communication facilities that could be used by policemen on patrol. Selected residents were issued with keys allowing them to activate communication with the station if they required the assistance of police.



Early wooden Metropolitan Police box, circa 1900

The Liverpool City Police were also early users of street call points at the end of the century. Small cupboard style boxes allowed officers to communicate with their headquarters. Both systems, produced by various companies, were supplied by the National Telephone Company which was prominent in the field of communications at the time. Unlike the trials in London these became permanent and remained until replaced some years later.



Liverpool City Police call point system

Photograph by courtesy of, and © Merseyside Police

Monday 23 April 1923 really marked the beginning of police box schemes, as we were to know them, when Frederick Crawley, the Chief Constable of the Sunderland County Borough Police introduced boxes in the town. Crawley's system of kiosks gave the man on the beat immediate contact with his headquarters by telephone.



*Early Sunderland County Borough
Police box, circa 1923*

Photograph by courtesy of, and
© North Eastern Police History Society
(Mr Harry Wynne)



*Sheffield City Police box, circa
1927*

Encouraged by Crawley's success, other borough and city forces, throughout the country introduced their own schemes, tailored to meet local policing methods. By 1931 there were in the region of eighty police forces operating schemes throughout the United Kingdom.

At the end of 1929, the Metropolitan Police in London introduced a police box scheme to the Richmond area, consisting of wooden kiosks. Over the next few years the system spread throughout the capital with the introduction of the familiar concrete kiosk later immortalised by Doctor Who. The Glasgow City Police did introduce concrete kiosks almost identical to those in the Metropolitan Police area, but with the standard Post Office equipment, which was not used by the Met.

By the end of the 1920s, it became clear to the Post Office that a considerable market existed for standard police communication from the streets. Difficulties were being experienced by the Post Office in maintaining the many different types of equipment used throughout the country.

The answer to the difficulties came in the early 1930s when the Post Office carried out tests on the new Ericsson 'police kiosk or pillar telephone system' that had been developed by the company. The Post Office adopted this as its standard, and designated the pillar the PA1, which it would supply and maintain. The PA1 facility included a loudspeaker device for use by the public when contacting the police station, and a separate telephone for police use.



A PA1 post at Force Training School, Bishopgarth

Photograph by courtesy of, and
© West Yorkshire Police



PC Eric Clark, Stone Division, Staffordshire Constabulary, at a Type PA1 pillar

Photograph by courtesy of, and
© Staffordshire Police

Unlike the pillars, kiosks were still supplied by the local police authorities with the Post Office usually responsible for the communication equipment, similar to that in the posts. Consequently kiosks varied in design throughout the country from force-to-force.

In May 1933, the Edinburgh City Police became the first force to introduce the new Post Office PA1 pillars along with the telephone equipment in the force's newly designed cast iron kiosks. Soon many forces took up the new system, and switchboards to cater for the police boxes were installed by the Post Office in many police stations.

By the 1950s, the police decided that they needed a new style of pillar, and one similar in design to that the Metropolitan Police had been using since 1937, was approved. On Thursday 22 July 1954, the new PA2 pillars were introduced by the Post Office in the Cardiff City Police area.

This system gradually replaced old PA1 equipment in many forces, or encouraged those without a system to adopt one. The loudspeaker device, that was a feature of the old pillars, was replaced by a normal telephone handset for both police and public use.

The PA2 was a particularly heavy pillar and, in 1958, a new one, of identical design, but of much lighter weight, was introduced for new installations. It was designated PA3.

The 1960s would witness the demise of the police kiosk and pillar throughout the majority of the country's police forces. A few kiosks remain but now with little operational value. In Edinburgh, for example, some have been sold and converted into coffee stalls, and elsewhere some wooden boxes finished up as garden sheds. The only surviving Metropolitan Police 'Tardis' style kiosk is on display at the National Tramway Museum at Crich in Derbyshire. A concrete Glasgow kiosk, very similar to the Met box, can be seen at the Avoncroft Museum of Buildings at Bromsgrove and at a few other locations.

Very few of the City of London Police posts survive on the streets and only two in the Metropolitan Police area. Some kiosks and pillars remain on police premises and there are enthusiasts who lovingly restore privately owned posts.



*Police pillar, City of London Police,
Aldgate High Street,
June 2005*

By the 1960s, the policemen were being issued with personal radios and the public had far more effective means of contacting the police. The police box had had its day. But at least *Doctor Who* has ensured that it will not be forgotten.

For those who want to know more about the different styles of police kiosk, and the way in which they were used by the policemen, should read John Bunker's fascinating book *The Rise and Fall of the Police Box*, published by Brewin Books in 2011, and priced at £9.95p.



*Edinburgh Police box, converted to a
coffee stall, Rose Street, Edinburgh*