How the Red Telephone Box became Part of Britain's National Heritage.

by Patrick Wright

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One day in July 1988, I stood on the concourse of Waterloo Station in London thinking of the hopes once entertained by the late politician Anthony Crosland. As a leading Labour Party intellectual in the mid-Fifties, Crosland had dreamed of a less austere socialism where the uniformity of the reforming State would weigh less heavily on the life of the nation. As he wrote in *The Future of Socialism,* it was time for a 'reaction against the Fabian tradition'. The mixed economy could be expected to deliver higher exports and old-age pensions, but only a 'change in cultural attitude' would make Britain 'a more colourful and civilized country to live in'. There should be more night-life and open-air cafés, pleasure gardens, repertory theatres, and statues to brighten up the new housing estates. There should be better design, not just for furniture and women's clothes, but also for street-lamps and telephone kiosks.[1] It was the reference to telephone kiosks that brought Crosland to mind.

The Royal Corps of Transport Band was warming up the crowd for the launch of Mercury Communication's new 'payphone' system: a banner mounted over the head of its ceremoniously besworded conductor showed a victorious cavalry charge at the Battle of Waterllo and promised 'The Greatest Advance since 1815'. Here was British Telecom's private rival, much grown since it was first licensed in 1982, opening its latest assault on a public domain where the franchise certainly was being extended. Waterloo Station may once have had the grimy and uniform look of nationalized space, but in the age of privatization and niche marketing, it had come to resemble a shopping mall: diversified, colourful, and superficially more civilized too.

After the band had ripped through 'Ghostbusters' and 'In the Mood', Gordon Owen, the Managing Director of Mercury Communications, stood up in his appointed space between Casey Jones's hamburgers and the Knicker Box, and declared a 'first for Britain'. We were standing in a newly 'competitive arena', and Owen was proud to be cutting into British Telecom's monopoly for the first time. Unfettered by a public-service obligation of the kind that prevents British Telecom from confining its phone boxes to the most profitable sites, Mercury would be concentrating its 'state-of-the-art' payphones at airports, railway termini, and new shopping malls – while, of course, loudly denying all charges of 'cream-skimming'. The new phones would be especially convenient for people wanting to make international calls. They would accept credit cards, but coins

were a thing of the past. A special Mercury card had been introduced, but Owen also looked forward to the day when Mercury's growing list of private subscribers, most of which are businesses, would be able to use the company's payphones with the equivalent of a PIN number, logging the charge back onto their account.

Owen promised a facility distinguished by 'reliability, cleanliness, and value for money'; and though it was obvious Mercury had no intention of mounting a universal public service for the convenience of every welfare bum in the land, he stressed that everything possible would be done to accommodate the genuinely disabled consumer. Wheelchair access had been built into the designs wherever possible, and there was to be volume adjustment to help the hard of hearing. The Mercurycard was notched on one side to help people with sight problems, and phones would even squeak obligingly to tell blind or partially sighted users when their card was running out.

Next up was Lord Young, Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, who would unveil the new kiosks. Diversity is an essential part of enterprise culture, and Mercury certainly wasn't going to make the mistake of coming up with a uniform design for all its locations. There were three models to unveil, each one designed to be fitted into 'different parts of the society'. Fitch & Company had come up with a 'totem concept' payphone booth that, as their press release put it, took 'Mercury's key requirements' and 'embodied them in a powerful, physical form.' The result had already been dubbed the 'Art Deco' kiosk, but to me it looked less like a totem pole than an extruded Fifties-style petrol pump. The model provided by Machin Designs was named the 'Ogee Pylon'. The designers claimed their version of the Mercury logo-stand to be one in which 'classical aesthetic values are executed in a sophisticated system of structural components', I was inclined to agree with the architecture critic Gavin Stamp, who at that moment was telling a radio reporter that it looked more like a conservatory of the kind you might expect to find in Islington, a gentrified area in north London, than a proper public telephone kiosk.

It was, however, the neo-classical payphone designed by John Simpson and Partners that made the greatest impact. The astonished guffaws were out before the covers had properly hit the ground, and it was in this kiosk that the next morning's papers would show Lord Young making the inaugural call to Sir Erik Sharp, the Chairman of Cable and Wireless (of which Mercury was a subsidiary). Both Mercury and the Department of Trade and Industry had already issued press releases insisting that Young spent the call congratulating Sharp on the speed with which his company had carried through their assault on British Telecom's heartland. However, hindsight now suggests that the old bosy may actually have been sorting out the tactical details of a different exchange: the one that would elevate Sir Eric into the House of Lords as Lord Sharp of Grimsdyke, thus making way for Lord Young of Graffham to slide into position as the magnificently paid executive chairman of Cable and Wireless only two years thence.

John Simpson may have been ambitious, but he was no such smooth operator. Looking frankly disconcerted by the derisive hoots that greeted his cast-aluminium classical kiosk, he kindly found a moment to talk me through some its many distinguishing features. He pointed to the ornate finial on top of the roof – a decorative touch that also served to

to see a much greater number of different types

Lord Young: getting to grips with diversity
of call boxes installed and available to the public.

provide ventilation and that could, if need be, house an aerial. Then there were the winged sphinxes flanking and, indeed, struggling to dignify the monstrous Mercury logo. Demanded by the brief, the gap at the bottom of the side panels was intended to discourage tramps and dossers from using this new service as a public convenience of a different kind. The fluted Doric columns at the corner were certainly ornamental, but they also had the practical advantage of providing a curved edge that would be less easy to vandalize.

Flagship on the Rocks

How, I wondered briefly, might one explain all this to the late Anthony Crosland? It was at the end of November 1987 that John Butcher, a junior industry minister, had announced the government's decision to break up British Telecom's call box monopoly. 'The idea', as he said at the time, 'is to see a much greater number of different types of call-boxes installed and available to the public, and to provide British Telecom with competition in what has hitherto been a restricted market'.[2] Launched as the 'flagship' of Thatcher's privatization programme in November 1984, British Telecom PLC had seemed to work fine for a while. Chairman, Sir George Jefferson, and Chief Executive Iain Vallance made all the right noises as they sailed off into the new world. They promised to shake off the grim legacies of nationalization and turn their overmanned, badly managed, and ill-equipped organization into a properly tight ship that would be both profitable and better for its customers.

British Telecom was declaring huge profits by 1997, yet it was also coming under fire from all sides. In three short years, the flagship of privatization had been renamed the 'most loathed institution in Britain'. Consumer surveys declared British Telecom the worst public service in the land. There was evidence of overcharging (with some

subscribers, including the Bank of England, eventually receiving a refund). The long-promised technological improvements, which included the introduction of digital exchanges and a new labour-saving switching technology known as 'System X', had caused havoc, striking central London and City exchanges hardest of all.[3] As the service declined and complaints soared, British Telecom set about squandering large fortunes on advertising campaigns designed to manipulate public opinion. It was evidently considered easier to establish a new 'corporate image' than to improve the service.

British Telecom tried to counter the rising tide of criticism. It blamed its own engineers, who had been on strike earlier in 1987. It blamed the fact that it had once been a nationalized industry, and was therefore full of sullen and morose employees who couldn't all be retrained in a day. It blamed vandalism for the problems with its call-boxes – some 25 per cent of which were found to be out of action in a damning survey conducted by the regulatory body, Oftel. Indeed, it even toured an exhibition of ingeniously vandalized payphones around British schools to show what it was up against.[4] In the end, however, it caved in. Chairman Sir George Jefferson may previously have distinguished himself at the head of the earlier privatized British Airways, but British Telecom's shareholders wanted blood and he resigned ignominiously at the Annual General Meeting of September 1987. There was to be no place in the House of Lords for him.

Newspapers were quick to interpret the story. For the Conservative *Daily Telegraph,* the chaos in British Telecom didn't raise doubts about the wisdom of privatization itself. Indeed, it provided yet more support for the dogmas of liberal theory: privatize a nationalized industry without breaking it up into competing units, and all you get is a private monopoly. The liberal *Guardian* drew broadly comparable conclusions, declaring that British Telecom was displaying the 'classic symptoms of a monopoly: defending itself from competition, refusing to publish the criteria according to which it measured performance, failing to innovate, and overcharging.'[5]

Nobody bothered to recall that, in the days when the system was run by the General Post Office, there had been a strong and generally accepted case for the essential uniformity of a public service like the telephone system. There wasn't a single journalist who chose to mention 1912, when the British telephone system was nationalized in an attempt to overcome the failure that had marked the earlier years of multiple and partly private ownership, or who exploited the irony of the fact that, in those days, when Britain had what was widely known as 'the worst telephone system in the civilized world', it had seemed obvious that the telephone network should be run by a single statutory body.[6]

A Matter of Style

Such is the general background to the Mercury payphones, but how, as Mr. Crosland himself might have wondered, does one account for the style of the most eye-catching model? Why should the new kiosk look like a crudely engineered collision between the

Acropolis and a wedding cake? What could possibly motivate John Simpson's absurd classical design?

At the beginning of 1985 Mr. Iain Vallance, who at that time was Managing Director of BT's Local Communications Service, announced that his newly privatized organization would be taking a 'radical approach to the problems inherent in today's outdated payphone service'. Those old, coin-operated red telephone boxes would soon be things of the past, replaced by yellow, anodized, aluminium kiosks and cardphones. Privatization hadn't freed BT of its public service obligation, but there was a need for more efficient and vandalproof facilities.

The new designs would be more accessible to wheel-chair users, and less inclined to scalp anybody over six feet tall. They would be more open than the old red telephone boxes. Litter and unpleasant smells would be blown away, and the homeless would feel less tempted to move in on cold winter nights. Just as Mercury was to do a few years later, BT stressed the needs of the disabled, who knew the impracticalities of the old red telephone box in close detail.

Behind all the smooth talk, however, many suspected a hidden motivation. The newly privatized BT was concerned to be profitable, and a redesign would not just help to create that much desired new 'corporate image' but it would surely also provide the perfect cover under which a secret but thoroughgoing reorganisation of the service could be carried out. Confronted with these suspicions, BT admitted that hundreds of boxes had indeed been moved in the changeover but regretted that (conveniently enough, as critics recognized) it had no method of classifying these changes and was therefore simply unable to say whether the redesigned service had also been concentrated at more lucrative sites.

The man who launched the redesign would soon replace Sir George Jefferson as Chairman of British Telecom. Questioned by angry BT shareholders devoted to the old red phone boxes at the 1988 Annual Meeting, the fast-moving Mr. Vallance insisted that 'there is no accounting for taste'. In fact, his newly privatized industry had already found a very good way of accounting for taste. If the old phone boxes had their admirers – not least in the USA where many of these uprooted British icons were finding their way into service as cocktail and shower cabinets – then so much the better. They could be auctioned off, and long may demand outstrip supply.

It was a voluntary association, an architectural conservation group called the Thirties Society, that initiated the defence of the old red phone box. Denouncing the auctions as a squalid asset-stripping of the public sector, its members wasted no time extending the traditions of cultural connoisseurship to street furniture, declaring the hitherto taken-for-granted old red telephone box to be a vital part of the national heritage. Writing in the early 1940s,George Orwell, in his essay on wartime patriotism*, The Lion and the Unicorn,* had cited suet puddings, misty skies and red pillar-boxes as essential emblems of Britishness, but by the eighties the old red telephone box had also 'entered into' the nation's soul.[7] Where the philistine Vallance saw only 'outdated' payphones, these

campaigners looked at the kiosks with which the architect sir Giles Gilbert Scott had set out to civilize a rampant technology and recognized them as significant works of architecture that were 'wholly classical in spirit.'[8]

The K2 was Scott's original kiosk. Dating from 1927, it had been brought into service mostly in London. The smaller and more familiar K6 was designed in the mid-Thirties, and was still being installed up until 1968. Thanks to a scheme announced in April 1935, the K6 had been set up in remote villages all around the country as 'a special concession' designed to commemorate George V's Jubilee. The organizers of the Jubilee Scheme recognized that money could have been saved by fitting phones into existing rural post offices, but freestanding kiosks were chosen for the sake of the extra privacy,visibility and accessibility they afforded. Since the scheme was an extension of a vital public service, it was accepted that it should be paid for out of 'general funds' and not 'left dependent on the ability of some small community to contribute to the cost'.[9]

Quickly dubbed the 'Jubilee Kiosk', the K6 went on to become, as BT itself admitted, an 'established British institution.' Nevertheless, its introduction was fiercely contested in the Thirties, especially in rural areas. From Oxfordshire to the Lake District, local branches of the Council for the Preservation of Rural England denounced the new kiosks as eyesores, complaining especially about the insidious 'intervention of red' into their villages.[10] But the Post Office resisted their arguments in favour of green or stone-grey camouflage, rallying such authorities as the Royal Fine Arts Commission and sir Edwin Lutyens in support of the chosen red.[11] Light grey would show up every 'ribald scrawl' and be stained by dogs and rain. Green wouldn't stand out to the eye of the wayfarer who might need to make an emergency call. And as was pointed out by John Gloag, a designer who at that time was also on the Central Executive Committee of the Council for the Preservation of Rural England, if the principle of camouflage is accepted for every modern amenity in rural areas, we will end up 'thatching everything, including motor coaches.'[12] It was eventually allowed that a dark 'battleship grey' could be used in areas of outstanding natural beauty (as long as their glazing bars were still picked out in red), but with this one variation, the Jubilee Kiosk went on to become a uniform feature of the national landscape.[13]

Those who rallied to the defence of the old red phone box in the nineteen eighties might easily have extended their appreciation of this endangered national icon to include the interior fittings chosen in the Thirties by a special interdepartmental Post Office committee. The members of this committee went out of their way to come up with an interior fit for well-mannered ladies and gentlemen. They resolved that the backboard should be made of polished bakelite rather than plywood. They decided to include a cigarette holder, an umbrella rack, and also the bevelled mirror that was provided for 'feminine users' despite the Traffic Section's concern that callers with urgent business would 'occasionally be kept waiting' while a lady adjusted her make-up. The committee wanted hard-backed directories and was reluctant to accept that they would have to be chained to the kiosk. It was against all but the most limited publicity; there was to be no external advertisement and the limited space allowed for internal notices (which were to be properly framed and mounted on the backboard) was reserved for information about

the operation of the phone itself. While it would have been desirable, even in those days, to include a 'Monogram . . . like that used by the Public Relations Department', there was no space left after the functional notices had been accommodated, and the idea was abandoned.[14]

Scott's Jubilee Kiosk was distinguished not just by its design but also by the uniformity of its presence. The new 'pay phones' introduced by Mr Vallance in the nineteen eighties were of a mediocre design borrowed from the United States, but they too had a broader significance. Under the new British Telecom system, there would no longer be one type of kiosk to be used in all places. Paving the way for Mercury's later and more exclusive collection, BT's new range was designed so that different models could, to quote the well-chosen words of executive Gordon Owen, be 'put in different parts of the society'. The post-privatization kiosks would stand as BT's humble contribution to growing social polarization. Nobody could be entirely certain of getting a door anymore but, according, to the new Vallance equation, the better your area the more kiosk you could expect to find on your street corner. Users in respectable neighbourhoods and well-policed thoroughfares would still be offered a roof, at least some walling and a choice between cardphone and cash. The new and growing underclass, meanwhile, would have to settle for a sawn-off metal stump with an armoured cardphone bolted onto it.

BT's pre-vandalized model in Dalston, north-east London

By the 1980s the red Scott kiosk had itself become emblematic of the traditional nation that, fifty years previously, it had been thought to despoil. In August 1986, a K2 kiosk in London Zoo's Parrot House, became the first telephone box ever to receive listed-building status. An old public service that had become indefensible as a 'private monopoly' could at least be saved as part of the nation's architectural heritage.

Meanwhile, the 'quality' newspapers – themselves torn between their old ways and frenzied modernization – had been printing rousing letters in defence of the old red phone box, some of them coming from expatriates who were apparently still shocked by the passing of windmills, steam engines and the farthing. The *Guardian* mustered a wistful article by Richard Boston who scorned the new designs ('all the vandal's work has been done already – except peeing on the floor') and eulogized the disappearing works of Sir

Giles Gilbert Scott. Newspapers all over the world (including, most eloquently, the *Frankfurter Rundschau*) contributed their own elegies to this icon of old England. BT's auctions went ahead, but they were quite overtaken by this embarrassing cult of the old red phone box. Many papers printed evocative photos of Britain's heritage going under the hammer, but the *Independent* caught the most poignant episode of all. On 14 September 1988, it showed one of Scott's kiosks being hoisted out of native land near Swindon in preparation for a journey to the Falkand Islands, recently won back after General Galtieri's invasion, where it would be installed 'for members of the armed forces to use for phoning home'.

A red British Telecom telephone booth being hoisted from its site near Swindon to begin a journey to the Falkland Islands where it will be installed for members of the armed forces to use for phoning home.

Independent Sept 14 '88

A Symbol of National Embarrassment

Thatcher's policies of deregulation and economic liberalism had ripped many gaping holes in Britain's national fabric, yet it was the threat to the red phone box, rather than to schools, hospitals, coal-mining or manufacturing industry, that finally triggered revolt from the right – a revolt in which the red phone box was suddenly reborn as the acceptable face of state-imposed uniformity. Writing in *The Times,* the Conservative philosopher and gadfly Roger Scruton regretted the 'tyrannical pursuit of novelty' and the inevitable but 'horrifying advance of science'.[15] For him, the Scott kiosk was one of the last creations of a 'disciplined tradition of design whose products included the Gothic factory, the Palladian clubhouse, the Pullman railway carriage and the Bombay shirt'.

He didn't mind what a phone box looked like in a place like Birmingham (an industrial city 'where modern architects have already done their work'). But the Scott kiosk should continue to grace real England – every village green, every moor, every hillside should have one – as an emblem of stability. Scruton liked the plinth, the classical outline, and the embossed crown that, far from just serving as a ventilator, stood over the nation's

communications as a 'symbol of national identity, and promise of enduring government.' He was so impressed by the colour that he renamed it, turning what had been known as 'Post Office Red' ever since the Royal Fine Arts Commission chose it in the thirties, into the more ideologically correct 'Imperial Red'. A vehement anti-modernist, Professor Scruton looked at the K6 and even managed to approve an 'interesting suggestion of Bauhaus naughtiness in its fenestration.'

Charles Moore, who was then editor of the *Spectator,* took up the subject in the *Daily Telegraph.* For him, the Scott kiosk spoke most evocatively of enduring national values at the very point where it was being broken up by BT's brutish workforce. More ambitious for the nation than Scruton, he argued that the Scott kiosk could actually exert a civilizing influence in those urban areas that had been ruined by modernism and the Welfare State. Even in the most dismal post-war housing estate the old red telephone box sent out signals of hope – its classical lines and proportions offering an image of the traditional hierarchies to which society could return.

Had Moore been more thoroughly acquainted with the inner city he would have found incontrovertible support for his theory of architecture as a creator of social behaviour. In many urban areas, drug-dealers had really only felt at home with the 'pay phone system' since Mr Vallance removed the Scott kiosks (in which the police could trap suspects simply by putting a foot against the door in classic PC Plod style) and replaced them with open booths that provided the vigilant hoodlum with far greater visibility and a quick escape. Even without this supporting evidence, however, Moore denounced BT's decision to replace these kiosks as a classic example of the British ability to spit on our luck: 'we think that we have achieved something by smashing up the old, leaving its shards in the street and replacing it with a featureless affair of plastic and low-grade metal'.[16] Pressed by an unfriendly critic [myself], he was happy to go further: 'British Telecom had 77,000 little equivalents of Big Ben before they started their destruction, 77,000 objects which commanded the affection of their customers, and now they have squandered that affection.'[17]

As chairman of the Thirties Society, Gavin Stamp had wandered the land photographing well-placed Scott kiosks wherever he found them. Stamp now advanced his own intriguingly volatile version of the argument from his other position as architecture critic of the *Spectator.* As a man who found himself increasingly disturbed by the government's 'blinkered refusal to recognize the valuable and essential role' of the public sector, he valued the Scott kiosk not just as a work of architecture that may well have been inspired by no less a figure than the eighteenth century classicist, Sir John Soane, but also as a 'sympathetic and serviceable' piece of street furniture.

At last the argument seemed to be getting somewhere. Would Gavin Stamp be the man to place the blame where it obviously belonged – on privatization itself? Would he even come to the conclusion that the only way of defending the Scott kiosk and the standards of public service that it symbolized was to renationalize British Telecom immediately? Having suffered considerable inconvenience on his own line in King's Cross, a part of London that had become something of a red-light district since he had moved in, Stamp

had recently written to Chairman Jefferson protesting that 'British Telecom could be no worse if it were nationalized and that in fact it was better when it was'.[18]

BT must have feared the direction in which his thoughts were moving, for at that moment Mr. Stamp's phone seems to have gone permanently out of order, forcing him to conduct his business through 'new, squalid kiosks', which had already been 'conspicuously disfigured by a rash of prostitutes' sticky advertisements on the windows.'[19] Overwhelmed with frustration at the 'monstrous private monopoly' that was BT, Stamp fumed and fulminated and failed to follow his argument through to its logical conclusion.[20]

More generally, the *Spectator* struggled to hold three at least partly contradictory positions on British Telecom at once. It remained unwavering in its advocacy of privatization. It was anxious to see the old red telephone box saved. It wanted to see improvement and indeed technological innovation in Britain's telephone service. By May 1987, it was evident that this intriguing acrobatic performance was going to end in a painfully contorted heap on the floor. Just as the *Spectator* was celebrating the final demise of nationalization as a reputable political concept, its phones joined the other victims of BT's new switching technology.

A gleeful Des Wilson, then still a respected social campaigner, wrote in to point out the confusion of that week's editorial page: on the top half a leading article headed 'Nationalization doesn't work', and at the bottom of the same page a note apologizing for the inconvenience caused by the collapse of the Spectator's telephones ('A large part of our telephone system has been broken by British Telecom and has still not been mended after ten days. The company is unable to tell us what is wrong or when the full service will be restored'). As Wilson asked, 'perhaps you could explain the inconsistency between the claims you make for privatization and the reality?'

With embarrassed fury, the *Spectator* pursued its complaints through the labyrinth of BT management, eventually laying them at the door of the doomed Chairman Jefferson only a week or so before his unexpected resignation. Lively discussion and correspondence filled the magazine throughout the summer of 1987. The letters page was used to foment an insurrection among the privatized company's new shareholders. Led by J.R. Lucas, an Oxford don who, having expressed his determination that the privatized industry's new shareholders should recognize their responsibilities and get British Telecom to 'pull up its socks', went on to BT's Annual Meeting and chastised the new management for their 'blithering incompetence and invincible complacency'.[21] As a right-wing ideologue who had been a tireless advocate of privatization, Digby Anderson also did the decent thing and communicated his embarrassment on the letters page: he admitted that that BT had turned out an 'uninspiring advertisement for the cause'.[22] Another correspondent borrowed a conspiracy theory from the wilder reaches of the *Sunday Telegraph.* According to A. Green, who wouldn't give an address for fear of suddenly being put 'out of order', BT's socialist employees were targeting advocates of privatization for special treatment. Meanwhile the journalist Bernard Levin, an enthusiastic admirer of Margaret

Thatcher, wrote in to whine about the 'thieving bastards' whose new-style pay phone had claimed his money without even so much as connecting his call.[23]

But no one could be entirely convinced. The *Spectator's* whole outlook was founded on the conviction that nationalization had disfigured the face of the nation but, whichever way you looked at it, the story of the old red telephone box pointed accusingly in the very opposite direction: here was privatization completing the mission of the destructive State bureaucracy it was meant to have vanquished. A 'Telecom Horror Contest' was launched in a bid to divert attention from the embarrassing implications of this story. It was announced with much trumpeting that a redundant Jubilee Kiosk would be awarded as a prize to the provider of the worst disaster story. By this time, however, the *Sunday Times* had already counted up the bizarre uses to which people were putting old red telephone boxes and it was apparent that the *Spectator's* was just one more variation on the theme of the telephonic hen-house.[24] Bought at a BT auction early in 1987, it resounded through the summer with the scratching and clucking of chickens coming home to roost. It was fitting that the eventual winner of the Telecom Horror Competition came from Ohio: at least there was a chance that he would accept his prize and then the whole guilty, squawking, and by that time, rather filthy package could be bundled up and shipped conveniently over the horizon.

It was a sense of guilt as well as aggravated patriotic pride that established the Scott kiosk as such an evocative symbol in the camp of the privateers. Far from standing as an image of transcendent authority, as Roger Scruton had jokingly imagined, the embossed crown on the Scott kiosk was actually the mark of the old Post Office. As the privatization programme rolled on, the old red telephone box became the evocative symbol of endangered ideals of public service, of a socially conceived provision that should, as the emblematic kiosk now suggested, be reliable, uniform, and equally available to all. It had been on this interpretation that, as early as 1983, the British Telecom trade unions adopted the Scott kiosk to symbolise their cause against the privatizing measures of their management. Similarly, when Gavin Stamp tried to awaken BT to the value of this traditional shrine to public communication, he used an emphasis reminiscent of George Orwell's essay 'England Your England', describing the Scott kiosk as 'decent', 'solid', 'sympathetic', and 'serviceable'. Here again was the vocabulary of public service, taking refuge under a contemporary architectural gloss. Far from having been finished off, as the advocates of privatization kept claiming, that old idea of the common good had escaped into heritage country. Hiding against rough weather in the old red telephone box was the petrified spirit of the Welfare State itself.

In the real world, meanwhile, or at least at Waterloo Station, Mercury was offering increased polarization in the 'payphone system' and a range of conspicuously ill-mannered phone-booths that shrieked 'design' at citizens who were now only distinguished by the credit cards in their wallets.

The classical kiosk, however, had a special meaning of its own. John Simpson, its designer, was a young architect with a growing reputation as a classical revivalist. He subscribed to the conventional revivalist belief that 'art and culture reached a pinnacle in

the years around 1800, and that the architecture of this period is a better, indeed more appropriate, basis for development than the "modern" architecture of recent years'.[25] In the style wars of that period, Simpson stood in the anti-enlightenment camp alongside architects like Robert Adam and Quinlan Terry, and his espousal of classicism was accompanied by the usual polemical denunciations of modernism as the style of post-war egalitarianism and state-led social reform.

As a self-declared 'real architect', Simpson was a great admirer of the old red telephone box. Indeed, as we stood together on Waterloo Station, he told me his classical kiosk was intended to be firmly in now sadly uprooted tradition of Sir Giles Gilbert Scott. Mercury's gaudy logo was a poor substitute for the embossed crown on the Scott kiosk bvut at least, as Simpson claimed in his publicity handout, his own model was a proper building rather than just a nondescript piece of disposable street furniture. Unlike BT's new payphones, it had been designed to form 'part of the traditional urban townscape'. Indeed, it should be sited 'in the manner of statues or fountains to enhance the quality of public space'. Simpson would have liked to see his cast-aluminium classical kiosk issued in red or maroon, but Mercury evidently balked at erecting such an obvious memorial to it's rival's better days. Ostensibly a tribute to the old red telephone box, Simpson's crudely realised classical kiosk was not to be mistaken for just another piece of trivial post-modern pastiche. Simon Jenkins may have greeted it as 'a phone box on which . . . an artist had been at work', but it deserved to be remembered not for its aesthetic pretensions but as the monstrous contrivance that finally finished off the idea of universal public service by reducing it entirely to a matter of style. In this respect it was the true telephone box of its time.

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[1] C.A.R. Crosland, *The Future of Socialism,* London: Cape, 1956, pp. 521-2.
[2] *The Independent,* 26 November, 1987.
[3] System X was described as the '£5 billion blunder' by *The Sunday Times* (9 August 1987).
[4] The travelling exhibition included kiosks that had been filled with flour, set in concrete, or incinerated with a butane lighter was described in 'Troubles by the boxful for BT', *Evening Standard,* 28 September 1987. British Telecom liked to treat vandalism as if it were an entirely recent problem, but literary evidence reveals that telephone kiosks were suffering rough treatment even in the Forties when, according to BT's theory of post-war degeneration, British manners should still have been intact. The hero of John Lodwick's novel, *Peal of Ordnance* (1947), enters a telephone box to find the usual disordered scene: 'The booth smelt of urine and spittle gouts. He opened the directory; obsolete, tatty and well-thumbed . . . signatures in the bargain (Jack H. Rossback; USN Yonkers, NY), and here and there addresses underlined with words of advice: "Call her up any time. She'll be there"'. By the Sixties, a Canadian poet who was accustomed to visiting London at the time, was writing a poem about a character named Roderick who enters a telephone box and then finds that the door has disappeared:. Trapped, he spends his time calling friends for help and, when his money runs out, chatting up the girl at directory enquiries. In the end, the booth fills up with beard and excrement, and it becomes impossible to tell from outside whether Roderick is living or dead. See 'Telephone' in Lionel Kearns, *By the Light of the Silvery McLune,* Vancouver: Daylight Press, 1969.
[5] *The Guardian,* 24 September 1987.
[6] Charles R. Perry, 'The British Experience 1876-1912: the impact of the telephone during the years of dfelay', in Ithiel de Sola Pool (ed.), *The Social Impact of the Telephone,* MIT Press, pp. 68-96.
[7] George Orwell, 'England your England', *Inside the Whale and other Essays,* Penguin Books, 1968, pp. 63-90.
[8] See Clive Aslet and Alan Powers, *The British Telephone Box . . . take it as red',* The Thirties Society, 1987.

[9] Quoted from papers held at the Historical Information Centre, British Telecom Archives, London.
[10] The BT Archives include a number of patiently argued letters written by the Post Office's G.E.G. Forbes to CPRE supporters who had protested against this shocking 'intervention of red' in the English scene. In a final sentence of a letter concerning the Lake District (dated 24 June 1936) he is reduced to wondering 'whether the exclusion of these minute patches of red from the District is so important as all that.'
[11] This battle against red would continue to rage in distant villages for several decades. Even in the early nineties, visitors to the Dorset village of Litton Cheney would find a Jubilee Kiosk that was green rather than red, thanks to the nocturnal and evidently rather hasty activity of local vigilantes.
[12] 'Colour of "Jubilee Design" kiosks', memo 2687/36 in British Telecom Archives.
[13] The decision to allow battle-ship grey to be used in 'very exceptional cases' was made on the recommendation of the Royal Fine Arts Commission, but not until 1948.
[14] See E.T. Judd, *Post Office Engineers Journal,* 29 (October 1936, pp. 175-80.
[15] Roger Scruton, *The Times,* 29 January 1985, p. 10
[16] Charles Moore, 'Better Red than Dead', *Daily Telegraph,* 29 December 1986.
[17] Charles Moore, *Spectator,* 22 August 1987.
[18] Gavin Stamp, letter to the editor, *Spectator,* 6 June 1987.
[19] Gavin Stamp, letter to the editor, *Spectator,* 15 August 1987.
[20] Gavin Stamp, letter to the editor, *Spectator,* 30 May, 1987.
[21] *Spectator,* 25 July 1987.
[22] *Spectator,* 27 June, 1987.
[23] *Spectator,* 29 August 1987.
[24] Tim Rayment, 'A phone box needs love when its number is up', *Sunday Times,* 17 May 1987.
[25] Quoted from Alan Powers, *Real Architecture: An Exhibition of classical Building by the New Generation of Architects,* Building Centre Trust, 1987, p. 58.

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