

How Britain's red phone boxes are being given new life

Level 2 • Upper intermediate

1 Warmer

- The red phone box is a well-known British design. In pairs or small groups, make a list of five more well-known British designs.
- Compare your lists.
- Say which of these British designs you have seen, worn, used, etc.
- Scan the article to see which of the things on your lists are mentioned there.

2 Key words

Match the key words with the definitions and then find them in the article to read them in context. The paragraph numbers will help you.

enthusiast	adopt	profitable	ceased	refurbished	decommission
listed	preserve	adjacent	sophistication	melted down	traders

- the quality of being modern and fashionable _____ (para 3)
- someone who is very interested in something or excited by it and spends time learning about it _____ (para 3)
- keep something from disappearing or being destroyed _____ (para 3)
- stopped doing something _____ (para 3)
- (of a building) important because of its history or design; cannot be changed without permission from the government _____ (para 4)
- (of a metal) heated until it becomes liquid, especially in order to make something new from it _____ (para 5)
- taken out of service and no longer in use _____ (para 5)
- take care of something as though it were your own _____ (para 5)
- people who buy and sell things _____ (para 9)
- When you are able to make money from a business idea, it is _____ (para 11)
- next to or near something else _____ (para 12)
- improved and restored by cleaning and painting _____ (para 14)

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Ringling the changes: how Britain's red phone boxes are being given new life

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27 August, 2019

- 1 Britain's red phone boxes once appeared on every high street in the country, but now there are only 10,000 or so (and half of those are decorative, not used as phones).
- 2 In 2015, the K2 traditional red phone box was voted the greatest British design of all time, ahead of the Routemaster bus, the Spitfire, the Union Jack and Concorde. It was designed in 1924 by the architect Sir Giles Gilbert Scott.
- 3 In his 1989 book on phone boxes, the architectural historian Gavin Stamp called Scott's cast-iron box "a classical design of refined sophistication and timeless elegance". Stamp was a great enthusiast for Scott's boxes and led a campaign to preserve them after they ceased production in 1968.
- 4 There are still numerous Scott boxes in central London, many of which have been listed as historically or architecturally significant.
- 5 The fact there were once more than 70,000 red boxes and now only 10,000 remain on the streets suggests that a lot of boxes have disappeared. In the 1970s and 80s, many were melted down, but gradually the boxes' beauty and value started to be recognized. Since 2008, rather than remove decommissioned ones that have not been listed, BT (British Telecom) has allowed local councils and charities to use them for other things with its adopt-a-box scheme. More than 5,000 have been adopted.
- 6 Many now contain defibrillators. The Community Heartbeat Trust has adopted 1,300 boxes, more than half of which have been converted to store defibrillators.
- 7 There are many other varied uses for the boxes. Book-swap points that are also miniature libraries are popular. The village of Marton cum Grafton in North Yorkshire was one of the first places to open a mini-library in 2010; another was opened in the London borough of Lewisham in 2013.
- 8 Art galleries in old phone boxes are also popular – the Gallery on the Green in Settle, North Yorkshire, is celebrating its 10th anniversary soon. "A group of residents thought it would be a shame for the box to disappear, and they had the idea of a gallery," says Mike Smith, one of the local people who keep it running.
- 9 Some people attempt to make money from the boxes. The Red Kiosk Company has bought 124 boxes from BT under the adopt-a-box scheme and charges traders about £300 a month to use the boxes.
- 10 Mustafa Mehmet runs a coffee stall in a phone box in Hampstead, north London. He says it's not easy selling coffee to a customer with both buyer and seller inside the box.
- 11 Phone repair company Lovefone repairs cracked iPhone screens from a phone box in Holborn, central London. The Lovefone technician who works there, Fouad Choabi, loves it. "This is my office," he says. He has been based in the box for two and a half years. The business is very profitable, showing it can be done if you get the concept right.
- 12 Next to the pier in Brighton, Senegal-born Abo Fall is selling hats, sunglasses and beachwear out of two adjacent boxes. He has been there for two years, but he says it can be difficult if the weather's bad. "People like the boxes, and it's different from an ordinary shop," he says. Wherever you see a red box, you will see someone taking a picture of it, although, as the traders know, that doesn't automatically mean they will buy a coffee or a sunhat.
- 13 Plenty of other unusual ideas have been tried. A box in the village of Meols, Merseyside, has been turned into a miniature museum dedicated to the band Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark, who used to make calls from the box. And in 2018, a box in Kingsbridge, Devon, was turned into "the world's smallest nightclub".
- 14 People can also buy boxes that aren't listed and have no prospective adopter, so are being removed. A box in poor condition will cost you almost £2,000 on eBay, or you can buy a refurbished later K6 box for £3,300 through BT's approved reseller X2Connect.
- 15 "We supply boxes to private buyers and commercial organizations," says a director of X2Connect, Martin White. "They go all round the world. We've sent them to shopping malls in Florida and Dubai. They're very popular in Australia and America, but places in Europe take them as well. People put them in their gardens,

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and companies have them in their offices. They buy them as birthday presents or just for themselves, telling us it's something they've always wanted."

- 16 The boxes have been on a million postcards and in many films, and they have been a central part of British life for much of the 20th century.

17 I wonder how Scott's phone boxes will look 50 years from now, when everyone has forgotten why they were ever there and thinks they were built as micro-libraries, art galleries and mini-shops.

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First published in *The Guardian*, 27/08/19

3 Comprehension check

Are these statements true (T) or false (F) according to the article? Correct any that are false.

1. Sir Giles Gilbert Scott's classic red phone box is called the Routemaster.
2. His original phone boxes, designed in 1924, were made of wood and painted red.
3. Some of these original phone boxes can still be seen on the streets of London.
4. The last of Scott's famous phone boxes was made in 1968.
5. It's no longer possible to make phone calls from red phone boxes in Britain.
6. Many people do not want Scott's red phone boxes to disappear from the streets of Britain.
7. Many of the old red phone boxes are now used as mini-shops and libraries.
8. People can buy a decommissioned red phone box, but only from BT's approved seller, X2Connect.
9. There are now refurbished red phone boxes all around the world.
10. Scott's red phone boxes have become a symbol of British culture and are famous across the world.

4 Discussion

- When did you last use a telephone box?
- Was there a time when you used phone boxes regularly?
- What are your country's five most well-known designs?

5 Developing and pitching an idea

You've been offered the use of a red phone box that is situated at the entrance to a park near a busy town centre. You cannot move it, but you can adopt it or rent it out. Many different groups are competing for this rare opportunity, but only one group can get the phone box. What are you going to do with it?

Work in small groups. Think of ideas for how you would like to use the phone box. Choose your favourite idea and develop it further. Prepare a three-minute presentation.

After all the ideas have been presented to the class, vote for your favourite.

6 Webquest

Look back at your lists in task 1, and find out more about one of the well-known British designs. Further suggestions and images can be found here:

www.wired.co.uk/gallery/top-25-british-designs-gallery

Present your findings to the rest of the class.

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KEY

2 Key words

1. sophistication
2. enthusiast
3. preserve
4. ceased
5. listed
6. melted down
7. decommissioned
8. adopt
9. traders
10. profitable
11. adjacent
12. refurbished

3 Comprehension check

1. F – His classic red phone box is called the K2. The Routemaster is the red double-decker bus.
2. F – They were made of cast iron.
3. T
4. T
5. F – About 5,000 are still used as phones.
6. T
7. T
8. F – You can also buy them on eBay.
9. T
10. T