

THE HISTORIC POST-BOXES OF CLONAKILTY AND ENVIRONS IN CONTEXT

Bernadette McCarthy



Introduction

Cast-iron post-boxes are a familiar feature of the Irish street and roadside; so familiar, in fact, that until they are needed they often go unnoticed. Yet they are not simply functional, but an intrinsic part of our heritage. Designed with care for aesthetic value as well as practicality, these heritage objects provide an insight into the changes that have taken place in Ireland over the past 150 years. Despite their archaeological and historic value, however, they do not enjoy legal protection based on their heritage status, as they are not yet included in the official Record of Monuments and Places, and while some, but not all, have been included in the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage, they are not listed in the Cork County Record of Protected Structures.¹ Post-boxes are, therefore, particularly vulnerable to vandalism and mismanagement. Once any heritage object has been removed from its original setting, it loses much of its archaeological value, especially if its original location is not recorded. In recent years, decommissioned post-boxes have been removed by An Post, who have no clear policy on the management of these historic objects; in some cases, they are replaced by new steel models. Worse still, many historic post-

boxes have been ripped out of their settings by thieves, often to be sold on the internet as ornaments (naturally, without any information on their original whereabouts). Following a brief background history of the Irish postal service prior to 1850, this paper provides an overview of the dating and historical context of Irish post-boxes, referring to historic examples in Clonakilty town and environs.

The Irish Postal System Prior to 1850

The modern postal service developed during the seventeenth century, at a time when effective communication was needed for colonial control of Ireland. The first Postmaster of Ireland was appointed in 1638, whose assistant, Captain Talbot, organised post-stages along the three principal roads of Ireland: the Cork Road, Connaught Road and Ulster Road (Feldman and Kane 1975, 4). In 1656, Cromwell passed an act setting charges for letters (2d for a single sheet posted to or from anywhere 40 miles from Dublin and 4d for further afield) and forbidding private post, the norm until then, giving the government a monopoly on the emerging system (*ibid.*, 4; Reynolds 1983, 12). Throughout the eighteenth century, post was generally carried on horseback or, more commonly, by male and female letter-carriers on foot, often dressed in rags, who were obliged to travel long distances daily while being vulnerable to robbery and the elements (*ibid.*, 12; M.H. 1935, 90). While the authorities tried to introduce standard uniforms in the early 1800s (Reynolds 1983, 77), letter-carriers coming from Cork were said to have been dressed in discarded military coats, buttoned behind them for ease of movement, leading to the use of the phrase ‘Here’s Paddy from Cork with his coat buttoned behind him’, applied to anyone in a rush (M.H. 1935, 90). By 1659, a foot-post was regularly collecting post brought along the main route from Dublin to Cork, and running with it to Bandon (Reynolds 1983, 42). From here, post for those living in Clonakilty may have been picked up, probably by servants, or perhaps sent on elsewhere via a letter-carrier again. As time went on and roads were improved, the number of post-stages increased and more linkages between towns developed. By 1760, in addition to the General Post Office (GPO) in Dublin, there were forty-five receiving houses – predecessors of the post office – throughout Ireland (*ibid.*, 23). By 1782, the number had risen to 145 (Dixon

1970, 130). These receiving houses would have been based in pre-existing local businesses rather than purpose-built post offices, and would have used wooden post-boxes (Ferguson 2009, 9).

The *Freeman's Journal* of 29 June 1786, published a notice by the GPO stating that from 5 July the same year 'Cloghnakilty and Skibbereen [are] to be established Post Towns, with a Post twice a week, through Bandon'. Later that year, 'Cloghnakilty' is listed as a post-town from which it cost 4d to post a letter to Dublin or vice-versa by normal post, or £3.13.3 by express post, which would take a mere forty-five hours (Wilson 1786, 495). In 1789, stage-coaches were introduced on the Belfast and Cork roads, leading to a faster service; by 1809, eight were leaving Dublin every night of the week (Reynolds 1983, 23, 44-5). By the 1820s, riding- and foot-posts had generally been replaced by mail-coaches on the main roads. One local driver of the mail-coach on the Cork–Skibbereen route was, according to information provided in the West Cork Regional Museum, Clonakilty (hereafter Clonakilty Museum), a Michael Galwey of Kilkerrin (Kilkeran), Clonakilty. *Pigot's Directory* (1824, 235) informs us that 'Cloghnakilty' had a post office on Main Street (now Rossa Street), with John Bennett as postmaster, and noted that 'the Mail [coach] from Dublin, Cork, and all parts of Great Britain arrives every day at half-past one, and is despatched every morning at half past eleven. The Skibbereen Mail leaves immediately on the arrival of the Dublin mail'; it also notes that the mail-coaches carried passengers on the Bandon–Cork and Rosscarbery–Skibbereen routes (*ibid.*, 236). John Bennett is also listed as a grocer and proprietor of a flour factory on Main Street, presumably the same premises as the receiving house (*ibid.*, 236).

By the 1830s, the postal system still remained the preserve of professionals and the gentry, costing 3d to send a single folded sheet to a location 7 to 15 miles away, with 1d added for each additional 10 miles; the price doubled if two sheets were used. Most Irish emigrants were, therefore, entirely cut-off from home as they could not afford the cost (Reynolds 1983, 60). However, the postal system of the then British Empire was revolutionised at the end of the 1830s by Rowland Hill, who introduced reforms still in place today (Hill 1837). On 17 August 1839 the Bill for the Penny Postage System passed, leading to a cheaper rate of postage, and by May 1840 the first adhesive stamp,

the Penny Black, was issued. Pre-paid postage was also introduced, which meant that the postman would not need to wait for payment but could knock and drop the letter in a specialised post-box or through a door letter-box. Adjustment took time, however, and in 1849 the Postmaster General issued a public notice asking people to provide ‘street-door letter boxes or slits’ (Ferguson 2009, 57). A developing rail network and the growth of literacy following the introduction of national school education in the 1830s also helped the expansion of the postal system. The numbers of letters posted soared despite (and perhaps partly because of) Famine deaths and emigration: 41,832,834 letters were delivered in Ireland in 1855 compared to 8,301,904 in 1839 (Postmaster General 1856, 515). *Aldwell’s Directory* for 1844–5 lists Mrs Diana O’Connor as postmistress in Clonakilty (1844–5, 286). Decades later on 21 April 1881, an advertisement was published in the *Cork Examiner* on behalf of Eliza Beamish, who had emigrated to Canada in 1842, requesting information on the whereabouts of Mrs Daniel O’Connor (née Dinah Smythe), ‘whose husband kept a post office in Clonakilty and died a year after his marriage’.

Victorian Cast-iron Post-boxes

Prior to the 1850s, members of the public wishing to post a letter had to call into a receiving house or give it to a letter-carrier on his/her round. The novelist Anthony Trollope, who worked as a post-office surveyor in Ireland, is credited with introducing public cast-iron post-boxes to Ireland and the British Empire from 1852. What is thought to be the oldest surviving pillar-box (an upright, freestanding post-box c. 1.2m high) is on display in Collins Barracks, Dublin; it is one of five commissioned by Trollope with a crown on its roof and inscribed with ‘Post Office Letter Box’ on its sides (Ferguson 2009, 10-11). The earliest functioning pillar-box in use in Ireland is in Kent Station, Cork, and dates to c. 1857; ironically, such early examples were all painted green and bore no royal insignia. It has an unusual feature: a slot on the top part, rather than the side, for inserting letters. This design flaw would have caused the post to get wet (Spalding 2009); today the pillar-box is located indoors. This flaw was soon rectified: a flap at the aperture to keep out rain and an internal wire cage to stop post from falling out when the door was opened became standard changes incorporated in the design of post-boxes

from this era (Ferguson 2009, 16), while from c. 1859 to 1901 all new post-boxes carried the block cipher of Queen Victoria, the letters VR with a crown in between (VR = Victoria Regina). No pillar-boxes exist in Clonakilty, but an ornate example of the hexagonal Penfold type dating from c. 1866–79 stands on North Street, Skibbereen. Inspired by the Athenian Temple of the Winds, the architect J.W. Penfold combined aesthetics with practicality in the design of these boxes (Ferguson 2009, 17), the cap of the Skibbereen example is typically decorated with beading and acanthus leaves, and topped by an acorn. Letters tended to stick in the Penfold's hexagonal cap and so pillar-boxes from c. 1879 onwards are cylindrical with more subdued decoration around the cap. From 1887, the design was refined further and the imperial cipher of Victoria, more elaborate than the block cipher, began to appear below the collection plate on pillar-boxes (Robinson 2000, 4).

Designs were also drawn up in this period for post-boxes that could be set into walls. Firstly, the rear part of the wall-box – which would be set in the wall – had to be cast in one piece in the foundry. After this, the whole front of the box including royal insignia and aperture were cast, leaving a space for the insertion of a hinged door later on; a Chubb lock was also fitted to all examples made after 1870 (Farrugia 1969). From around 1880, royal red replaced green as the standard colour of Victorian post-boxes (Reynolds 1983, 75). H.C. Smith of King Street Iron Works, Cork, were awarded the contract for supplying wall-boxes to all of Ireland in 1859 (Reynolds 1983, 75). In 1881, the contract passed to W.T. Allen and Company; in Allen boxes royal insignia always appear at the top, with the words 'POST OFFICE' on the hood of the aperture (Robinson 2000, 22). They also have a low door handle and a central slot for a plate that gave the times of collections (Ferguson 2009, 27). An example of such a box is in use on Oliver Plunkett Street, Clonakilty, close to the Catholic church and inserted into the wall outside the parish centre (formerly Clonakilty Boys National School). Careful observation will reveal the foundry mark, 'W.T. Allen & Co. London', on its base. Outside of the towns, wall-boxes were also set up at central places at or near crossroads and a similar example can be seen inserted into a stone pier outside Hurley's shop at Lisavaird (Lissavard) crossroads (Fig. 1), where there was also a national school and a smithy. The post-box is distinctive because of its riveted door, possibly

a sign of repair. Another was set up in the front wall of a fine farmhouse just west of Bealad Cross c. 1900 (Fig. 2), where the Catholic church and a national school had been built by this time (Ordnance Survey 1st and 2nd ed. maps). A letter published 12 February 1916, in the *Skibbereen Eagle*, retaliating against a previous letter demanding a post office in Bealad, notes that the box had been ‘a true and trusty friend’ serving the public for fifteen years. The author also condemns the previous letter’s styling of the ‘respectable farmer’s house’ it is situated in as a ‘pig sty’. With the opening of the Clonakilty extension to the Cork, Bandon and South Coast Railway in 1886, the postal system would have expanded, while the mail-coach service became redundant. The three Victorian wall-boxes discussed above may all have been erected in the years that followed in order to keep up with the demands of various commercial, institutional and personal interests in the busy town of Clonakilty as well as in the surrounding region.



Fig. 1: Post-box, Lisavaird.



Fig. 2: Post-box, Bealad.

A range of postmasters and postmistresses are recorded during the Victorian period in Clonakilty. *Slater's Directory* for 1856 lists Denis Donovan as postmaster, and notes the times of the coming and going of the mail-coach: 'Letters from Cork, Dublin, and all parts north arrive at eight every morning, and are despatched thereto at half-past four in the afternoon. Letters from the west arrive at four in the afternoon, and are despatched at eight every morning' (1856, 196). According to information provided in Clonakilty Museum, the postal service was operated from the Shannon Arms Hotel, now O'Donovan's Hotel (Pearse Street). In 1870, *Slater's Directory* lists the post office as located on Sovereign Street (now Pearse Street) with Jeremiah Coughlin as postmaster. At that time the post arrived from all parts at 5:40am and was despatched at 6:15pm. A second batch of letters from western parts including Rosscarbery, Schull and Skibbereen arrived at 6:00pm, and was despatched at 5:40 am. The office also offered money orders and savings services, as well as providing for the sending of telegraphs (*Slater's Directory* 1870, 31). *Guy's Postal Directory* lists Thomas J. Wolfe, Main Street (now Rossa Street), as postmaster in 1875; according to information in Clonakilty Museum his premises were at no. 12. By 1881, William Wolfe is listed as postmaster and there were two batches of letters arriving (6:00am and 6:30pm) and being despatched (8:30am and 6:30pm) each day (*Slater's Directory* 1881, 35). *Guy's Directory* later lists Patrick O'Brien (1883; 1884) and Mrs Ellen O'Brien (1891; 1897) as postmaster/postmistress. According to information provided in Clonakilty Museum, they operated from no. 5 Rossa Street, and John O'Brien was also providing for letters to be posted at the Imperial Hotel on Strand Road in 1886, where the mail-coach horses and drivers could also recuperate en route. Such private post-boxes were normal in commercial towns, though they had an extra fee (Ferguson 2009, 51, 55). In February 1900, while Mrs O'Brien was still postmistress, Clonakilty Petty Sessions dealt with the case of a 'delicate young boy' who, while employed in Clonakilty post office as a telegraphist, messenger and auxiliary postman was charged with stealing postal orders from letters in the sorting office and trying to cash them in the head post office on Oliver Plunkett Street, Cork (*Cork Examiner*, 23 Feb. 1900). Later that year, a former local postman appeared in court charged with larceny and embezzlement of letters containing valuable property (*Skibbereen Eagle*, 27 Oct. 1900).

Edward VII and George V Post-boxes

Wall-mounted post-boxes dating to the era 1901 to 1910 are decorated with the block cipher of Edward VII, the letters ER with a crown in between (ER = Edwardus Rex), above the hooded aperture. They continued to be supplied by W.T. Allen and Company, London. Local examples of such include a wall-box on what is now the shop-front of Cash's clothes shop, Rossa Street, Clonakilty (Fig. 3), another inserted into the high wall outside the Convent of Mercy, Clonakilty and a box in a concrete wall-pier on the hill descending into Ring, adjacent to an old iron water-pump. Where lamp-boxes and pillar-boxes are found elsewhere in the country, a more elaborate imperial cipher can be seen at the base. Post-boxes dating from 1910 to 1922 are decorated with the insignia of George V (GR = Georgius Rex), the last British monarch to adorn an Irish post-box. One such box is in use in Clogagh: a round-headed box displaying the block cipher of George, the letters GR surmounted by a crown, below, rather than above, the collection plate. Two GR lamp-boxes are on display in Clonakilty Museum, one of which may have originated from Strand Road (now Wolfe Tone Street; Fig. 4); a photo of an identical example fixed to a post at this location is also displayed in the museum. Lamp-boxes were convenient to set up as the postal network expanded because they could be easily fixed to a street lamp or pole. The Post Office generally adopted strict policies in relation to the placement of new post-boxes, decreeing that country letter boxes would not be provided where there was already a box within half a mile, unless there was a huge demand for such (Ferguson 2009, 33-4).

During this era, Margaret Murphy served as an assistant in Clonakilty post office (*Southern Star*, 24 Feb. 1896), while John Spiller is recorded as the postmaster (*Guy's Postal Directory* 1903; 1907; 1910), and is listed in the 1901 census as inhabiting no. 3 Main Street (now Tom Sheehy's hardware shop, Rossa Street) with his wife, four children, two servants and a boarder, Alfred Roberts, a Church of Ireland curate. A photo in Clonakilty Museum shows well-dressed staff outside this purpose-built post office in 1910. The still functional ER wall-box is located across the road from these premises. From c. 1904 to 1906, Michael Collins attended a course in Clonakilty for those wishing to work for the postal service (Crowley 2015, 32). According to the 1911 census, Morton Syms Bruton, aged thirty-nine and born in Cork City,



Fig. 3: Post-box, Rossa Street, Clonakilty.



Fig. 4: Post-box, West Cork Regional Museum, Clonakilty. Permission to photograph exhibit: Michael O'Connell.

occupied the post office with his sixty-two-year-old widowed mother Mary Anne (who won third prize for her Orpington cock and hen in Carbery Show according to the *Southern Star*, 5 Aug. 1911). The 1911 census indicates that the Brutons also ran an adjacent hardware shop, boot shop, and grocery and drapery at nos 1, 2 and 4 Main Street. In *Guy's Directory* M.S. Bruton is still listed as postmaster in 1921.

Post-boxes after 1922

This was a turbulent time in Irish history and no doubt many historic letters passed through the hands of the staff of post offices in the Clonakilty area. On

22 February 1922, a circular was issued stating that ‘The Postmaster General of the Irish Free State [J.J. Walsh] has decided that in future all Letter Boxes are to be painted emerald green instead of P.O. red as at present’ (Ferguson 2009, 42). Pillar-boxes were immediately painted green, thereby allowing the Free State to preserve the existing infrastructure while demonstrating their independence. Over the next couple of years, wall- and lamp-boxes were gradually painted. Harrington’s of the Shandon Works, Cork, were appointed Munster contractors for supplying the new green paint (*ibid.*, 43). Later that year in September, the first industrial dispute of the Free State occurred as postal workers went on strike protesting against pay-cuts instigated by the new Postmaster General.

On 26 April 1922, it was decided that SÉ for Saorstát Éireann would form part of the design of new post-boxes, and boxes with the stylised letters SÉ and a harp in relief below the collection notice were cast from 1928 onwards (Ferguson 2009, 50). The Department of Posts and Telegraphs (P&T) became the official name of the authority responsible for the postal system from 1924 until 1984, when it was changed to ‘An Post’, and some SÉ boxes also feature the P&T logo. The old Irish-style lettering used in both logos was a clear statement of a new order. Early on before the new boxes were being cast, the P&T logo was painted onto some post-boxes, such as that at the hospital cross on Convent Hill, Clonakilty. This box lacks any distinguishing features (Fig. 5), but a photo of it in Clonakilty Museum shows a P&T transfer in gold and black now no longer visible between the aperture and the collection notice on the front of the box. Anti-British sentiment ran high in the new state, and many post-boxes had their royal insignia ground off. This appears to be the case with a wall-box in Connonagh of a similar style to Edward VII boxes in the area, reading ‘Post Office’ on its canopy, and with the foundry mark of W.T. Allen and Company on its base. The royal insignia, however, have been smoothly ground off, possibly when the box was first painted green. In 1924, P&T took over the recently deconsecrated Presbyterian church on Bridge Street (now Edward Twomey Street), Clonakilty, for use as a post office (NIAH). In 1930, *Guy’s Directory* lists John McCrohan as postmaster in Clonakilty. The same year, the post office made national news when it was broken into by thieves who were unable to open the safe (*Cork Examiner*, 31 July 1930). John O’Sullivan is recorded as postmaster by *Guy’s Directory* in 1935, and T.P. Flynn in 1945.



Fig. 5: Post-box, Hospital Cross,
Convent Hill, Clonakilty.



Fig. 6: Post-box outside co-op,
Lisavaird.

From 1937 when Ireland ceased to be known as Saorstát Éireann, SÉ boxes were no longer cast and instead boxes were cast with the P&T logo alone. An example of such a post-box is visible in a brick wall outside the co-op north-west of Lisavaird, with the foundry mark 'JESSOP DAVIS ENNISCORTHY' visible across its bottom (Fig. 6). Another P&T post-box with a rounded head is mounted in a wall in Ballinglanna (Fig. 7), and an identical example is set in a wall on the roadside in Greenfield townland, near Ardfield. A photo of a P&T lamp-box in Lisselane is displayed in Clonakilty Museum, probably located where a modern 'An Post' box is now attached to a pole. Identical lamp-boxes are still *in situ* at Hayes' Crossroads, Cloonlea townland, and at the crossroads in Lislevane townland (Fig. 8), each of which lack any Irish logos. On the

bottom right corner of each the foundry mark reads ‘CARRON COMPANY STIRLINGSHIRE’ while ‘POST OFFICE’ can be read over their apertures, though ‘P&T’ had become the official name of the Irish postal service (Fig. 8). These boxes likely date to the mid-twentieth century, as identical models in England commonly bear the insignia of Elizabeth II, from 1952 onwards, and would have ceased to be produced by the time Carron Company, based in Scotland, went into receivership in 1982. With independence, Irish firms were able to tender for production of post-boxes but some UK firms including Carron Company continued to be prominent suppliers (Ferguson 2009, 46), implying that these monarchless models were designed for the Irish market.



Fig. 7: Post-box,
Ballinglanna.



Fig. 8: Post-box at
crossroads, Lislevane.

Conclusion

By the 1980s, cast-iron post-boxes had ceased to be produced in Britain and Ireland alike, being replaced by steel models. In 1984, P&T was divided into two separate state bodies, namely, Telecom Éireann and An Post. Boxes that display the 'An Post' logo therefore date to after this period. The quality and aesthetic appeal of these boxes could hardly be said to match that of the cast-iron examples, though they may be seen as cheaper and more practical in the globalised world we live in. Around the country, antique post-boxes continue to be threatened by vandalism, robbery and lack of legal recognition as part of our heritage. For example, locals informed me that there was formerly an old post-box at Shannonvale bridge, but following works on the bridge in recent years the box failed to re-appear. In an era when letter-writing has become more of a hobby than a necessity, the postal infrastructure is bound to suffer neglect, but it is vital that both the public and An Post recognise the heritage value of these objects, central to life for many in an era without internet. They facilitated business, sustained friendship and nourished love, enabled families to keep in contact with emigrants and made historic change possible. As points of importance in the local landscape that reflect our history over the past 150 years, they should be granted the legal protection as heritage objects that they deserve.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Mr Michael O'Connell of the West Cork Regional Museum, Western Road, Clonakilty, for kindly sharing his wide knowledge of Clonakilty's postal heritage and allowing me to photograph exhibits. I would also like to thank Clíodhna O'Leary and Joseph Flahive who spent an enjoyable day hunting post-boxes with me. Any errors or omissions are my own.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Aldwell's Directory, 1844–5. [<http://www.corkpastandpresent.ie/places/streetandtradedirectories>]

Census of Ireland, 1901 and 1911. [<http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/>]

Cork Examiner. [<https://www.irishnewsarchive.com/>]

Freeman's Journal. [<https://www.irishnewsarchive.com/>]

Guy's City and County Almanac and Directory, various issues. [<http://www.corkpastandpresent.ie/places/streetandtradedirectories>]

Hill, R. 1837. *Post Office Reform: Its Importance and Practicability*. London.

Ordnance Survey 1st and 2nd edition maps, c. 1840 and c. 1900. [www.osi.ie]

Pigor's Directory, 1824. [<http://www.corkpastandpresent.ie/places/streetandtradedirectories>]

Postmaster General. 1856. 'The Post-Office: First Report of the Postmaster General on the Post Office; Second Ditto'. *The Irish Quarterly Review* 6, 499–540.

Skibbereen Eagle. [<https://www.irishnewsarchive.com/>]

Slater's Directory, various issues. [<http://www.corkpastandpresent.ie/places/streetandtradedirectories>]

Southern Star. [<https://www.irishnewsarchive.com/>]

Wilson, W. 1786. *The Post-Chaise Companion or Travellers' Directory through Ireland*. Dublin.

Secondary Sources

Crowley, T. 2015. *In Search of Michael Collins: An Illustrated History and Guide to Places in County Cork Associated with Michael Collins*. C. O'Leary (ed.) Skibbereen.

Dixon, F. E. 1970. 'Irish Postal History'. *Dublin Historical Record* 23(4), 127–36.

Farrugia, J. Y. 1969. *The Letter Box: History of Post Office Pillar and Wall Boxes*. London.

Feldman, D. and Kane, W. 1975. *Handbook of Irish Postal History to 1840*. Dublin.

Ferguson, S. 2009. *The Irish Post Box: Silent Servant and Symbol of the State*. Dublin.

M.H. [Michael Holland] 1935. 'Paddy from Cork with his coat buttoned behind him'. *Journal of the Cork Archaeological and Historical Society* 40, 90.

Historic Post-boxes

NIAH: National Inventory of Architectural Heritage. [www.buildingsofireland.ie]

Record of Monuments and Places. [www.archaeology.ie]

Reynolds, M. 1983. *A History of the Irish Post Office*. Dublin.

Robinson, M. 2000. *Old Letter Boxes*. Princes Risborough.

Spalding, T. 2009. *Cork City: A Field Guide to its Street Furniture*. Cork.

(Endnotes)

1 The Record of Monuments and Places (RMP) is a statutory list of archaeological monuments protected by the National Monuments Acts. It is available to view at www.archaeology.ie. The National Inventory of Architectural Heritage (NIAH; www.buildingsofireland.ie) compiles records of Ireland's built heritage. It is used by planning authorities in deciding whether structures should be added to the Record of Protected Structures (RPS). Cork County RPS is available to view at <http://www.corkcoco.ie/co/pdf/901892758.pdf>.

