



▲ If you had wanted to make a telephone call in 1906 you would have probably visited your local general store or chemists. Here you would have found tucked away in the back of the shop, a 'Silence Cabinet' like the one in the picture.

Silence cabinets were made of wood, and although called 'Silence Cabinets' were probably not very silent or soundproof.

Phone companies like the National Telephone Company tried to find the busiest places to install the 'Silence Cabinets'. Railway stations, hotels and busy 'high class' shops were found to be the best sites.

QUESTION

How is making a call from a 'Silence Cabinet' different to the way we make a call from a modern payphone today?



The sign of the Blue Bell



▲ What would you have done if you couldn't find a 'Silence Cabinet' in your local store or chemists?

Well in 1907 you would probably have looked for the 'Blue Bell' sign of the National Telephone Company.

Building call offices or kiosks in the street was becoming more common by this time. They could be used at any time and with more privacy.

By 1907 The National Telephone Company had 7,800 telephone call offices spread around the country.

The Company was always looking for busy new sites for their call offices and the 'Blue Bell' sign soon became well known.

▣ Here you can see a photograph of a small iron kiosk (taken about 1911). It was built at the side of the road in Holborn, London. This call office had an attendant to help the public.



QUESTION

Call offices were often built near lamp posts. Why do you think this was?



▲ But in 1912 a new sign had begun to appear. The Post Office had taken over responsibility for all the telephones and call boxes. The new sign showed a lion, crown, shield and a unicorn.



The first street kiosks



As you have seen, most of the first call offices were placed in busy shops, and were looked after by an attendant. However, not everybody liked to visit a shop to make a telephone call. Some shopkeepers only allowed their best customers to use the phone. Other shopkeepers would pretend that the phone was out of order. Another problem with shop call offices was that when the shop was closed the phone could not be used.

◀ To overcome these problems telephone companies began to build call offices or kiosks in the streets. They were about the same size as telephone kiosks today, but were up to two feet taller.

At first they were built from wood and were of two different kinds. The first kind was the automatic-lock type. To enter you had to insert a penny (or two halfpennies) into the lock. The second kind had an attendant who made the call to the operator and collected the money for the call. Once the call had been connected the attendant would step outside the call box.

Gradually, automatic kiosks became more popular than the attended type. People enjoyed placing their own calls using the new instruments. They also felt that their calls were more private without the attendant listening in outside the box.





↑ Stations were very popular places for the siting of call boxes. The picture above shows a call box on Portsmouth railway station in 1905.



Listen for the coin to drop



▲ A coin operated phone.

The first coin box telephones were not very strong and they were quite hard to operate.

The operator would only connect you when she had heard the coins drop into the box. Sometimes this caused problems. It certainly did for Samuel Wartski! On a December day in 1907 he tried to make a call from a Bishopsgate street call box in London. The operator didn't hear his money fall and refused to connect him. Angered by this Samuel tried to break into the coin box to get his money back. He failed but was arrested, charged and fined for causing 95 pence worth of damage to the box.



▲ Instructions on how to insert your money.

QUESTION

What was the only coin you could use in this box?



▲ The police found the new telephone call boxes very useful in an emergency like the one above. They were often given a key to the call box and could make free calls to their station. Often these calls resulted in the saving of a life. Such a call was made on the night of 16th February 1907,

when two policemen noticed a man drowning in the river near Thorpe Station, Norwich. After he had been pulled from the river, a call was made from the new kiosk nearby, and soon a horse ambulance arrived to take him to hospital.




All shapes and sizes




When you think of a telephone box you probably think of the well known red kiosk with a domed roof. But in 1912 when the Post Office took over the telephone network, kiosks came in all sorts of shapes and sizes, and were made from several different materials.

There were kiosks in many large towns and all cities, but there were still very few in country areas.

 Coin-operated 'Norwich' Kiosk.



 This kiosk was built in Folkestone in about 1909. It was designed to look like a garden shelter and to blend in with the trees behind it.