

Made in Sheffield 2

Children of the Revolution.

by Greg Spring

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The Sheffield Philatelic Society

Ever since the general population developed the desire, and the economy, to communicate with each other using paper and postage stamps it has been necessary to provide some efficient method of collecting letters for sorting and distribution. In Sheffield post made its way to a coaching Inn for transport but as the city grew this became less convenient. Some facility to allow local collection was needed.

Initially wooden boxes were erected at key points but these proved insecure to both thieves and natural elements. Finally, in 1879, a national program revolutionised the postal system with the large scale production of cast iron pillar boxes. The design of these letter boxes was so ideal that it took a century, and a radical change in social thinking, before anyone dared change this British icon. Not surprisingly such a revolution originated in Sheffield, in the Swinging 60s.



In 1966 David Mellor, famous for his cutlery designs, was commissioned by the Post Office to devise an innovative type of letter box. This box was not just a fashion statement but a practical advancement. It was made from vitreous enamelled sheet steel, making it resistant to environmental wear. The box was constructed from panels, which could be replaced if damaged. It was also fitted with an internal clearance mechanism which allowed letters in the box to slide into the collection bag. This halved the collection time of the mail.

Of course, such a radical new idea had to have a champion. In this case it came in the guise of Tony Benn, then Postmaster General, who had decided that he would use his appointment to make as many changes to the Post Office and Royal Mail as he could, dragging them (unwillingly) into the modern world. The British postal system was very set in its ways, and it took the actions of many more governments over many decades to impact its core infrastructure (perhaps detrimentally). Unfortunately, the Mellor design was way ahead of its time and although the box was put into production and introduced into several cities (called the Type F) in 1968 the basic design was changed to a cast iron box, produced by the Carron Company and still in use today (Type G). Unfortunately, these boxes are no longer to be seen in Sheffield, according to the current Royal Mail letter box location list.

My thanks to David Mellor and his staff for providing the above information and photograph

You can find more articles on Sheffield's postal history at our web site.

The Sheffield Philatelic Society meets at 7.15 pm on the 2nd and 4th Thursday of each month (except August) at the Central United Reformed Church, 60 Norfolk Street, Sheffield, S1 2JB.

For a programme of events please visit:

www.sheffieldps.org.uk