

Letter Box Histories



This web-page details the chronological development of the letter box in several countries from around the world. It does not claim completeness for the listed countries, but will hopefully prove useful to collectors.

The compiler would welcome further information - if it is not included in the next update, then it is because you have not responded to this request! Please help your fellow collectors by sharing your knowledge.

Argentina ↗

Letter Boxes for Pick-pockets. Argentinian letter boxes have large slits for mail. When the collection has been made and sorting is undertaken, three piles emerge, namely letters, printed matter and 'documents'. This third pile comprises wallets and handbags stolen by thieves and, in 1969, up to 200 items a day were posted thus!

Australia ↗

1856 In New South Wales a circular pillar, designed by T W Levinge and cast by Robert Bubb and Sons of Sydney, was in use by this year.

Austria ↗

1817 (1 June) Up to this date sender and recipient had to pay postage in equal shares, after date addressee alone paid postage.

1850 (1 June) Stamps introduced.

1850 (1 June) All letters had to be prepaid when posted.

1850s 2 types of PO - government offices and postmasters in the private sector.

Each had their own LB's. All coloured yellow - as were the mail coaches.

1870 'Mainz Weber' type LB introduced at Vienna PO.

1890 'Wiczek' type LB introduced.

1899 'Paris' type in use until 1918.

1918 'Braun' type introduced.

1948 'Dworschak' type in use until 1980.

1980 'Mailbox 80' type introduced.

1980s 23,600 boxes in use. Boxes are currently blue.

---- Red boxes for pneumatic mail.

---- Blue boxes for airmail.

Belgium ↗

1808 A slit was placed at every Post house.

1836 By this year boxes sited away from the Post Office were at every commune without a Letter Receiving House.

1840's Letter boxes held a rubber stamp. An impression would be made by the postman as proof that the box had been emptied

1847 That September all LB's were on commune buildings or churches.

1848 Street letter boxes introduced.

1849 (1 July) Stamps introduced. An increase in letter posting resulted in more boxes being required.

1850 (April) Every railway station provided with an LB.
 1850 By this year cast iron boxes were erected in the streets.
 1852 (July) Letter boxes on TPOs for receipt of letters before departure and at stops en-route. A handstamp or cachet in the top left of letter showed what town the letter had been posted in. Bureaux Ambulants.
 1866 By this year a new style green letter box was introduced.
 1867 Portable letter boxes installed on PSVs (Buses).
 1893 Sunday labels introduced. They were attached to stamps (in the same manner as Israeli Tabs) for the sender to indicate NON-delivery on the Lord's Day. Inscribed in French and Flemish 'Do Not Deliver on a Sunday'. It was all part of a campaign to reduce Sunday work. It lasted until 1914.
 1897 Cast iron 'Prismatic' letter boxes introduced..
 Modern letter boxes are of the wall box type in sheet steel and are enamelled red.

France

1653 Parisian boxes erected by Villayer.
 1653 The letters were enclosed in special postpaid envelopes bought at special Post Offices. The scheme was a flop and no covers are extant.
 1829 Letter boxes introduced generally in towns and villages.
 1829 Poste Rurale introduced which extended posts to every commune.
 1829 The Post Office were obliged to maintain at least one letter box per town, preferably at the Town Hall.
 1829 Rural Letter Carriers collected mail and took it to the nearest Post Office.
 1849 Stamps introduced, resulting in extra letters being sent.
 1850 Belgian style letter box installed in Paris as an experiment.
 1871 Extra letter boxes allowed at a cost to the village. Sited at tobacconists, stations and crossroads.
 1884 Mayors ordered to indicate next collection time on letter doors.
 1890s Letter boxes introduced on Paris tramcars.
 1899 New style household letter boxes introduced. They accepted mail going in or out.
 1900 Gallic cock style letter boxes introduced. Later Pagoda style, similar to cock, introduced.
 1934 By this year letter boxes were appearing on Mobile PO's.
 1961 Letter boxes coloured blue until this date.
 1961 Letter box colour changed to yellow.
 1993 The Universal Postal Union advises that the French Post Office have produced two intelligent post boxes. Located in the Champs Elysees they have liquid crystal displays that depict the time of the next collection and details of the nearest post office. Also, they can talk in French and English and incorporate a solar powered microscope. Whatever next!
 ---- Special LB's for motorcyclists.
 ---- Letter boxes in shops are not uncommon in France

Germany

17th C Letter boxes at Post houses.
 1766 Post box erected in a Berlin PO, but not effective as postage had to be pre-paid at Pots Office counter before posting.
 19th C By this time Rhineland letter boxes in the French style were erected.
 1818 All letter boxes were to have been removed as they were being used for sending begging letters to the King.
 1823 A Royal Edict decreed the general introduction of letter boxes.
 1834 Before this date letter boxes were not allowed to be used for sending letters to Ludwig I.
 1834 From this year until 1841 local letters were not allowed to be posted in letter boxes.
 1841 Bavarian PO expanded the use of letter boxes due to an increase in trade.

1842 Letter boxes for unpaid letters erected wherever possible.

1842 Letters for abroad not to be deposited in letter boxes. Instead they had to be pre-paid at a PO.

1845 Letter boxes at non-PO buildings. Grocers shops were preferred as the boxes could be kept under observation.

1846 Letter boxes at Munich and Augsburg railway stations. The inner container was put on the train with a postal conductor. The box was not opened en-route.

1849 Bavaria introduces stamps as a direct result of the need to be able to post letters pre-paid.

1853 Bavarian railways TPO's given posting aperture on the side of carriages.

1853 Metal letter boxes erected by the Berlin PO.

1858 Every community had to provide a letter box by law.

1858 Bavarian PO set-up a rural postal service for the delivery and collection from remote hamlets. Simple wooden types were used.

1859 One village rebelled because the bread man brought the post every Tuesday, which was considered adequate.

1867 Metal letter boxes introduced in Bavaria.

1875 Fancy boxes in a renaissance style introduced.

1870s Large towns had special horse-drawn letter box collection carts.

1877 In Berlin, bags were introduced in place of containers within. The bottom fell away and letters dropped into bag.

1886 Bicycles first used for the collection of mail from letter boxes.

1900 Pillar boxes introduced.

1962 100,000 letter boxes in use.

1962 Fibre-glass letter boxes start to take-over from metal ones. They were yellow in colour.

---- Wars of Independence. Old letter boxes kept in place but concealed from the Berlin authorities.

Ireland

1985 The Irish 1986 "Love" stamp has the experimental yellow band (matching An Post bands, The experiment lasted 1985/1986 only and applied to boxes in the inner city area between the canals.

Netherlands, The

1616 Oldest mention of skippers of boats to Hoorn and Enkhuizen permitted to hang two boxes at the Pile House for collection before departure.

17th C Letter boxes were commonplace in towns.

17th C Postmasters provided letter boxes for convenience of senders at their houses or at place of boat departure.

17/18C Amsterdam was littered with boxes belonging to boat skippers. The boxes were of limited use as they were for one destination only!

1807 A postal law dictated that only appointed officials could collect letters. A monopoly had therefore been established.

1810 Every Post Office to have a letter box.

1850 Street type letter box designed to go against a wall as towns did not have foot paths.

1850 Privacy of concern to public as the secrecy of the mails was not sacrosanct. An inner drum was therefore removed and taken, locked, to the local Post Office.

1851 Postage stamps introduced.

1857 Collection times affixed to boxes.

1869 Separate letter boxes for printed matter.

1869 A second aperture was fitted to letter boxes of 1850.

1870 New type letter box incorporated the 2nd aperture.

1879 Collecting carriages on wheels were introduced.

1893 The inner drum was substituted for a mailbag.

1893 Uniforms given to mail collectors.

- 1898 Colour of letter boxes was bronze green, but Amsterdam alone chose red, as in England.
- 1907 The quantity of boxes was doubled to cope with an expanding population.
- 1908 Automatic clearing system introduced, with postmen instructed on their use.
- 1914 Red became the official colour for letter boxes.
- 1920s Royal Arms removed from letterboxes.
- 1920s Posters affixed to all letterboxes of the 1850 type (why?).
- 1962 Polyester town boxes began replacing the 1850s type letter boxes.

New Zealand

- 1855 Postage stamps issued.
- 1859 Pillar receiving boxes introduced. Improved versions of the Australian Levinge box installed at Wellington and Auckland.
- 1860 Private boxes fitted at Lyttelton and Christchurch post offices.
- 1868 At least eight pillar boxes in use by this year.
- 1868 Boxes painted white in colour initially, but subsequently red.
- 1880s Penfold look-alikes introduced. Made by P&D Duncan.
- 1890s VR posting box enamelled plates brought into use.
- 1904 Round-topped metal rural delivery boxes began to appear, with its red metal flag. Settlers were expected to provide their own at the roadside.
- 1910 Over 150 iron pillar boxes in use in NZ.
- 1910 At about this time wooden boxes started to be used. (Referred to as 'hutches'.)
- 1911 The Post and Telegraph Department provided private rural boxes at fifteen shillings each (.75p) to anyone who wanted one. Made in Canada. The flag was to indicate that mail was awaiting collection, not that mail had been delivered.
- 1911 (September) Red officially chosen as letterbox colour. Berger's Signal Red Paint was used, finished with a carriage varnish. Boxes, at this time, were painted once a year.
- 1951 A survey showed that 71 iron pillars still in use. Due to dogs fouling the bases of boxes most were removed from service.
- 1976 (6 December). A Rapid Box System introduced at Wellington Postal Centre to ensure a rapid delivery of urgent letters to Postal Centre private box holders. Delivery made within one hour of posting.
- 1983 Mail Overflow Boxes introduced. Painted green they are made of wood and are used by postmen who deposit some of their 'walk' and pick it up once they have delivered their first mailbag. Previously, bags were left at convenient points en-route, but mail was being stolen from them. Now we know where the British Post Office got their pouch box idea from!
- 1987 The establishment of NZ Post Limited resulted in Community Mail Boxes (CMB's) being established. They comprise nests of lockable sheet steel private boxes for use in rural areas and follow the Canadian pattern. A large box for parcels is accessible to all box holders and mail for collection may be left at the CMB.
- 1988 Box colour changed to red, white and blue from red on an as and when needed basis.
- 1988 3,700 boxes in use.
- 1988 (June). Larger Post Offices have Fastpost mail boxes with distinctive red and black vertical bars on them.
- 1988 (October). Metal post boxes issued for use at street corners in place of the wooden 'hutch' boxes so familiar to this country. All wooden boxes to be replaced in three to four years.
- 1989 (February). BoxLink service commenced. It is intended to be used by businesses who post large volumes of mail to private boxes and bags. Special posting boxes with big red arrows on them on a white background are used for this special class of mail. An annual fee is charged and postage rates are cheaper. The bulk of all business mail is addressed to a Post Office Box.
- Late fee letterboxes fitted to Guard's vans of NZ Railways, but they have

gradually been phased away. The 'Silver Star' express between Wellington and Auckland still has a late fee posting box

---- The Rural Mail Delivery service distributes mail up to six times a week to communities and farms across NZ to over 85,000 mail box holders.

Qatar

- Qatar does not have a door-to-door delivery service

1987 (Spring). A huge bank of numbered personal mailboxes opened at Doha postal headquarters. The locked boxes are operated by magnetically encoded cards with personal numbers.

Management information is obtained via the card, such as how frequently the box is accessed. The boxes have been manufactured in Scotland.

Sweden

1835 Boxes introduced on ships following a Royal proclamation.

1850s Boxes on stagecoaches (probably).

1855 By this date LB's at Post Offices in towns.

1856 Letter boxes on railway coaches.

1868 Stagecoach drivers equipped with LB's around their neck.

1869 Before this date padlocks were on boxes.

1869 Wall boxes with bases that dropped away and allowed a bag to be placed underneath.

1870 From this date until 1890 an envelope motif appeared on letter box flaps.

1890 A Crown over post horn logo introduced on letter box flaps.

1906 Letter boxes on tramcars.

1912 Letter box as on yellow lettercard postal stationery item.

1988 Stockholm. Blue boxes inscribed LOKALPOST for any part of Stockholm with postcode prefix beginning 1.

1988 Stockholm white boxes inscribed POSTGIRO for Giro payments and same day crediting to account. They were constantly robbed!

Switzerland

Swiss letterboxes are all set in/on walls.

1832 Letter boxes introduced in important towns without a Post Office

1937 First Mobile PO introduced with posting facilities on board.

---- Swiss letter boxes have recently been modified to accept roll film. A specially shaped widening of the slot is filed on old boxes; whilst new boxes come with this facility.

Taiwan

1968 An article about Taiwan and its postal services extolled the virtues of a new Prompt Delivery Service, which involved the use of a special letter box; the carriers departure and arrival time being controlled by the use of time recorders or punched cards, motor cycle delivery and personal notification by the carrier to the addressee.

Does any reader know whether there were any special markings to indicate that mail had been posted by this method?

United States of America

1870s Dime Box, Texas was so named because the post office in town did not keep a supply of postage stamps

and so it became the practice to throw mail into the box with a 10c piece (a 'dime')

1892 The United States Post Office invented an ingenious box that was operated by a time-lock, which automatically displayed a ticket showing the time of the next collection. It also stamped the exact time of posting on each letter as it was dropped

into the letter box. This can be considered to be the first attempt at a mechanical time-keeper, even if not for franking purposes. In the same way, a Mr Fuller offered a machine to the British Post Office in 1895. This latter idea was turned down by the Duke of Norfolk, "for fear it should be robbed."

1987 New lightweight delivery vans introduced by the USPS made by Grumman Corporation. They incorporated the ability to allow the postal service to develop an integrated modular container system so that mail receptacles may be removed from inside street collection boxes and fitted snugly into the vehicle.

Vatican City

---- Vatican City authorities have a fine that they give to motorists who park in front of a pillar box. Part of the fine goes to the Post Office as compensation for loss of business. Has any reader seen a copy of the parking ticket?

(Previously unpublished, written 2002)