



## Pleasing design of red, white and A to B

**T**he old thrupenny bit was twelve sided, made of nickel-brass and we kept a stock of them by the front door. When a phone call was really necessary we used the neighbour's phone and paid with the familiar, unique coin.

When out and about a similar stock of pennies was reserved for the public phone in its friendly red turret and the clanking buttons A and B.

As with so many features of one's early world, we took these courtesies of communication for granted - lots of streets had one, and they earned little comment. Looking again at them years later one can appreciate the pleasing design and the usefulness of this street furniture.

Public phone boxes began life in 1920 in concrete, then graduated to wearing a crown on the front and to being cast iron. Sir Giles Gilbert Scott designed several, adapting the dome of the mausoleum of Sir John Soane's grave in St Pancras' Old Churchyard for the roof.

They were solidly built, didn't need drain pipes and rarely leaked. They withstood endless use and abuse, swallowing pennies



**Horsham District Council chairman Christian Mitchell is supporting efforts to preserve red phone boxes.**

and gossip, alarm and affection with equanimity. By 1980 there were 73,000 of them all over the country. The exact shade of red apparently altered over the

years though they were never less than conspicuous in any location.

However, the most notable factor of our day is the vigour of technical change. Think of how Swiss watch makers stared in spluttering disbelief at the first digital watches, all plastic, tiny battery and sand, which could out-perform the handsomest of hand-crafted clockwork at a tenth the price.

Mobile phones came hard on the heels of these miniaturised wonders and the phone in your pocket soon devalued the kiosk on your street (incidentally, kiosk along with yoghurt is one of the few words English has borrowed from Turkish).

Now many of them will be removed, having fallen into sad disrepair, their useful days behind them.

There are around 400 in Sussex and some brave souls are campaigning to save them. They are expensive to maintain - all that metal to paint and those glass panes to repair - and even more expensive to move.

They can be bought from dealers, with originals costing around £3,000 and replicas going for a third of that. Some may be replaced by new high-tech booths with Wi-Fi and emergency life saving equipment,

so the idea of their deployment may well outlive their presence.

Public phones have a little footnote in economic history. To avoid theft of coins from their boxes the French among others issued jetons, funny little tokens which worked in place of our pennies. In those days French banknotes were an impressive autumn brown while their coins were a miserable aluminium.

The jetons were preferable to the coins. And public phones have saved the worth and life of coins. The old Soviet five kopek piece kept its value when the worth of rouble of which it was part evaporated - all because the coin still operate public phones.

And the white bit? One of the neatest phone boxes in Sussex is in Slaughtam. It's white.

*The Horsham Society is concerned about the past, present and future of the town. It seeks to promote good planning and design for the built environment and open spaces. Membership of the Horsham Society is open to anyone who shares these concerns. For more information, visit the website [www.horshamsociety.org](http://www.horshamsociety.org) or phone 01403 261905.*