



AA Box 456

by Ian Hosker

AA Box 456 stands almost half hidden in a layby that is shrinking annually as the hedgerow creeps ever closer to the A3052, Lyme Regis to Exeter road in Devon. It is very easy to miss as you drive westwards towards Exeter, near Newton Poppleford, where the road climbs and gently curves towards the left as it approaches a hazardous junction. The driver's attention will most likely be focused on the safely navigating the junction. If you are a passenger, then turn your head to the left as the car climbs towards the Halfway House restaurant, and you will see what must be one of the smallest 'Listed' buildings in England.

The first of these iconic kiosks were built in 1912, initially as shelters for AA patrols, and by 1920, there were 61 kiosks fitted with telephones. Every AA member had a key to gain entry, giving access to the telephone. This allowed members to make local calls free of charge, presumably, but perhaps not exclusively, to call for help. There was also a first aid kit and a small supply of petrol (health and safety was not invented then).

By 1962, there were almost 1000 boxes (kiosks) across the UK, but the exponential growth in car ownership, and the expansion of the motorway network saw the end of traditional boxes being built in favour of telephone posts. These were much cheaper and so could be more numerous across an expanding road network. By the late 1960's the traditional wooden kiosks were being phased out and decommissioned. All the remaining working AA kiosks were decommissioned in 2002 because the rise of the mobile phone made them redundant.

There are now only 19 traditional AA telephone kiosks in existence (*although none are functioning as telephone boxes*), and eight of them have a Grade II heritage listing because of their iconic status and historic value. In granting heritage listing status, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport considers two key criteria:

- Architectural interest; or, as in the case of AA Box 456;

- Historic Interest. To be of special historic interest a building must illustrate important aspects of the nation's social, economic, cultural, or military history and/or have close historical associations with nationally important people. There should normally be some quality of interest in the physical fabric of the building itself to justify the statutory protection afforded by listing.

AA Box 456 (*and the other seven*) stand as icons of a bygone era in motoring history when men (*and they were men*) in their ochre coloured uniforms and peaked caps saluted members as they passed by. Formed in 1905 when there were severe restrictions imposed upon motorists, especially regarding speed, the AA began life as patrols to warn motorists of nearby police patrols, and to offer any assistance they could.

Of course, we now have our Garmin and TomTom satnavs with safety camera warnings, and we may have mixed feelings about that. How times have changed: or perhaps not.