

BT ERODES BRITAIN'S HERITAGE

PRESS RELEASE

Remember when BT started taking away our lovely British red phone boxes and replacing them with metal and glass ones? Well now they are just removing "unprofitable" payphones all over the place.

There have been many stories in the news about BT removing payphones from rural areas, especially in Wales and Scotland leaving remote communities, where there is still no mobile phone reception, in a vulnerable position. BT currently has a legal obligation to provide public payphones in the United Kingdom. It was recently reported in the news that BT was looking to Ofcom to remove their obligation to provide payphones, but on further enquiry with Ofcom they have received no such request from BT.

In 1991 when UK Payphone Directory began logging, mapping, counting and analysing Britain's payphone estate there were just over 154,000 operational and working payphones. Obviously, many of these were operated by BT with a few other operators just starting out. Hull, Isle of Man and the Channel Islands are all operated independently of BT. Today there are just 98,986 BT payphones left in operation and these are rapidly decreasing.

BT claim that out of the 8,465 payphones it operated in Scotland, during 2007, 200 of these phones were not used to make a single chargeable call. This statistic overlooks calls to the emergency services on 999 or 112 and also calls to freephone numbers. Let's look at the breakdown of BT operated payphones in Scotland by area in 2008.

Aberdeenshire	414	East Lothian	79	Orkney	75
Angus	449	Falkirk	159	Perth & Kinross	251
Argyll & Bute	388	Fife	432	Renfrewshire	61
Borders	228	Highland	712	Shetland	103
City of Aberdeen	560	Inverclyde	97	South Ayrshire	168
City of Edinburgh	913	Isle of Skye	65	South Lanarkshire	147
City of Glasgow	1507	Mid Lothian	41	Stirling	189
Clackmannan	73	Moray	141	West Dunbartonshire	69
Dumfries & Galloway	368	North Ayrshire	118	West Lothian	160
East Ayrshire	109	North Lanarkshire	231	Western Isles	158

Source: www.ukpayphone.com

During the last 2 months, UK Payphone Directory has visited 239 random BT public payphones in Scotland. What we have shockingly discovered is that on average 43% of BT payphones were not in working order when we checked them. This includes there being no dial tone, the telephone handset being smashed and a BT Maintenance message being displayed which renders the payphone inoperable until an engineer has visited it. Others have battery faults and line faults and some keypads were so badly affected by salty air or water in coastal locations that the buttons physically wouldn't work. Where we managed to actually find a working payphone and make a test call back to HQ, the line quality was poor and on many occasions very crackly. On the Islands of Harris and Lewis in the Western Isles, which the team visited in August 2007, 96% of the payphones were broken. These were all reported to BT's payphone maintenance team, based in Liverpool.

We questioned BT about all these faults and they told us that they can only rectify faults when they know about them and they rely on the British public to tell them when a payphone doesn't work!

OK, so what this really means is that 81 year old Mrs McGregor goes to a BT public payphone to make a phone call in the pouring rain or snow and when the payphone doesn't work she should write down the details, find another payphone and report it to BT I just don't think it's going to happen. How lucky for BT ... this means that the broken payphone is then another one that they can say wasn't used for a year and so try to justify its' removal. This is a clever plan to try and justify a "no cash in the box" removal by stealth stance when of course the public can't use the payphone in the first place because it's broken! In the last 2 years, BT has removed 2,251 public payphones in Scotland and still the cull continues, one of the next victims being the public payphone at Fearnan near Aberfeldy in Perth & Kinross due to be removed on February 22nd, 2008.

Of course, what we also need to remember is that BT have also stopped a huge number of their payphones accepting coins and in many cases the mechanism has simply been ripped out of the phone leaving the square black box at the bottom open and exposed to vandals. Many BT payphones that we visited were also dirty, some with food in them and old cans and other awful unmentionable things. When challenged about this, BT said that their payphone cleaning programme only extended to rural payphones when they were reported as 'dirty' by the public due to the high cost of maintenance of payphones in rural areas. Interesting then isn't it that they can put a "No Smoking" sticker in every single one, but can't mend or clean it! I have to mention at this point that only 3% of payphones operated by NWP Spectrum, an alternative payphone provider in the UK, were broken and the vast majority were clean and provided a pleasurable experience when using them.

OK, let's move on to Wales, the second worst area for operational efficiency of the 5,321 BT payphones there. Here's the breakdown of phones in Wales by area in 2008

Blaenau Gwent	67	County & City of Swansea	303	Neath Port Talbot	157
Carmarthenshire	380	County of Bridgend	192	Pembrokeshire	341
Ceredigion	345	County of Caerphilly	146	Powys	541
City of Cardiff	510	County of Merthyr Tydfil	69	Rhondda Cynon Taff	227
Clwyd	686	Gwynedd	627	Torfaen	124
County & City of Newport	184	Monmouthshire	230	Vale of Glamorgan	192

Source: www.ukpayphone.com

Wales scored better than Scotland, on average 56% of payphones in rural areas such as Ceredigion, Pembrokeshire and Carmarthenshire were operational and this figure was much higher in Swansea and Cardiff, around the 88% level, although still not as good as NWP Spectrum who scored 98.6% in the South Wales area. It was interesting to note that BT are able to maintain the bi-lingual signage and posters within these payphones as well as other eastern European languages and "No Smoking" signs, but once again still can't seem to mend or clean them. Wales may be able to beat England at Rugby, but not on its working public payphones.

A cynic might say that BT wants to sell off its payphone business to remove the millstone of its obligation to maintain them, but of course it would need to get Ofcom to agree that any commercial buyer of its' business would be free of such an obligation otherwise any such sale would be rendered inoperable as it would be unprofitable. So with BT being able to demonstrate usage falling they will try and get Ofcom to agree, even though usage is falling because the phones don't work to begin with. Over the past 2 years, BT has removed 1,386 public payphones in Wales.

As yet our team hasn't visited and assessed Northern Ireland although we believe from some of the reports we have had from members of the public that the 2,312 BT payphones

there will score somewhere between Scotland and Wales for usability. BT has removed 785 public payphones in Northern Ireland in the last 2 years.

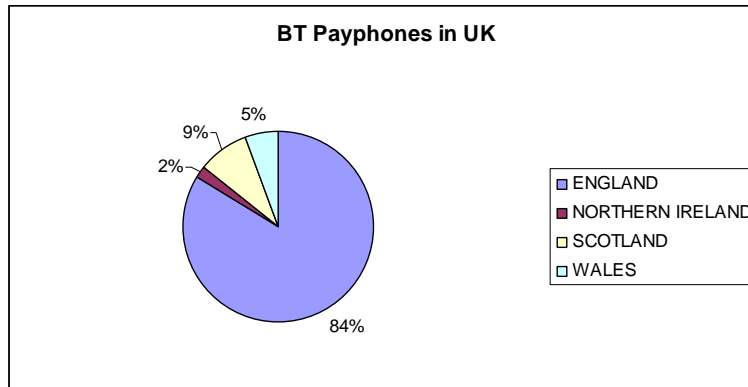
Now for England, and its 81,888 BT payphones. Here's the breakdown by area

Bath & North East Somerset	248	Gloucestershire	1104	Northumberland	461
Bedfordshire	823	Greater Manchester	2825	Nottinghamshire	1442
Berkshire	1620	Hampshire	2268	Outer London	7707
Buckinghamshire	900	Herefordshire	377	Oxfordshire	1283
Cambridgeshire	1205	Hertfordshire	1400	Rutland	94
Cheshire	1358	Inner London	7488	Shropshire	903
City of Bristol	520	Isle of Wight	223	Somerset	1026
City of Leeds	871	Kent	3031	South Gloucestershire	306
City of Liverpool	1813	Lancashire	2573	South Yorkshire	1780
Cleveland	586	Leicestershire	1224	Staffordshire	1554
Co. Durham	770	Lincolnshire	1338	Suffolk	1203
Cornwall	1187	Merseyside	147	Surrey	1110
Cumbria	1132	Middlesex	2713	Tyne & Wear	1423
Derbyshire	1021	Norfolk	1595	Warwickshire	1045
Devon	2416	North East Lincolnshire	151	West Midlands	2839
Dorset	1247	North Lincolnshire	181	West Sussex	1192
East Riding of Yorkshire	364	North Somerset	189	West Yorkshire	1777
East Sussex	1329	North Yorkshire	1545	Wiltshire	1197
Essex	2283	Northamptonshire	735	Worcestershire	746

Source: www.ukpayphone.com

England has the largest ground area of the four UK constituent countries and the largest population, so therefore it probably stands to reason that it should have the most public payphones, but they are disappearing faster in England than anywhere else. Over the past 2 years, BT has removed a whopping 24,336 public payphones in England, the majority of which have been in cities and large towns but a large number of rural locations have found themselves without a payphone. Even with the existing mobile phone network coverage claiming between 95% and 97% of population their actual landmass coverage is far less due to cost of implantation versus profitability. This means that the public payphone still provides a very important part of daily life for many people.

Are we just going to stand by and watch our Post Offices, village shops, village schools and now our payphones being culled as part of the Government and big business strategy to take away all of our traditions?



Source: www.ukpayphone.com