

In Plain Sight: The Treasures all Around Us!

Intro: Hello and welcome to Hampshire HistBites. Join us as we delve into the past and go on a journey to discover some of the county's best and occasionally unknown history. We'll be speaking to experts and enthusiasts and asking them to reveal some of our hidden heritage, as well as share with you a few fascinating untold tales.

Ellie: Hello, and welcome to Hampshire HistBites. This week, we're joined by hosts Madelaine and Catherine. Every day, we notice new things that we haven't spotted before, and this was especially the case during the national lockdown.¹ At the beginning of lockdown, Winchester HODs spotted that there was only one Edward VIII postbox in Winchester, and this sent them on a mission.

What could you find that you didn't normally notice? Madelaine, our host today, started photographing boot scrapers outside front doors, and Catherine soon took notice of door knockers. In July of 2020, Dinah, from the Handwritten Letter Appreciation Society, started a new hashtag on Twitter. This was the start of the #PostboxSaturday movement. Every week, on Saturday, those of us involved now find our favourite pictures of postboxes or strangely placed ones, and post them on Twitter for everyone to enjoy. This soon evolved into finding many different things. Make sure you include capital letters in your hashtag for those with sight disabilities and get to exploring.

Enjoy the episode and we'll see you on Twitter.

Catherine: Hi, I'm Catherine Polly and I've lived in Winchester for over 25 years now. I'm currently the head of Winchester School of Art library and have a really intense interest in the history of both Winchester and also of place, and this project really resonated with me.

Madelaine: Hello, I'm Madelaine. I've lived in Winchester for 22 years, and like Catherine, I have an interest in history and particularly social history. So I've written some books, local history books, one about the area of Hyde and also one about St Bede's School, and also one about Theatre Royal Winchester. What we're going to be doing today is talking about postboxes and we'll tell a little bit about how it came about and why we're interested in it.

This started, I think back in May, wasn't it, Catherine? We started, somehow, looking at postboxes and photographing them.

Catherine: We did indeed. We responded to a Tweet from Winchester Heritage Open Days that highlighted a particular postbox, and this just sort of set us off photographing them.

¹ This is referring to the first national lockdown beginning in late March 2020. Any mention of lockdown in this episode refers to the first national lockdown back in 2020.

Madelaine: That's right. It was a postbox that was tweeted. There's only one Edward VIII postbox in Winchester. And Heritage Open Days put up a Tweet about it and said, 'Does anybody know where this is?'

And I recognised it because a couple of years ago, when Heritage Open Days had a quiz, it was in one of the questions. So I'd always remembered that the only Edward VIII postbox was outside the Golden Lion on Alresford Road. And it was actually back in lockdown, Catherine and I both started walking quite a lot, and we started tweeting different things to each other. So Catherine, you started with door knockers?

Catherine: Yes. Lockdown really started making me look at details and, also, walking different routes that I hadn't walked through the city of Winchester before, and just started noticing details. So one of those was door knockers and the complete range of door knockers that were across Winchester, so I started recording those and photographing them and tweeting about them.

Madelaine: I suppose what we're both saying with that, is that we did start to notice little details and although history can be very big, in many ways, and we've got wonderful big buildings in Winchester, the Great Hall and the Cathedral, but sometimes history can also be about tiny details. We'd both always tweeted to each other photographs of what are called ghost signs, which are old advertising signs on the side of buildings which might've faded over the years. So actually, when somebody tweeted first off about a postbox, this was right up our street in more ways than one. It just appealed to us and because we were out and about walking every day, looking at detail and it gave us a form of communicating with each other, because of course we weren't necessarily seeing each other as much as we would normally have done. So we started photographing postboxes.

Catherine: I think we, well, certainly I started doing different routes that I knew would take in a different postbox and I think it started to become quite obsessive, possibly even a bit of a competition between us.

And I think the more we started doing that, the more we started noticing both the different housing, whether they appeared in a wall, whether they were stand-alone with a little roof of their own, perhaps, you know, if there were two together – I know a very early one I noticed the two together that are on Southgate Street, which actually marks the entrance to the city, so through looking at the postboxes, you start to sort of see traces of history and I think that was what started to spur us on as well.

Madelaine: Because we'd both lived here for 20 plus years, I began to think about things that weren't there anymore. So you'd say about two postboxes on Southgate Street, but there also used to be two outside the Discovery Centre on Jewry Street. And when it was redeveloped back in, about 2010, the two postboxes were taken away while the refurbishment happened, but only one of them ever came back and I've never known what ever happened to the other one. And you just begin to realize that this is living history because it's actually within our own lifetime, that things have begun to change.

Catherine: And I think it started to pull other people in within the community. Certainly, I remember a picture, I think that was part of the Mayor's Choice, that had the postbox on the High Street by the Buttercross, that also generated interest from people as to why that wasn't

there before, and also, questions were started to be asked about why postboxes were in particular places, why there were two together, for example.

Madelaine: And also, we looked at some of the other bits and pieces around that. So, for example, there's a postbox on Hyde Street, which, when we were putting together the *Hyde in Living Memory* book, we found an advertisement, which said that when the collections were made from that postbox.

And of course, they used to be collected from that postbox, something like 8 or 10 times a day. Whereas now postboxes are only collected from once a day. Postboxes are never full. People just don't write letters in the way they used to. So it's a little bit of history again, that I think in some ways I feel like I'm trying to hold on to, because they will disappear if we all stop writing letters.

Catherine: And I think that link to letter writing was really interesting, 'cause I think a month or so into the project, a Tweet went out from the Letter Appreciation Society Twitter account saying, 'Ooh, has anybody got any pictures of any interesting postboxes around the country?' And I replied to that saying that Madelaine and I were involved in this project in Winchester and then a whole other community opened up around letter-writing and postboxes and the idea of posting on #PostboxSaturday, which we've continued.

Madelaine: So every week now on Saturday, each of us put up a photograph of a postbox, and they don't necessarily have to be in Winchester. We've been lucky enough to get away from Winchester for short periods, and so I did quite a few from Herefordshire and Catherine did some from the West Country. And also I've challenged my husband, that if he goes out on a bike ride and he sees a postbox, he's got to Tweet me a photograph of it. And so it's been a bit of a joke in some ways, but in other ways, we've actually really got into the interesting side of it.

And of course, each postbox we can tell the era of it by the cypher on the front, which shows which King or Queen was on the throne at the time. There are no postboxes older than Victoria. Although there was a post system of some sort, it wasn't an official one and there weren't boxes. Cause I was thinking, I was actually out in Chawton and there is a postbox, right opposite Jane Austen's house in Chawton. But of course it's not where she posted her letters. She used to go into Alton and there was a coaching inn, where she would have taken her letters and somebody from the coaching inn would have taken them on the coach, so there's lots of bits of history in there that we haven't really even gone into yet.

Catherine: And I think that idea of the stories behind a postbox, I know that wasn't the postbox that Jane Austen used, but I think it's been quite thought provoking, and we started to think about particular postboxes, not just in terms of their history or their cyphers, but in terms of personal stories.

I know that when I went back home, saw my parents for the first time in July, after lockdown, and walked to the postbox that I'd always used as a child, and started to think more clearly about memories and what that meant and I know that, Madelaine, you posted about one that you used with your mother-in-law.

Madelaine: She lives just six houses away from a postbox, which of course is no distance at all, but these days it's quite a distance for her, but she uses it as a challenge. She walks there

with her walker to post a letter because letters are how she still communicates with people. And I stood at this postbox and looked out and actually it was the view across the North area of Winchester, it was just lovely. And I thought, you know, I can really see the sense of achievement that she would have reaching that postbox.

But actually something Catherine just said about postboxes of her childhood. I grew up in Australia and we had postboxes too, and they were red and, you know, they had ER on them and there was one just down the road from us, we lived in a house in a suburb of Sydney and I loved that postbox and I loved writing letters. So I had several pen friends, and sometimes I would spend all day writing letters, but in between each letter, I would go to the postbox. I would post each letter as I wrote it, because that was what I wanted to do is the whole experience of doing that.

And actually, here in Winchester, I can tell you the times of the collections of all the postboxes that are quite near me, because if I've written a letter in the evening, I know if I get to the one up on Hyde Street, it'll go first thing in the morning. Whereas if I've written it during the afternoon, actually, if I go to the postbox down by St Bede's School, then it will go sooner.

Catherine: But I think as well, obviously we have the ones that are nearest to us or fit the particular time, but I think that we each have or have developed favourite ones through this project.

I know one on Kingsgate Street that's Victorian, and probably one of the earliest in the city and that's set into the window, is a favourite with mine. It resonates with me. I did a degree in Victorian studies, so the fact that it's Victorian and it's the earliest in the city, I really liked. It's one that became part of treasure trails or things that I did with my children to find that one.

Madelaine: One of my favourites is on the corner of Egbert Road and Dane Road in Hyde, and it's outside a building which still shows that it says the Old Hyde Post Office, and when we first moved here, there was a little corner shop and there was a little post office inside.

And now most of these little corner post offices have disappeared. And I was really glad when that was redeveloped, that they kept the postbox and they recognized that this was where previously the post office was, and there are various other favourites as well, which you just sort of like for different reasons.

Catherine: And I think, interesting that you refer to that particular postbox, on the corner of Danes Road as being near the old post office, because I think part of this project has also led Madelaine and I down another track, which links into something that Madelaine said at the beginning about us both being interested in history and traces in the landscape and in the city, that we've also been looking for buildings that are called 'the old', whether that's 'the old post office', which is where the link is with this project.

Madelaine: On Hyde Street, again, there is the 'Old Smithy'. So where a blacksmith used to be. The other day I spotted the 'old mill', and there's various others. So again, I mean, what I like about them is they are hints to the past. They're telling us what used to be there because so many signs of what was there previously have disappeared. And although particularly in

Winchester, we look a lot at our long ago history, you know, doing digs to dig up an old Abbey or buildings that have now gone.

But actually there are so many clues around us all the time, which, if you look for them, they're there, the ghost signs do it, the names of houses do it, the names of streets do it as well, don't they? Staple Gardens in Winchester is to do with wool stapling and the Market car park, of course it's called that because there was a market there. So all these things are all around us all the time and we just keep going.

Outro: We hope you enjoyed listening to today's episode. If you'd like to find out a little bit more about what we've been talking about, then please visit the website, winchesterheritageopendays.org, click on Hampshire HistBites, and there you'll find today's show notes as well as some links to more information.

Thank you for listening.