

LISTING REPORT

CITY/SUBURB/TOWN	NAME OF IDENTIFICATION	ADDRESS OR LOCATION
Narooma	Telstra public telephone: 'The Disaster Responder'	195 Princes Highway, Narooma (Narooma Plaza), NSW 2546

LGA:	Eurobodalla Shire	ABORIGINAL NATION:	Yuin (Walbunga)
POSTCODE:	2546	LOT/DP:	N/A
COMMITTEE:	Built Heritage Committee	GRID:	-36.22301, 150.12691
AUTHOR:	Naomi Parry Duncan on behalf of Telstra Communications Corporate Affairs and Herd MSL	LISTING DATE:	17 June 2026

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Telstra public telephone outside Narooma Plaza (Southfield), at 195 Princes Highway Narooma, is emblematic of the vital role public telephones play in the lives of Australians, particularly during disasters. During the Black Summer bushfires of 2019–20, and in the two months immediately following, this telephone was used for nearly 1000 calls and became a hub for a community that was isolated and traumatised. Telstra has dubbed this telephone point as 'The Disaster Responder' and has identified it as representing the importance of public telephones for keeping communities connected in times of need, and during emergencies.

This public telephone is representative of the cultural significance of public telephones, on social and historical grounds, on *Burra Charter* principles (Australia ICOMOS Incorporated 2013) (please refer to Appendix: Desktop history of public telephones in Australia).

The following themes in the National Thematic Framework (Australian Heritage Council 2022) apply to this telephone:

- 5.6 Transport, Communication and Infrastructure (5.6.1 Linking a Nation; 5.6.3 Advances in communication technology)
- 5.7 Knowledge and Social Systems (5.7.1 Equal Opportunity)
- 6. Living as Australians.

DESCRIPTION

The public telephone at 195 Princes Highway, Narooma, became a lifeline during the 2019–20 South Coast fires. When many were without power or signal due to fires and their aftermath, this single public phone became a hub, clocking almost 1,000 calls in just two months. Telstra has dubbed this telephone 'The Disaster Responder' and consider it epitomises the vital role of public telephones in the lives of Australians, particularly in times of need.

The National Trust acknowledges that essential upgrades may be necessary to update the fabric of this site for contemporary and best practice uses. The listing refers to the enduring use of a public payphone at this location.

HISTORY

There is little information available about the development of public telephones in Narooma, but it is undoubtedly linked to the arrival of telegraph and postal services on the South Coast. The town, on the Wagonga Inlet, was surveyed in 1883 (as Noorooma, County of Dampier), and was declared a port in 1884. A post office opened there in 1889 (*Walkabout - Narooma* 2006), which would have incorporated telegraph services and a telephone line. A National Archives image shows an old cottage serving as the post office building (see Figure 4). Later, the post office moved into Narooma, next to the premises of WB Smyth, who began trading on Wagonga Street/Princes Highway around 1940 (see Figure 5). In 1958, a new post office was opened in Narooma, on the current site at 48 Wagonga Street (see Figures 6 and 7). The town was renamed Narooma in 1972.

The shopping centre of Narooma has shifted over time to Southfield Plaza shopping centre (now Narooma Centre), which was built in 1980 ('interstate NSW Coastal shopping centre sells' 16 September 1994). A public telephone was installed at Southfield Plaza on 16 August 1993 (information from Telstra). There are two other public telephones in Narooma at present: one at 48 Princes Highway (serving Easts Narooma Village) and one at the 1950s post office at 106 Wagonga Street, but the telephone at Southfield Plaza/Narooma Centre, was the one that made the most calls during the disasters of 2019 and 2020. One can only assume the proximity of shopping and parking factored into this.

CONTEXT OF THE LISTING

During the Black Summer of 2019–20, the South Coast of NSW was affected by multiple fires, over several months. The Badja Forest Road Fire, which began on 30 December 2019 caused multiple fatalities and the loss of hundreds of homes (*Black Summer bushfires, NSW, 2019-20* | *Australian Disaster Resilience Knowledge Hub* n.d.). Affected towns included Cobargo, Quaama, and the localities of Yowrie, Wandella, Verona, Coolagolite and Dignams Creek. The residents of the surrounding villages, valleys, and holiday campsites evacuated to Narooma, to the waterfront, joining residents and holidaymakers. Several thousand people, with their cars, cats, dogs, and horses, lived on the waterfront for days, in the PCYC and the golf club.

There was no electricity, no mobile telephone coverage, and no internet. Few people had cash. ATMs and petrol bowzers were inoperable and refrigeration impossible. While locals pulled together emergency supports, Telstra made the street phones free.

Residents formed lengthy queues to take turns in contacting the outside world. Dr Naomi Parry Duncan, the author of this submission, was staying in Narooma on the night the Badja Forest Road fire started and was evacuated, joining friends at the PCYC and then finding a bed with a friend's elderly relative on the waterfront. She wrote a blog post about the experience of being on the waterfront from New Years Eve 2019 until 2 January 2020, and recorded how important it was that Telstra made the public telephones free for all users: 'big thanks to Telstra for offering free use of the payphones and Wi-Fi points, where dozens gathered' (Parry 2020). A photograph of the queue is included in this listing (Figure 2). The queues for the telephones served a distinct social purpose:

The phone box became a community meeting place for people who had no other way of connecting.

"I had a friend I knew she was in Narooma but I didn't know precisely where she was and I had no way to contact her and there she was in the phone queue ... so many hugs and embraces," Dr Parry Duncan said ("Unconventional" campaign to have phone boxes heritage listed' 5 May 2025).

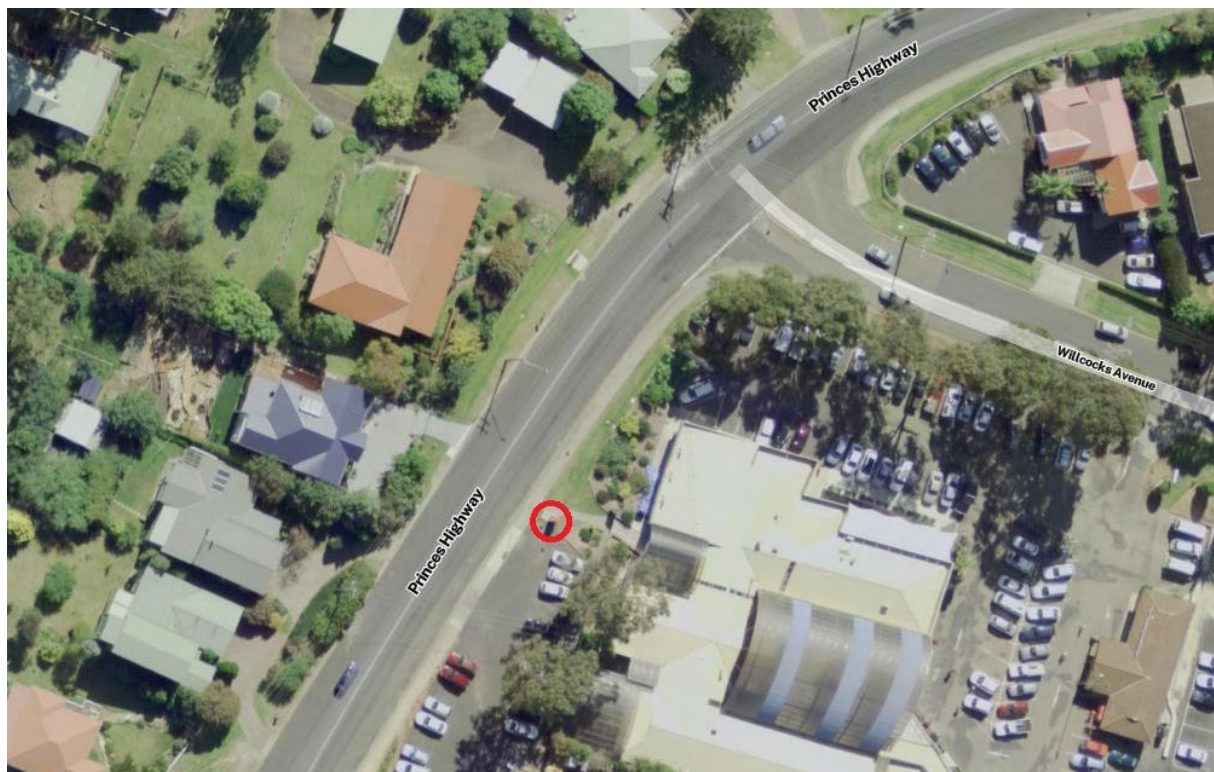
A public telephone box that once stood outside Cobargo Post Office and was destroyed by the Badja Forest Road fire, is now part of the permanent collection of the National Museum of Australia (*Collecting the Cobargo payphone* n.d.) (Figure 3).

Shortly after the fires, Narooma experienced severe flooding, adding to the demand for public telephone services.

In the two months immediately following, this telephone was used for nearly 1000 calls and became a hub for a community that was isolated and traumatised. Telstra has dubbed this telephone point as 'The Disaster Responder' and has identified it as representing the importance of public telephones for keeping communities connected in times of need, and during emergencies.

BOUNDARY OF LISTING

The boundary of this listing includes the telephone box at its current location.



PHOTOGRAPHS



Figure 1: 'The Disaster Responder' at Narooma Plaza, 195 Princes Highway, Narooma (Google Street View)



Figure 2: The public telephone at 48 Princes Highway, Narooma, during the Black Summer (taken by Naomi Parry Duncan)



Figure 3: The Cobargo payphone in situ, photographed by Libby Stewart after the fire, 'Collecting the Cobargo payphone', National Museum of Australia, <https://momentous.nma.gov.au/stories/collecting-the-cobargo-payphone/index.html>



Figure 4: National Archives – Old Narooma Post Office, C4076, HN16058A



Figure 5: National Archives of Australia – Narooma Post Office, undated (prior to 1950), C4076, HN16058B. This site is now 129 Wagonga Street. The shop next door, WB Smyth General Produce, 131 Wagonga Street, traded on this site until 2017. The current post office is located across the road.



Figure 6: National Archives of Australia – Narooma Post Office [opened 1958], C4076, HN16058C



Figure 7: Narooma Post Office at 106 Wagonga Street – Google Street View. Note the Telstra telephone outside.

APPENDIX: Desktop history of public telephones in Australia

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Introduction

This paper was prepared by Dr Naomi Parry Duncan, Accredited Professional Historian (NSW/ACT), to provide historic context for public telephones to support Telstra's request for recognition of three public phones that represent the crucial role of these phones in the daily lives of Australians. The author acknowledges the support and advice provided by Telstra staff and Tom Fletcher.

Historical sources about telephony and public telephones in Australia are limited. Jim Bateman wrote *History of the Telephone in NSW* (Bateman 1980). The late distinguished historian and policy advisor Ann Moyal wrote the first major study of the telephone in Australia in 1984, *Clear Across Australia: a history of telecommunications* (1984), which was commissioned by the Australian Telecommunications Authority (Telecom). That work celebrated the engineering achievements of the people who made Australia's telecommunications network (Garland, 1987). Unfortunately, there is a paucity of research available to the general reader about the period from the privatisation of Commonwealth Government telecommunications and the creation of Telstra in 1993.

However, public phones have been part of Australian life for more than 140 years. They are a universal service, the provision of which is an expectation of government, and enshrined in legislation. This expectation has continued despite widely available mobile telephone technology and the advent of the National Broadband Network and WIFI – universal service obligations have been adapted accordingly. Public telephones, currently provided by Telstra, now incorporate WIFI stations, and have been free to the Australian public since 2021.

The history of the telephone in Australia

Alexander Graham Bell published details of his telephone in *Scientific American* in 1877 and enthusiasts across the world emulated his designs. Alfred W Biggs, head teacher at Campbell Town Public School in Tasmania, successfully connected hand telephones that he had made himself between Launceston and Campbell Town railway stations. He connected Launceston Telegraph Office with the Low Head signal station, using instruments made by Robert Henry, in April 1878. This is thought to be the first use of the telephone in Australia (Telecom Australia Educational Development Unit 1993:3).

In New South Wales, AC Cracknell, Superintendent of Electric Telegraphs, successfully transmitted songs and music over the 224 km distance between West Maitland and Sydney using telegraph wires in December 1877, with instruments inspired by Bell's article (Telecom Australia Educational Development Unit 1993:4).

In Victoria, WJ Thomas of the Geelong Customs House was another early enthusiast and from 1877 experimented with hand-made telephones, eventually connecting Geelong with Melbourne and Queenscliff in January 1878 and transmitting recognisable songs. The first regular commercial service was installed in January 1878, in Melbourne, by hardware importers Messrs McLean Bros & Rigg, who used it to connect their Elizabeth Street head office with their Spencer Street store, 1.2 kilometres away. The following month, Mr Challon of the Central Telegraph office in Melbourne connected a telephone line to Ballarat (Telecom Australia Educational Development Unit [TEDU] 1993:4).

In South Australia, CA Unbehaum, Electrical Engineer for South Australia, used telephones of the Bell type to connect Semaphore, Adelaide, and Kapunda in January 1878, and subsequently Port Augusta and Port Darwin. The Superintendent of Telegraphs in Western Australia, JC Fleming, reported successful experiments in 1882. WJ Cracknell, brother of EJ Cracknell, experimented with telephones at the Brisbane General Post Office in 1878, and a separate experiment connected the Electrical Telegraph Office with the Brisbane GPO in January 1878. By February 1878, circuits connected Brisbane with Toowoomba, Ipswich, and Rockhampton, creating 1600km of lines that were successfully transmitting speech (Telecom Australia Educational Development Unit 1993:5).

Early communications were between fixed points, but in January 1878 the Connecticut telephone exchange opened. It was a single switching office enabling subscribers to connect using their telephone to the lines of any other subscriber to that exchange. By lifting the telephone and hand-winding a magneto, the subscriber signalled an operator at the exchange, who could, using a switchboard, connect the subscriber to the person they wished to speak to.

The first telephone exchanges opened in Australia was the Melbourne Telephone Exchange Company, in August 1880, located in the old Stock Exchange building at 367 Collins Street and described in one Melbourne newspaper as 'the palace of winged words' (Telecom Australia Educational Development Unit 1993:5–7). The Victorian Colonial Government bought the exchange, which had moved to Wills Street, in 1887. As such, it was the first public telephone exchange in Australia. It moved to Lonsdale Street in 1910, which adopted a central battery system, pioneered in Hobart in 1907 (Telecom Australia Educational Development Unit 1993:9).

The Royal Exchange in Sydney, run by investors, had established NSW's first telegraph link in the 1850s and the Stock Exchange. It ran a trial line from its building in Bridge Street to the

General Post Office (GPO) in George Street in August 1880, and then to Darling Harbour Goods Yard. A switchboard was installed there in 1881 (Telecom Australia Educational Development Unit 1993:10). Subscribers had to build their own lines and poles. In 1882, the Postmaster-General's Department installed an exchange and switchboard in the GPO – the Central Exchange – and after a fire in the Royal Exchange, took over its switchboard (Bateman 1980:18).

In Queensland, government offices were linked by telephone in October 1880, through an exchange at the Brisbane GPO. A country exchange opened at Maryborough in 1882. Adelaide, Hobart, and Launceston introduced exchanges in 1884 and Western Australia had exchanges in Perth and Fremantle by 1888 (Telecom Australia Educational Development Unit 1993:13).

Automatic exchanges, which functioned without operators and switchboards, were introduced from 1911, first in the Sydney GPO, but manual services survived in various parts of the country well into the late twentieth century (Telecom Australia Educational Development Unit 1993:16–17).

With Federation in 1901, the newly introduced Australian Constitution gave the new Commonwealth Government power over all postal, telegraphic, telephonic, and 'all other' communications services. The first Postmaster-General (PMG) became responsible for managing all domestic telephone, telegraph and postal services. The colonial networks (staff, switches, wires, handsets, buildings etc.) were transferred to the Commonwealth and became the responsibility of the first Postmaster-General (PMG), a federal Minister overseeing the Postmaster-General's Department that managed all domestic telephone, telegraph and postal services.

Trunk line services, connecting distant Australian capitals, developed from 1907, and in 1930 overseas calls became possible with the introduction of a radio-telephone service to England, and through there to Europe and America. These connected manual exchanges and depended on trunk operators, so were labour-intensive, and expensive.

More than one million telephones were in use in Australia by the 1950s (Telecom Australia Educational Development Unit 1993:18–19).

The development of Australian pay phones

The first Australian coin-operated public phones appear to have been installed around 1890, only a few years after the first ones appeared in the USA. At this stage there was still no national telephone network – each colony's Postmaster General was responsible for the network in their colony. The first public telephone line in Australia was opened in the Sydney General Post Office (Martin Place) in 1893 (Vintage Phones n.d.). By the late 1890s, there was considerable demand across Australia for the establishment of public telephone exchanges.

When the Commonwealth Postmaster-General's Department commenced there were around 33,000 phones across Australia, with 7,502 telephone subscribers in inner Sydney and 4,800 in Melbourne's central business district. A trunk line between Melbourne (the headquarters of the PMG Department) and Sydney was in place by 1907. The first automated telephone exchange opened in Glenelg, South Australia in 1912.

Timed local calls were stopped by PMG in 1910, making local calls free (Moyal, 1992, p. 51). Long-distance (subscriber trunk dialling, or STD) calls were charged.

Trunk lines were extended to Adelaide in 1914, Brisbane in 1923, Perth in 1930 and Hobart in 1935 (Vintage Phones n.d.; Gerrand 2014). PMG exchanges spread across Australia, becoming increasingly robust. The first telephone call linking Perth and Melbourne was made between Postmaster-General Lyons and the Western Australian Premier, Sir James Mitchell, across the Western Australian Transcontinental Telephone Service on 18 December 1930. The Bass Strait cable bringing Tasmania into telephone touch with mainland Australia was laid in November 1935 and opened for telephone business in March 1936 (Abbott 29 April 2025; Molloy 29 April 2025; 'Three payphones nominated as national landmarks' 2025; "'Unconventional" campaign to have phone boxes heritage listed' 5 May 2025; *Calls go out to recognise three Aussie payphones as national landmarks* 2025).

From 1967, during the leadership of Prime Minister Harold Holt, the Australian Labor Party, led by Gough Whitlam, developed a new policy approach to reconstitute the Postmaster-General's Department as a relatively independent statutory authority. This was intended to provide affordable universal services through a government department that was expected to operate as a "business-like" enterprise. The Whitlam Government won the 1972 election, and legislated these changes (Doyle, 2015).

From 1973, the PMG began to transition into the two separate entities: the Australian Telecommunications Commission (trading as Telecom Australia) and the Australian Postal Commission (trading as Australia Post). This was completed on 1 July 1975 under *The Telecommunications Act 1975* (Cwlth). The operation and culture of the new organisations changed from that of a public service organisation into that of a quasi-autonomous national-government organisation (Quango – a novel concept in Australia at that time), with their own boards of directors and vigorous approaches to costs and profitability, and especially to improved customer service (Doyle 2015). From 1981, mobile telephone technology has developed and become part of Australian life, with 1G phones introduced in 1987. Smart phones arrived in Australia in 1996 (Local Government Association of Queensland 2025).

Public phones were deregulated in 1989 and continued to be supplied by Telecom under the Universal Service Obligation (USO) (Raiche). This instrument requires all Australians to have reasonable access to fixed voice services on an equitable basis, and traditionally included fixed-line telephones, landlines, and payphones, as well as the National Relay Service and

other services provided by radio and satellite technologies. It is 'technology neutral' (Productivity Commission 2017).

In the 1990s, under the Hawke-Keating Government, the Overseas Telecommunications Commission (formed in 1946) was merged with Australian Telecommunications Commission to become Australian and Overseas Telecommunications Corporation (AOTC). This body was renamed Telstra Corporation Ltd in 1993. Telstra was partially privatised in 1997 and fully privatised in 2006, while the number of active carriers has dramatically increased.

Universal service and public phones

The *Telecommunications (Consumer Protection and Service Standards) Act 1999* (Cth), created the concept of Universal Service Obligation (USO). It enables the Minister for Communications to determine which carrier is the 'primary universal service provider'. The social benefit of public telephones with respect to these USOs is monitored by the Australian Communications and Media Authority. The growth of mobile telephony, the internet, and the NBN, has resulted in various reconsiderations of the nature and form of the USO and levels of government funding (Productivity Commission 2017). In December 2018, the USO was incorporated into a wider Universal Service Guarantee (USG) which included access to broadband and voice services (Local Government Association of Queensland 2025).

Australia is not unique in maintaining universal service – many countries within the European Union implemented such provisions as they privatised their services:

Universal service is one of the keystones of the liberalisation of the telecommunications sector. It aims to guarantee that affordable access to a minimum set of communication services of specified quality subsists after the end of the public monopoly. Universal service is designed to avoid social exclusion, ensuring that everyone, and specifically those that an unregulated market would not serve for economic efficiency reasons, has access to a basic set of communication services ... the inclusion of public payphones in the scope of universal service is not solely founded on social grounds but also on economic grounds. Due to the existence of network externalities, it may be founded from a social welfare point of view to support the expansion of the network. Besides, as the postal network, the telecommunications network is a means to promote regional and rural development (Hasbi 2015).

Telstra has been the designated provider of universal services since 1999. Although a listed company, the organisation has inherited and maintains the services initiated by the Post-Master General's Department, and its colonial predecessors.

The obligation of the universal service provider extended to the supply, installation and maintenance of public payphones, to ensure reasonable access to all people in Australia, on an equitable basis, regardless of location.

As the national carrier, Telstra is responsible for delivering the USO, the main feature being the obligation to provide Standard Telephone Services (STS) to everyone in Australia and access to payphones. This is both a legislative and contractual obligation, to ensure untimed local calls, 24-hour access to emergency services, priority assistance to those with disabilities, a Customer Service Guarantee about acceptable connection and repair timeframes, and reasonable proximity to a public telephone service (Productivity Commission 2017:84). Telstra

made all standard national and mobile calls free in August 2021. Since then, usage has more than tripled. In the last year (2024–2025), 25 million free calls were made – including more than 300,000 to Triple Zero and other vital crisis support lines. So, while ‘payphone’ is a name many still use out of habit, today they’re more than that, and they’re truly public phones – helping Australians stay connected, often when it’s needed most. Herd MSL and Telstra have chosen three public telephone sites that typify the value of public phones to Australian communities.

The social and cultural significance of telephones

According to the late independent scholar and public policy advisor Ann Moyal, the telephone has long been neglected in communication and information technology scholarship:

While a steady stream of monographs and journal articles has examined television, broadcasting, video, cable and satellite communication, and the organization and politicization of telecommunication, the ubiquitous, pervasive, invisible but culturally significant connector – the telephone – has been taken for granted and ignored. (Moyal 1992, p. 51).

As part of a 1980s Australian Research Council grant (‘Social Impact of the Telephone’), Moyal analysed how politicians used telephones, both as an electoral asset and as a tool that enabled them to work. The telephone reshaped government record-keeping systems and was a vital implement during many key political moments, including wartime, the death of Prime Minister Harold Holt, and the Whitlam Dismissal (Moyal and Russell, 1988).

Moyal followed this work with an interest in women’s use of the telephone in an ‘information society’. With more funding from Telecom Australia, she conducted national surveys of gendered telephone usage (Moyal 1989, 1992). The study was prompted by a proposal to introduce timed local calls, and a resulting backlash about the adverse effect this would have on women.

Moyal found that the telephone was key to a ‘psychological neighbourhood’ for women, enabling connections between family and friends, and was particularly significant for older Australian women (Moyal 1989:2), as well as those experiencing separation and other adverse life events. The telephone played a vital sociological role and was crucial to maintaining social relationships, especially for isolated women, as well as working women and those without transport (Moyal 1989: 77–78).

Moyal’s 1988 survey included Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents from Darwin and Alice Springs in the Northern Territory, as well as Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia. Citing a 1985 report by Bliss and Wild (1985), Moyal noted that where high-quality services has been provided to remote Aboriginal communities, the effect was beneficial and, when conducted with sensitivity to the needs of communities, had created a positive image for Telecom Australia (Moyal 1989: 66–67). Issues with telephone access included male-dominated decision-making and control over telecommunications equipment, leaving some women in ‘telephone inequality’, which, along with limited service-provision in more remote areas, limited the capacity of communities to engage with communications on their own terms (Moyal 1989: 68–71). In Queensland, telephone communications were essential for reuniting Indigenous families separated through government policy, as well as for contacting social and other supports (Moyal 1989: 68–71).

Moyal identified that other groups experiencing social disadvantage struggled to access telephones, owing to the cost of installation of fixed lines and the precarity of their accommodation. Moyal identified the vulnerability of unemployed women and residents of social housing who had no domestic telephone and were reliant on public phones for telecommunication (Moyal 1989: 72–75).

Moyal found feminine telephone cultures were part of women's values of feelings, relationships, family and friendship nurture, community care and helping:

The telephone emerges from [women's] voices as one of the basic agencies for holding people together, as a 'bonding' instrument, and as a tool for the stable 'gendered' lives of women ... the telephone has assumed high importance as a medium that transcends the damaging effects of psychological and physical isolation (Moyal 1989:92).

Moyal's study had an overtly feminist lens, but her conclusions about the social value of telephones are universal – they are essential for parents, the aged, people with disability, migrants, people with low incomes, and those in regional and remote areas, as well as Aboriginal communities – there are acute social and psychological risks for the 'telephone poor' (Moyal 1989:94). For the telephone poor, public phones are essential.

The special significance of public phones

Mobile telephone technology has led to a decline in usage of public phones and in some countries, particularly the United States, they have been removed and replaced with commercial services (Treisman 24 May 2022). Universal service obligations are prevalent in the European Union, where regulation has a significant impact on usage, which would otherwise have declined by 15 per cent (Hasbi 2015).

Sydney architect Tom Fletcher (Design Inc Studio) collects and documents phone boxes and payphones because he loves the design and architectural elements of public phones. He says they are 'part of the language of our streets', and emblems of the work of engineers and manufacturers to meet the needs of the public and government agencies. Documenting them is not a nostalgia project:

It's a tribute to the practical, social, and architectural role payphones have played in Australian life—and a call to recognise their ongoing relevance in a changing world (Fletcher).

They are also a lens on social history:

Beyond emergencies, payphones have long served as an equalising force—open to anyone, regardless of age, income, or social background. They were places where people connected: calling home, arranging lifts, checking in on loved ones, or sometimes simply escaping loneliness. These human moments took place in public but carried immense private weight. They've also borne silent witness to countless stories: teenage whispers, job interviews, confessions, crimes, reconciliations, and goodbyes. (Fletcher).

Most Australians who were born before mobile phones became ubiquitous, like Fletcher and this author, have fond memories of public telephones and their role in everyday life – for

everything from getting a lift home to sending a message from afar. For young people, public phones were a site of shenanigans and prank calls.

Few people notice the public phones in Australian streets, until emergency strikes. In 2019, the author was one of thousands evacuated to the Narooma shoreline during the devastating fires of 2019–2020. There was no electricity, no mobile telephone coverage, and no internet. When word spread that Telstra had made the street phones free, residents queued to contact the outside world: 'The ABC radio was a godsend and big thanks to Telstra for offering free use of the payphones and wifi points, where dozens gathered' (Parry 2020). The queues served another purpose:

The phone box became a community meeting place for people who had no other way of connecting.

"I had a friend I knew she was in Narooma but I didn't know precisely where she was and I had no way to contact her and there she was in the phone queue ... so many hugs and embraces," Dr Parry Duncan said ("Unconventional" campaign to have phone boxes heritage listed' 5 May 2025).

One of the telephones destroyed in that fire has been collected by the National Museum of Australia (*Collecting the Cobargo payphone* n.d.).

The three telephones identified by Telstra for listing by the National Trust epitomise this vital role. They are:

The Disaster Responder:

195 Princes Highway, Narooma Plaza, Narooma, NSW, 2546

Located in the NSW coastal town of Narooma, this public phone at 195 Princess Highway, remained a lifeline during the 2019–20 South Coast fires. When many were without power or signal, this single public phone became a hub, clocking almost 1,000 calls in just two months. It's also set to be included in Telstra's upgrade of 1,000 public phones in disaster-prone areas – adding features like USB charging, free Wi-Fi and extended battery backup to help keep communities connected during times of need.

The Regional Connector:

Goodeedawa Rd, Doomadgee, QLD, 4830

Tucked away in Far North Queensland and more than 1,000km from the nearest major city, the remote town of Doomadgee relies on more than just roads to stay connected. The public phone on Goodeedawa Road has become a vital link, especially since it was enabled with Wi-Fi in late 2024. Over the past year, locals have made around 1,400 calls – roughly one for every person in town. Built to withstand extreme conditions, its weather-resilient design helps keep the community connected, even when internal temperatures soar above 60°C.

The Support Line:

146 Melville Rd, Brunswick West, VIC, 3055

Nestled in the heart of Melbourne's Brunswick West, this unassuming public phone on Melville Road has become a vital bridge to mental health services. Between the establishment of free public telephones in August 2021 and April 2025, it facilitated over 1,300 calls to Lifeline – averaging more than one person per day reaching out for support, and the most in Australia. Beyond Lifeline, it's frequently used to contact emergency services like Triple Zero and other crisis support lines, highlighting its significance as a trusted community connection point.

Telstra's campaign to list three public phones for social and cultural significance

The campaign has been instigated by Herd MSL, working with and on behalf of Telstra to highlight the important role that public telephones continue to play for communities across Australia. Dr Naomi Parry Duncan, Accredited Professional Historian and heritage consultant (author), was identified by Herd MSL as a historian with an interest in the social value of public phones, via a post on her personal blog about her experience in Narooma during the 2019–2020 fires (Parry 2020). She agreed to support the campaign and act as a spokesperson for the campaign launch.

The campaign was launched in April 2025 (Corbin 2025; *An Iconic Shape Containing Tales of Connection: Telstra Public Phones* 2025). The campaign ran for two weeks and received strong national coverage, including Nine's mastheads *The Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald*, Channel Seven, Australian Community Media, various channels of the ABC, and SBS (Abbott 29 April 2025; *Calls go out to recognise three Aussie payphones as national landmarks* 2025; Molloy 29 April 2025; 'Three payphones nominated as national landmarks' 2025; "'Unconventional' campaign to have phone boxes heritage listed' 5 May 2025). The media coverage unearthed poignant stories of the role these phones play in public life, and, via Telstra's campaign website, many positive responses from the public.

All three sites are in operational use, by Telstra, and Telstra intends to keep updating the hardware and cabinetry and improving the services on all three sites. Council and state government actions may also affect the location of these sites. However, recognition of the three telephones is a way of marking the historic, social, and cultural significance of public phones in Australia.

Conclusion

The research I have conducted for this project underscores the social and cultural value of the public phones and their historical value. The public phone in Brunswick West dates from the 1930s and was the result of a campaign by locals for telecommunications services in Moonee Vale. It was placed in a shopping strip that developed around the Melville Road tram line. Today it is a 'Support Line' but also reveals patterns of suburban development. The Narooma phone is a marker of the terrible disasters that afflicted the eastern seaboard of Australia from 2019 to 2020. The telephone in Doomadgee speaks to the provision of services to remote Aboriginal communities.

Collections relevant to public phones

Archival

Telstra Historical Collection, National Archives of Australia (Melbourne and Canberra),
('“Unconventional” campaign to have phone boxes heritage listed’ 5 May 2025).

Collections identified in 1980 (absorbed into other collections)

Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Harris Street, Ultimo (mounted a substantial exhibition
for the 1977 centenary of the invention of the telephone).

Sydney Telecom Collection, 36 Pitt Street Sydney (above the Royal Exchange Post Office but
due to be moved to Haymarket Telephone Exchange in 1980).

Extant institutional collections

Mt Laura Homestead Telecommunications Museum, Whyalla, South Australia (National Trust
SA).

National Communications Museum (possibly related to Victorian Telstra Museum), Hawthorn,
Victoria <https://ncm.org.au>

National Museum of Australia, Canberra, ACT www.nma.gov.au

NSW Telstra Museum, Bankstown (status unclear September 2025, possibly closed).

Power House Museum (*Powerhouse Collection* n.d.; *Powerhouse Collection - Design model for
'Gold phone' coin operated public telephone or pay phone* n.d.)
Now houses the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences collections and additional items
in four sites (Castle Hill repository and museum, Ultimo, Parramatta, Sydney
Observatory).

Queensland Telstra Museum, Clayfield (status unclear September 2025).

Victorian Telstra Museum, Hawthorn (status unclear September 2025).

Contemporary collectors and societies

ATCS Website Home Page (n.d.), <https://telephonecollecting.org/>, accessed 30 September
2025.

Australian Historic Telephone Society - Home Page (n.d.), <https://www.ahts.org.au/index.html>,
accessed 30 September 2025.

Australian Historic Telephone Society (South Australia) (Australian Historic Telephone Society -
Home Page n.d.).

Field, Field, Field and Chang (n.d.) 'That Exchange Project',
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Notes on telephone hardware

Public (coin-operated) phone hardware in Australia

The first public telephone in NSW was provided at the Telegraph Receiving Room at the GPO on 8 March 1893, relying on the existing telegram system, rather than telephone lines (Bateman 1980:54).

Initially, members of the public used the phones in post offices by paying over the counter for access to a standard phone in a cubicle housed outside the post office or on the verandah in a 'silence cabinet'. The caller would pay for the call at an adjacent window and the operator would place the call then switch it to the cubicle phone (Bateman 1980:54).

In 1912, the first dedicated public phone was introduced, for local calls only. It was an Automatic Electric unit similar to Tele No. 31 but with the dial blanked out. Service was still operator-controlled, but the means of payment was in the telephone itself. Each coin hit a gong as it dropped into the coin tin, sending a tone back to the operator (Vintage Phones).

Public (payphone) technology developed in this period, with various varieties of fixed units with transmitters and automatic electric systems in use. In 1935, the A.B. Multicoin public telephone was introduced, and remained in use until the 1970s and 1980s. Some of these were upgraded in 1966 to enable STD calls and were painted bright orange.

At the same time, a variety of attractive handsets were developed that are coveted by collectors (<https://vintagephones.com.au/Pages/AustPostOffice/Payphones.htm>).

Coin Telephone 1 (CT1) was introduced in 1965. CT3 was introduced in 1972. Heavily armoured, with sophisticated electronics, it remained in use until the 21st century, when Telstra upgraded public phones and enabled wireless, and, later, free calls. From the 1960s, a range of private companies provided 'company telephones'. These were absorbed by Telecom in December 1974 (Bateman 1989: 71).

Telephone boxes

Cabinetry is a crucial element of the experience of public telephones, both for those who see them on the street and those inside them. Public telephone cabinets were introduced after 1901 and by the time of the First World War (1914–1918) were located in post offices in most popular city, metropolitan and country locations: 'They started as grand attachments to post offices and railway stations and transformed into practical enclosures sympathetic to climate, capital cost and maintenance' (Moorhead, 2015).

In 1956 and 1960, a divisional engineer for the Telegraphs & Workshops Section of the Postmaster Generals Department, HJ Lewis, summarised the telephone cabinets in use in

Australia, and the way the materials used, and their construction varied across the states, according to climate. As these articles have been reproduced online (Moorhead 2015), I will not provide detail about cabinets here, but to summarise:

- In the 1930s the APO Standard Cabinet was composed of wood and glass, which required frequent rotations of cabinetry
- Kiosk No. 3 was a copy of British Post Office steel cabinets with a cast iron and asbestos roof, but proved susceptible to rust
- Concrete cabinets were introduced from 1927, but could not be removed
- Head-boxes (cabinets on stands) were useful in temporary locations but disliked by the public
- Tropical type cabinets were designed for Queensland and incorporated louvres for ventilation and galvanised iron roofs, but as they were made of wood, were short lived
- Victoria introduced domed roof cabinets, with timber frames clad in lead sheeting, as a modified standard. They incorporated ventilation louvres
- NSW introduced louvre-glazed steel cabinets in 1951, with timber frames, that required excessive maintenance

Lewis considered the essential elements of a cabinet were adequate ventilation; natural lighting during the day; artificial lighting for the evening; a complete view into the cabinet for security and to prevent vandalism; a durable floor surface; durable exteriors; easily moveable; easily repairable; acoustics that shielded the user from interruption and protected their privacy; shade, and ease of access for customers and technicians. They also needed to be 'readily discernible by the public and yet aesthetically designed to harmonize with local buildings' (Lewis 1956).

In 1960, Lewis wrote about the achievement of 'the Australian Aluminium Public Telephone Cabinet', which was developed in 1957. While he considered the louvre-glazed wooden cabinet with a domed roof, introduced in 1956, had remedied many of the faults of previous cabinets, it still required painting. The aluminium cabinet did away with this requirement. Red phone boxes became a thing of the past, as silver alloyed aluminium boxes were distributed across Australia (Lewis 1960). Telephone boxes are much less common in today's streetscapes, and have often been replaced with a stand, screened with Perspex, but identified with the distinctive Telstra orange roof and lighting.

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