

## **Phase 2: 1957 – 1960**

### **Automatic letter facing and cancelling**

This section covers the important developments made in UK postal mechanisation that took place at Southampton between 1957 and 1960.

The following key developments took place on the Automatic Letter Facing (ALF) machines during this period . . . .

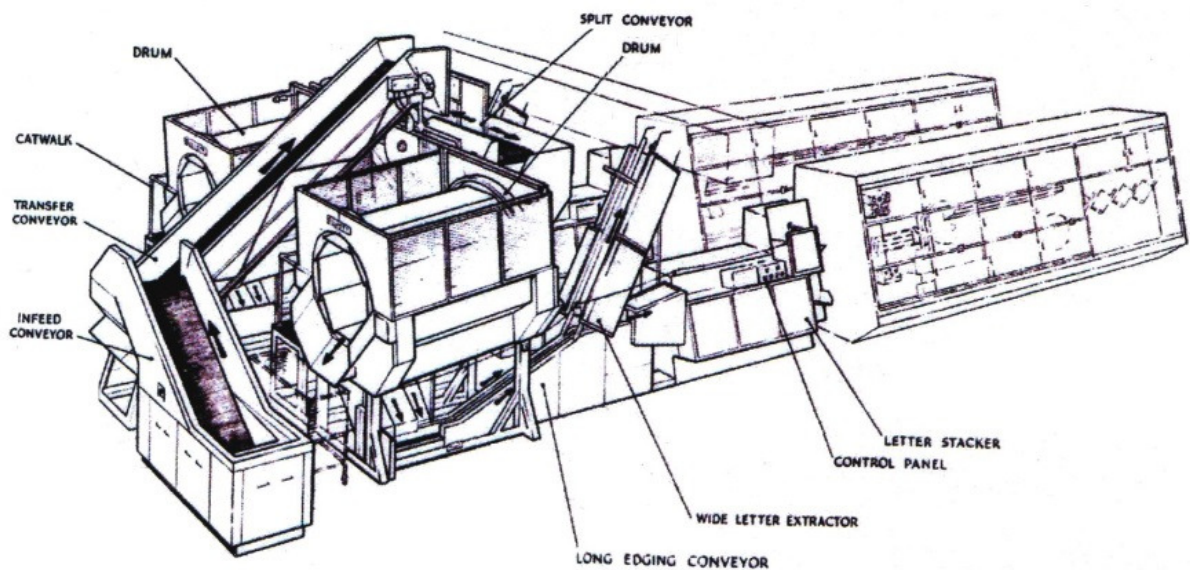
1957      Trials involving the use of graphite-lined stamps

1959      Trials involving the use of phosphor-graphite stamps

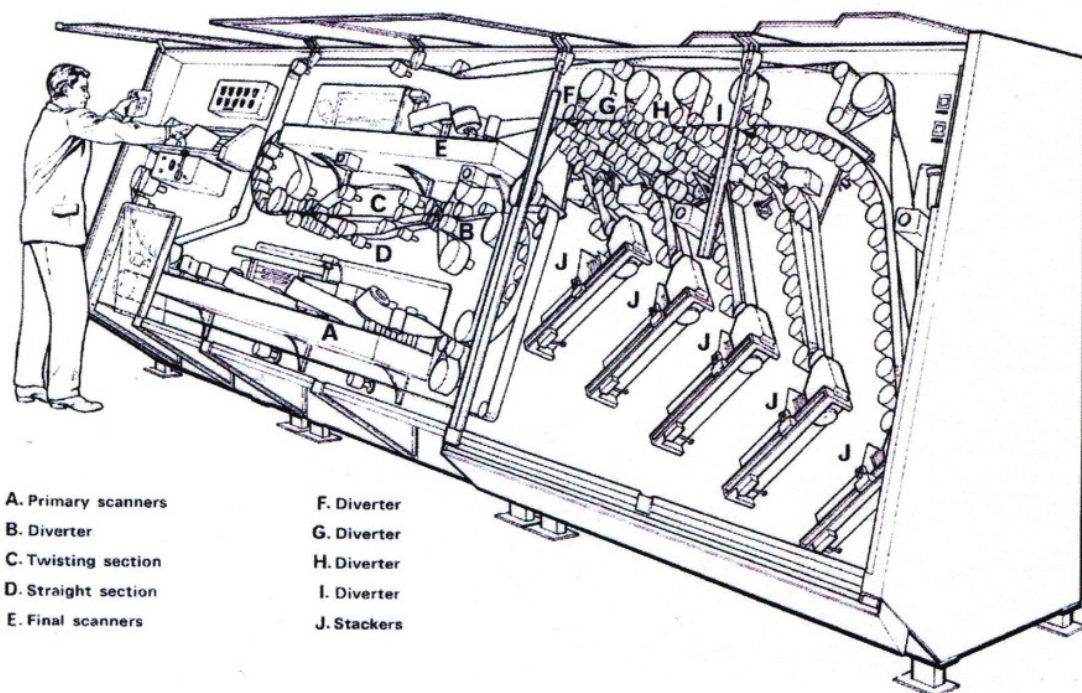
1960      Trials involving the use of phosphor-only stamps

# 1957 – Automatic Letter Facer (ALF) at Southampton

The 19th Dec 1957 marked an important date in postal mechanisation history with the installation of the first Automatic Letter Facer machine at the Southampton office. The first production machine was made by Elliott Brothers (London) Ltd. and was the world's first operational automatic letter facing machine. It had a handling capacity of about 25,000 items per hour.



*Schematic diagram of the segregator, linked to two ALF machines*



*Schematic diagram of the prototype ALF*

## 1957 – ALF and the ‘Graphite-Line’ trial

The ALF was designed to detect graphite-lines on the back of stamps and therefore one month before the trial started, the first graphite-lined definitive stamps were issued on 19 Nov 1957 to Post Offices in the Southampton area.

The ALF was able to detect the difference between one and two graphite lines – not by counting the number of lines but by using a time-division test. Having detected a signal from a graphite line, the scanner was set up to look for a second signal within 40ms of the first. Mail items that only triggered one signal indicated a 2d stamp, i.e. the printed paper / postcard rate at that time.



Single-lined  
graphite stamp



Double-lined  
graphite stamp



*3d graphite-lined stamp processed at Southampton – 26 Jan 1959*

## 1959 – ALF and the ‘Phosphor-Graphite’ trial

The initial trials involving detection of graphite-lined stamps were unsuccessful as the scanners could not reliably detect the signals and a second trial took place between November 1959 and February 1960 involving phosphor detection.

On 19 Nov 1959 phosphor-graphite stamps were issued to Post Offices in the Southampton area to replace the graphite-lined stamps.

One of the ALF machines was converted to detect the presence of phosphor on the stamps in order to compare the performance with the other ALF that was still set up to detect the graphite-lines.

Below is a commemorative cover to mark the first day issue of the phosphor-graphite stamps.



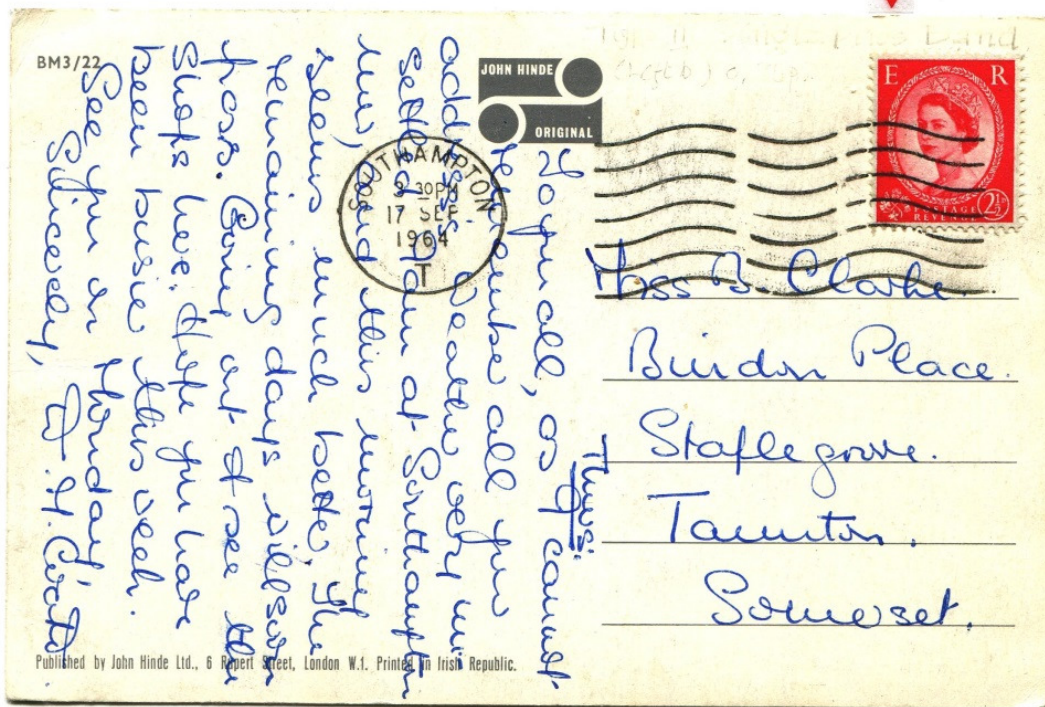
*Commemorative First Day Cover with Phosphor-Graphite stamps*

## 1960 – ALF and ‘Phosphor-only’ stamps

The second trial, comparing the performance of phosphor and graphite detection, showed a great improvement with the phosphor detection. As a result, from July 1960 onwards, both of the Southampton ALFs operated in phosphor-only scanning mode.

In preparation for this, on 22 June 1960, the first phosphor-only definitive stamps were issued to Post Offices in the Southampton area. The first phosphor commemorative stamps were the ‘National Productivity Year’ set of three stamps, issued on 14 Nov 1962.

The postcard below has a single side-band phosphor stamp and was processed by the ALF at Southampton, indicated by the ‘T’ in the town die of the postmark.



Postcard with a side-band phosphor 2½d stamp – 17 Sep 1964