Phase 3: 1958 – 1971

The first codes and Phosphor Dots

This section covers the significant historic developments conducted at Norwich, Luton and London FS between 1958 and 1971.

The following key developments took place during this period . . . .

1958 The Norwich Single Position Letter Sorting Machines (SPLSMs)

1959 The Norwich postcode trial

1960 The early phosphor coding trials at Luton

1971 The Single Position Letter Sorting Machines at London Foreign Section

Note that the postcode publicity campaign aspects associated with the postcode trial at Norwich are covered in the second half of this display.

1958 – The Norwich SPLSMs

Norwich was the first office to have Single Position Letter Sorting Machines (SPLSMs) installed in late 1958. Initially, there were eight such machines, with a further two in 1959 and 1960.

From 1959, operator idents were applied to mail items. The machines were operational throughout the 1960s, but were phased out in 1970.

The cover below is an early example of an operator ident, showing up clearly on a window envelope. The ident here is a number '17', printed in black (sideways base right) on a meter franked item.

Cover showing an early SPLM operator ident '17', dated 17 III 60.

Source: Automatic Letter Sorting In The United Kingdom, P.G. Awcock

1959 - Norwich - The Birthplace of Postcodes

The Postcode System is now part of everyday life and used in sat navs and lending its name to the postcode lottery. The concept and trials first began in Norwich in 1959.

The photograph below shows the sorting work being carried out at Norwich in about 1960 – shortly after the experimental postcode system was first introduced.

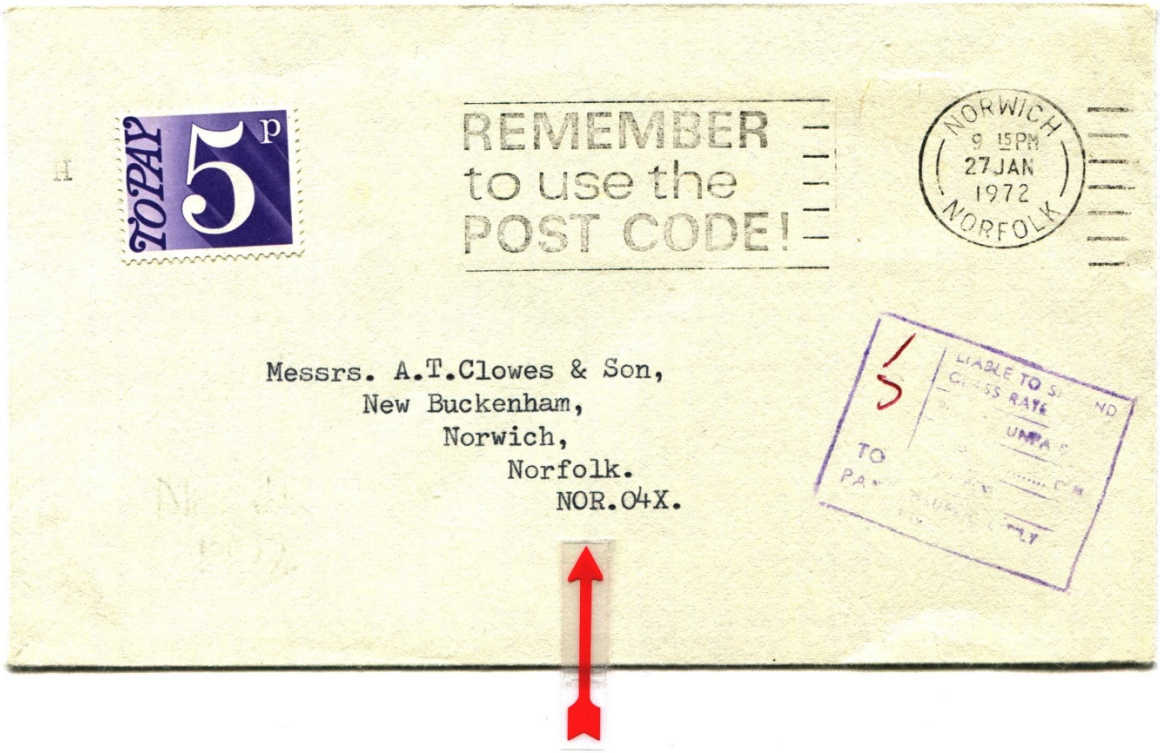
However, it took until 1974 for the allocation of postcodes to every town in Britain to be completed.

The technology improvements, based on the postcode system, made the sorting of mail 20 times quicker.

1959 – Norwich Postcode Trial

Due to the growth in mail volumes after the Second World War, it was realised that a nationwide postcode scheme was required to enable mail to be sorted automatically by machine. The first postcodes were introduced on a trial basis in Norwich on 8th October 1959 with the first three characters of the 'NOR' code representing the name of the city, and the last three characters a particular street. Larger firms and businesses received their own individual codes.

Norwich had eight new sorting machines that were adapted so that operators could simply key in the postcode to sort letters to the postmen's delivery rounds. However, the trial was not as successful as expected. Less than half of all letters posted bore codes, and it was found that greater division of the last three characters was needed.



Cover with an address containing the trial 'NOR' postcode

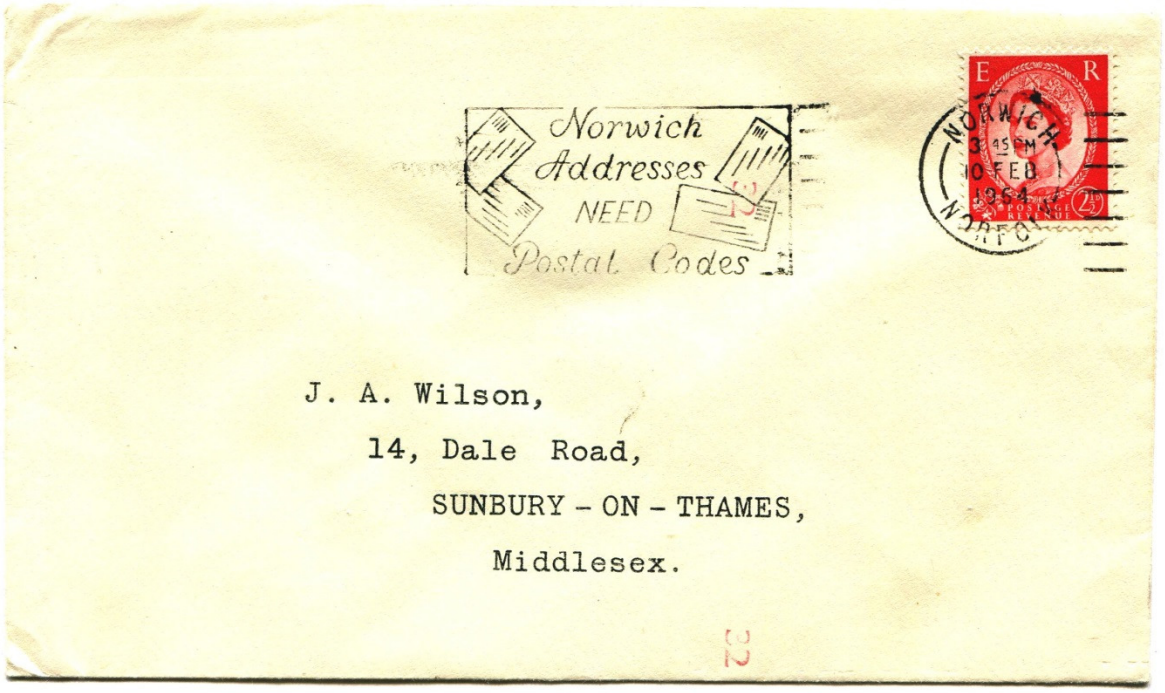
Source: http://www.postalheritage.org.uk/explore/history/postcode/

1960 – Norwich 'Postal Code' slogan

The first postmark to include a postal code slogan was at Norwich and was applied to mail from 5 September 1960.

The slogan read "Norwich Addresses NEED Postal Codes".

An example of this slogan is shown below. The envelope also shows the operator ident '32' in red ink (base left), indicating that it was processed through one of the SPLSMs at Norwich.



'Postal Code' postmark slogan applied at Norwich – 10 Feb 1964

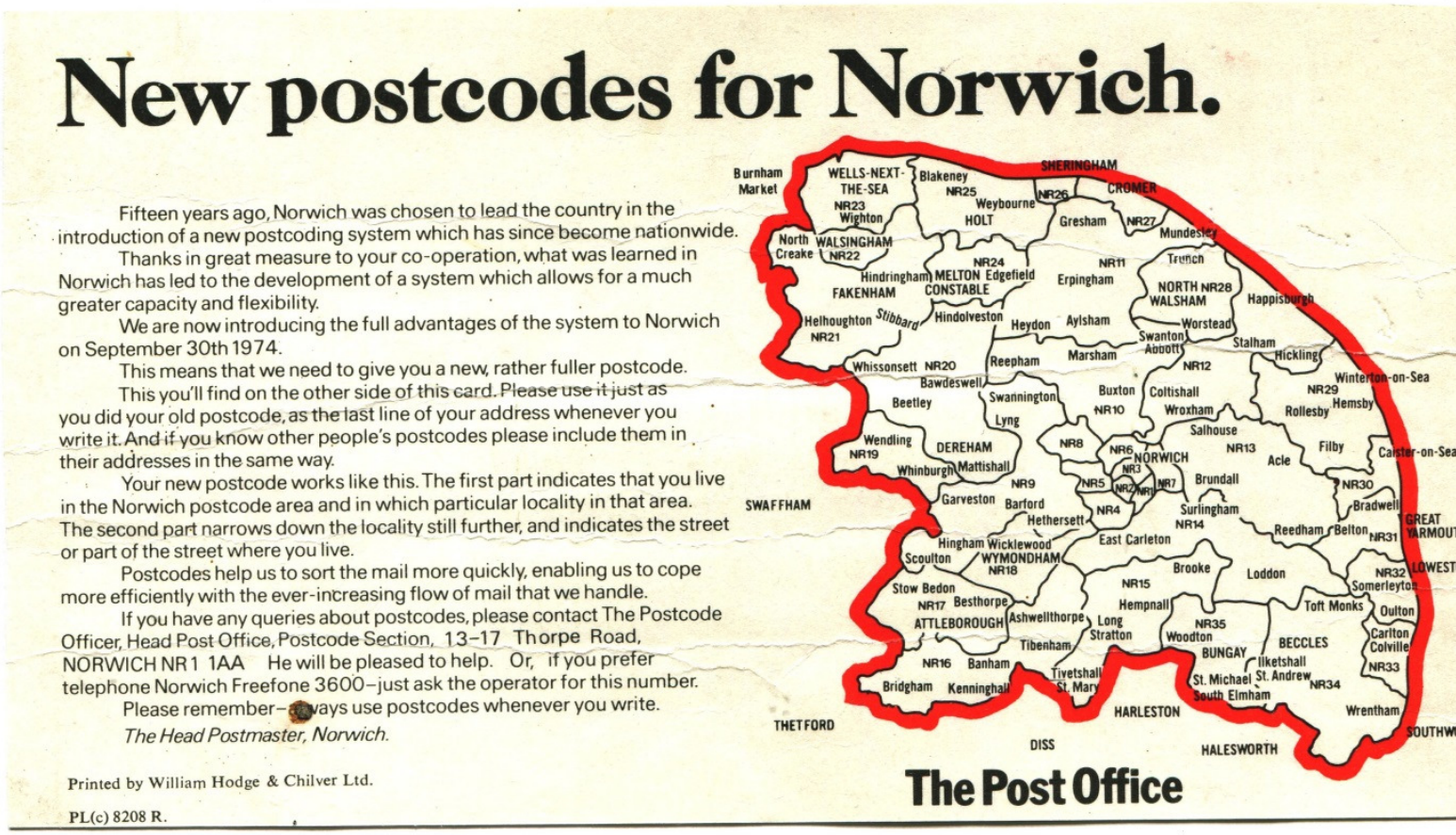
Source: Collect British Postmarks, Automatic Letter Sorting in the United Kingdom, P.G. Awcock

1974 – Completion of the National Postcode System

The lessons learnt from the 1959 'NOR' postcode trial in Norwich (for example, a greater depth to the code was needed), were incorporated into the national postcode system that was devised in the mid-1960s. The new system began in Croydon in 1966.

The roll-out of the new system across the country completed on 8th April 1974 when Norwich finally dropped their 'NOR' based system and adopted the new national system with an 'NR' postcode area in their case.

The following advertising card was sent to every address in the Norwich area to explain how the new system worked. The address on the reverse side of the card included the new postcode.



New postcodes for Norwich.

Fifteen years ago, Norwich was chosen to lead the country in the introduction of a new postcoding system which has since become nationwide.

Thanks in great measure to your co-operation, what was learned in Norwich has led to the development of a system which allows for a much greater capacity and flexibility.

We are now introducing the full advantages of the system to Norwich on September 30th 1974.

This means that we need to give you a new, rather fuller postcode.

This you'll find on the other side of this card. Please use it just as you did your old postcode, as the last line of your address whenever you write it. And if you know other people's postcodes please include them in their addresses in the same way.

Your new postcode works like this. The first part indicates that you live in the Norwich postcode area and in which particular locality in that area. The second part narrows down the locality still further, and indicates the street or part of the street where you live.

Postcodes help us to sort the mail more quickly, enabling us to cope more efficiently with the ever-increasing flow of mail that we handle.

If you have any queries about postcodes, please contact The Postcode Officer, Head Post Office, Postcode Section, 13–17 Thorpe Road, NORWICH NR1 1AA He will be pleased to help. Or, if you prefer telephone Norwich Freefone 3600–just ask the operator for this number.

Please remember–always use postcodes whenever you write.

The Head Postmaster, Norwich.

Printed by William Hodge & Chilver Ltd.

PL(c) 8208 R.

1974 Publicity card - advertising the new postcodes for Norwich

Source: The Post Office

1960 Luton - Phosphor Coding Trials

By late 1958 / early 1959, an experimental SPLSM machine was installed at Luton, followed by operator training in 1959 / 1960.

The coding desk was separated from the sorter and provided the means to print phosphorescent dots on to the envelopes via pins impressing themselves on to a tape.

The code itself was translated into a dot pattern by a translator and this pattern could be read by means of U.V. light. The code used was based simply on the address written on the envelope and an 'extract' code was typed by the operator. This code comprised the first three and last two letters of the town – e.g. GLAsgOW.

The earliest recorded example on live mail was on 12 Aug 1960. The item below, dated 22 Sep 1960, shows the coding as a column of vertical dots on the right hand side of the envelope.

The phosphor used was Lettalite B1, as used on Wilding stamps at that time and gave a green afterglow under U.V. light.

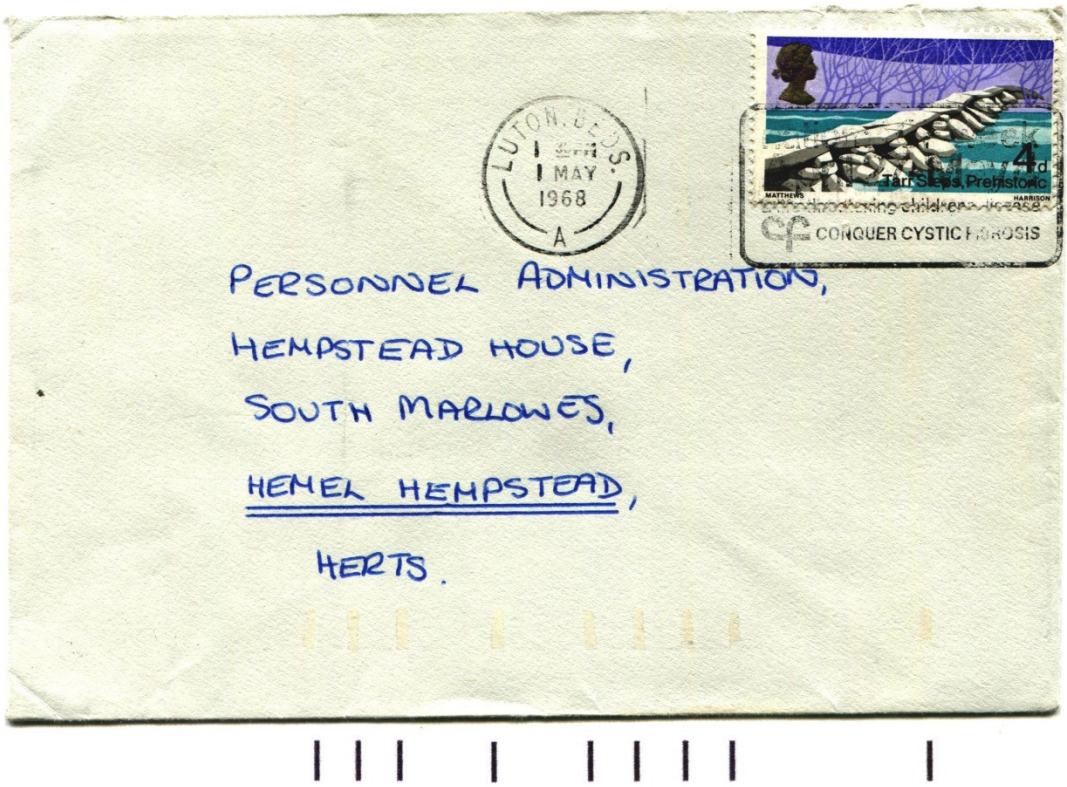
Source: Handbook of Postal Mechanisation, Automatic Letter Sorting in the UK by P.G. Awcock

1965 Luton – change to horizontal coding dots

In August 1965 the position of the coding dots was changed to improve readability by the sorting equipment.

The dots were changed to ¼ inch pitch and positioned horizontally at the bottom of the envelopes.

The cover below shows the new position of the coding dots.



Horizontal coding at Luton – 1 May 1968

Source: Automatic Letter Sorting in the UK by Patrick Awcock

1971 - SPLSM at London Foreign Section

During January 1971, five Single Position Letter Sorting Machines (SPLSMs) were introduced at the London Foreign Section office to sort mail items to one of 144 boxes, each representing a country. For short periods at a time, idents identified the machine involved. Three sizes of ident have been recorded, namely: 4½mm (Jan 71 - Oct 71), 6mm (Feb 71 - Aug 84) and 9mm (Oct 83 - Sep 84). The examples here show the 6mm and 9mm versions of machine ident 'D'.

Source: Automatic Letter Sorting in the UK (P.G. Awcock)