Phase 8: 1992-2016

Advanced technology sorting equipment

This section covers the period from 1995 and includes the major investment made by Royal Mail in various new sorting equipment technologies. It also covers the new 'Automated Processing Centres', and the re-naming of all sorting offices to 'Mail Centres'.

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

1990   The creation of the Postal Address File (PAF)

1992   The Automated Processing Centre (APC)

1995   The MTT Mail Transport System

1995   The Royal Mail 'Internal 4-State Code'

1996   The Integrated Mail Processor (IMP/IMPEX)

1996   The 4-state meter franking IMP trial at Watford

2001   The introduction of 'Address Interpretation' (AI)

2001   The Manual Data Entry Centres (MDEC)

2004   The TOPS 2000 Flat Sorting Machine

2009   The Integrated Letter Sorting Machine (iLSM)

2010   The Compact Sequence Sorting Machine (CSSM)

2015   The Banbury Stamp Cancelling Trial

The Postal Address File (PAF)

The Postcode Address File (PAF) is a database held by Royal Mail which contains all known 'Delivery Points' (see below) and postcodes in the United Kingdom. The PAF is a collection of over 29 million postal addresses and 1.8 million postcodes.

Below shows the information that Royal Mail holds on us in the PAF:

Address:

Organisation:	
Property:	
Street:	7 Bramblegate
Locality:	
Town:	Crowthorne
Postcode:	RG45 6JA
Country:	United Kingdom
Country ISO:	GBR
DPS:	2A
Area/STD Code:	01344

Censation:

Censation Code:	AX02
Affluence:	Wealthy
Lifestage:	Older families

General:

Postal County:	Berkshire
Abbreviated Postal County:	Berks
Optional County:	Berkshire
Abbreviated Optional County:	Berks
Traditional County:	Berkshire
Administrative County:	Wokingham
Postcode From:	
Postcode Type:	S
Mailsort Code:	39913
TV Region:	London
Occupancy:	6
Occupancy Description:	Residential
Address Type:	1

Address Type Description:	Numbered
UDPRN:	20065670
Just Built:	

Geographical:

Grid East:	483198
Grid North:	164686
Miles:	
Km:	
Latitude:	51.3752
Longitude:	-0.8061
SOA Lower:	E01016709
SOA Middle:	E02003458

Administrative:

Urban Rural Code:	C1
Urban Rural Name:	Urban City and Town
Ward Code:	E05002396
Ward Name:	Wokingham Without
Constituency:	Bracknell
EER Code:	E15000008
EER Name:	South East
Authority Code:	E06000041
Authority:	Wokingham
LEA Code:	872
LEA Name:	Wokingham
NHS Code:	E18000009
NHS Name:	South Central
NHS Region Code:	Y24
NHS Region Name:	South
PCT Code:	E38000209
PCT Name:	Wokingham

The Postal Address File – some facts and figures

The Postal Address File currently (in 2016) contains . . . .

124 Postcode Areas

2,983 Outward Codes

11,192 Postcode Sectors

1,749,748 Postcodes

29,776,100 Delivery Points

112,298 Large Users

56,877 PO Box addresses

1,500 Post towns

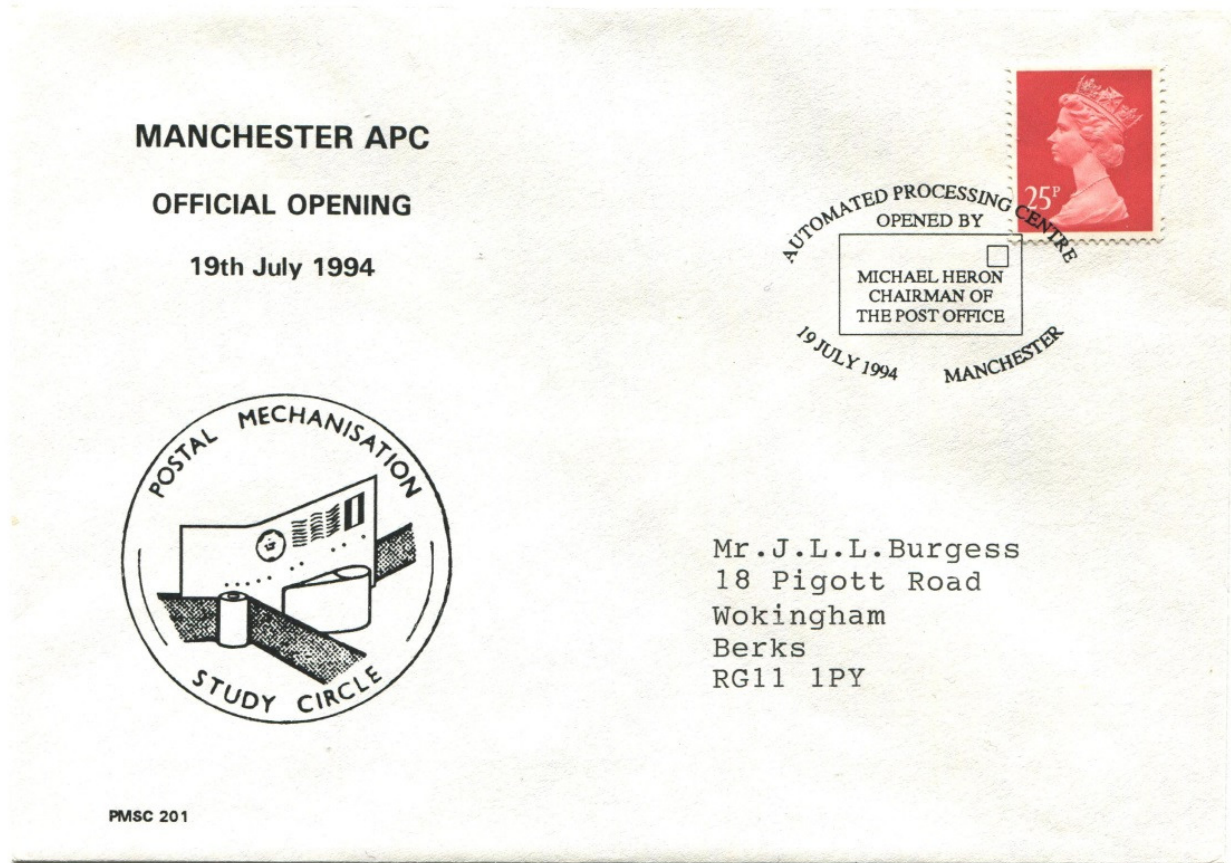30,441 Localities

379871 Thoroughfares

There are 10,077 places and street names containing the word "wood".

Each year approximately 16,000 new postcodes are added and 12,000 are deleted.

On average, each postcode covers 17 different addresses.

1992 – The Automated Processing Centre

Between 1992 and 1996 newly opened Royal Mail sorting offices were called 'Automatic Processing Centres'. The commemorative cover below marked the opening of the Manchester APC in 1994.

MANCHESTER APC

OFFICIAL OPENING

19th July 1994

POSTAL MECHANISATION STUDY CIRCLE

PMSC 201

AUTOMATED PROCESSING CENTRE
OPENED BY
MICHAEL HERON
CHAIRMAN OF
THE POST OFFICE
19 JULY 1994   MANCHESTER

25P

Mr.J.L.L.Burgess
18 Pigott Road
Wokingham
Berks
RG11 1PY

PMSC Cover 201: Manchester APC – 19th July 1994

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MANCHESTER
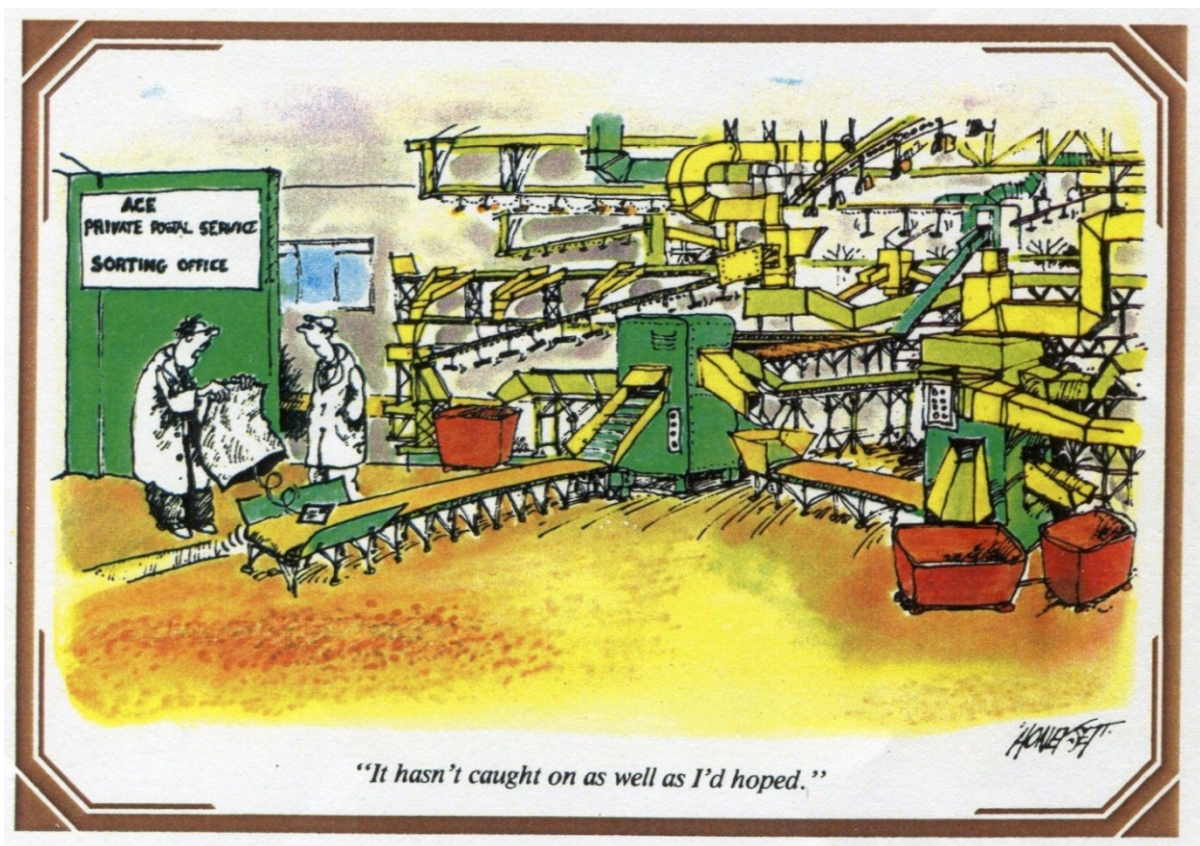APC PRIV BOX

P3809CX CON1392173

Manchester APC bag label

1993 – Farnborough 'Automated Centre of Excellence'

In January 1993, Farnborough APC was chosen to be Royal Mail's 'Automated Centre of Excellence' (ACE) and become a model of best practice for automated processing and equipment.

The objectives included:

i)   To determine the most efficient handling methods
ii)   To enhance team working
iii)   To introduce team 'coaches'
iv)   To introduce single grade working

Indeed, in 2002, Farnborough was chosen as a testbed for the introduction of Address Interpretation (AI). However, Royal Mail decided to close the office in 2011 as part of the ongoing mail concentration programme.

"It hasn't caught on as well as I'd hoped."

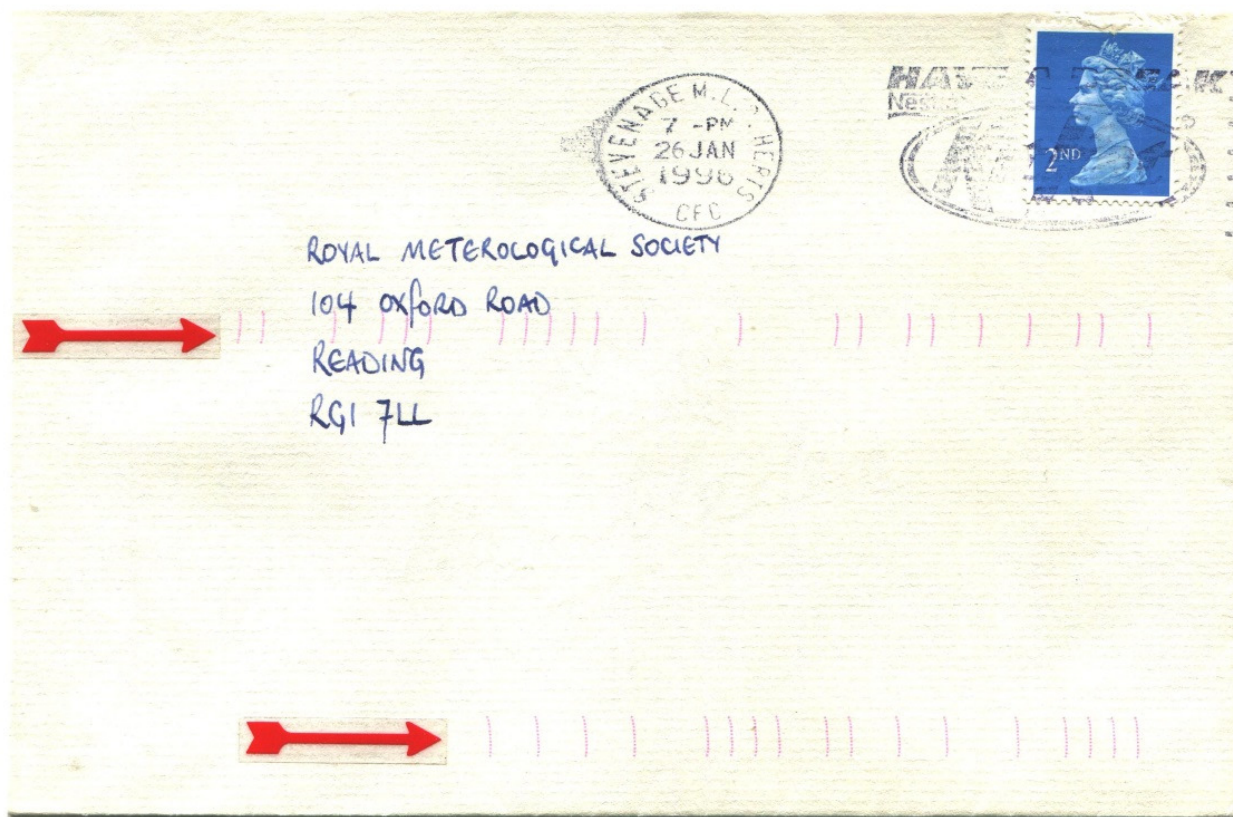*A Royal Mail produced postcard with a cartoon featuring the ACE*

1995 - MTT Transitional Code Marks

Between June 1995 and July 1996, a mail transport system (MTT) was introduced nationwide. This code was brought in as an interim stage, prior to the development of a 4-state code reader.

A 'tagcode' (top row) was printed in the area where the Inward code was traditionally found and a 'routing code' (bottom row) was printed in the area where the Outward code traditionally appeared.

The codes were not encrypted and the tagcode contained the machine identity, the day of the month, the time of day and a letter identity; whereas the routing code contained both outward and inward code information.

Below is an item posted at Stevenage MLO on 26 Jan 1996 that bears both a transitional tagcode and a routing code.

1995 – The Royal Mail Internal 4-state code

Initial trials of the Royal Mail 4-state code took place in 1994 and early 1995 at Swindon, Glasgow, Preston and Manchester. The first operational use was at Glasgow from 9 April 1995. This was followed by Aberdeen, Belfast and Edinburgh on 2 October 1995. The nationwide roll-out took place during 1996.

The code involves a complicated algorithm and has been designed with some built-in redundancy to cater for any poorly printed bars.

The upper row is the 'tagcode' and comprises a machine identifier, the day of the month, the time of day and an item count. The lower row is the 'routing code' and contains information relating to the address shown on the envelope.
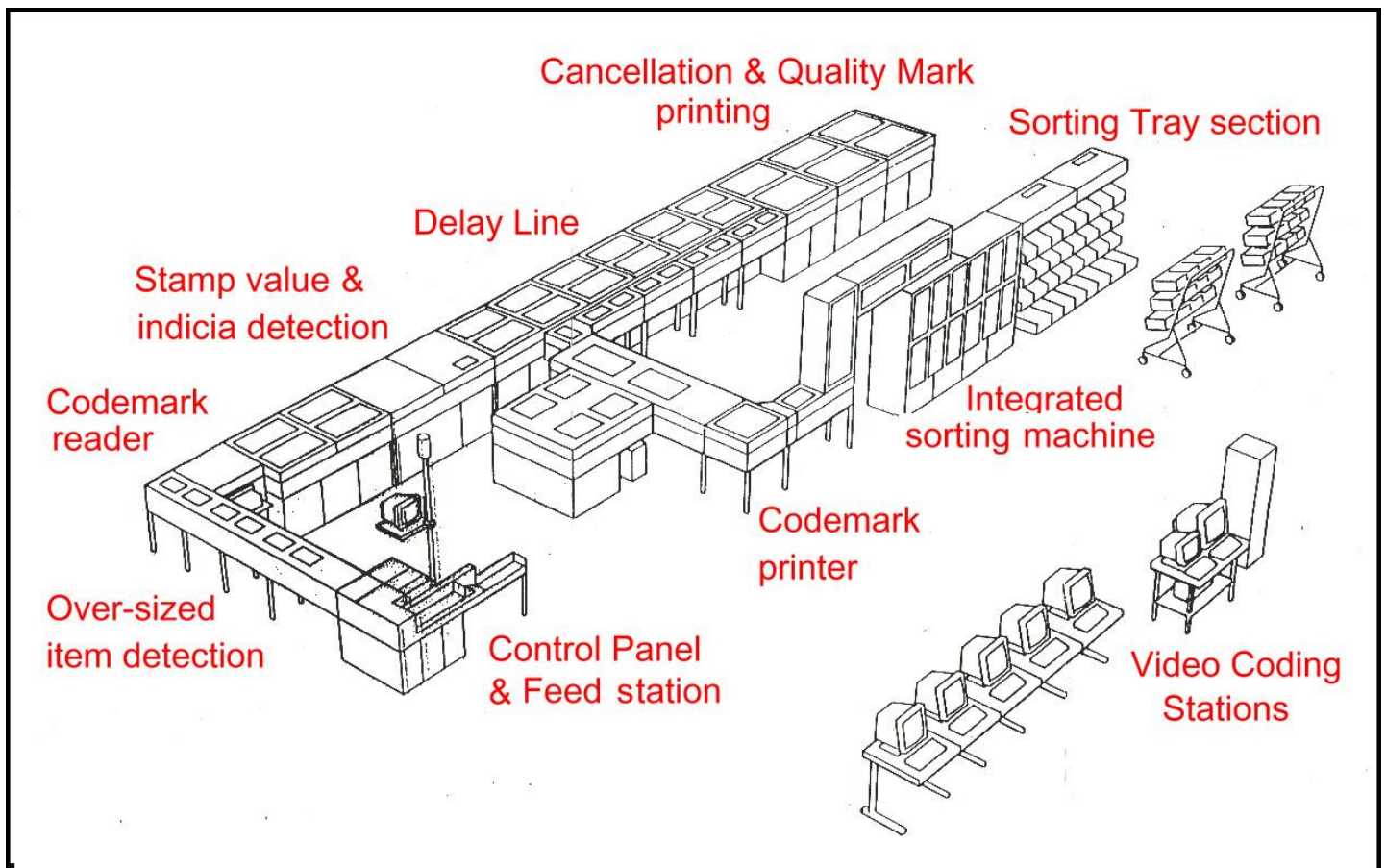
4-state tag and routing code – Glasgow, 23 Aug 1995

1996 – The Integrated Mail Processor (IMP / IMPEX)

In 1996, the first 'Integrated Mail Processor' was installed at Watford Mail Centre. The machine combines the processing that was previously carried out by stand-alone sorting equipment, namely Culler Facer Cancellers (CFC), Optical Character Recognition / Video Coding Systems (OCR/VCS) and Letter Sorting Machines (LSMs).

In some offices, extra machines known as IMPEXs have also been installed for processing meter mail. These are similar to IMPs but without the segregation and culling section.

The main sections of the IMPEX are shown in the diagram below:

Diagram showing the typical layout of an IMPEX

Currently, in 2016, there are 103 IMPs and 17 IMPEXs operational in about half of the Mail Centres across the country.
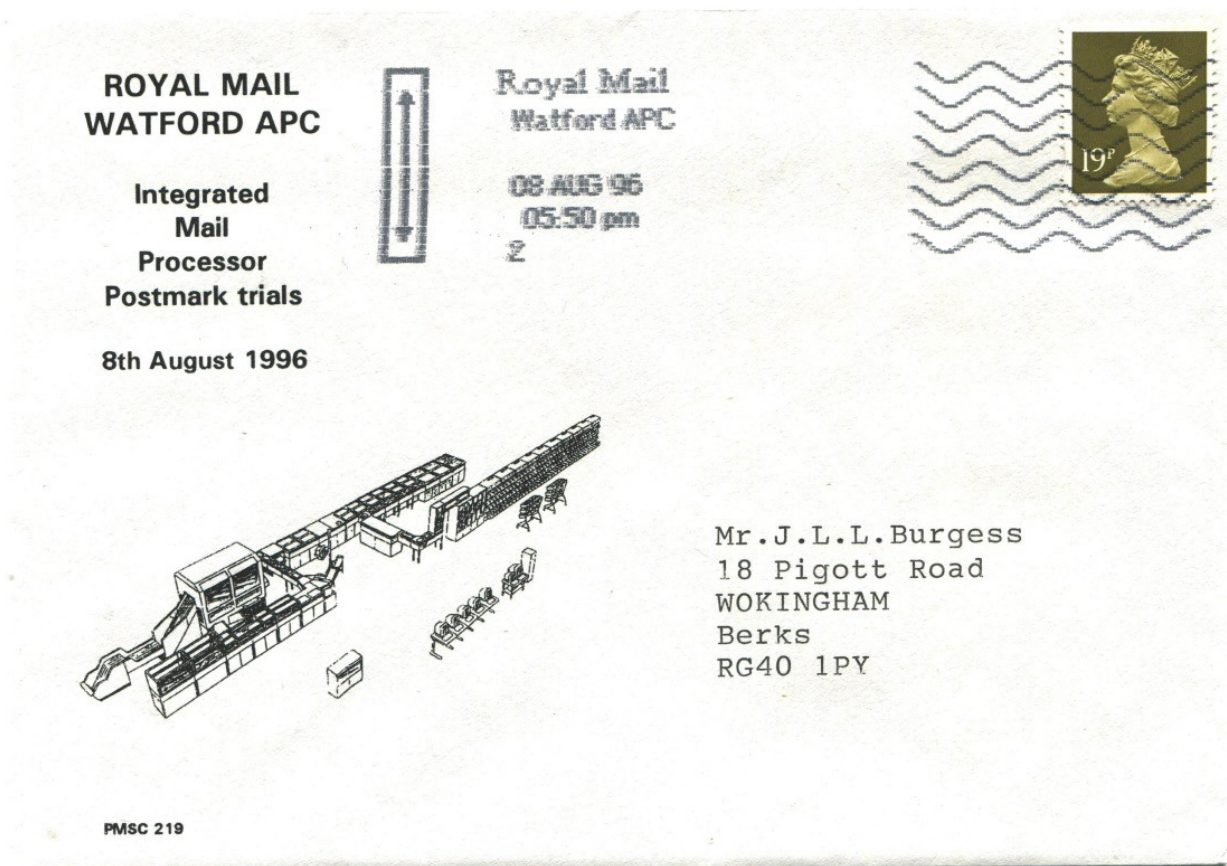
1996 – The Watford IMP

The IMP at Watford APC first processed live mail on 8 Aug 1996 which marked a landmark event for Royal Mail.

The postmark used on the IMP had 8 wavy lines and also contained a 'Block Quality Mark', comprising the name of the office, the date, the time and an digit (1 or 2) to indicate the class of the mail item. On the left-hand side, the postmark also contained a double-arrowed vertical line known as a 'Return Mail Marker' which was used to detect any mail items that had re-entered the mail stream.

The item below is a special PMSC commemorative cover to mark the first day of operations.

First day commemorative cover processed by the IMP at Watford – 8 Aug 1996

Source: The Postal Mechanisation Study Circle