IMP – Linear Quality Marks (LQMs)

Linear Quality Marks were applied on the back of meter franked mail processed by the IMP (until 2008 when they were discontinued). The marks varied in format but normally included the following:

1) A boxed arrow - applied in order for the equipment to detect any mail erroneously entering the system for a second time.
2) A string of alpha-numeric characters made up of an office code, the date, an 8-digit number and a 'code logo'.

The number string included a single digit to indicate the machine number local to that office, the time of day in half-hour units and the item number processed within that half-hour period. The code logo, when applied, reflected the following conditions: C = Miscode (when the routing code was not appropriate for the sorting plan being used), S = Missort (when the routing code could not be read), U= underpaid, 2 = mail item found in a mail stream of the wrong class, or M = misread of the meter indicia value – see example below:

IMP meter franked LQM item with code logo 'M', Dec 2001

Source: A Collector's Guide to Royal Mail's Integrated Mail Processors

IMP – Transposed Printing

At Christmas time we often see a particularly interesting aspect of postal mechanisation coming into play. In the early days of the IMP, square envelopes used to be a problem as the correct orientation could not be properly determined and such envelopes often ended up on the 'Reject' stack or the stamp failed to be postmarked. However, IMP 'intelligence' has improved over the last decade and the correct orientation of square envelopes can now be determined. In cases where an envelope passes sideways through the conveyor system, the printer is automatically instructed to produce a 'reversed' and 'transposed' cancel so that the wavy lines are applied vertically across the stamp as shown in the following example. Note also that the coding bars align with the postmark.

Source: PMSC

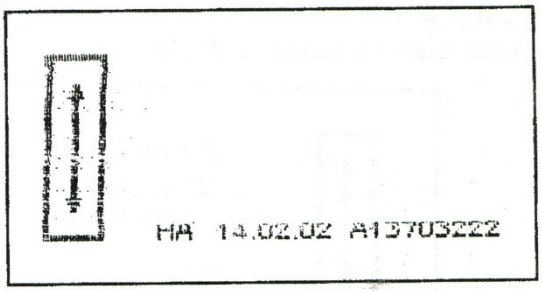
2001 – Introduction of Address Interpretation (AI)

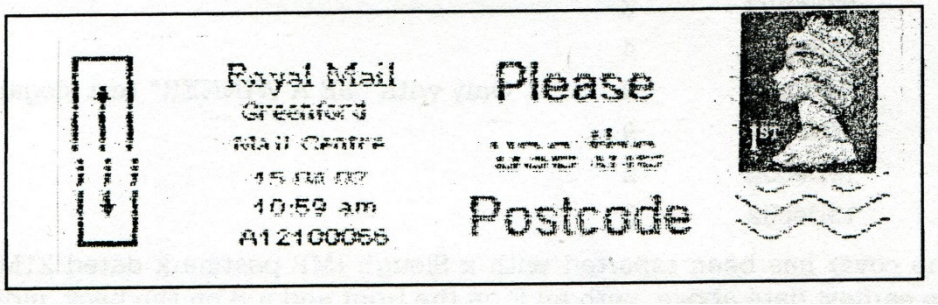
In 1997 the concept of improving the ‘read’ quality of the OCR began, which lead to Lockheed Martin being appointed as prime contractor for a major IT project called ‘Address Interpretation’ (AI). The other companies involved in this £130m project and sub-contracted to Lockheed Martin were Bell & Howell, IBM and Siemens.

The main emphasis of the project was that the read accuracy of the OCR would be increased from 70% to 89%, leading to enormous cost savings in the long term. Furthermore, for mail items that could not be read by the OCR, an image of the address would be sent to one of three centralised data management centres at Doxford (Sunderland), Plymouth, Stockport and Stoke-on-Trent for manual operator keying.

Following trials on dummy mail in late 2001, this new technology was first trialled at Greenford Mail Centre on live mail in mid-February 2002. The technology was then gradually rolled out nationwide, affecting 70 mail centres at that time, equipped with 86 MTTs, 138 IMPs, 25 V3 OCRs, 138 IMPs and 274 LSMs. The project finally completed in 2004.

From a philatelic point of view, mail items processed using AI technology, were identified with an ‘A’ prefix in the Letter Quality Mark (LQM) or in the address block.





The ‘A’ prefix was dropped in 2008.

2001 - Manual Data Entry Centres (MDEC)

In 2001, with the introduction of Royal Mail's Address Interpretation (AI) system, video images from all Mail Centres of mail items with unreadable addresses are fed to one of four special handling centres for manual coding.

The four MDEC centres are based at Doxford (Sunderland), Plymouth, Stockport and Stoke, each equipped with about 400 workstations.

The following is an internet blog from 2004 that reflects the thoughts of one of the operators working at MDEC.

1.

MDEC

One of several centres of severe embarrassment to Royal Mail, employing teenagers and women to manually input address data that the very expensive mail sorting machine can't read. For the risk of running carpel tunnel syndrome and repetitive strain injury a small annual pittance is renumerated to these fortunates; with added benefits of no recognition, no reward and promotion only by bed hopping with unattractive male managers. If you would like the word DOORMAT tattooed on your head, then working at the MDEC would be an ideal employment opportunity for you.

This town is a shit hole, the only job I can find is at the MDEC.

by BastardManifesto January 22, 2004

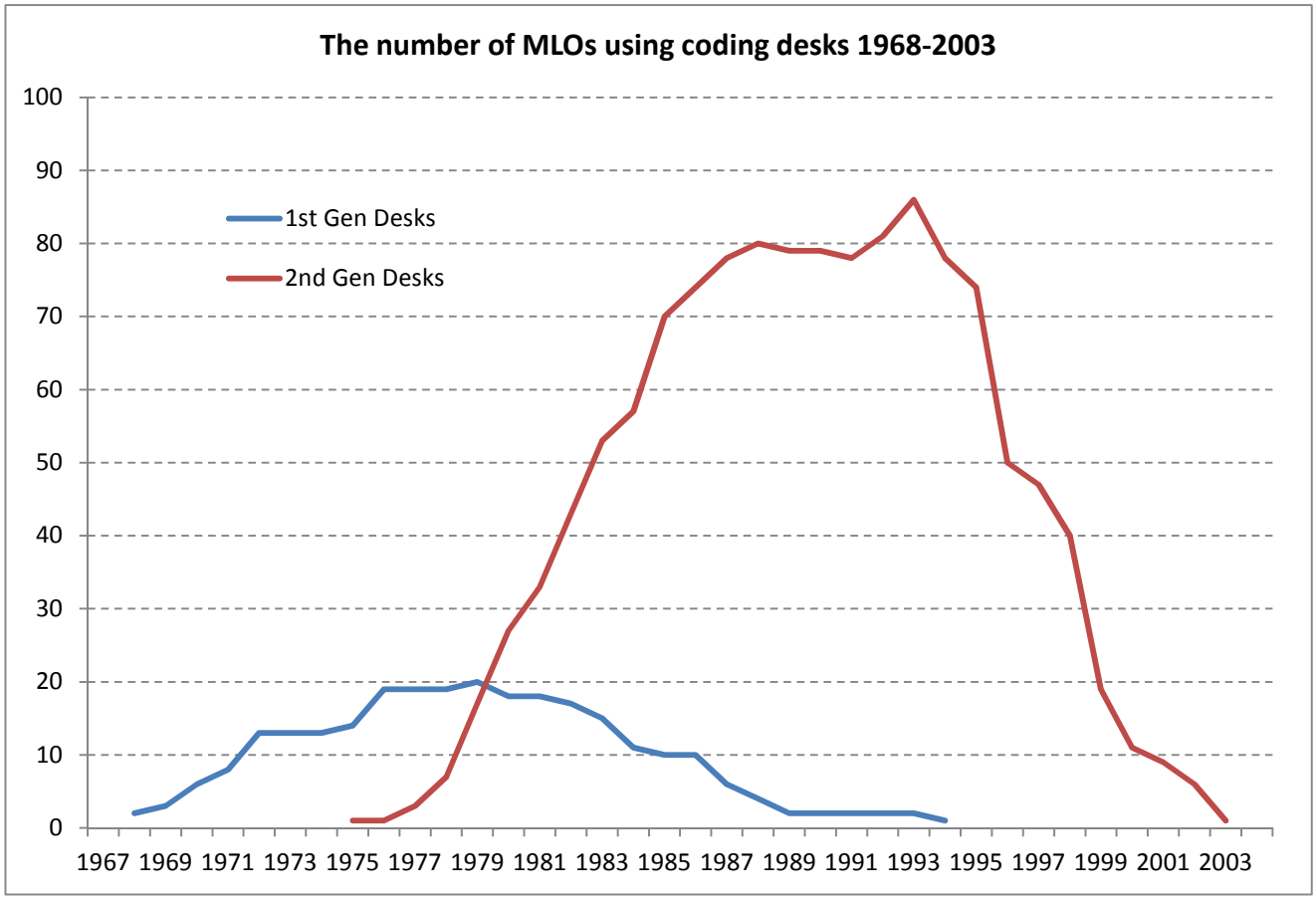
2003 - End of the road for Coding Desks

The national roll-out of coding desks began in 1968 with the ‘First Generation’ desks being installed at the London EC sorting office.

The ‘First Generation’ desks were gradually phased out and replaced with ‘Second Generation’ desks starting in 1975 at the Redhill MLO.

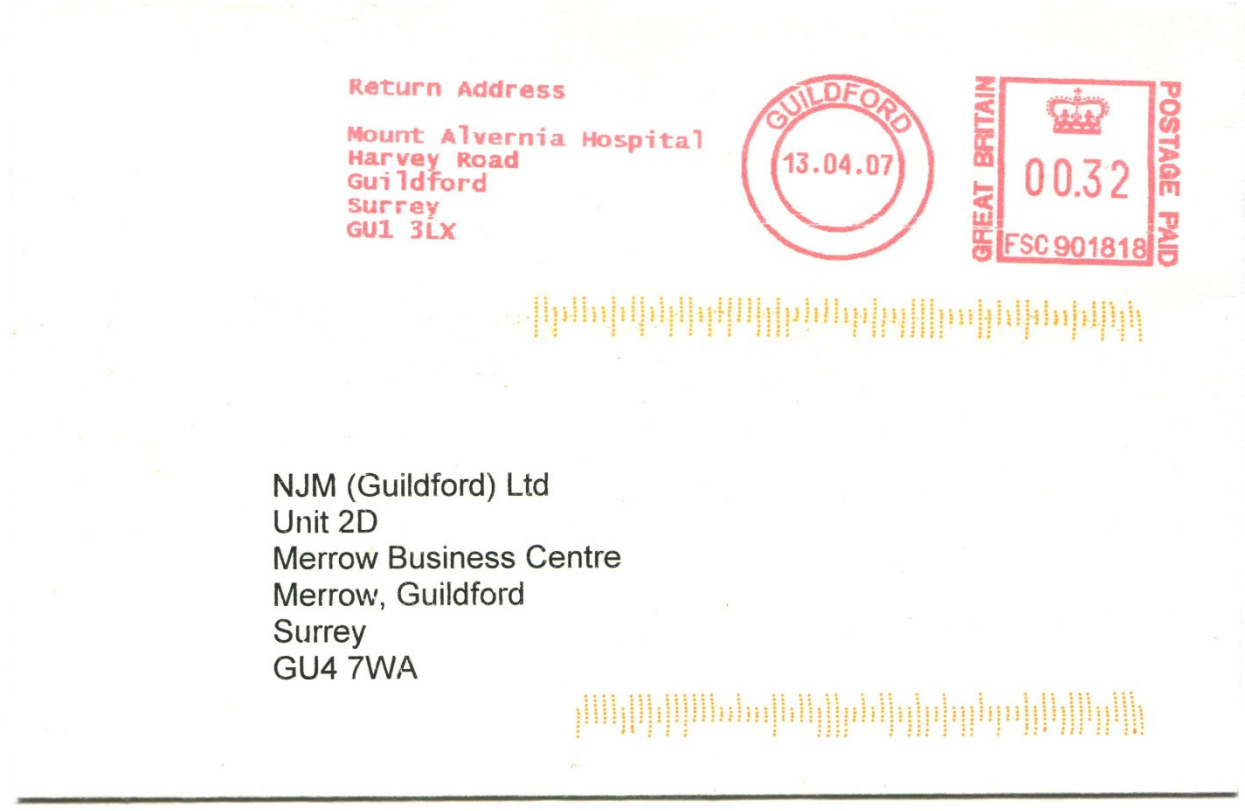
In the 1990s, the coding desks were gradually phased out and replaced by OCR/VCS (Optical Character Recognition / Video Coding Systems) equipment.

The graph below shows the number of MLOs using coding desks and hence reflects the growth of mechanisation over the period to its peak in 1993 before being replaced by OCR/VCS equipment. By 2003, all coding desks had been phased out.



2004 - Change to Fluorescent ink

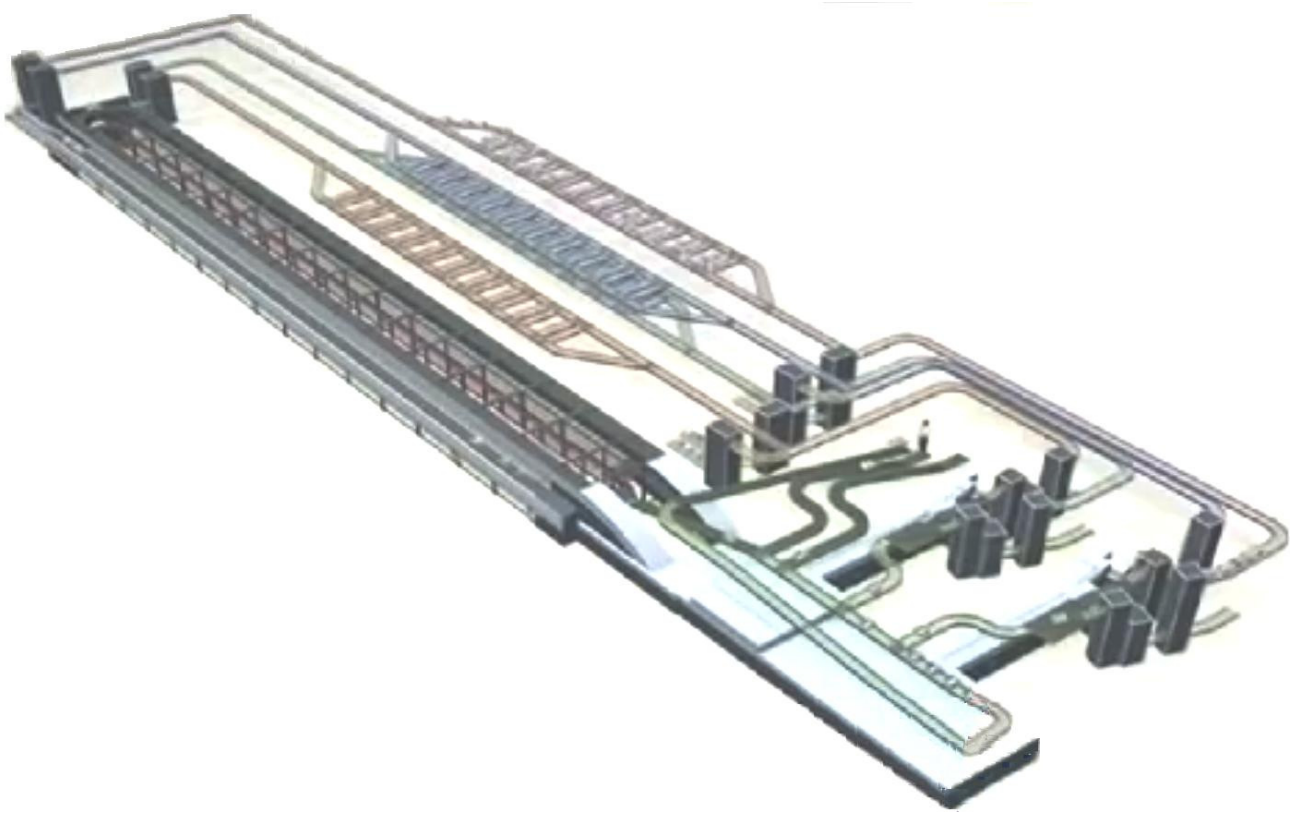
The following items show the marked difference in colour from the old phosphor ink and the new brighter fluorescent ink. The change took place between 2004 and 2007.



Source: PMSC Newsletters

2004 - TOPS 2000 Flats Sorting Machine

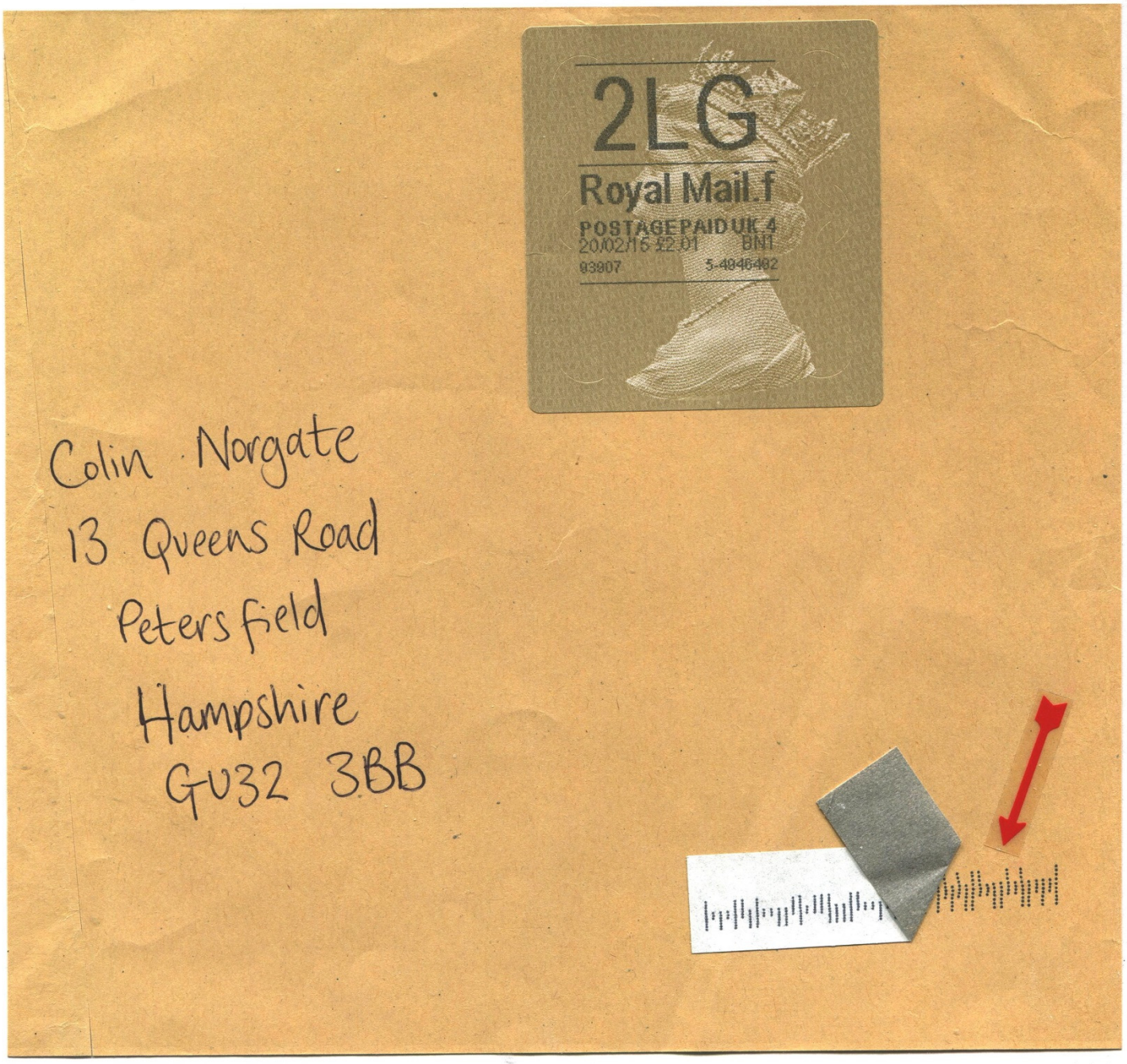
The first TOPs 2000 Flats Sorting machine in the UK entered service in May 2004 at Edinburgh Mail Centre. It is a highly complex machine that is capable of processing up to 38,000 items per hour, each item sent to one of up to 480 destination trays. It is typically operated by just 5 operators. A typical layout and a photograph are shown below.



TOPS 2000 – Barcode Labels

The TOPS 2000 sorting machines can perform both Outward and Inward sorting. The tagcode marks on Inward sorting are frequently applied on white removable labels to cover any tagcodes that have already been applied during Outward sorting at a different Mail Centre.

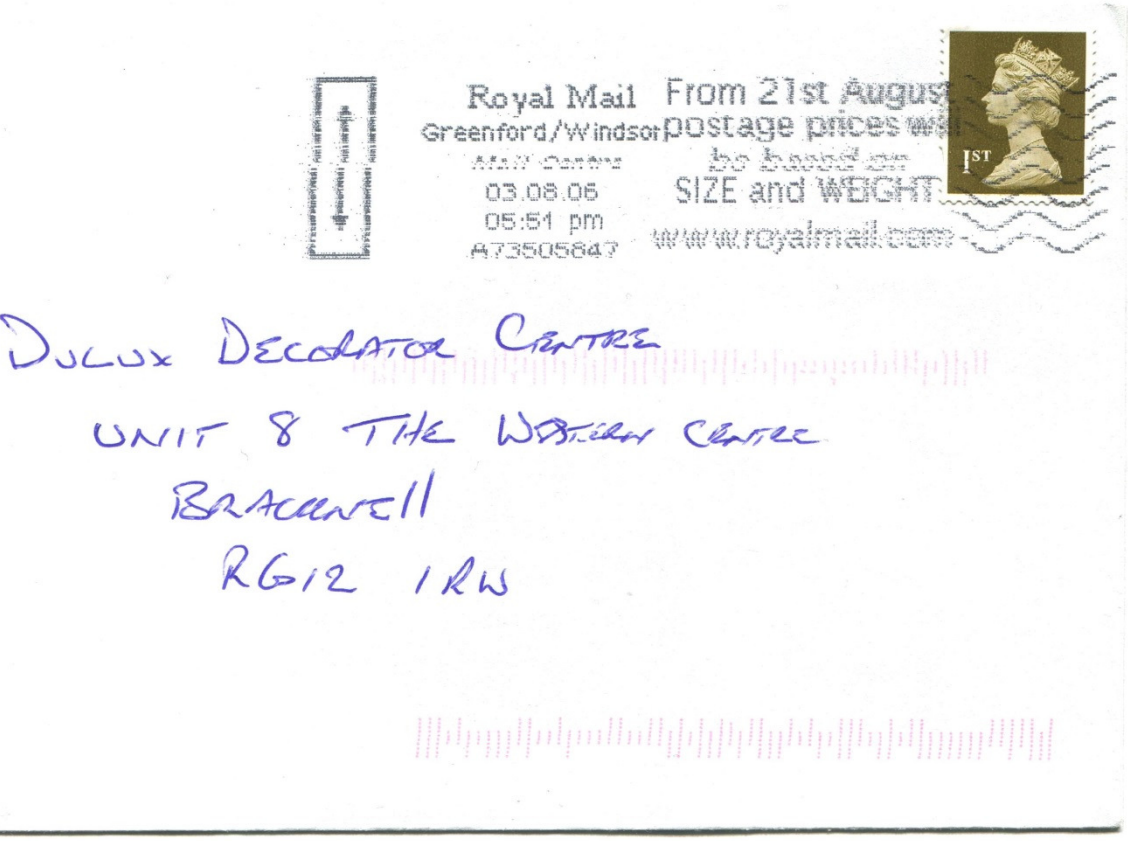
This item was Outward coded on 20 Feb 2015 at Gatwick and then Inward coded 21 Feb 2015 at the Jubilee Mail Centre in Hounslow.



2006 – Major changes to Royal Mail pricing policy

On 21 August 2006, Royal Mail brought in a fundamental change to their pricing policy. From that date, the cost of posting has been based on the size and weight of items. The scheme is known as "Pricing In Proportion" (PIP).

Publicity announcing this major change was issued to every household and business prior to the event. This publicity postmark was also used in the run-up to the change:



"From 21st August postage prices will be based on SIZE and WEIGHT"

Source: Royal Mail