Introduction

Good evening everyone. My name, as most of you will know, is Alastair and my display this evening is entitled “Postal Mechanisation for Philatelists”.

So what is Postal Mechanisation all about?

My own view is that it is a somewhat overlooked aspect of philately that actually touches on most other areas of philately. We see here a Venn diagram that reflects my view of where the topic fits in – i.e. at the centre of the universe!

‘Postal mechanisation’ was defined in a 1980 philatelic magazine as “**A side-line aspect of postal history that has no significance**!”

My aim this evening is to try and demonstrate that is not the case, and to show why it holds a great interest to me (and a few other individuals). I believe the subject plays an important role in the study of postal history.

My interest in postal mechanisation probably started back in 1959 when I was 9 years old. One day, my father (who was a member of the WDPS for 25 years and many of you will remember) brought home a large bag of kiloware and I helped him to soak off the stamps. In that bag were half-a-dozen Wilding stamps that had some strange black lines on the back.

These “graphite-lined” stamps as they are known held a particular fascination for me at the time and I wanted to know more about them. The following year my father took me to Stampex and I learned that they were used in connection with an automatic letter sorting trial at Southampton. One of dealers there had for sale a quarter-sheet of ‘SG605a’ – the rare 2d phosphor-graphite with the error of watermark. However, the dealer wanted a massive £25 for the 80 stamps and, after much deliberation, my dad decided not to

buy them - which was a shame really as today they typically fetch over £100 a stamp!

This evening I am going to try and explain many of the strange postal markings that we have seen (and ignored) on our past and present day mail. I should emphasise that what I am going to cover this evening is just an overview. It is a complex topic that you won't find covered in a catalogue but I shall try to keep it as simple as possible.

The first half of my display covers what I like to call the '**mainstream aspects**' that relate to the machine markings applied by Royal Mail (which many people still call the 'GPO' or 'The Post Office') within the main sorting offices (nowadays known as 'Mail Centre's but formerly called 'MLOs' or Mechanised Letter Offices).

The first half of the display is split into 8 parts, each one covering a distinct phase of technology, relating to the sorting equipment being developed at the time. By the way, the sheets with a white spine are 'summary sheets' that mark the start of each section.

The second half of the evening will cover what I call the '**peripheral aspects**' of postal mechanisation when I shall try to explain more about *why* the topic holds such a fascination for me.

The sheets are written up in a form that would never be allowed in a competition, but I make no apology for that. The emphasis this evening will be on 'information' rather than display etiquette, as will soon become clear.

Before we start, I am wondering, how many of you have visited a sorting office in the past?

In order to help you follow the story, I have prepared a 2-page hand-out comprising a list of abbreviations / terms that I shall be using, together with a timeline chart, showing the dates when the

key developments occurred against the 8 phases of development – it represents postal mechanisation on a page!

My apologies but the font size on this sheet but I had to reduce the size in order to get in all the information.

I have gathered the information from a number of different sources and in most cases the primary source is given in the footer on each sheet (not shown on my web site files). In many cases, the information has come from the publications of the Postal Mechanisation Study Circle (PMSC) - of which I have been a member for 30 years.

This evening is also a way of saying a big ‘thank you’ to all those of you who have kindly saved me their unwanted envelopes over the years.

By the way, I have numbered each sheet on the back, so if anyone wants a copy of any display sheet, please note the reference number on this ‘Request Sheet’. I have also brought along some of my reference library if anyone is interested.

Right, here we go with the first half . . . .

Postal Mechanisation for Philatelists

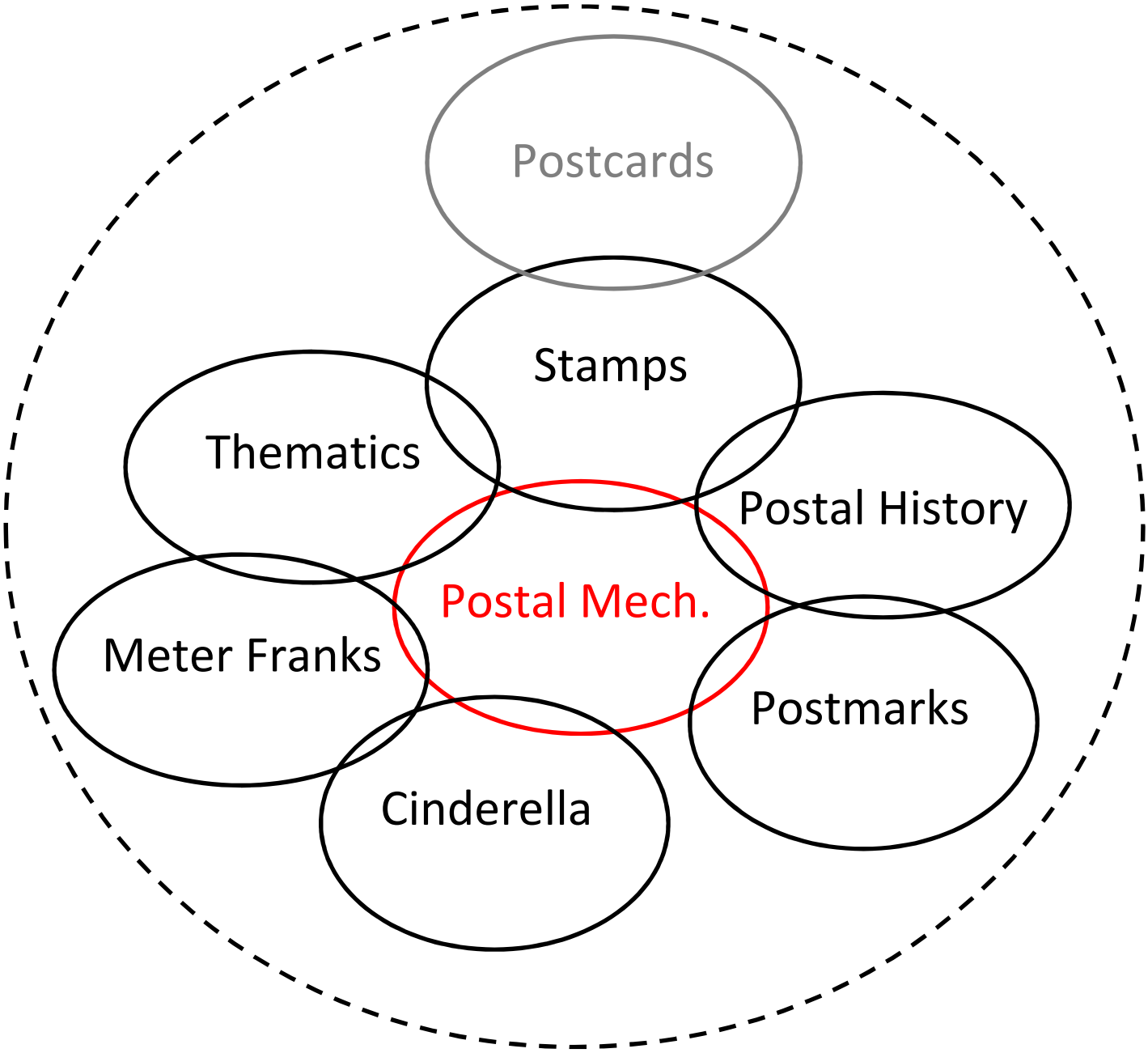
A talk given to the Wokingham & District Philatelic Society

By Alastair Nixon

11th October 2016

Postal Mechanisation – an aspect of Philately

The diagram below attempts to represent the degree that Postal Mechanisation, as an aspect of philatelic interest, ‘overlaps’ with some of the other areas of philately.



Areas of Philatelic Interest

UK Postal Mechanisation – main development phases

Over the years, eight distinct phases of postal mechanisation can be considered to have taken place within sorting offices. These can be summarised as follows:

Phase 1:	1935	Sorting machines based on memorised codes
Phase 2:	1957	Automatic letter facing and cancelling
Phase 3:	1959	Initial phosphor dot coding based on postcodes
Phase 4:	1968	1st Generation sorting machinery
Phase 5:	1975	2nd Generation sorting machinery
Phase 6:	1983	OCR & IJP technology
Phase 7:	1987	3rd Generation sorting machinery
Phase 8:	1995	Advanced technology sorting equipment

Note that the dates above reflect when live mail was first processed for each phase. In all cases, however, internal trials on dummy mail took place prior to these dates.

Throughout the first half of this display, the main emphasis will be on the handling of live mail that occurred within sorting offices, although some mention of internal trials will be made.

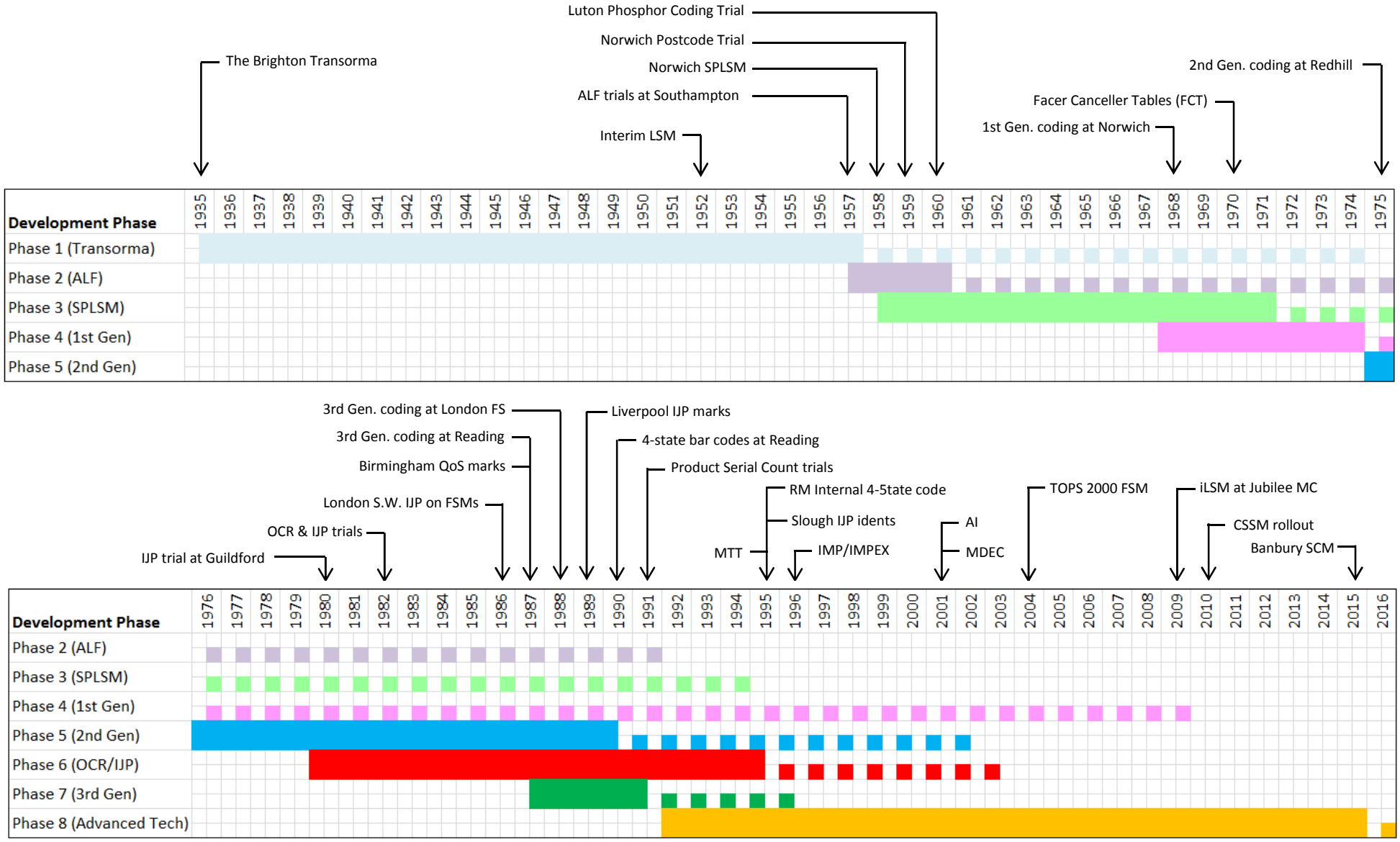
The second half of this display will look at the various ‘peripheral’ aspects of postal mechanisation that have occurred within the UK over the years. In many cases, these topics will cover the developments that have taken place externally to the sorting offices.

Postal Mechanisation Abbreviations

Like any other area of study, Postal Mechanisation brings its own terminology. The following is a list of the main abbreviations used in this display and their associated meaning.

Abbreviation	***Meaning***
ACE	*Automated Centre of Excellence*
AI	*Address Interpretation*
ALF	*Automatic Letter Facer*
ASM	*Automatic Sorting Machine*
CFC	*Culler Facer Canceller*
CSSM	*Compact Sequence Soring Machine*
FCT	*Facer Canceller Table*
FSM	*Flats Sorting Machine*
IJP	*Ink Jet Printed / Printing*
iLSM	*intelligent Letter Sorting Machine*
IMP	*Integrated Mail Processor*
IMPEX	*Reduced variant of the Integrated Mail Processor*
LSM	*Letter Sorting Machine*
MDEC	*Manual Data Entry Centre (at Plymouth, Stoke and Doxford)*
MLO	*Mechanised Letter Office*
MTT	*Machine de Tri a Tasseurs (Mail Transport System)*
OCR	*Optical Character Recognition / Optical Character Reading*
PAF	*Postal Address File*
PPI	*Printed Postage Impression*
SCM	*Stamp Cancelling Machine*
SEG	*Segregator*
SPLSM	*Single Position Letter Sorting Machine*
TOPS 2000	*Name given to the Flats Sorting m/c - Tiids Ojects Plats Sorter*

UK Postal Mechanisation - Key developments from 1935



Note: Solid lines show the main development for a given phase. Dotted lines show when equipment from that phase continued in use.