

Phase 1: 1935 – 1957

Sorting machines based on memorised codes

This section covers the first phase of development between 1935 and 1957 when the concept of postal mechanisation was really in its embryonic stage. The following key developments took place during this period

1935 The Brighton Transorma

1952 The Six Position Letter Sorting coding desks

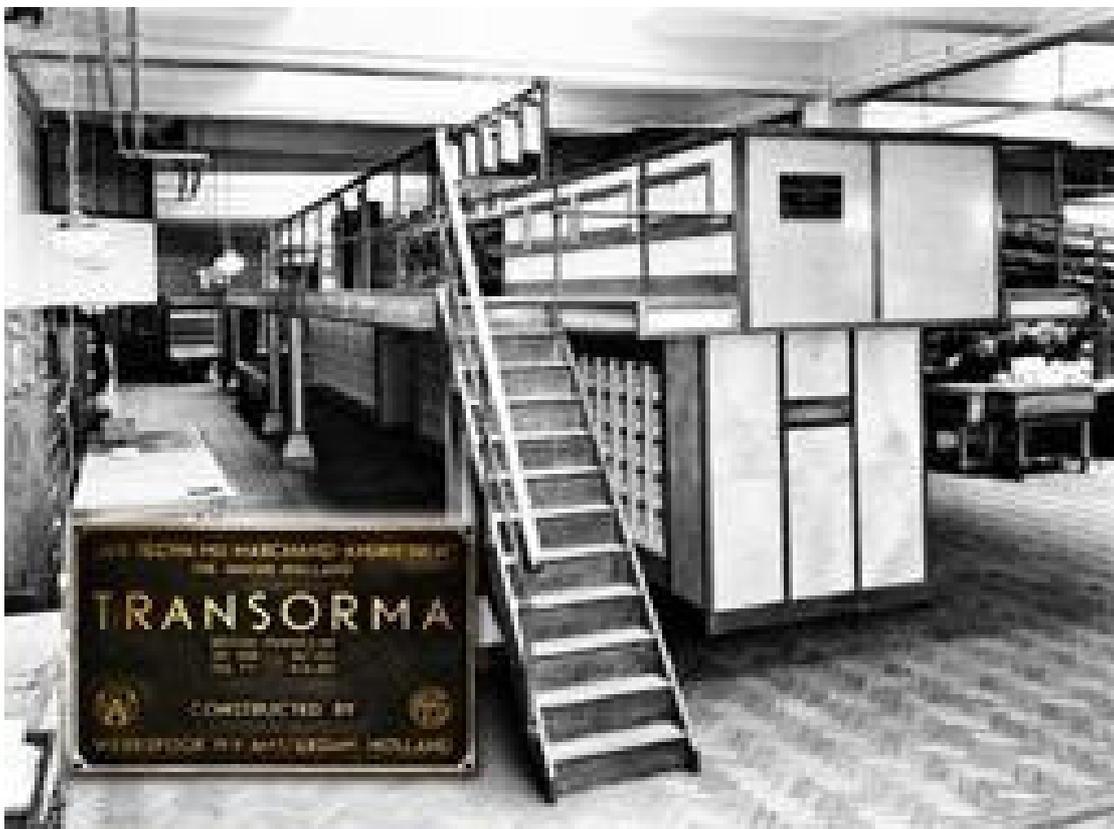
1955 The Single Position Letter Sorting Machine coding desks

1935 – The Brighton Transorma

From 1935 to 1968, the GPO in Brighton operated two Dutch sorting machines for the sorting of mail, known as 'Transormas'.

The name Transorma originated from a combination of TRANsportation and SORTing of mail, together with the initials 'M' and 'A' of its Dutch inventors, Marchand and Andriessen.

Below is a photograph of one of those machines at Brighton, together with an insertion of the maker's name plate.



The machine weighed 20 tons and was capable of processing up to 15,000 items per hour.

Brighton was chosen as the location for this machine for two reasons. Firstly, there was the suitability of the available building and secondly the size and type of mail traffic which had to be sorted there.

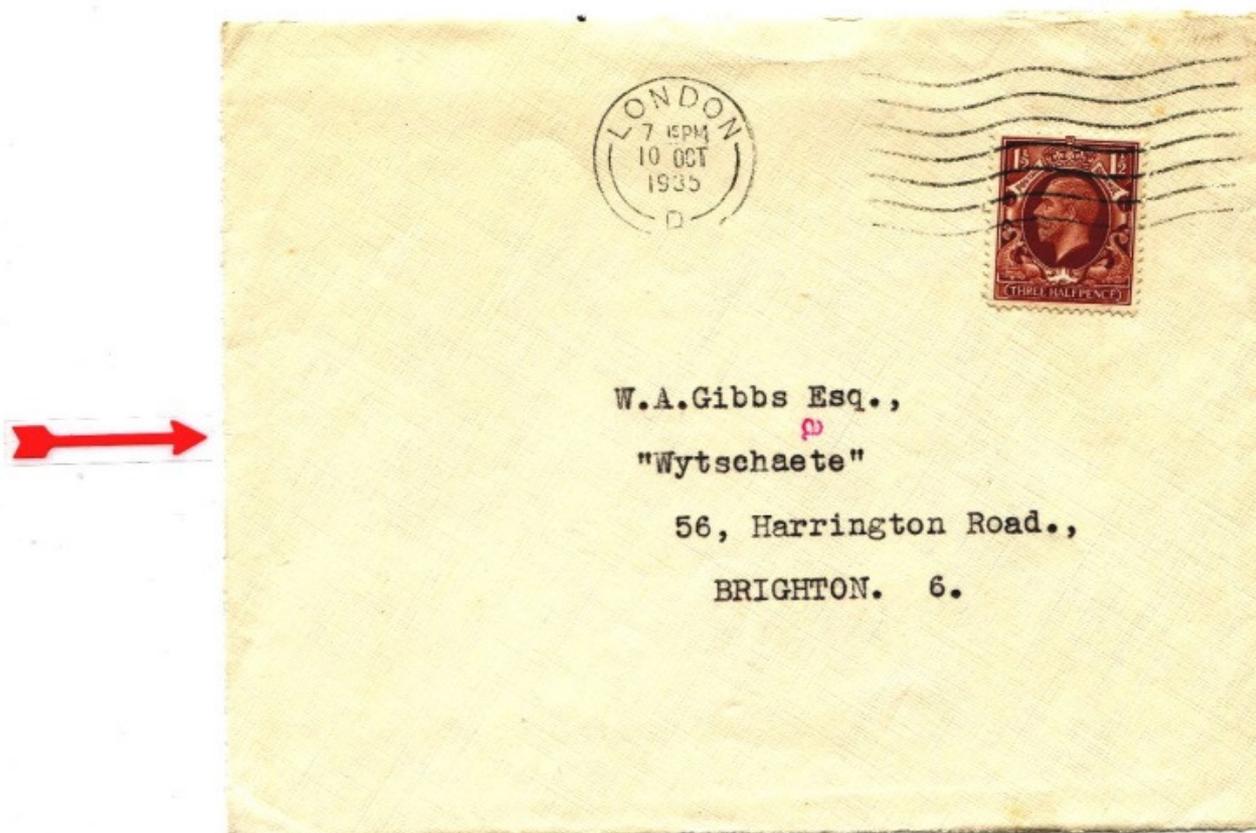
1935 – The Brighton Transorma

The first trials started in September 1935, but the official first day of operation was on the 7th October 1935.

Key codes were used by the operators for both inward and outward sorting into one of 300 destination boxes. For outward sorting, the operators (or 'Transormists' as they were proud to be known) had to memorise over 290 different key codes.

For inward sorting, the Brighton area was divided into seven districts: Districts 1 and 2 covered central Brighton, Districts 3 and 4 covered Hove, whilst Districts 5, 6 and 7 covered the outer Brighton region.

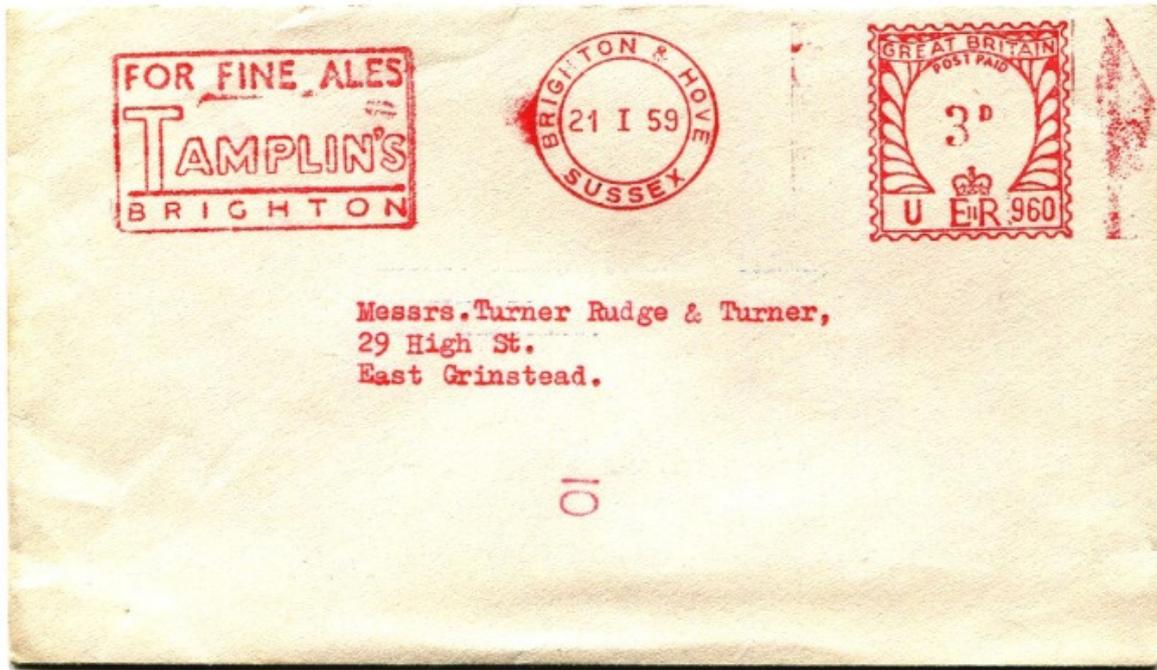
The following is an example of inward coding from London. It is addressed to 'BRIGHTON 6' which was to the north of the town. It bears the operator ident 'a' in red (sideways base left) and was processed during the first week of operation on 10 Oct 1935.



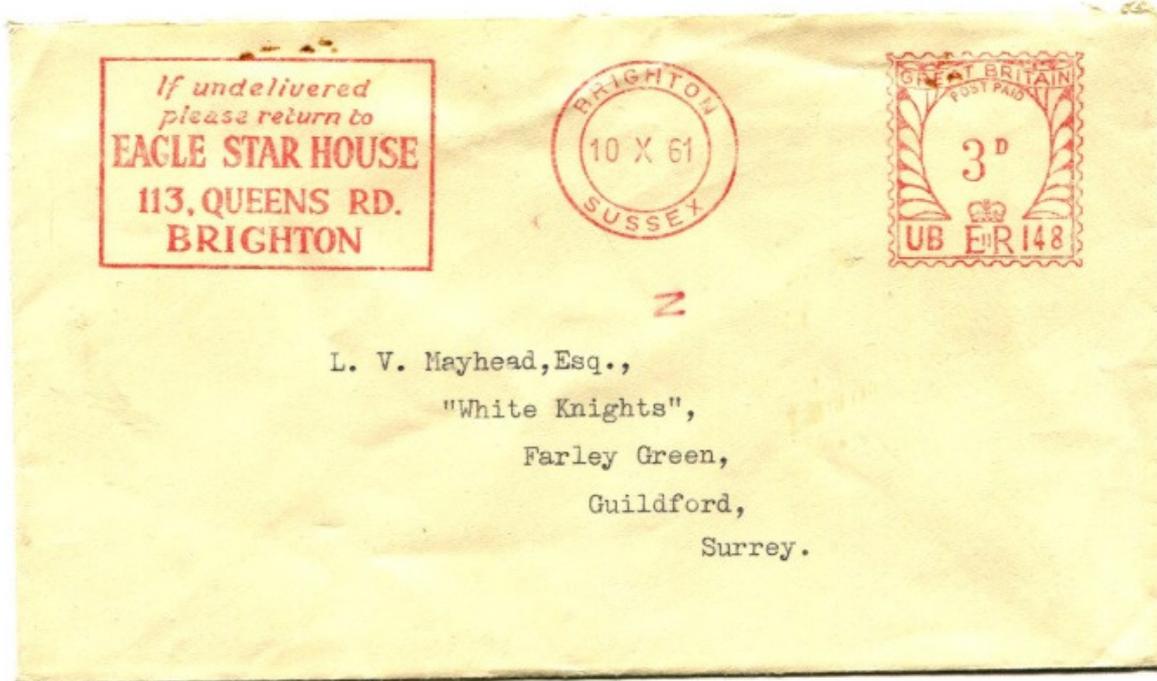
Cover front bearing operator ident 'a' - dated 10 Oct 1935

Brighton Transorma – Outward Sorting

Below are two examples of outward coded mail from Brighton, applied to meter mail in 1959 / 1961.



Operator ident '10', dated 21 I 59



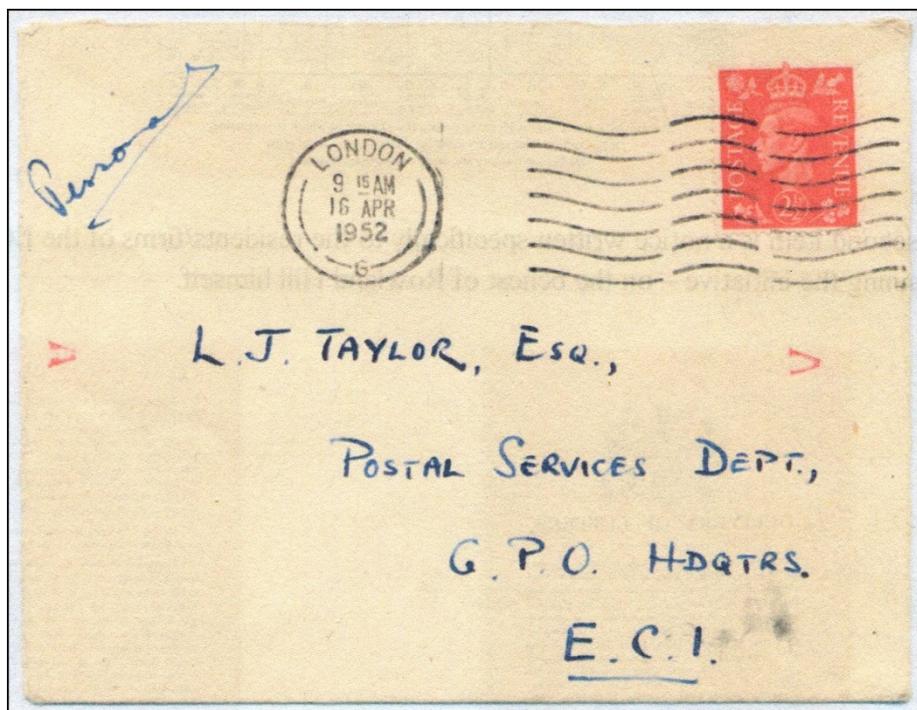
Operator ident 'N', dated 10 X 61

The First British Sorting Machines

In 1938 a specification for a better machine than the Transorma was drawn up by the Postal Services Department of the British Post Office. This would be capable of having 500 selections and be able to sort letters at the rate of 50-60 items per minute.

In 1946 some research into letter sorting machines was re-opened by the Mechanical Aids Committee and two separate lines of action were considered. The first was a long-term project involving the use of a single-position machine and applying 'fluorescent' marks on letters for subsequent sorting by separate high-speed sorting machines. However, some intractable problems were encountered and the use of 'phosphorescent' ink was considered instead in 1950.

The second project, regarded as an interim stage, was to design and construct a six-position manually operated letter sorting machine and some live trials were conducted at Mount Pleasant between 16 April and 3 May 1952.



First trial of Six-Position LSM on live mail – ident 'V' (sideways) dated 16 Apr 1952

A Very Early Postal Mechanisation Item

I have been attempting to find out what the postal markings are on the cover below. It is an Air Mail letter sent from the USA and dated 16 Sep 1952. It has two inverted 'G's printed vertically above each other. It is possible that these idents were applied as an early trial in the USA but it is also possible that the markings were applied in the UK as part of an early experiment.

One thing that is certain is that these idents were not made by a Transorma machine. First of all, the item has been addressed to Swanage (i.e. nowhere near Brighton) and, secondly, the markings made by Transorma machines always appeared once on the envelope as single letter or numbers.

The item happens to be dated from the same period when the first trials on the Interim (six-position) Letter Sorting Machine were being made at Mount Pleasant. However, the idents recorded for these trials normally appear as two Roman numerals, printed horizontally across the envelope, so the item will have to remain a mystery!



1957 – The ELSIE / SPLSM

Following trials in Bath and Mount Pleasant in 1955, the first prototype letter sorting machine was installed at Southampton in February 1957. Initially it was called the Electronic Letter Sorting Indicator Equipment (ELSIE) but later became known as the Single Position Letter Sorting Machine (SPLSM).

In 1958 the first production machines were installed at Norwich, London SEDO, Liverpool, Luton, Leeds, Southampton, Birmingham, Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast.

SPLSM machines were 17' long, 3' wide and 7' 6" high, weighed 2½ tons and was capable of sorting 3,500 items per hour. Operators used both hands to key in one of 144 memorised codes. Coded mail items were routed to one of 144 stacking boxes.



The last operational SPLSM, transferred to the National Postal Museum in 1993