

Section 5: Postal Mechanisation Trials

This section covers various trials involving postal mechanisation since the mid-1970s. The trials sometimes led to major technology changes but sometimes the ideas fell by the wayside. Some of these trials were conducted internally within Royal Mail and other involved trials on live mail. The topics covered in this section include:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Event</u>
1976	The Norwich Video Coding experiment
1982	IJP & OCR trials at Mount Pleasant
1984	The Frama Postage Stamp trial
1990	The packet sorting trial at Coventry
1990	The 4-state bar code IJP trial at Reading
1991	IJP Product Serial Count trials
1991	The Klüssendorf cancelling trial at London SE
1993	The IJP postmark trial at Gloucester
1995	The IJP desk ident trial at Slough
1996	The 4-state meter franking trial at Watford
2004	The IJP postmark trial at Swindon
2008	The Automatic Catalogue Recognition (ACR) Trial
2008	The Beaumann SCM trial at Swindon
2011	The Royal Mail Branding trial
2015	The Banbury Stamp Cancelling trial

Royal Mail trial types explained

Depending on the circumstances, various types of trial can take place. The main types are described as follows:

Internal trials

Conducted using dummy mail (i.e. test) items for internal research purposes (e.g. Dollis Hill phosphors research).

Commissioning trials

An engineering trial in connection with the testing of new equipment (e.g. initial IMP testing at Watford).

Field trials

A term used when it is uncertain whether or not live mail was used.

Nationwide trials

A trial performed on live mail at most or all offices across the country.

Multi-location trials

Used to compare the effectiveness in different offices (e.g. SPC trial).

Local trials

Performed on live mail - often just in one office (e.g. the ATB stamp cancelling machine trial at Swindon in 2008).

Concealed trial

Conducted with little public awareness (e.g. the RM Branding trial).

Secretive trial

Conducted with no public awareness (e.g. the ACR catalogue trial).

Immediate roll-out (no trial)

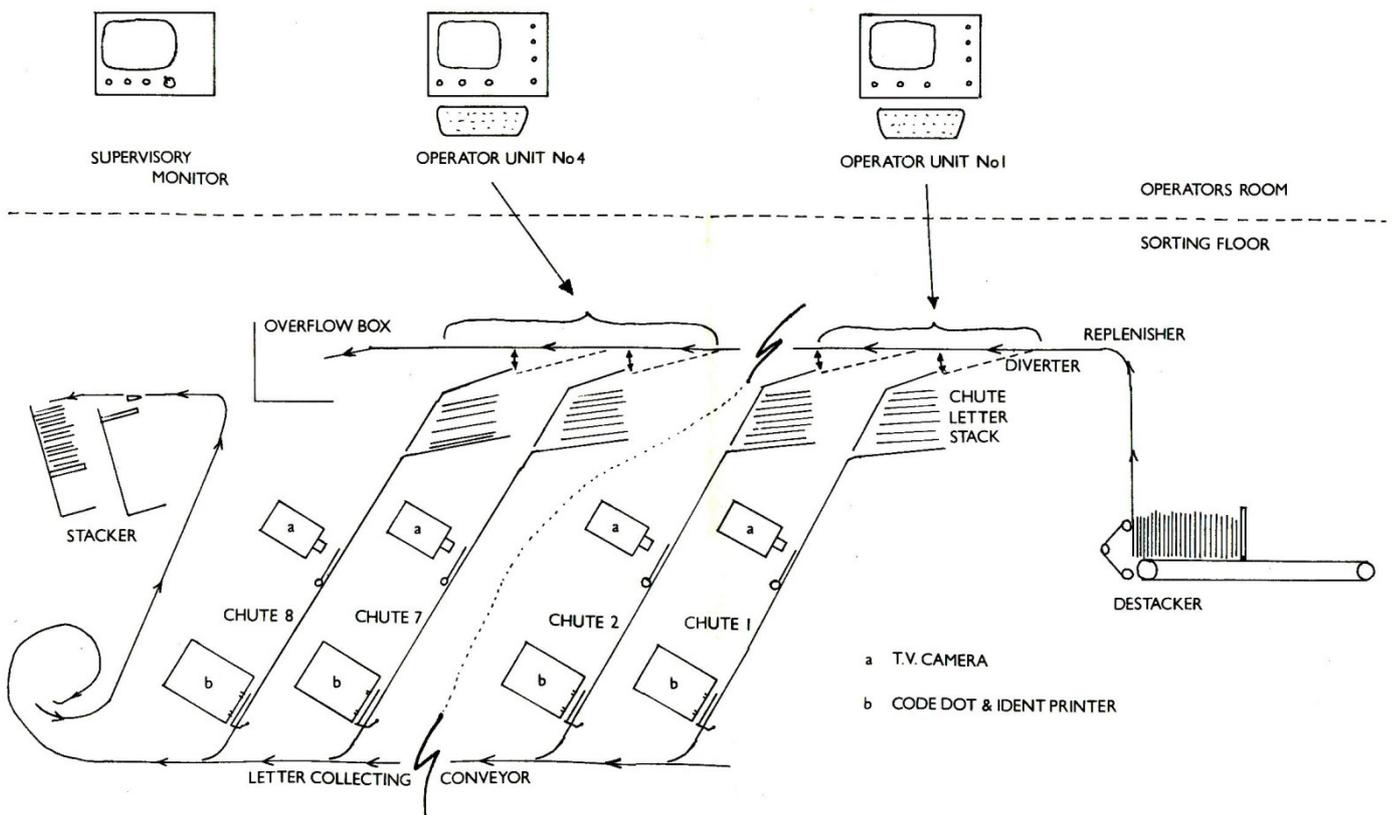
Usually in connection with a service (e.g. Pricing In Proportion).

1976 Norwich Video Experiment

An experimental closed circuit television coding system was trialled at Norwich in 1976/7. In this experiment, four coding desk operators with monitors and keyboards were positioned remotely in a separate room. A fifth monitor was available for supervisory purposes to select the video image seen by any of the four operators.

Letters were fed into one of four chutes, each chute having its own CCTV camera and code dot and ident printer. Once coded, letters were released to a collecting conveyor and taken to the box stacker.

A schematic diagram showing the major components of the equipment used in the experiment is shown below.



Experimental CCTV Letter Coding Equipment at Norwich MLO 1976/7

1982 IJP 'Coding Desk / Operator Ident' Test Mail

This test mail item has some IJP 'Coding Desk / Operator Ident' marks that were applied in connection with the early development of the 3rd Generation coding desks. This engineering test was likely to have taken place in early 1982 – probably at Mount Pleasant MLO.



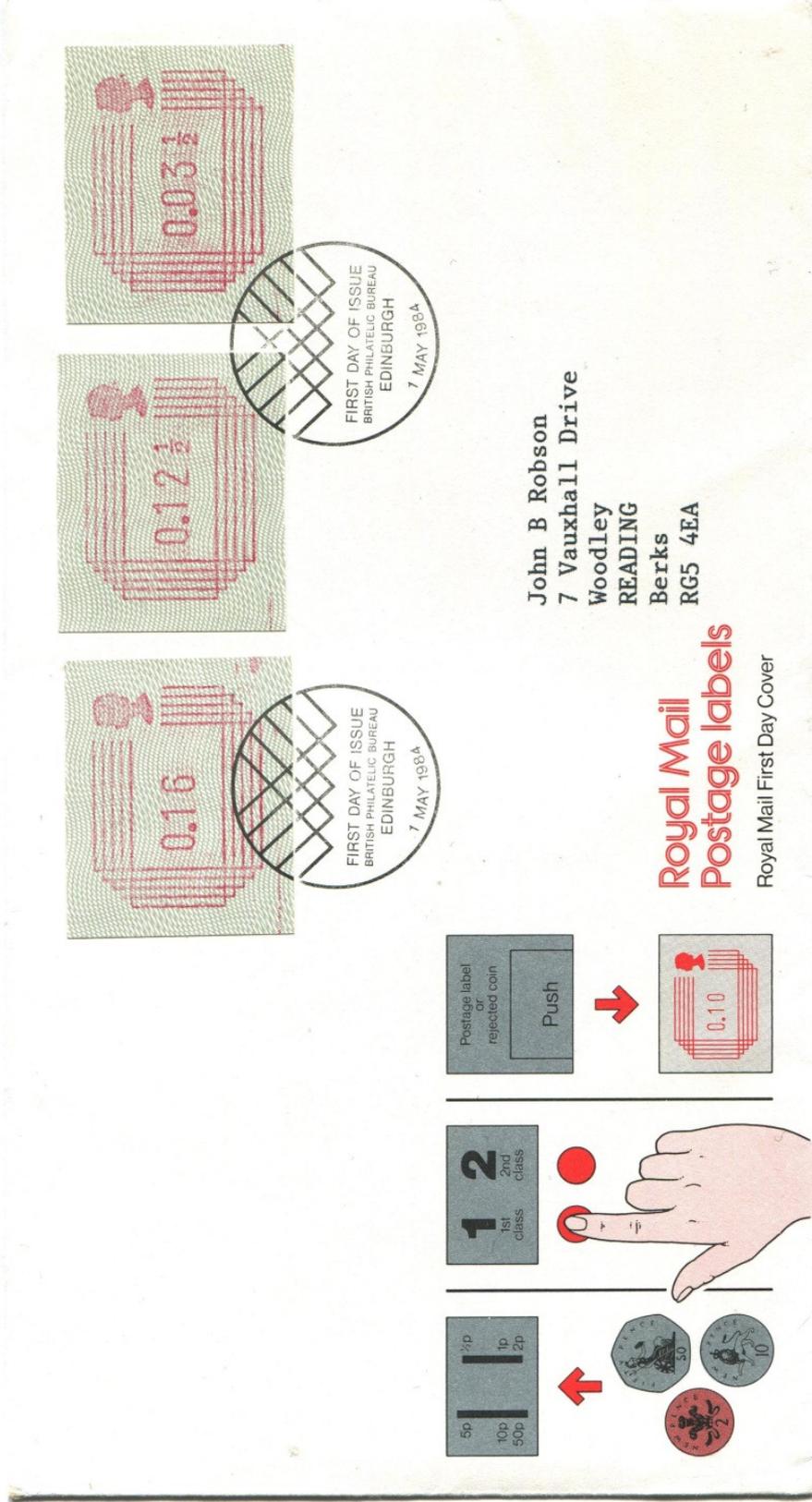
1982 Optical Character Recognition (OCR) Coding - IJP Test Mail

This test mail item has IJP coding marks that were applied in connection with the early development of OCR coding of mail. Note that the pre-printed date in the meter frank is artificial as the engineering tests were likely to have taken place in early 1982 – probably at Mount Pleasant MLO.



1984 – Royal Mail ‘Frama’ Postage Stamps

On 1 May 1984, Royal Mail installed ATM stamp vending machines at Cambridge, Southampton, Windsor, Edinburgh and London EC. The machines, manufactured by the Swiss company Frama, were capable of producing labels with values from 1/2p to 16p. The trial lasted about a year but was deemed unsuccessful.



1990 – Packet Sorting Machine trial at Coventry

A trial took place at Coventry MLO in the second half of 1990 to evaluate the cost effectiveness of using a machine to handle packets, which account for approximately 2% of the total mail volume.

The machine at Coventry was capable of facing the items but the bulk of the machine was a transportation system. It was capable of processing about 15,000 items a day.

The trial was deemed unsuccessful and no more were built. Sadly, the machine did not leave any postal markings on the mail items and therefore there is nothing for the philatelist to collect - and we have to make do with this photo!



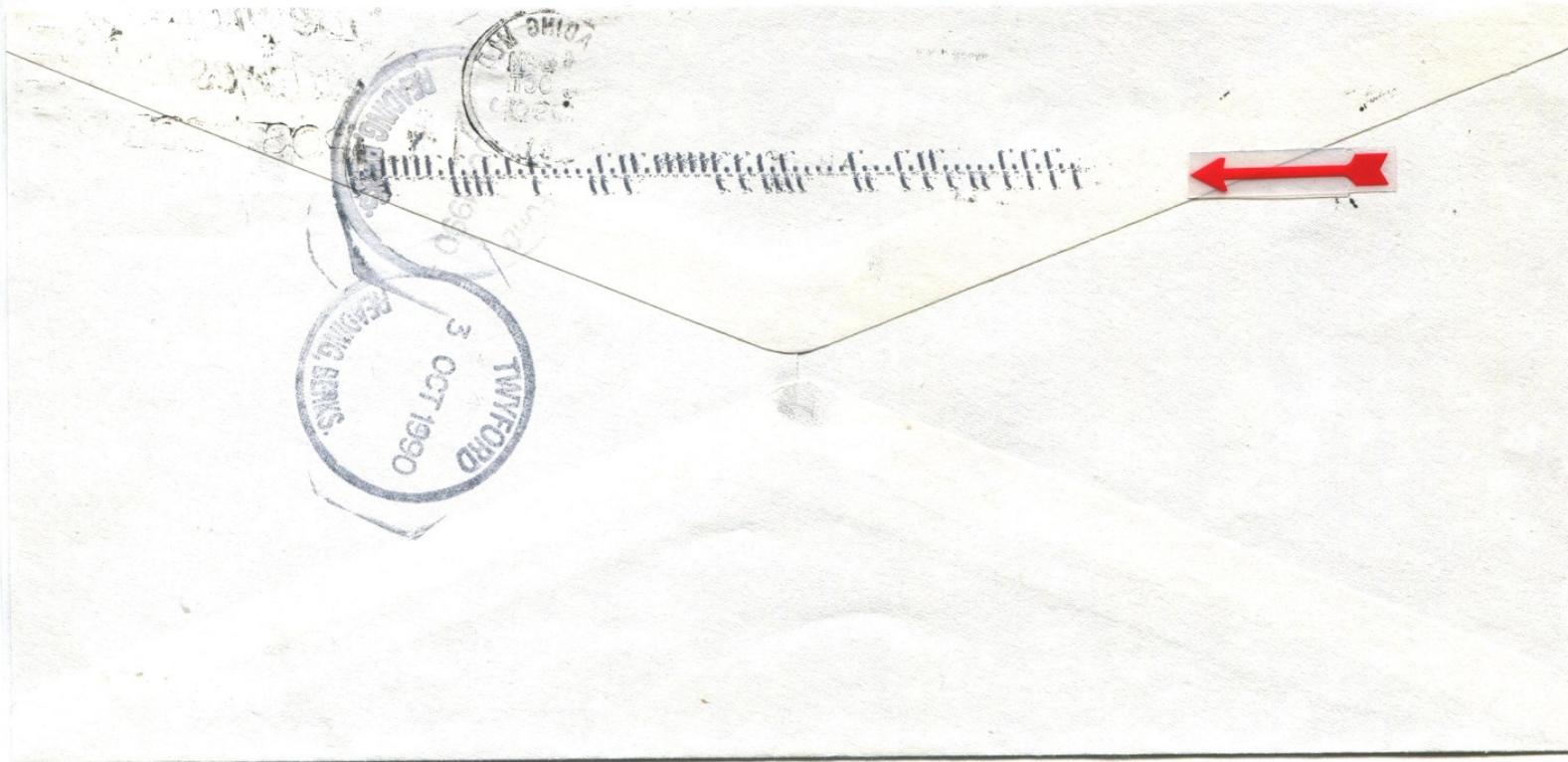
Coventry Packet Sorting Machine - clearing down of mailbag selections

1990 – Reading 4-State Bar Code IJP Trial

In October 1990, a trial took place on live mail at Reading MLO to test the concept of printing '4-State Code' marks. The printer, fitted to the OCR, generated one of 12 fixed patterns of 64-element codes on the reverse side of the envelope. The patterns themselves had no other operational significance.

The trial took place on three days on 3rd, 4th and 12th October 1990 and was deemed a success. It was to play an important role in the nationwide application of 4-state coding that commenced in 1994.

The example here shows was processed on the first day of the trial and bears the handstamp 'TWYFORD / READING BERKS'.

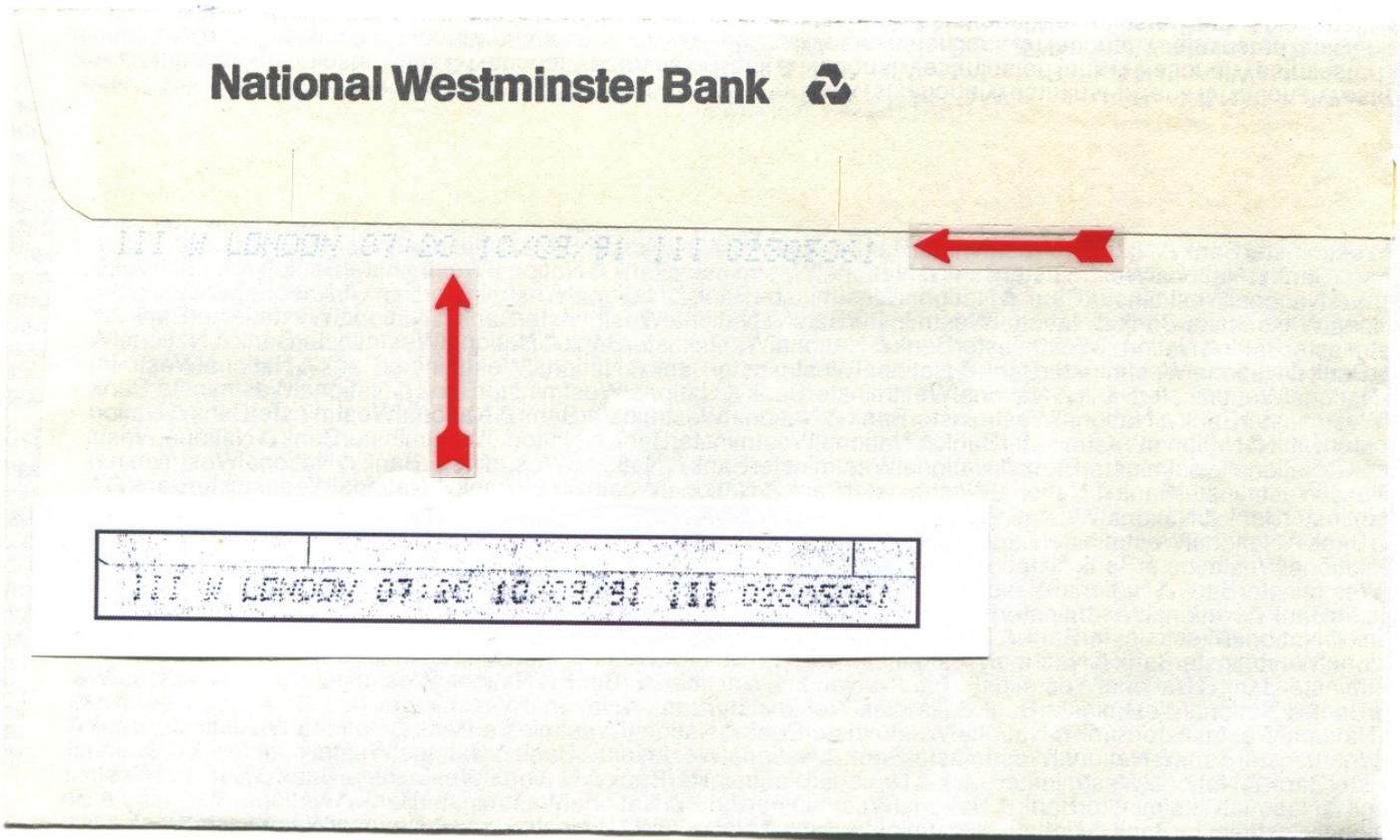


Reading 4-State bar coded item – 3 October 1990

1991 – IJP ‘Product Serial Count’ Trials

Between July and September 1991, trials took place involving the application of Ink Jet Printed ‘Product Serial Counts’ in pale blue phosphor ink on the reverse side of mail items.

The live trials involved six MLOs, namely: Birmingham, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Liverpool, London W1 and Southend-on-Sea.



The marks applied were barely visible and the insert on the item above is a photocopy that has been darkened to illustrate the printing, which in this case reads:

III W LONDON 07:20 10/09/91 III 02505061