50 years of the postcode by Richard West

WHILE the postcode, as we now recognise it, was introduced to Norwich 50 years ago, the idea of dividing a city or similar large area for ease of delivering the mail is much older. The reforms of the postal system in 1839 and 1840 resulted in a great increase in letter writing. However, in an

The UK postcode identifies a group of homes, with the final sorting for delivery being left to the postman on his rounds. First introduced in Norwich 50 years ago this month, it has become a familiar and useful tool, used not only to sort letters but also to quickly identify an address or determine the status of any area in the country.

area like London, the same street name could be found in different places. It was Sir Rowland Hill who devised the idea of dividing London into ten postal districts, with East Central (EC) and West Central (WC) surrounded by the eight principal compass points, N, NE, E, SE etc. Hill's plan was implemented in 1857 and 1858, with the public being asked to add their district to the end of their address. About ten years later, both the E and S districts were dropped as unnecessary. During the First World War, in 1917, the idea was extended, mainly to help the women who had been recruited as postal sorters and who understandably had not built up the knowledge of London's geography. Outside EC and WC, for each district the area nearest the centre of London was designated '1', all others being numbered in alphabetical order.

The idea of dividing large areas into regions soon spread – to Liverpool and Manchester initially, and then also to Birmingham, Brighton, Bristol, Dublin, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Leeds, Newcastle and Sheffield.

Postcode publicity labels.

The introduction of postal codes In time the need changed – from helping manual sorters, to undertaking the tasks automatically. Eight new sorting machines were installed in Norwich in 1959, which it was thought could sort the incoming mail into the individual postman's rounds. To put this plan into effect, postcodes were introduced, all starting with NOR for Norwich, with three additional characters that identified a particular street (large businesses each had their own identifying code).

Norwich residents were introduced to the plan in a letter received from the Postmaster General, Ernest Marples, dated 28 July 1959. On 1 September 1959 a press conference announced the scheme, with postcodes, or postal codes as they were then known, to be introduced for Norwich on 8 October 1959. During November the people of Norwich received green cards to send to their correspondents, requesting that the postal code be added to the address when replying. Labels, with red lettering on white or white lettering on red, urging 'Please include the POSTAL CODE in my address when replying' were also supplied. ▶
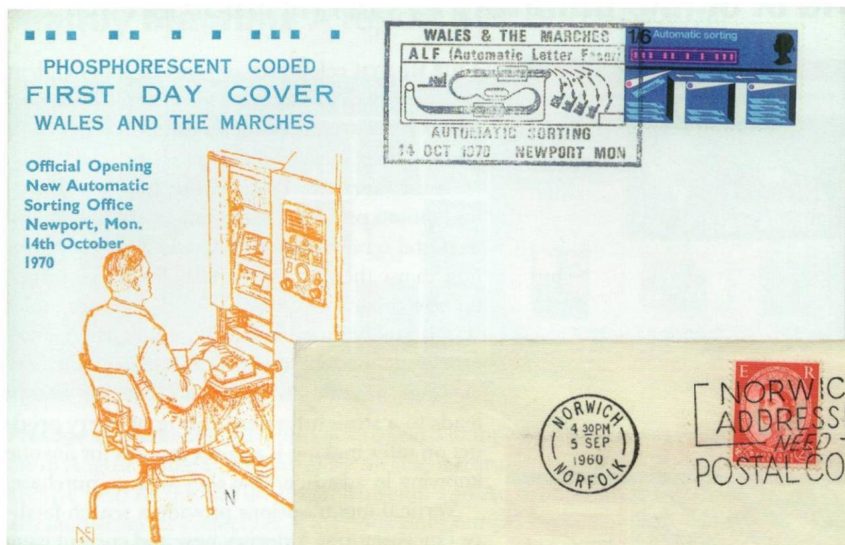
The eight automated machines already mentioned were commissioned in December 1958, and came into use during the following January. Initially the postmen keying in the information relied upon memory codes when coding letters: letters that passed through the system during the Spring and Autumn of 1959 received an identification mark, or ident, in violet, which can be seen on the front of the envelope adjacent to the address. In the early part of 1960 two of these eight machines were converted to interpret the postcodes, still keyed-in by hand. Envelopes can again be identified by the ident applied during the Spring and Autumn of 1960, now in black. For a time during 1963 the ident was applied in red.

Phosphor dots However, the Norwich experiment did not prove a great success, mainly because many did not include the postcode in the address. That was despite postmark slogan campaigns, 'Norwich Addresses Need Postal Codes', introduced on 5 September 1960, and in use for various periods up to 31 March 1967. Nevertheless development of automated sorting continued, still using a postcode, but now it would be translated into phosphor dots that could be sensed by the equipment. The use of phosphor dots was introduced in 1966, with Croydon being the second place to be allocated postcodes. Croydon established the pattern for future postcodes in the UK, with an outward and an inward section, the outward part identifying a place, the inward section homing in on just a few addresses. Croydon remains unusual, in that some of its outward codes start with CRO, albeit this caused immediate confusion as many mistook the final zero for the letter 'o': the use of zero was not repeated in other areas. Also in Croydon, all large businesses were given the code of CR9, a practice that was again not repeated, as it had to be used for too much mail. After Croydon, every UK address was given a postcode, the task being completed in 1974, at which point Norwich was allocated new codes. The style adopted was a letter and numeral combination, followed by a numeral and letter combination. However, not all letters have been used: letters are not used if they might be confused with numerals in a hand-written address. A slogan postmark campaign, 'Remember to use the POSTAL CODE', supported the introduction of codes, starting with Croydon on 21 November 1966.
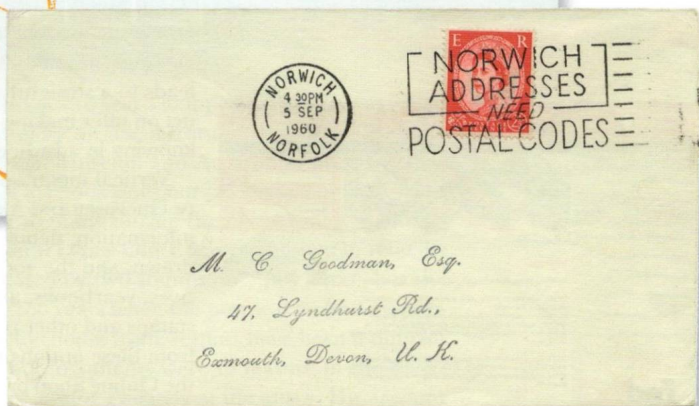
It was not until the early 1990s that Guernsey, Isle of Man and Jersey, postally independent since 1 October 1969, introduced their own postcodes. The system has also been extended to certain of the British dependencies overseas, such as Ascension Island, the Falkland Islands, St Helena and Tristan da Cunha. This is to prevent confusion with place names that can look similar when hand written, resulting in mail being mis-sorted.

Gradually even keying in the postcode manually was overtaken by automation, with Optical Character Recognition (OCR) capable of reading most of the postcodes. At one time, those that were indecipherable were captured on camera, and an operator within the sorting office would determine what was intended. Now even that process has progressed, and with the latest Address Interpretation (AI) system, if an address is not automatically read, an image of the item is transmitted to one of three Manual

Above: cover for the opening of the new automated sorting office in Newport, showing a postman postcoding the mail. Right: a 1960 cover posted in Norwich, with publicity slogan (courtesy Tom Norgate).

Data Entry Centres, at Plymouth, Stockport or Stoke, where the necessary information will be keyed in to enable the item to be handled automatically thereafter.

The idea of postcodes has spread to many countries, with Germany introducing a two-digit code in 1942, changing to a four-digit code on 3 November 1964. Other countries to introduce their own codes in the 1960s were Austria, Australia, Belgium, Demark, Finland, France, Italy, Japan, Norway, Philippines, Sweden, Switzerland and USA, the first of these being the United States on 1 July 1963.

Automatically sorting the mail ready for delivery was first developed by The Netherlands, its Transorma machine being brought into use in 1930: two of these machines were introduced at Brighton and Hove in September 1935, where they remained in use until July 1968.

The postcode used in the UK identifies a group of homes, the final sorting for delivery being left to the postman. Gradually being introduced is equipment that sorts the mail ready for the postman's walk. I will leave you to contemplate what will be the next stage ●

To celebrate the 50th anniversary of postcodes on 8 October 2009, the Norfolk and Norwich Philatelic Society has invited the Postal Mechanisation Study Circle (PMSC) to give a display to the Society on 10 November. Jeremy Meal and Bob de Vekey will give a display entitled '50 Years of Postcodes in Norwich'. Both PMSC members are experienced collectors of the inauguration and development of postcodes both in Norwich and nationally. The meeting will be held at the United Reformed Church Rooms, Princes Street, Norwich NR3 1AZ. Doors open 19.00, and the display commenes at 19.30 ●