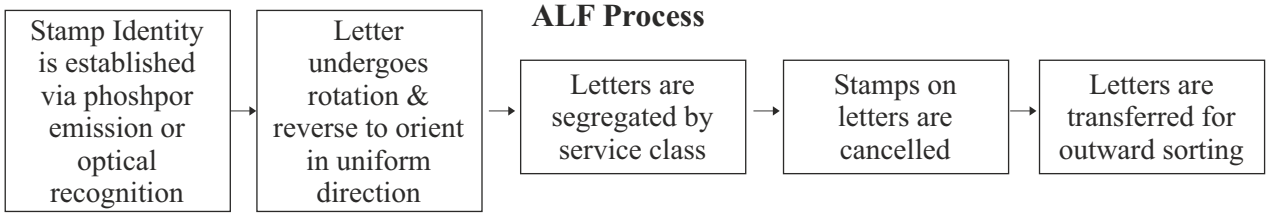
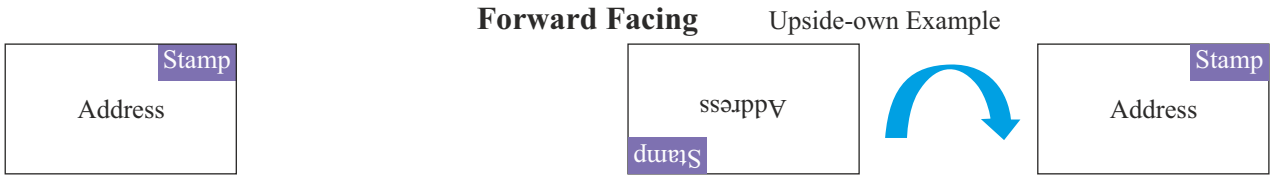
Automatic Letter Facing (ALF)

Royal Mail envisioned an automated mechanism that would compliment the Automated Letter Sorting (ALS) by performing the 'front end' function of facing letters so that they could be presented to the address coding operator in an automated process. Cancellation of letters was also part of the ALF process and later, when 1st & 2nd service classes were planned, identification and segregation of class were added.

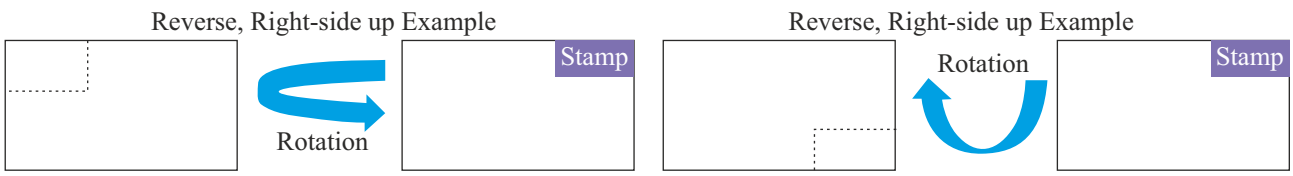
ALF Process



Once the stamp identity was established, an envelope could be flipped or rotated in the most efficient manner to 'face' it uniformly and place it in a stack. The possible manipulations are shown below using stamps & cancels to assist in visualizing orientation prior to processing. (Cancellation occurs after facing and class process)

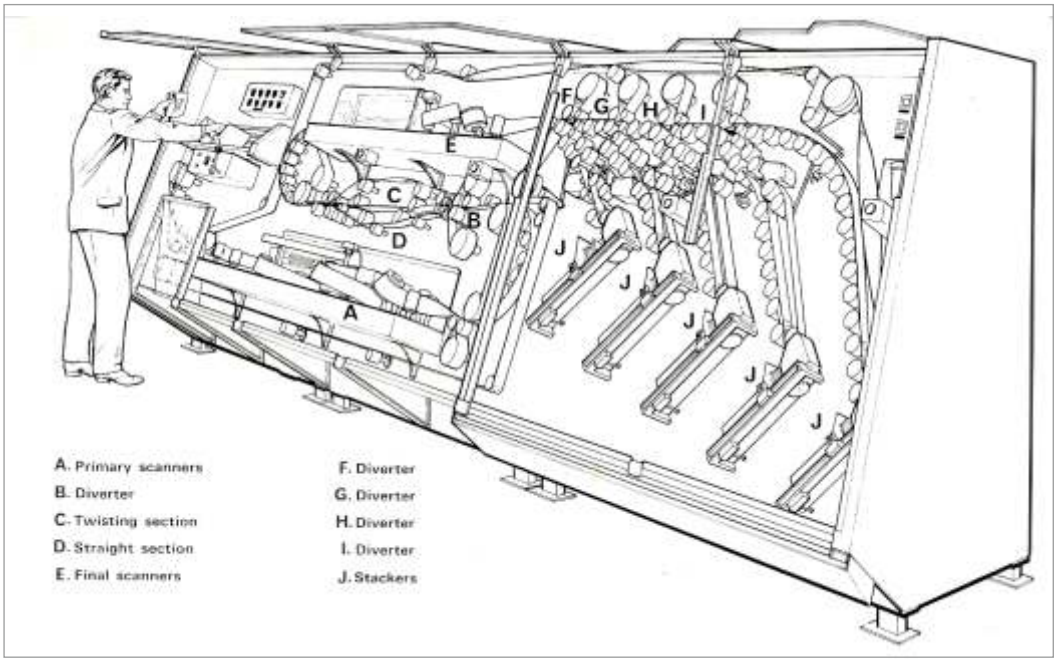


1st class Rate (3½p) paid for letter posted at London E.C. 21st Nov 1973.



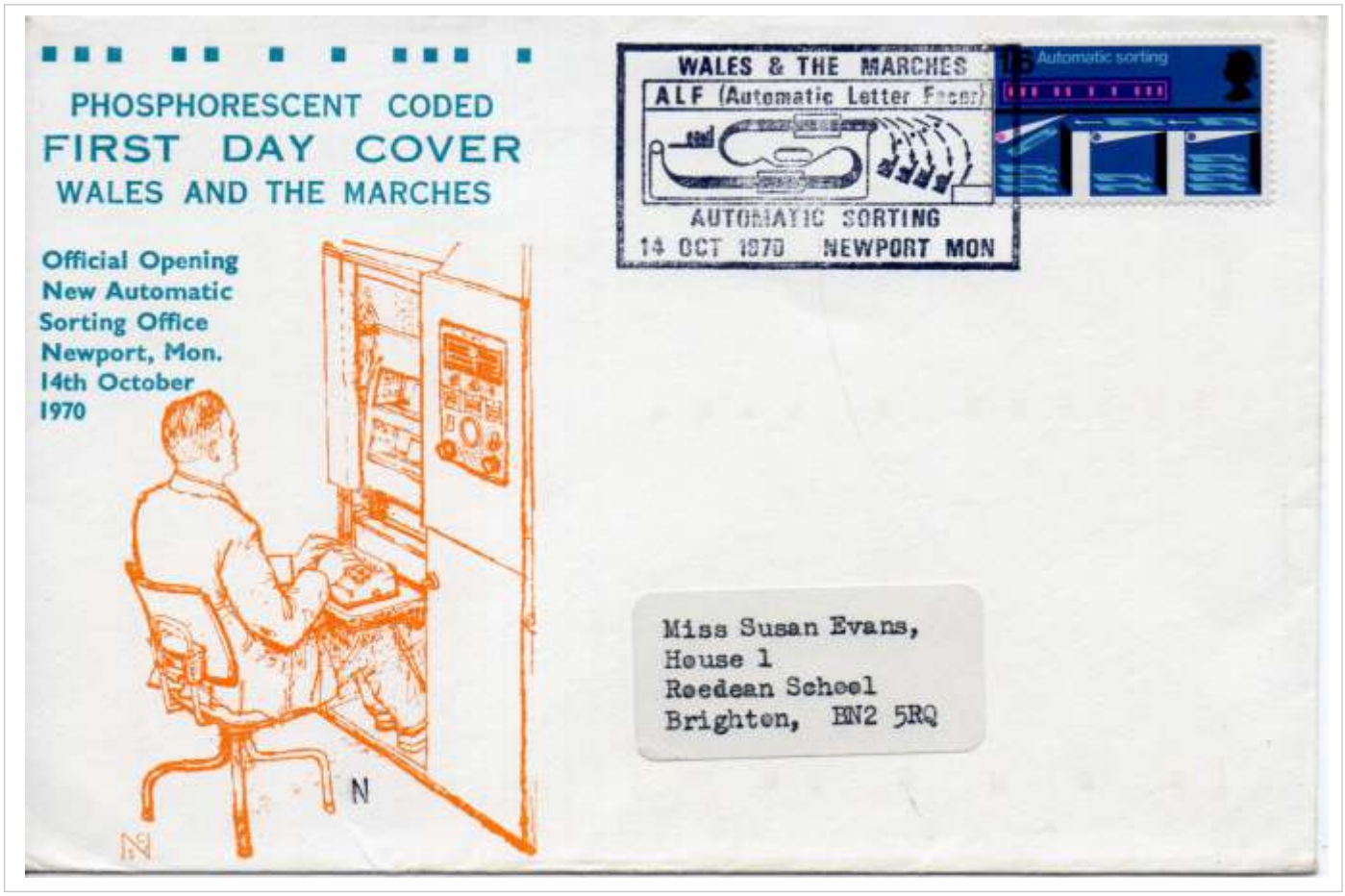
Post Office Proportions (POP) stipulate a rectangular envelope shape since this eliminates two sides from which rotation can occur.

One of the disadvantages of ALF was the extra machinery (i.e. SEG) that was necessary making the overall system very bulky and taking a long time to install. Simpler facer/canceller tables (FCT), consisting of a manual facing table with conveyors taking letters to an automatic canceller and stacker unit, came into use from 1969 and were installed in large numbers at smaller offices or to supplement SEG/ALF systems at larger offices.



Video

Scan & Watch



Philatelic Cover announcing the Wales & Marches - ALF machine 14th Oct 1970 /(see Cancellation too)

ALF - Missed Cancelling

Early ALF Machines had a tendency to miss this cancellation on the stamp itself, as the stamps didn't have any electronic Identity.

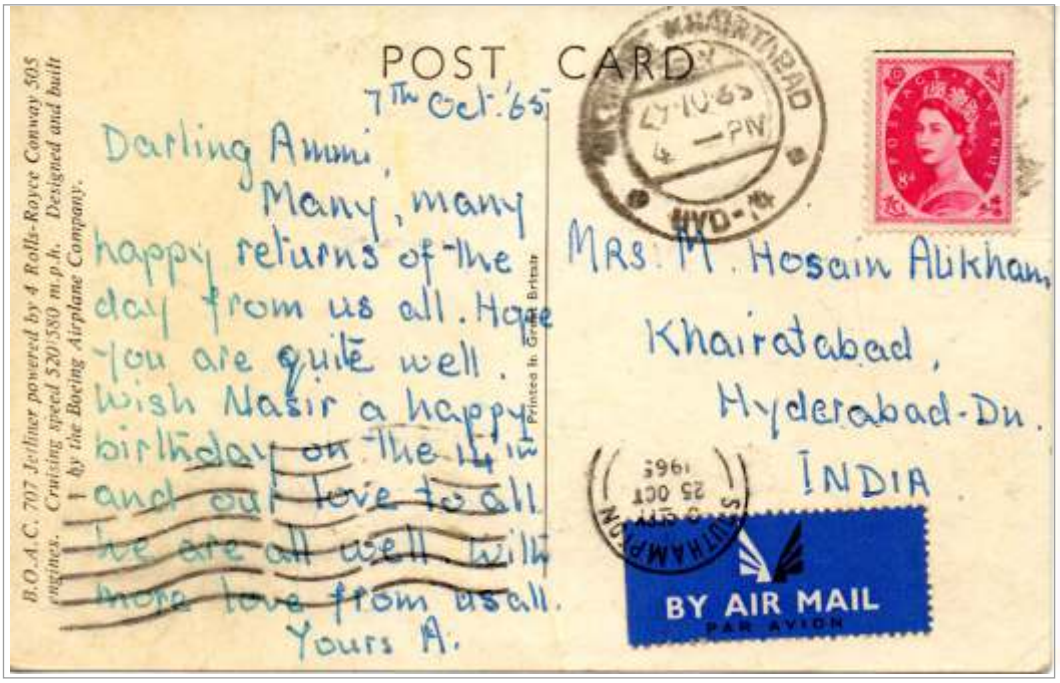
Stamp placed on different positions.

The postage stamp wrongly placed, hence missed the postmark, subsequently hand cancelled.

Letter rate (3d) paid for letter posted at Lancing 25th Jan 1959.

It was long recognized that postage stamp were predominately applied the upper-right front position of an envelope.

Mistaken Identity - Airmail label mis-took for a stamp.
Postage Stamp Correctly placed; but the machine identified the airmail label as a stamp .



Airmail post card rate (8d) paid for letter posted at Southampton 25th Oct 1965 to India.

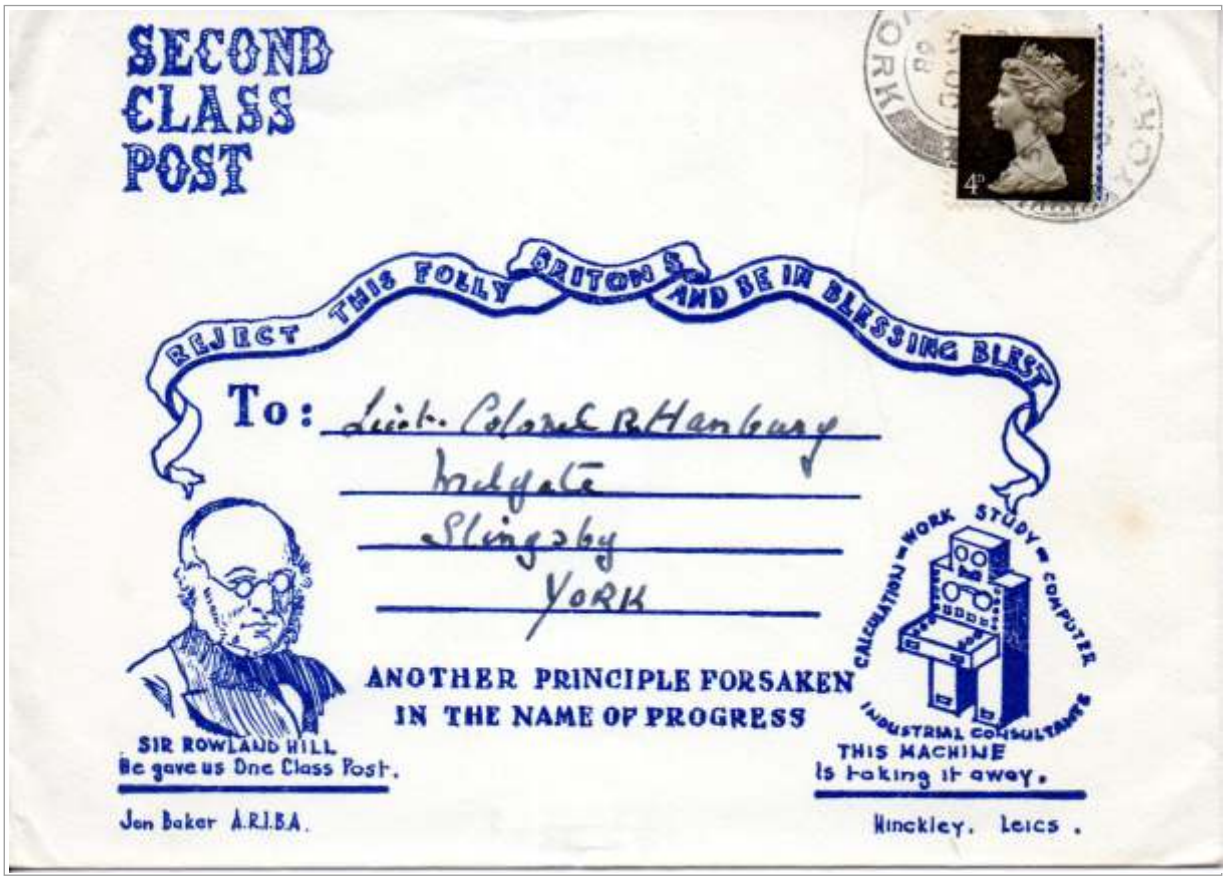
Use of Bisects

Bisects - Incomplete Stamp
Pass as 1/2 of 4d rate 2p Rate. ALF could not read the rate on stamp.

A one day strike and "overtime ban" by Postal Staff in the spring of 1965, let to a service shortage of 1d & 4d stamp.
Bisects of 4d to mark for the letter rate (of 2d) were allowed but never officially authorized.
Those that were 20 used and escaped postage due.
It did so by courtesy rather than by right.

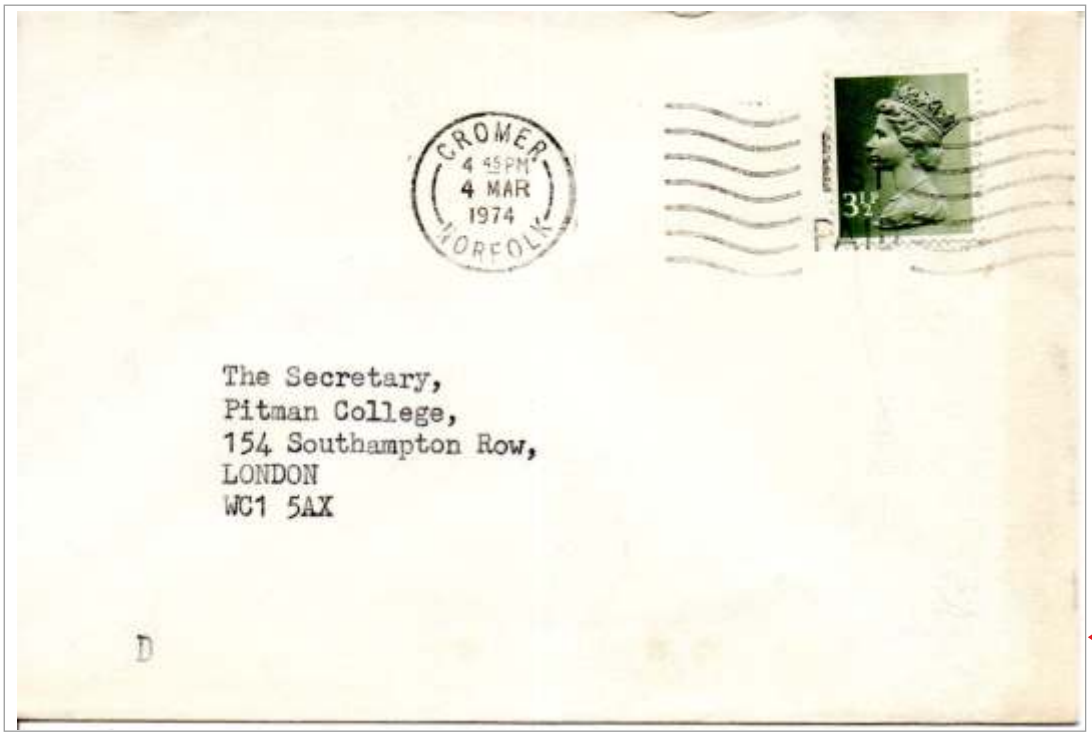
This letter was not accepted for valid stamp postage hence unpaid marked and double postage of 8d collected.

On September 16, 1968, the Post Office announced a fundamental change in the rate structure. The 'Printed Paper' rate would henceforth be replaced by 2ND class letter rate and the 'Letter' rate would be replaced by a 1ST class letter rate. This meant a 25% increase in the letter rate for next day delivery. Not everyone was pleased. Political statement envelope is franked with a 2-band (old letter rate) stamp.



Posting letter Printing for "Second Class Post"

A cover from Cromer , Norfolk with 1st paid wavy line ALF mark.



← Ident D with Sorting Marks

1st class Rate (3½p) paid for letter posted at Cromer 4th Mar 1974.

The postmark dies used in FCTs are often not distinctive; those used in the two machines at Bradford from 1981 are particularly helpful in identifying the machine used.

F01

F02

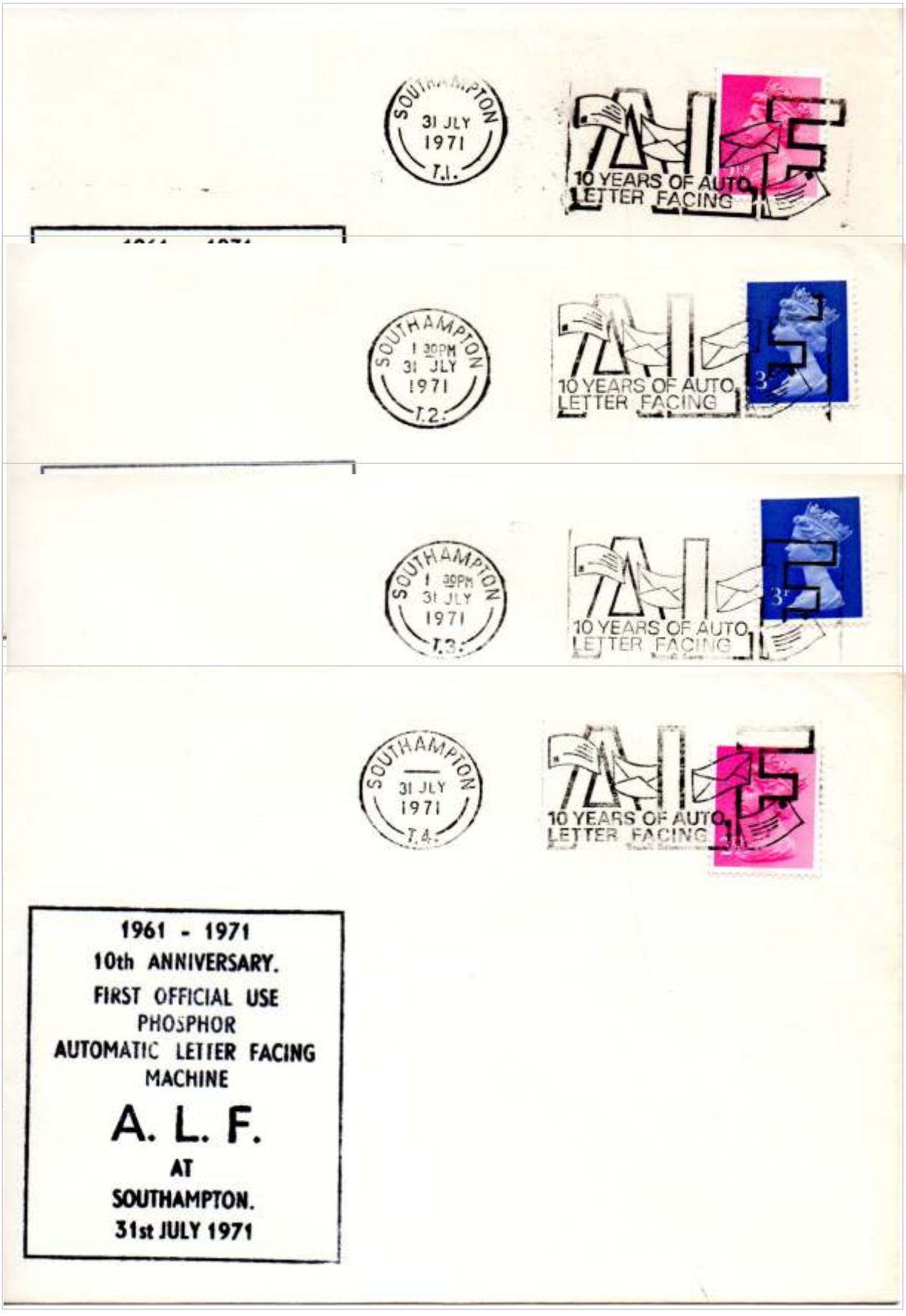
F03

F04

Mail used from Bradford in 1982 FCT - F01/F02/F03/F04

Many post offices had multiple ALFs designated A, B, C, etc. The dies were then degignated as A1, B2, etc., indicating the machine and die. First class dies were allocated the numbers 2 & 3 while second class dies were assigned numbers 1 & 4.

Second Class Mail Rate, Southampton TI Die



Southampton / Machine T1

Southampton / Machine T2

Southampton / Machine T3

Southampton / Machine T4

Second Class Mail Rate, Southampton T4 Die

From the beginning of stamp identity mechanisation, the equipment was capable of rudimentary optical recognition. Two examples are shown where the boxed "1" (for 1st class) could be processed automatically without the need for phosphor bands. The lower two examples are postal stationery item have phosphor bands placed to either side of Queen's image.

Official Mail
Phosphor Dots
Out ward
Code at the back
of the letter.
Ident 'O'
on LHS
25 July 1979
Working/Surrey

1st Paid
Phosphor
Band or either
side of the
Queen head
31 Dec'1984

2nd Paid
(3p + 2p)
Phosphor
Band on
either side of
the Queen's
head
11th May 1974

Ink jet printers were fitted to the presorters at Liverpool MLO in 1989 to provide a quality of service imprint as a check on meter-franked mail and to date PPI mail. Different printers (Linx, Domino and Video Jet) were used in the 3 presorters each situated at the end of a suite of 12 coding desks.
In April 1990 these were all replaced by 3 new Domino printers.
Linx printer - suite 1 (coding desks 01 to 12)

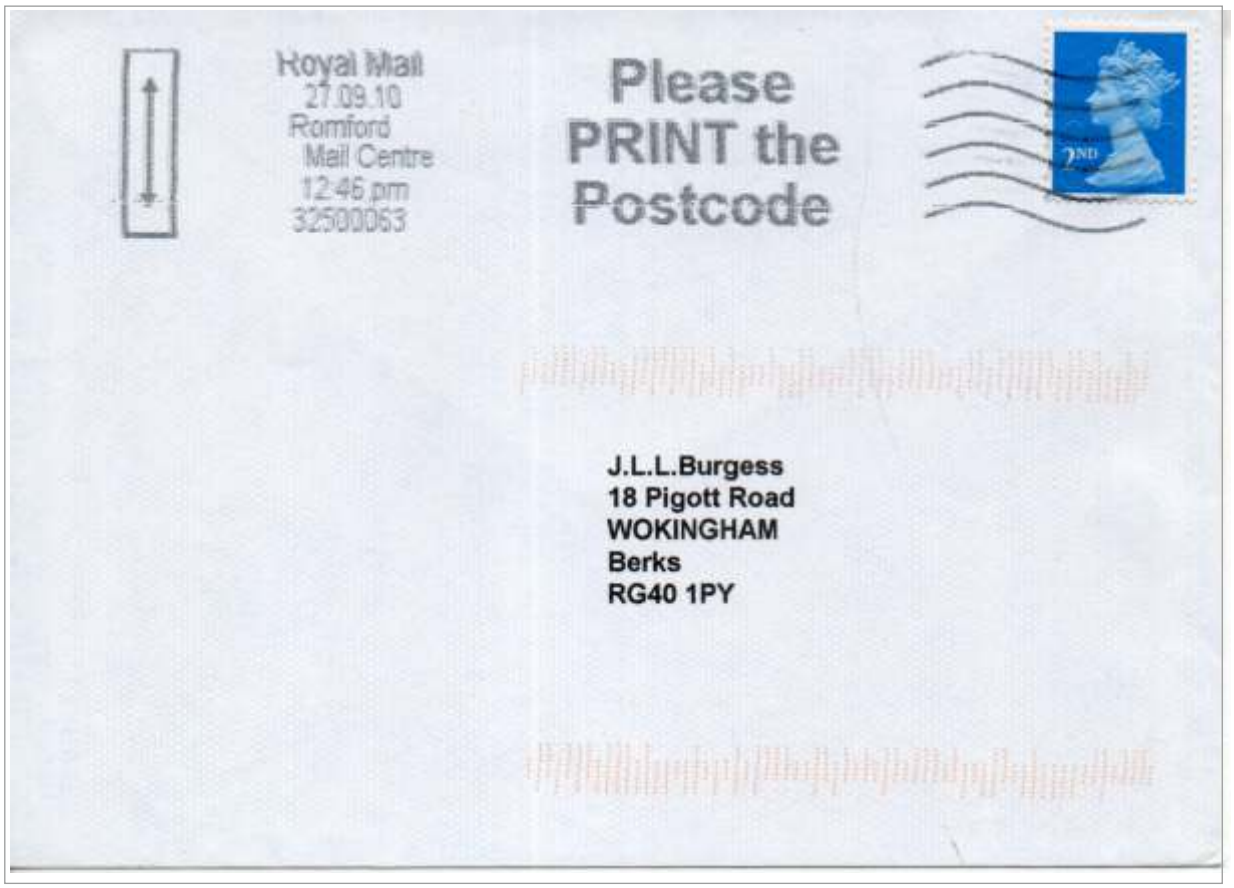
Code
Desk 01

Code
Desk 04

Letter posted on 1st Dec 1989 / Inkjet date 4th Dec 1989 (3 days delay at sorting office)

Three new Domino Codebox 2 printers were fitted, one to each suite, in April 1990.

Pink Colour: Difference in Inkjet Sorting Mark



Orange Colour : Difference in Inkjet Sorting Mark

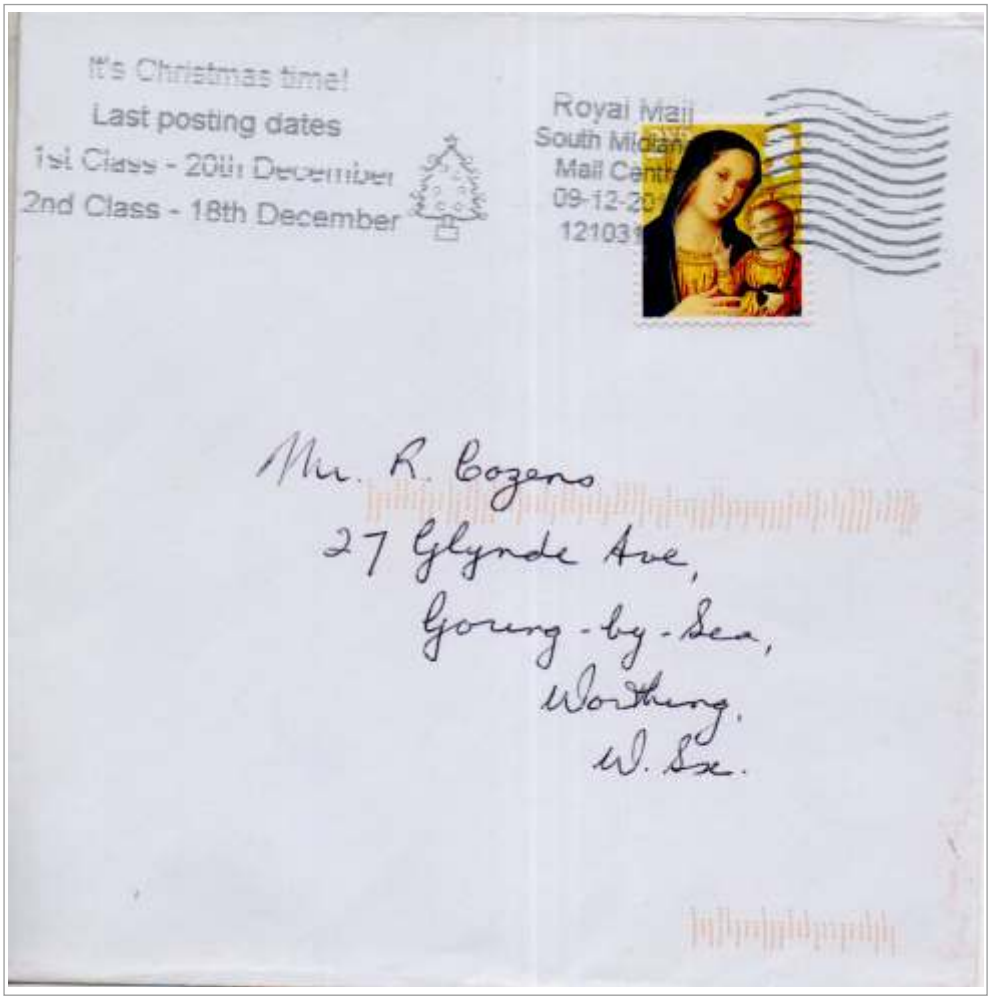
At Christmas time we often see a particularly interesting aspect of postal mechanisation coming into play. In the early days of the IMP, square envelopes used to be a problem as the correct orientation could not be properly determined and such envelopes often ended up on the 'Reject' stack or the stamp 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.

Full code

Swindon

Full Postal Code
at the Right Position
has both Inward &
Outward code

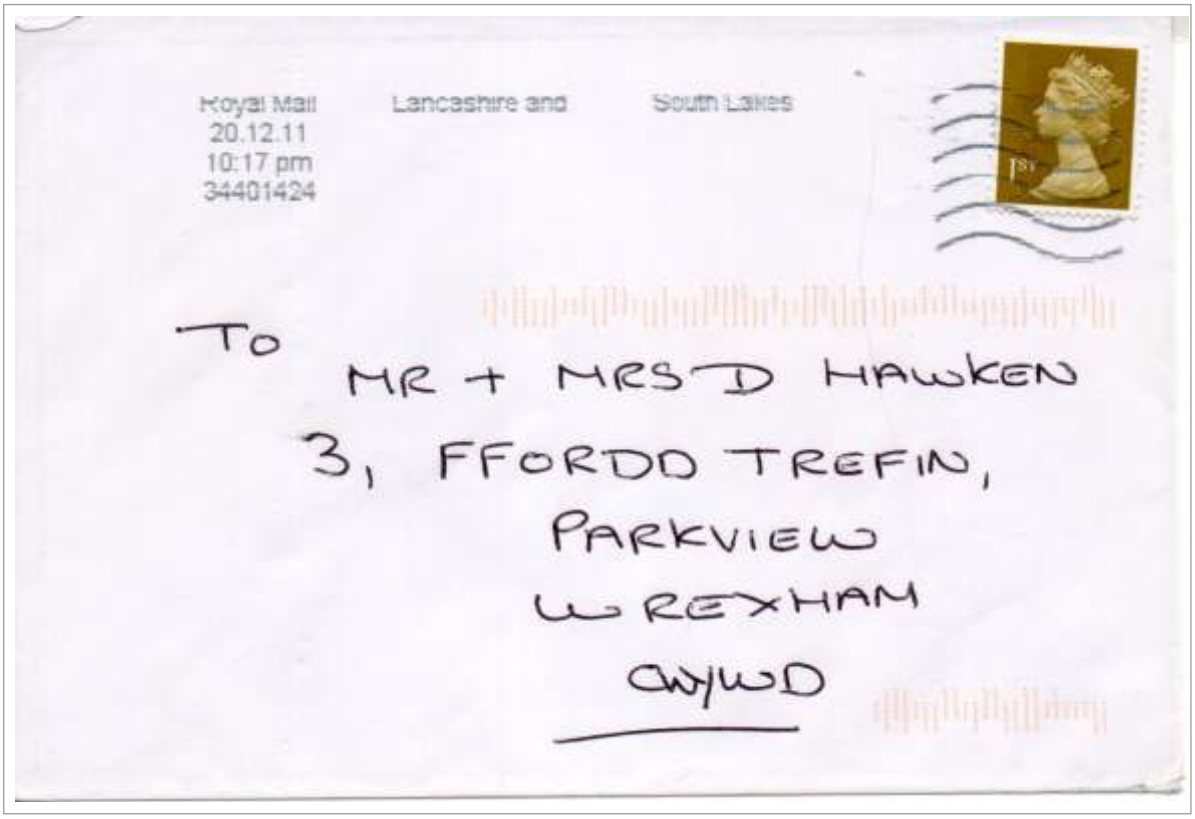
←
Full code



Short code

No Postal Code
Hence the Outward
code is short

←
Short code



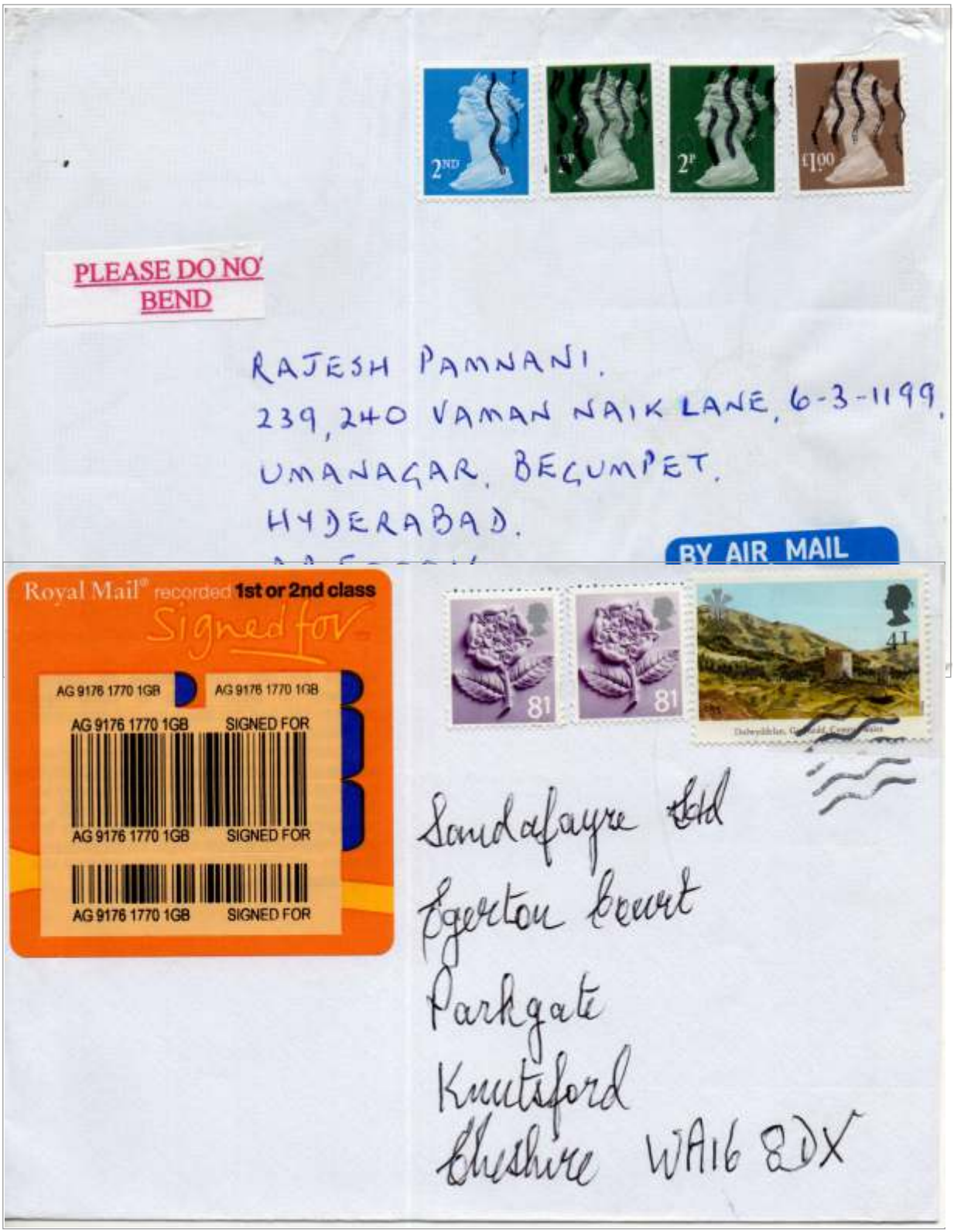
← Short code

Error in writing Post Code, Not readable - Hand writing

← Short code

Underlined Text not permissible after the post code.

2015, The "Branburry" stamp cancelling trials
A new device was used at Post Office to cancel any stamps that have not been Post Marked during earlier handling at a Mail centre . These devices are, effective self-inking stamps (with no date).
A cover sent from high peak, England to India back stamped 16/05/2021, but delivered on 20/06/2021 due to COVID-19 challenges.



Branbury 'Stamp' Cancel.
Reg Post from GB to Cheshire (2019), machine cancelled at rear erroneously .
Hence this front stamp was later cancelled with self-inking stamp at the delivery office,\.
(Note (2) stamps all still not defaced).

In Feb'22, Royal Mail introduced a new design for its definitive stamps.
The rectangular codes – which look like QR codes but are apparently not QR codes, and trademarked, kind of code – are designed to stop counterfeiting and to enable the tracking of all letters to improve efficiency.
From 1 February 2023, only the new stamps will be accepted. Any old stamps must be used before then or traded in.