

Royal Mail Stamp vending trials

by Glenn H. Morgan

Recently, I was given the rare opportunity by Dr A R (Tim) Lane, Head of Laboratory at the Materials Research and Quality Assurance Laboratory within the Post Office Research Centre (PORC) at Swindon, to interview Mr. Cetin B Elmas who is responsible for stamp vending trials.

The information that follows explains where Royal Mail is heading in an area that is of such special interest to members of the Great Britain Decimal Stamp Book Study Circle.

Current machines

Following on from the trials of type K at Brighton in 1986 (manufactured by Coinage (Bristol) Limited) came a second, similar, machine referred to as type L (manufactured by Sterners Specialfabriks AB of Sweden).

There are now about 1,700 Royal Mail owned vending machines selling stamps in books throughout the United Kingdom.

Type K Stamp Book Vending Machine

Referred to by Coinage as a 'Stamp Book Vendor SVM1', it was supplied to Royal Mail in a quantity of 1,200 machines from 1987 to 1989. More recent statistics are unavailable. A maximum of 220 books measuring 54mm by 41mm with a thickness of between 0.4mm and 1.2mm can be held in each column without the need for making thickness adjustments.

There is also the option of a Remote Signal Relay which, as its name implies, outputs signals to a remote position. This would inform the owner of the machine that it is out of service, enabling an engineer to attend the fault or to reload with booklets if the machine is empty. This facility also applies to the L type machine.

Type L Stamp Book Vending Machine

The Sterners model is referred to by the supplier as an 'EFM-E2' and is in a modular format, thus permitting easy replacement of interior parts. It can dispense books of two different face values and accepts four different coins, but cannot give change. Each column can hold 200 books of 1mm thickness.

Sterners have specialised in the production of

vending machines for postage stamps since 1953 and are one of very few companies that have been involved in stamp machine production for so many years.

Both machines are now well established and PORC do not have any more involvement with them, unless upgrades are required.

Field Trials

When money is available or, when sponsored, say, by Post Office Letters Limited or Post Office Counters Limited, development work is undertaken. There is currently a small range of projects and trials underway, as detailed below.

Verlink Retail Trial

In 1988, initially at Nottingham, machines dispensing Retail (window) books of ten stamps (either first or second class) began. These were made by Verlink Limited and only six of this type are in the field.

Additionally, there are also six other machines that can dispense the four stamp version undergoing similar tests.

MoMI Retail Trial

A machine sited at the Museum of the Moving Image (MoMI) in London, briefly dispensed four 27p postcard rate Retail stamp books whilst in operation. When I visited the site subsequent to my trip to PORC, it was hidden away behind some coat racks alongside the souvenir shop and was not in use.

The MoMI machine is encased in a tall free-standing unit and the actual dispenser is similar in its outward appearance to a model K, but there the similarity ends, as it, too, is made by Verlink Limited. The columns within hold the books in a criss-cross formation, as is used in American booklet machines. This was highlighted when the British Post Office purchased two such machines from Gap and Opal of the United States for evaluation purposes some time ago.

Loading is a problem with criss-cross stacking and even if the books are supplied from the Post Office Stores in this fashion they will

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invariably fall out of the wrapping and have to be resorted. It could take up to twenty minutes to load one machine; whereas the K or L types take only a minute or two to load.

All Retail book machines, incidentally, can give change due to the unusual rates that are dispensed, for example £1.08.

Counter Folded Booklets

Experiments had been carried out with one machine that was almost capable of vending the large format folded 'Swedish' style counter booklets. It did, in fact, vend if in use all the time, but not if left for periods of time between vends. The machine was restricted to use in the laboratories for testing purposes and was never installed for public use, neither was there a real requirement for it to be improved upon. The weaknesses, however, could be resolved should there ever be the need for such a machine. It was returned to the manufacturer.

The machine was a Coinage 'L4' and was adapted for use by Royal Mail for stamp booklets, as distinct from its more normal ticket and card issuance applications, to which it would appear to be more suited.

Being field trial machines, all of the foregoing models have not been allocated a code letter to identify them (such as K or L) by Royal Mail. If they ever did become live machines they would be given the letter M upwards. This is in accordance with the identification system established back in the mid-1930's when a series of experiments to find a machine that could withstand rapid change to weather and cope with vandalism was instigated. Nothing changes!

It's on the cards - or is it?

The subject of plastic cards for stamp payment was then discussed. Apparently, many card reader producers and plastic card manufacturers have been approached, but a need to use such cards has not been found yet. This is because stamps are of a low unit value, are freely available nationwide and there is strong customer resistance to spending a lot of money on many stamps at one time.

Cards are also not an especially viable proposition at the present time because sales of stamps at some machines amount to as little as £40 a day. Many customers only require one stamp, say for a letter, and such low transaction values could not justify the costs that would be incurred if plastic were to be used.

Pre-payment cards are used in a couple of overseas countries. In Japan, for instance, the customer purchases a 'Fumi' card, which is used in special stamp dispensing machines that decrement the card with each use. In other words they reduce the value left on the card by the amount of the transaction. A range of over twenty attractive cards have been issued so far with a total face value equivalent to over £80. How successful the machines are I do not know, but certainly the cards were issued with one eye on the collectors' market.

Switzerland also uses pre-payment methods, although it is the telephone card that is used in their Frama postage label machines. They utilise a special card reader device located above the standard model, but this dual-use card is only made possible due to the Post Office and telephone service being the same body, ie the Swiss PTT.

The British Telecom Phonecard is a success because making a telephone call involves the need to have access to a potentially large quantity of heavy coins if a long-distance call is made from a coin payphone. It is easier to knock-off a few units from a card.

Credit cards are not too viable because to buy just one 18p stamp would cost 68p when the credit card company fee is added to the transaction.

It was, therefore, decided not to go along the plastic card route for vending, at least not at present. There are developments in America though, whereby stamps are vended via cash machines (ATM's) at banks and Post Offices. It will be interesting to see if anything similar ever happens over here in the UK, but I digress. [See also 'Plastic Stamps' on page 16 of Volume 20. Ed.]

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Coin handling

The coin-handling mechanism within a stamp vending machine is very sophisticated these days. Many of the units accept coins for a dispense and give change from the coins supplied by previous customers. They are, therefore, self replenishing. The controller regulates the display and there is a printer unit that produces vital management information. This type is installed in the Hilday and some Verlink machines that dispense either single stamps from coils or books of four of the Retail books and all types accept a wide variety of coins.

Additionally, there are other versions of coin handlers in use by Royal Mail that collect the money in an 'escrow' (hopper) arrangement. These are used for the Retail books of ten, or 50p and £1 folded machine booklets, where transactions are always in multiples of 10p. They cannot give change, only full refunds for failed dispenses.

Reason for change

Machines change over the years for a variety of reasons. One is that the customer demands change. Another reason can be internal within the Post Office.

An example of this would be the K and L machines, where the designer responsible for the Post Office corporate identity at the time insisted that book slots in the front of the machines would not be permitted. This meant that the books had to be delivered through a flap behind the lid, so the pusher-plate mechanism had to push the book through completely. Previously it would have dispensed it half-way, requiring the customer to pull the book from the slot to complete the dispense. This designer intervention caused many problems for a while to the technicians who were expected to come up with a working product.

It takes brains

As technology advances, more brains are put inside the machines. The electronic stamp vendors are now micro-processor

controlled following the advent of a power source. To use this 'brain' it is necessary to give the unit some 'eyes' as well. In order not to take money from the customer when the dispense has failed these eyes detect when a vend has successfully taken place. This is an aspect that also gave the engineers many problems, but eventually the matter was resolved.

Display methods

A new style display is being considered which could be used with the stamp book vending machines and would tell the customer what stamps are available. It has 16 inputs, that is to say can support up to 16 characters and spaces, so that it can display a message relevant at that time.

Similarly, the idea of displaying the actual book covers affixed by double-sided adhesive tape is being considered for the K and L machines. So, when the need arises, PORC will get involved with machines that had ceased to come under their control.

Vending of stamps in coils

Yes, I know we are a stamp book circle and are not supposed to become involved with coils, at least not within the journal. However, with the permission of our Editor, I should like to record this aspect of the interview so that the whole United Kingdom vending story will have been presented. It must never be forgotten that one day coils could again take-over from books as the main method of selling stamps from Post Offices, other than in sheets.

Single stamp vend coil machines made by Hilday and Verlink are now increasingly in use nationwide. A third type is currently being field-trialled. Initially installed in March 1990 at the Fleming Way Branch Post Office in Swindon, it was the only one in existence. However, it has now been joined by another five similar machines elsewhere. They are a new development and are an improvement on the previous two models, being slim-line units.

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Four modules can be incorporated into them, as distinct from only two or three currently contained within far larger cabinets. The machines are completely electronic and are made by Coinage.

Up to three thousand stamps can be handled per roll within the 'Fleming Way' machines instead of the more usual five hundred or one thousand handled by the Hillday and Verlink machines, which, incidentally, can also hold three thousand stamps, should the need arise. However, rolls of three thousand stamps have NOT been produced, so do not search for coil leaders! Since the split in the Post Office, it would be necessary for 'Counters' to apply to 'Letters' for larger rolls to be manufactured and this has not happened.

It is important that one whole stamp is dispensed, as distinct from half stamps. More conventional machines utilise a pin-wheel principle, like a roll of film going through a camera. In other words, a metal pin locates in the perforations between the vertical coil of stamps preventing incorrect dispenses; whereas these Coinage machines again utilise electronics.

Frama and Klussendorf labels

The Frama experience ended unspectacularly because, it is believed, the Queen did not like the impressions of her effigy. The trial was also carried out at counter clerks' overtime rates, so, whenever there were things done to the machine, the Post Office had to payout overtime and, of course, it became more expensive to operate. The half-pence coin did not help matters, neither did the fact that change was given in small value labels which customers strongly objected to. Further trials were carried out utilising a breadboard model, but the 'Letters' business did not want to issue labels and so the project died.

However, Royal Mail did also look at German Klussendorf's. These models were called stamp machines because they utilised pre-printed stamps in rolls. The machine then overprinted the face value on to the stamp in a typeface that is of a security type unique to

Klussendorf. Again, 'Letters' did not want this type yet and so, once more, no further action was taken.

It is important that the wrong impression is not conveyed by the foregoing two paragraphs, for it would be easy to write these trials off as failures. However, Royal Mail Stamps and PORC, quite correctly, believe that the security of its products must be given serious consideration. Frama and Klussendorf labels are largely imperforate, but still need to be as secure against copying and re-use as their perforated definitive and commemorative cousins. They are not currently perceived as being so secure.

It is, however, acknowledged that they do possess certain benefits, particularly for parcels, where they can be used from counters, as in France. Royal Mail National is taking a new approach to marketing, so the next year may see some changes, but the emphasis at the moment is very much on security.

.... and finally

So, now you know what Royal Mail is doing to help its customers obtain stamps by means other than over the counter at shops and Post Offices. Clearly, a lot of thought goes into this important aspect of our postal service.

A big 'thank you' is due to the staff at PORC for their hospitality and willingness to answer the many questions posed. My only regret in an otherwise perfect day was the fact that I was not allowed to take home for my collection any of the fascinating 'samples' seen in the laboratories!

Whilst compiling this article I took account of recent reports in 'Bookmark' regarding dummy booklets and stamp vending machines, and detail below any further information that I have come across about them.

Volume 20, Number 6, Page 119 - Report by Mrs Pat Lyon. The 'Bristol Philatelic Bureau' machine is one of the Verlink Retail trial machines (see also the query in Volume 20,

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Number 5, Page 100); whilst the 'South Bank' machine is the MoMI, both of which are referred to in my article.

Volume 21, Number 1, Pages 18/19 - Letter from Pete Daniels. The pane of 16 'poached eggs' (also referred to and illustrated in Volume 20, Number 5, Page 113) could well have been a machine testing booklet. I overheard rumours at Stampex long ago that they were part of the 'multiples of four stamps' trials (6 and 10 stamps produced uneven stacking within machines, causing jamming). Members may recall that in 1981 the Mugdock Castle booklet re-appeared with a pane of eight stamps and that the 'Philatelic Bulletin' at the time gave 'multiples of four' as being the reason. Moving on to the 'Pillar Box' dummy (see also

Volume 20, Number 4, Page 88) - Len Newbery also confirmed to me that it was a machine booklet. Finally, my article officially explains the Counter dummy booklet - I was the 'source of information' that Pete refers to.

I would welcome correspondence on the subject of stamp vending in all its forms (especially the trial/dummy testing material) and details / photographs of the machines themselves for a monograph that I am compiling. I believe that to collect blindly whatever Royal Mail issues without analysing the reasons behind the issue, ie operational requirements and customer service, is to miss out on much of the fun of collecting. What do you think? I may be contacted at 17 Kingsley Court, Romford, Essex, RM2 5SY.



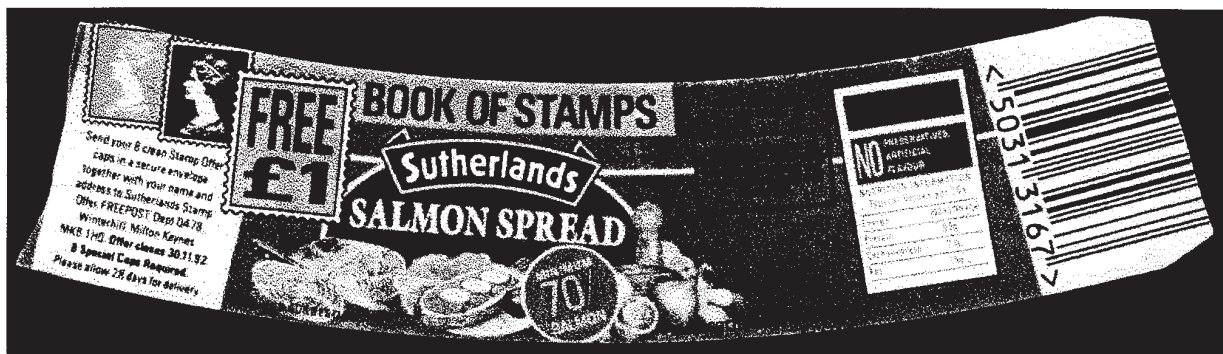
Special Offers: Spread a little happiness

By Robert Bostock

Many thanks to Vince Patel who sent me news of a further special offer in the form of a label from a jar of Sutherland's salmon spread. This offers a free £1 book of stamps in exchange for 8 'clean' stamp offer special caps. The label (see illustration below) does not illustrate a book cover, only facsimile yellow and green Machin definitives. The offer closes on 30 November 1992.

Another special offer involving booklet stamps was brought to my attention by Alec Withell. Customers spending £5 or more on

various Royal Mail Stamps products listed on an attractively illustrated leaflet entitled 'Gifted ideas from the Royal Mail' (among others, Presentation Packs, Yearbooks, Albums and even Prestige Books) could obtain a key ring encapsulating a pair of 'Good Luck' Greetings stamps in a clear plastic fob. Alec dissected one only to find the stamp had been stuck back to back and were therefore unusable. Five different key rings were on offer until 24 December 1991, only in selected Postshops and Philatelic Counters.



Label from a jar of Sutherland's salmon spread (enlargement 133%)