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POSTAL DIRECTORIES AS A SOURCE FOR PLACE NAMES

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POSTAL DIRECTORIES AS A SOURCE FOR PLACE NAMES

The past two decades have witnessed an ever-increasing utilization of post-code information as a means of combining location with a variety of social, commercial, economic and environmental data. What began as a means of expediting the delivery of mail has now become, amongst many other applications, a form of reference to name and location.

The first primitive post-codes in the United Kingdom were the Postal Districts of London authorized in 1856, but the modern post-code system dates from 1959. It consists of two parts, an "outward" code indicating the postal district to which the letter is sent and an "inward" code representing a geographic sector of the area covered by the postal district. The average number of addresses covered by a post-code is less than 15, evidently so small a location of 15 addresses can be defined in terms of the national kilometric grid and so a link can be established between the post-code and a grid reference on a map. The United Kingdom is divided into nine geographic postal divisions. They are covered by 11 Postal Address Books which give all addresses within the postal divisions. Each book also contains a list of place names for the area and the Postal District within which it is located. That list is, therefore, a kind of gazetteer which is kept permanently up-to-date.

Available on CD Rom are three products, the Postal Address Finder, the Address Manager and the Address Manager Plus. The first contains the Ordnance Survey National Grid reference, the electoral and Health Service area and a Mailsort code. The second contains the same information but has highly developed accessing software. The disc is updated every three months. The third of these has interactive searching and the ability to employ bar codes. Mailsort is an alternative method of representing post-codes.

Bar codes are being more widely used inside and outside the postal service. They are replacing the character-recognition system now used for sorting mail. Its alpha-numeric base, I suggest, could be applied to the transmission of geographic names, including locational data.

A cautionary remark must be added. People have become accustomed to including the name of the county in postal addresses, but that is not at all necessary. In some cases the county itself may have been abolished for the purposes of local government, but it is still found in many databases of postal addresses. Furthermore, many people prefer to retain county names and addresses, regardless of the fact that the county no longer exists. There is a second point. The code for a postal district is generally related to the name of the town in which it is located, e.g. KT for Kingston-upon-Thames. In a few cases the derivation of the code is far less obvious, e.g. ME for Medway Towns (the towns are Chatham, Gillingham, Rochester and Maidstone).

