# White Heat London 11 / Royal Mail

## West Central District Office Mechanised postal factory
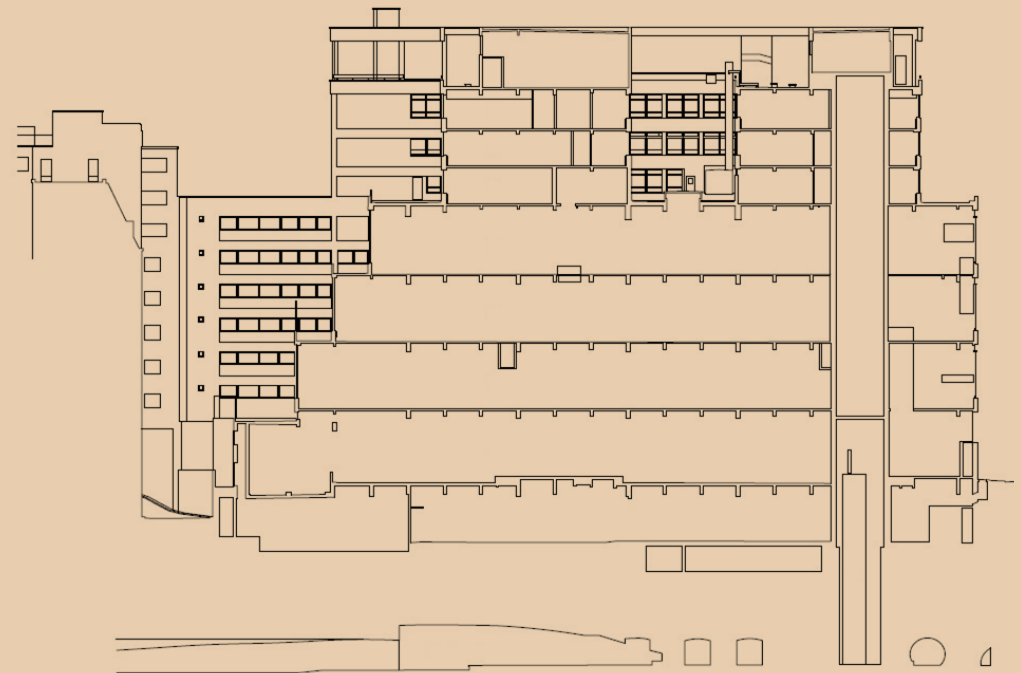
### E.T. Sargeant

### 1966-69

Britain was the first country to issue pre-paid postage stamps, in 1840, supporting the recently-created universal delivery service. Well over a century later, with mail volumes doubling within decades, the General Post Office was modernising. Every address in the country started to receive a new postcode, first and second class rates were brought in to reduce peak flows and the construction began of new, mechanised sorting offices capable of exploiting both to achieve faster and more accurate handling. The West Central District Office in Holborn was typical – seemingly an office block, it was actually a place for moving mail.

Four double-height floors stacked one above the other received, processed and despatched letters, packets and parcels through a combination of chutes, conveyors and lifts. The latest iterations of the necessary machinery were installed, merging the best of electro-mechanical (for bulk operations) and manual (for awkward, delicate or unusual) handling – a balance that also allowed staff to control the process rather than feel enslaved by it. Electronics tracked items.

Vans accessed the ground floor and basement, below which lay the unmanned Post Office railway system. The WCDO closed in the 1990s and was recently repurposed as the office block it once resembled.

Four conventional storeys for administrators and managers, topped with the open-work roofscape common to the period, sat above the sorting floors. The fenestration at the corner indicates the mezzanines within the latter, used for a variety of purposes.

The building's structure comprised steelwork acting compositely with in-situ reinforced concrete floors. This produced a slim, lightweight and adaptable framework. Very deep steel girders allowed fewer columns in the vehicle bays, from where chain conveyors took incoming mail bags up to the sorting floors.

Machines were used to segregate, orientate, cancel ('frank'), code, sort and move post; all existed before but were now faster. The ultimate aim was to reduce the number of times an item had to pause on its journey from sender to recipient. Much of the development work took place at Dollis Hill, where the wartime Colossus decryption computer was born.

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