A TOWN CODE FOR THE WEST MIDLANDS

This article proposes a two letter code for towns to run alongside the well known three letter Chapman County Code. The town code is designed for whose genealogy lies mainly in the West Midlands.

What kind of family tree charts are the best ? In my view, those in which many relationships and the dates and places of events are shown on only a few pages of paper. It's a subject for another article, but the principle has driven this proposal for a town code. If places are shown in abbreviated form, for example "DY St Thos" instead of "Dudley St Thomas", there is much more room for everything else. Besides, when copying records on a big scale, it's so much easier to get into the habit of writing the town in a short form. That needn't prejudice a general good habit of copying the exact words of the rest of the record.

Any two letter code for towns needs to accommodate more than just the West Midlands. It must be compatible with national and international codes, to avoid confusion. Thus, one could never suggest CA to stand for Cannock, because it is the International Organisation for Standards (ISO) symbol for Canada, the US abbreviation for California and the UK postcode for Carlisle.

In this proposal, the ISO-3166 code for any major country always reigns supreme. Few are familiar with it, so Table 1 shows a list of the commoner countries from a genealogical viewpoint.

Table 1: ISO-3166 TWO LETTER COUNTRY SYMBOLS

AT	Austria	DE	Germany	IN	India	NL	Netherlands
AU	Australia	EG	Egypt	IT	Italy	NZ	New Zealand
BB	Barbados	ES	Spain	JE	Jersey	RU	Russia
BE	Belgium	FR	France	JM	Jamaica	PT	Portugal
BS	Bahamas	GG	Guernsey	JP	Japan	SG	Singapore
CA	Canada*	HK	Hong Kong	KE	Kenya	US	United States
CH	Switzerland	IE	Ireland	MY	Malaysia	ZA	South Africa
CN	China	IM	Isle of Man	NG	Nigeria		

* Avoid using when possible, because of the clash with the US state of California. Often, BC = British Columbia, provides a way out of the difficulty.

It would not be practical to choose town codes that did not conflict with any of these country codes, because there are 244 of them ! I have found no genealogical use for PK = Pakistan, so have assigned this symbol to Penkridge, which is a Registration District.

After the country symbols, the next-ranking are the UK postcodes. Unfortunately, they appear to have been chosen without any regard for international clashes, e.g. CA (see above), DE is Germany and Derby, CH Switzerland and Chester, a subject returned to below.   The following Table 2 provides all except the London ones.

The next objective was to create a code for the 19th century West Midlands registration districts (RDs). Frequently in a chart one wants to specify a birth, death, or marriage, that has been registered, when obtaining a certificate to give the exact date would be an unwarranted expense. With a short code, one can simply enter "b. r. 3q. 1863 DY RD", meaning birth registered in the 3rd quarter of 1863 in Dudley Registration District.

After that, the code has to cater for towns and large villages. Here, the policy was to encode all those with a population of more than 4,000 in the 1881 census in the counties of Staffordshire, Warwickshire and Worcestershire. This seemed to be about the right dividing line, but a few "towns within towns" were added. These were Bilston, Bloxwich, Brierley Hill, Coseley, Erdington, Halesowen, Kings Heath, Old Swinford, Smethwick, Wednesbury, Wednesfield and Willenhall. The resulting code, which avoids clashes with UK postcodes and the major ISO symbols, is shown in Table 3.

Table 2: UK postcode areas

AB	Aberdeen	DT	Dorchester	LL	Llandudno	SM	Sutton
AL	St Albans	DY	Dudley	LN	Lincoln	SN	Swindon
B	Birmingham	EH	Edinburgh	LS	Leeds	SO	Southampton
BA	Bath	EN	Enfield	LU	Luton	SP	Salisbury
BB	Blackburn	EX	Exeter	M	Manchester	SR	Sunderland
BD	Bradford	FK	Falkirk	ME	Rochester	SS	Southend-on-Sea
BH	Bournemouth	FY	Blackpool	MK	Milton Keynes	ST	Stoke-upon-Trent
BL	Bolton	G	Glasgow	ML	Motherwell	SY	Shrewsbury
BN	Brighton	GL	Gloucester	NE	Newcastle-upon-Tyne	TA	Taunton
BR	Bromley	GU	Guildford	NG	Nottingham	TD	Galashiels
BS	Bristol	HA	Harrow	NN	Northampton	TF	Telford
BT	Belfast	HD	Huddersfield	NP	Newport	TN	Tonbridge
CA	Carlisle*	HG	Harrogate	NR	Norwich	TQ	Torquay
CB	Cambridge	HP	Hemel Hempstead	OL	Oldham	TR	Truro
CF	Cardiff	HR	Hereford	OX	Oxford	TS	Cleveland
CH	Chester*	HS	Outer Hebrides (Na h-Eileanan Siar)	PA	Paisley	TW	Twickenham
CM	Chelmsford	HU	Hull	PE	Peterborough	UB	Southall
CO	Colchester	HX	Halifax	PH	Perth	WA	Warrington
CR	Croydon	IG	Ilford	PL	Plymouth	WD	Watford
CT	Canterbury	IP	Ipswich	PO	Portsmouth	WF	Wakefield
CV	Coventry	IV	Inverness	PR	Preston	WN	Wigan
CW	Crewe	KA	Kilmarnock	RG	Reading	WR	Worcester
DA	Dartford	KT	Kingston-upon-Thames	RH	Redhill	WS	Walsall
DD	Dundee	KW	Kirkwall	RM	Romford	WV	Wolverhampton
DE	Derby*	KY	Kirkcaldy	S	Sheffield	YO	York
DG	Dumfries	L	Liverpool	SA	Swansea	ZE	Lerwick
DH	Durham	LA	Lancaster	SG	Stevenage*		
DL	Darlington	LD	Llandrindod Wells**	SK	Stockport		
DN	Doncaster	LE	Leicester	SL	Slough		

*Avoid using when possible, to prevent confusion with country codes.
** However, by way of exception, I use LD = Llandaff in connection with probate grants.

Table 3: A town code for the West Midlands

AE	Atherstone	DS	Darlaston	LY	Lye	SJ	Sedgley
AR	Alcester	DW	Droitwich	MA	Martley	SQ	Smethwick
AS	Aston	DY	Dudley	MN	Meriden	ST	Stoke-upon-Trent
AY	Audley	EB	Edgbaston	NC	Newcastle-under-Lyme	SU	Southam
B	Birmingham	EL	Eccleshall	ND	Northfield	TH	Tamworth
BG	Bromsgrove	ER	Erdington	NM	Norton on the Moors	TL	Tettenhall
BI	Bilston	EV	Evesham	NU	Nuneaton	TM	Trentham
BJ	Brierley Hill	FE	Feckenham	OS	Old Swinford	TP	Tipton
BP	Biddulph	FH	Foleshill	OY	Oldbury	TY	Tenbury
BU	Burton-upon-Trent	GM	Gt Malvern	PK	Penkridge	UP	Upton-on-Severn
BW	Bedworth	HB	Harborne	PS	Pershore	UT	Uttoxeter
BX	Bloxwich	HO	Halesowen	RB	Rugby	WB	West Bromwich
BZ	Burslem	HW	Handsworth	RL	Rushall	WK	Warwick
CC	Castle Church	KH	Kings Heath	RR	Rowley Regis	WL	Willenhall
CE	Cheadle	KL	Kenilworth	RY	Rugeley	WO	Wolstanton
CK	Cannock	KM	Kidderminster	SB	Stourbridge	WR	Worcester
CL	Claines	KN	Kings Norton	SC	Sutton Coldfield	WS	Walsall
CS	Coseley	KS	Kingswinford	SD	Stafford	WV	Wolverhampton
CV	Coventry	LF	Lichfield	SE	Stone	WY	Wednesbury
CY	Cradley	LK	Leek	SF	Stratford-upon-Avon	WZ	Wednesfield
CZ	Caverswall	LP	Leamington Priors	SH	Solihull		

Inevitably, there were some difficult decisions. Take, for example, Sedgley. SG, SL and SY are used by postcodes. SD and SE are consumed by the registration districts of Stafford and Stone. In such circumstances, the "wild card" letters J, Q, X and Z come into play, the choice often depending on sound-alike consonants. Here, Sedgley is phonetically similar to "Sejley", so SJ was adopted. For Smethwick, SM and SK clash with postcodes, while SW is phonetically wrong, as the "w" is not pronounced; SQ ("Smethquick") was the least bad choice.

Adopting the WM town code along with the UK postcodes and, sometimes, the Chapman county code can save space in indicating the place of a birth, death or marriage, even though a key to the symbols used in any particular tree will have to be provided. The key can be inserted into non-useful space on a tree or in a "notes" section.

There remains the "CA difficulty" mentioned above - how to show foreign places without confusion. One solution is to use the country code followed by the state or town code, separated by a hyphen. Thus, US-CA for California and CA-HX for Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada are suggested. Where a foreign town has the same name as a UK one, the principle is to use the country name followed, whenever possible, by the UK postcode. For instance, Newcastle in Queensland would be shown as AU-NE (rather than AU-NC).

The purpose of the WM town code is to provide a core set of standard abbreviations for the more densely populated places only. It is intended that the code be used only for the town and not in the surrounding area. For example, it is not intended that Bewdley (postcode DY12) should be represented as DY, still less Stourbridge (postcodes DY7 to 9) which has its own symbol SB.

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