Thomas Cook 1986

THOMAS Cook and 'Cooks Tours' have not only been names familiar in the high street for longer than most people can remember, but synonymous with travel around the globe.

Recent years have seen the company, properly known as The Thomas Cook Group Limited, become a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Midland Bank Group. Ever since moving out of London, nine years ago, it has been headquartered in an imposing modern building, set in rural surroundings, in Peterborough.

Thomas Cook's travel operations, after a period of strong growth and acquisitions, now include a number of specialised subsidiary companies which do not bear the Thomas Cook name. Thomas Cook Travel Limited controls over 400 outlets which includes such names as Compass Travel and Frames Travel.

Thomas Cook, the UK's largest travel agent, employs over 4500 people, 1500 of whom work in Peterborough.

Business travel forms a large part of Thomas Cook's turnover. It handles the complete business travel requirements of a number of top companies, and this level of travel provision involves Thomas Cook producing complete, itemised, itinerary packages. The provision of 'implant' offices on the client's premises together with specialist reception services at Gatwick and Heathrow airports is also part of the service.

Pictured outside the Peterborough headquarters of The Thomas Cook Group Limited are l to r: Manny Fontenla-Novoa – manager, data entry, who is in charge of the twin ROCC 2830 installation and Allan Riddick – project manager, Travel Systems.

THOMAS COOK FINDS ROCC 'JUST THE TICKET'

Holiday travel (including exclusive Thomas Cook Holidays), foreign exchange/ travellers cheque sales and insurance are the other large parts of the business being sold through the many retail outlets.

Currently over 2.5 million documents are sent to Peterborough, each of which represents a travel related booking, together with six million associated records, which may be tickets or vouchers and so on.

The formidable task of processing such an enormous level of data entry falls to two ROCC 2830 processors, connected to 70 workstations. "The idea is to feed the information into the system quickly and accurately and achieve very rapid turnaround times," says Manny Fontenla-Novoa, Thomas Cook's manager, data entry, as he surveys terminal after terminal in the data capture area. "Our aim is to have all the business transactions from the previous month keyed in by the fourth day of the following month," he adds.

The data entry procedure

Photographed around the pool at the Sheraton Skyline Hotel, Heathrow.

starts with each day's batch of documents. These are sorted into three types, business travel, inclusive tours and general batches, nearly all include associated records for such purchases as rail tickets and car hire, etc. The document batches are logged-in using a computer-aided control system. Documents are later microfilmed for future reference on computerised micro-image terminals. The batches are then filed in date order and allocated by the supervisors to individual accounts clerks in the data capture area.

Each batch represents the business of a particular branch or office. Data entry for each batch starts with a summary page, requesting batch header information. This includes 'batch type', for example, "business" or "general", the unique office code number, and the date of the cash book.

Once the 'summary page' is complete, data entry can begin in earnest. Coded information is entered as a standard set of requirements for each type of travel, together with transaction values. "Much of the data entered concerns transactions with our business 'principals'," says Allan Riddick, project manager, Travel Systems.

"These are companies from all over the world on whose behalf we act as agent, and include 12,000 hotels, 550 tour operators and 137 separate airlines. Each of these has a separate code," Riddick continues, "and because certain principal's names occur frequently the clerks are able to memorise many of the codes. If one of the principals is unfamiliar, the appropriate code can be traced in the reference lists the clerks have on their desks."

Just as the business specialities of the travel operators vary, so do the requirements for data entry. The simplest entry is usually that involving a ticket where only the principal code, ticket type code, number and format of the ticket is entered. In the case of inclusive tour bookings, information such as a Holiday Booking Receipt (HBR) number, departure date, traffic type and so on, is additionally required.

Any refunds contained in the batch are entered as 'minus' figures. As the batch entry progresses through a number of pages, the system self-validates for erroneous coding entries.

At the end of the entry cycle the system totals the gross value of the batch, the commission due to Thomas Cook, the net value and the total balance. This is checked automatically against totals supplied by the branch cashier with each batch.

"What particularly impresses us about the ROCC installation . . . is its reliability under a heavy workload."

At the end of the day the data entry load is transferred to tape ready for processing on Thomas Cook's IBM mainframes.

The 2830 system, which replaces an earlier ROCC Seecheck installation, also provides information essential to the effective management of Thomas Cook's business. The data entry operation supplies information used in accounting, forward planning, branch performance, cashflow forecasts and so on.

"What particularly impresses us about the ROCC installation," emphasises Fontenla-Novoa, "is its reliability under a heavy workload. The data entry work here really is non-stop." The click of the keyboards at Thomas Cook can now be heard well into the evening as the recently introduced 'twilight shift' comes in from five o'clock to nine. "A twelve-hour shift really metes out the punishment on the equipment," adds Fontenla-Novoa. "If the workstation terminals are up to the job here, I'm sure they could cope anywhere."

The formidable task of processing over 2.5 million travel related documents and six million associated records of data entry falls to two ROCC 2830 processors, connected to 70 workstations which are installed at the Peterborough headquarters of The Thomas Cook Group Limited.