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IMPROVEMENTS RELATING TO MULTI-COMPARTMENT MAILBOXES

Field of the Invention:

5 This invention concerns improvements relating to multi-compartment mailboxes such as are employed in multiple occupancy apartments and office blocks and wherein each compartment of the mailbox has a lockable door operable with a key individual to that particular compartment only. Such multi-compartment mailboxes enable mail to be delivered to a single location but separately for each occupier and with security that, barring mistakes by the mail delivering operative, each occupier will receive and have
10 access to only his own mail.

Background of the Invention:

15 Multi-compartment mailboxes are susceptible to misuse by persons delivering unwanted junk mail and measures have been proposed in an attempt to combat this. In particular, it has been proposed to provide an arrangement whereby the mail delivery flaps of the compartments are lockable all together and the legitimate mail delivery operative, hereinafter called the postman, has a master key which enables the mail delivery flaps to be unlocked all together so that legitimate mail can be delivered.

20 Such an anti junk mail system is disclosed in GB-A-2289500 and has a mail delivery flap and a lockable mail collection door associated with each compartment of a multi-compartmented array, the lockable mail collection doors being operable by their respective keyholders, different occupants of the building for example, and there being a matrix array of orthogonal bars which can be moved in dependence upon the operation of a master key between positions where the horizontal bars obstruct the mail delivery flaps and thus
25 prevent them from being opened and where the matrix array is moved bodily and permits the delivery flaps to be opened. The individual occupants of an apartment or office block are given keys for their own mailboxes and none other and can collect mail from their assigned mailboxes only, and the postman has the master key which enables the posting flaps to be collectively unlocked for delivery of mail items.

A problem that arises with the system of GB-A-2289500 is that the mail delivery flaps limit the size of package which can be delivered. Larger packages which will not fit through the delivery flaps may be left half in and half out of the respective flap or may be left on top of the mailbox array and in either case are not secure. Alternatively the postman has to hand carry the package to the respective apartment or office which obviates the advantages of providing a multi-compartment mail box in the first place.

Objects and Summary of the Invention:

In accordance with the present invention, a multi-compartment mailbox has a master door which can be opened by use of a master key and, when opened, admits substantially unrestricted access to all of the mailbox compartments, the master door incorporating a plurality of sub-doors arranged to register each with a different one of the compartments and the sub-doors being individually lockable and being openable only by assigned key holders.

In use of such an arrangement, a postman wishing to deliver mail including large packages has only to open the master door. Thereafter, the individual building occupants can open their respective sub-doors by use of their individually assigned keys to collect their mail, but cannot access anybody else's mailbox.

Clearly, not every mail delivery will necessarily include packages of such a size as would not fit a conventionally sized mail delivery slot. To accommodate this possibility, the present invention further contemplates the provision of a mail delivery flap associated with each compartment with all of the mail delivery flaps being commonly lockable to prevent posting of junk mail. For example, each of the sub-doors abovementioned might be provided with such a lockable mail delivery opening. For locking and unlocking such mail delivery openings, a common locking arrangement will be provided which may be operated by the same master key as is employed for operating the master door or might use a different key.

In accordance with a preferred embodiment of the invention which is described in detail hereinafter, an arrangement for collectively locking and unlocking mail delivery flaps provided on the compartment sub-doors makes use of vertical rods extending through

the array of compartments and the same vertical rods are utilised for hingedly mounting the sub-doors of the mailing compartments. The delivery flaps are horizontally hinged with respect to the sub-doors and the vertical rods are arranged so as to be vertically movable under control of a manual operating knob which can be locked so as to be rendered inoperable until unlocked. Attached to the vertical rods at plural locations are locking elements which, in one position of the vertically displaceable rods engage with the mail delivery flaps so as to lock them in closed position and, in another position of the rods to which the rods can be moved by operation of the operating knob, are disengaged from the mail delivery flaps which then can be opened for delivery of mail.

In accordance with a particularly convenient arrangement the manual operating knob is rotatable, once unlocked, and has attached thereto a gear wheel which engages a rack so that upon rotation of the knob and correspondingly of the gear wheel the rack is linearly displaced. A cam surface of the rack engages an actuator aligned with and adjoining an end portion of one of the aforementioned vertical rods so that displacement of the rack causes a corresponding displacement of the actuator and thereby of the respective rod and, in turn, determines the condition, locked or unlocked, of the mail delivery flaps.

According to a modification of the abovementioned embodiment wherein lockable mail delivery flaps are associated with each compartment to prevent posting of junk mail, the mail delivery flaps can be selectively left unlocked, this facility enabling junk mail to be delivered to whichever of the mail delivery flaps is not locked. The facility is available to each occupier, by virtue of this arrangement, to decide for himself whether or not his mailbox compartment is to be capable of receiving junk mail. This facility is readily achievable, for example by arranging the locking elements abovementioned to be manually adjustable between operable and inoperable conditions. An indication may be provided on the fronts of the compartment sub-doors as to the condition, operable or inoperable, of the locking element of the respective sub-door.

The above and further features of the present invention are set forth in the appended claims, and together with the advantages thereof, will best be appreciated from consideration of the following detailed description of an exemplary embodiment and a modification thereof which are illustrated in the accompanying drawings.

Description of the Drawings:

Figures 1A through 1E show, respectively, a front elevation view of the embodiment with the master door closed, a typical side sectional view, a front elevation (inside) view with the master door open, an elevation view of the rear of the master door and a plan view partly in phantom;

Figure 2 shows an enlarged front elevation view, similar to Figure 1A, which also shows in phantom the centralised locking arrangement for the mail delivery flaps;

Figures 3A and 3B show the centralised locking arrangement of Figure 2 in, respectively, locked and unlocked condition;

Figures 4A through 4D show the centralised locking arrangement in enlarged views and in closed (locked) condition, as in Figure 3A, Figure 4A being a detailed elevation view and Figures 4B, 4C and 4D being respectively, sectional views on the lines I...I, II...II and III...III shown in Figure 4A;

Figures 5A through 5D are views corresponding respectively to the views of Figures 4A through 4D with the centralised locking arrangement in opened (unlocked) condition;

Figures 6A through 6C are, respectively, front elevation, cross-sectional side elevation and exploded views of the locking control knob employed in the centralised mail delivery flap locking arrangement;

Figures 7A through 7D show, respectively, a detailed sectional side elevation view of the master door corresponding to the left hand side of Figure 1B, and enlarged sectional views showing anti-junk mail features;

Figures 8A and 8B are partial front and side elevation views showing a modification of the mail delivery flap locking member of the abovementioned embodiment, the modification enabling the mail delivery flap to be left open at the will of the respective mailbox compartment user and the modified locking member being shown in operable condition in Figures 8A and 8B; and

Figures 9A and 9B are views similar to those of Figures 8A and 8B but showing the modified locking member in inoperable condition.

Detailed Description of the Embodiments:

Referring to Figure 1A and the corresponding enlarged views of Figure 2, the multi-compartment mail box 1 of the embodiment has two columns each of nine compartments 2. A master door 3 is hinged on the right hand side of Figures 1A and 2 and has an associated key operated master lock 4 and a pull handle 5. When the master door 3 is opened, as shown in Figure 1C, the inner compartments 2 of the mailbox are fully accessible for placement of packages up to substantially the full size of the compartment. When the master door 3 is closed and locked, access to the compartments 2 is enabled by provision of sub-doors 6 individually associated with and in registry with respective ones of the compartments 2, the sub-doors 6 being mounted in the master door 3 so that when the master door is unlocked and opened, all the sub-doors 6 move with it. See in this connection Figure 1E which shows the master door 3 in closed condition with the sub-doors 6 in open condition in phantom. The sub-doors 6 each incorporate a lock 7 openable with a key which will not open any of the other sub-door locks and also each has a mail delivery flap 8 and, as described below, the plural mail delivery flaps 8 in the mailbox 1 are all commonly lockable and unlockable by a common arrangement including a manually operable knob handle 9 which, as can be seen from Figures 1A and 2, is provided on the front of the mailbox 1.

Figure 2 shows the basic principles of the mail delivery flap common locking and unlocking arrangement. The control knob 9 is a lockable and unlockable rotary knob which, when unlocked enables a gear wheel 10 to be turned. The gear wheel 10 meshes with two rack members 11 and 12 so that when the gear wheel is rotated the rack members translate horizontally. End portions 13 of respective rack members 11, 12 are wedge-shaped and locate between a roller 14 fixed to the mailbox chassis and a roller 15 attached to the upper end of a spring biased actuator 35 which is aligned with a spring biased vertical rod 16 which extends downwards throughout the extent of the master door 3 and provides hinged mounting for respective ones of sub-doors 6. In the embodiment shown, the vertical rod 16 associated with rack member 11 serves to mount the sub-doors 6 of one column of mailbox compartments, and the vertical rod 16 associated with the other rack member 12 serves to mount the sub-doors 6 of the other column of mailbox compartments.

Rotation of the knob handle 9 and of the gear wheel 10 causes horizontal translation of the wedge-shaped end portions 13 of the rack members 11, 12 between the rollers 14 and 15 which in turn causes the actuators 35 to be displaced so as to displace the vertical rods 16. Affixed to the rods 16 are locking members 17 which, as shown schematically in
 5 Figures 3A and 3B, interfere with the opening movement of respective ones of the mail delivery flaps 8 when the rods 16 are in their uppermost positions (Figure 3A) and prevent opening of the respective flaps, and when the rods 16 are displaced downwardly (Figure 3B) move out of engagement with the flaps 8 so as to permit them to be opened.

Figure 4A through 4D show the centralized mail delivery flap locking arrangement
 10 in full detail in its closed (locked) condition. Referring first to Figure 4A which shows the locking arrangement as viewed from the inside of the mailbox, namely from the back of the master door, the manually operable knob handle 9 can be seen in phantom and its attached gear wheel 10 engaging the racks 11, 12 can be seen in full line. The wedge-shaped ends 13 of the racks engage as shown between the rollers 14 and 15 which are
 15 affixed, respectively to the mailbox chassis and to the upper ends of the spring biased actuators 35 so that turning of the knob handle 9 in a direction such as to advance the racks 11,12 between the rollers 14,15 causes the actuators 35 to project through openings formed in the underside of the top of the master door frame. With the master door closed the lower ends of the actuators 35 project into openings provided in the top edge of the master
 20 door and engage and depress against spring bias the upper ends of the vertical rods 16. When the knob handle 9 is subsequently returned to its original position, the racks 11,12 withdraw from between the rollers 14,15 which permits the actuators 35 to resile upwards and, in turn, permits the rods 16 to resile upwards. Note that the rods 16 are always contained within the fabric of the master door, their extent of permitted movement being
 25 limited, and that the master door cannot be opened if the actuators 35 are depressed. To ensure that the knob handle 9 is not left in an unlocked position accidentally thereby preventing the master door from being opened, it is provided that the key to operate the knob handle 9 cannot be withdrawn from the lock if it is in an open position.

The vertical rods 16 extend downwards through respective ones of the two columns
 30 of mailbox sub-doors 6 and, as previously mentioned, provide for the hinged mounting of

the sub-doors. The rods 16 are spring biased upwardly by means of springs 18, 19 provided at appropriate locations and abutments 20 provided on the rods cooperate with portions of the frame of master door 3 (see Figure 4B) to determine the range of upwards and downwards movement permitted to the rods. Affixed to the rods 16 at the locations of the abutments 20 are plates 21 which carry at their edge opposite to the abutment respective ones of the locking members 17 which are in the form of elongate rod-like fingers extending parallel to the vertical rods 16.

The mail delivery flaps 8 can be seen in cross-section in Figure 4C and are horizontally pivoted with respect to respective ones of the sub-doors 6 along their upper edges. A lip 22 at the lower edges of the mail delivery flaps 8 interferes with the front face of the sub-doors 6 to ensure that the flaps can only pivot inwardly, and a counterweight 23 ensures that the flaps return to closed condition once an item of mail has been inserted.

When the mail delivery flaps locking arrangement is in the condition shown in Figure 4A, the rods 16 are in their uppermost positions and the locking fingers 17 are so positioned that their upper ends locate behind the flaps 8 (see Figure 4C) to prevent them being opened. When, as shown in Figure 5A, the knob handle 9 is turned to unlock the flaps 8 by translation of the racks 11, 12 and corresponding downwards movement of the actuators 35 and thus of the rods 16, the upper ends of the locking fingers 17 move clear of the flaps (see Figure 5C) so that the flaps 8 can be opened. Regardless of the condition of the flaps 8, that is to say regardless of whether they are collectively locked or collectively unlocked, the individual sub-doors 6 can still be opened.

Figures 6A, 6B and 6C show the form of the manual control that is associated with the above described centralised flap locking arrangement, and illustrate how such control can itself be locked so as to be inoperable and unlocked for operation. The control comprises a knob handle 9 as abovementioned which is rotatable relative to a knob base 24 in dependence upon the condition of a lock 25 which is bonded with the knob handle 9. When the control lock 25 is unlocked, the knob handle 9 can be rotated, and when the control lock 25 is locked a part 26 engages with the base 24 to prevent the knob handle 9 being turned. The control lock 25 has a rectangular section shank 27 with a screw-

threaded end portion 28 and, as shown in Figure 6B, this enables the gear wheel 10 to be affixed to the knob handle 9 for rotation therewith when the knob handle is unlocked and turned. Figure 6C shows the parts of the flap locking arrangement in exploded view, reference numerals 29 and 30 in this view designating NylonTM washers, reference number 31 designating an end washer, reference number 32 designating a circlip serving to retain the knob handle 9 and control lock 25 to the mailbox chassis 1, and reference numeral 33 designating a screw threaded fastening nut. As a precautionary measure to avoid the lock being left in an unlocked state unintentionally, it is provided that the key used with the control lock 25 cannot be withdrawn if the control lock 25 is not in a locked position. The user would therefore be alerted to the fact that the lock is still open as he or she would not be able to withdraw the key.

The arrangement thus described provides, amongst other features, a master door which the postman can open in order to deliver packages which are too large to fit the mail delivery flaps that are provided in the individual sub-doors. The mail delivery flaps can be accessed for delivery of small mail items and to guard against insertion of junk mail into the mailboxes, the mail delivery flaps can be commonly locked and unlocked. The same key as locks and unlocks the master door could be used to lock and unlock the mail delivery flaps, but it is preferred to provide different keys for this purpose since keys for locking and unlocking the mail delivery flaps may advantageously be given to other persons, such as the building supervisor or to council officials for example, who desirably should not have a key to the master door.

It is to be noted that the system of GB-A-2289500 contemplates only two way access to the mailboxes for the postman and each occupier. However, there is a need at times for an additional access by a third party such as a building supervisor or council officials who may wish to deliver mail without using the postal system, such that even if the postman has locked his or her access to the mailbox, the third party may still deliver mail. The above-described embodiment meets this need by providing three way access to the mailboxes.

Referring now to Figures 7A, 7B, 7C and 7D, these show features built into the mailbox structure to ensure that thin sheets of paper cannot be slipped into the mailboxes

when the mail delivery flaps are locked. Figure 7A shows a sectional view through a master door which clearly shows details of the mail delivery flaps 8 and of the sub-doors 6 and Figures 7B, 7C and 7D are enlarged showing of details. As can be seen from Figures 7B, 7C and 7D the upper edges of the mail delivery flaps 8 engage with complementarily shaped edges of the sub-doors 6 with a convoluted section and the same is the case for the edges of the sub-doors where they fit into the frame of the master door 3 and for the master door where it fits into its frame. These convoluted profiles effectively prevent the insertion of thin sheets into the mailboxes.

Referring now to Figures 8A and 8B and Figures 9A and 9B, these show a modification of the above-described embodiment which enables the mail delivery flaps 8 of the individual compartments to be selectively left unlocked if the user of the respective compartment is happy to receive junk mail and other materials. Comparing the arrangement shown to the arrangement in Figure 4A, it can be seen that the locking finger 17 of Figure 4A is modified so as to be selectively adjustable within a tubular edge portion of the plate 21 much in the manner of a door bolt. The tubular edge portion is designated 210 in Figures 8A and 8B and in Figures 9A and 9B, the adjustable locking finger is designated 170 and has attached thereto an operating member 171 which can move in an L-shaped opening 211 in the side wall of the tubular portion 210.

In the condition shown in Figures 8A and 8B, the locking finger 170 is advanced so that its upper end can interfere with the movement of the mail delivery flap 8 so as to prevent it from being opened. With the locking finger 170 in this position, the system operates as in the embodiment above-described. In the condition shown in Figures 9A and 9B, however, it can be seen that the locking finger 170 has been adjusted relative to the tubular portion 210 so that it is retracted from the location of the mail delivery flap 8 and cannot interfere with its movement. It is a simple matter for the user of the respective compartment to elect whether or not his mailbox should be capable of receiving junk mail or other deliverable material merely by selective adjustment of the operating member 171 and correspondingly of the position of the locking finger 170 relative to the tubular portion 210. An indication of the condition of the locking finger 170, visible from the front of the mailbox, could for example be provided by provision of sight glasses or windows (small

bores) in the compartment doors which enable coloured or other distinctive indicia provided on the fingers 170 to be observed.

Having described the present invention in the foregoing by reference to a particular embodiment and a modification thereof, it is to be appreciated that the embodiments are in all respects exemplary and that modifications and variations thereto are possible without departure from the spirit and scope of the invention as set forth in appended claims. Thus, for example, whilst the invention has been described by reference to multi-compartment mailboxes, the teaching of the invention could be applicable to other multi-compartment situations. Furthermore, the invention is applicable to retrofit applications where a master door as herein described is fitted to an already existing mailbox array. This is a significant advantage over the system of GB-A-2289500 which is not readily adaptable to retrofit applications since installation of the matrix array of orthogonal bars cannot simply be achieved by fitting the existing structure of a multicompartment mailbox with a new door. The various locks in the embodiments are key operated, but one or more or all could be replaced by corresponding combination locks and the references herein to operation of a lock by a key are intended to be interpreted accordingly.

CLAIMS

1. A multi-compartment facility, a mailbox for example, having a master door which can be opened to provide access to all of the compartments and, in the master door, a plurality of sub-doors which register with individual compartments when the master door is closed and can be opened to provide access only to a respective compartment wherein the sub-doors are each provided with a delivery opening enabling material to be placed in the respective compartment without need to open the sub-door, the delivery opening having a lockable closure which is integrated into each sub-door.
2. A multi-compartment facility as claimed in claim 1 wherein the master door has a lock and the sub-doors all have locks, the sub-door locks each being openable with a key which will open just that sub-door and no others and will not open the master door.
3. A multi-compartment facility as claimed in claim 1 wherein said closures comprise pivotally mounted flaps.
4. A multi-compartment facility as claimed in any of the preceding claims wherein said closures are collectively lockable and unlockable.
5. A multi-compartment facility as claimed in claim 4 wherein a manually operable control is provided for collectively determining the status, locked or unlocked, of said lockable closures.
6. A multi-compartment facility as claimed in claim 5 wherein said control incorporates releasable locking means for enabling it to be rendered selectively operable or inoperable.

7. A multi-compartment facility as claimed in claim 5 or 6 wherein the manually operable control is arranged to operate locking members associated individually with each of said closures.

8. A multi-compartment facility as claimed in claim 7 wherein said locking members are selectively and individually adjustable between operable and inoperable conditions.

9. A multi-compartment facility as claimed in claim 7 or 8 and comprising at least one group of compartments arranged in a linear array, a hinged rod traversing said array and serving for the pivotal mounting of the sub-doors of the compartments in the array, said hinge rod being displaceable longitudinally by operation of said manually operable control and said locking members being associated with said hinge rod so that the state of displacement of the hinge rod can determine the status, locked or unlocked, of the lockable closures of the respective sub-doors in the array.

10. A multi-compartment facility as claimed in claim 9 wherein the manually operable control comprises a gear wheel which, when turned by operation of the control, displaces cam means cooperating with an actuator arranged for displacing said hinged rod.

11. A multi-compartment facility as claimed in claim 10 wherein said gear wheel serves to linearly displace a rack member having said cam means formed thereon.

12. A multi-compartment facility as claimed in any of claims 9 to 11 wherein there are a plurality of such groups of compartments in parallel linear arrays and one and the same manually operable control serves to determine the status, locked or unlocked, of all the lockable closures of the plural groups of compartments.

13. A multi-compartment facility as claimed in any of the preceding claims wherein said lockable closures are arranged such that when they are closed no gaps exist therearound which would admit a thin sheet of paper for example.

14. A multi-compartment facility as claimed in claim 13 wherein the peripheries of the locking closures and of the delivery openings are complementarily shaped and

nest with each other when the closures are closed so that no straight line or gently curved path exists therebetween.

15. A multi-compartment facility as claimed in any of the preceding claims wherein said master door and/or said sub-doors are arranged so that when closed no gaps exist therearound which would admit a thin sheet of paper for example.

16. A multi-compartment facility as claimed in claim 15 wherein the peripheries of the master door and/or the sub-doors and of the openings which they serve to close are complementarily shaped and nest with each other when the respective door(s) are closed so that no straight line or gently curved path exists therebetween.

17. A master door for a multi-compartment facility as claimed in any of the preceding claims.

18. A multi-compartment facility, a mailbox for example, comprising at least one group of compartments arranged in a linear array and wherein each of the compartments has a lockable door which is pivotally mounted on a hinge rod extending through the array, the doors each having lockable delivery openings and the status, locked or unlocked, of said delivery openings being determined by means of a control enabling said hinge rod to be longitudinally displaced.

19. A multi-compartment facility as claimed in claim 18 and further comprising the features claimed in any of claims 10 to 16 but without the master door.

20. A locking arrangement comprising a manual operating member which can be turned so as to turn a gear and wherein at least one rack member is engaged with the gear so as to be linearly movable when the gear is turned, the rack member including cam means and a cam following actuator being provided for engagement with a locking

member for determining the status, locked or unlocked, of the locking member in dependence upon the position of said rack member.

21. A locking arrangement as claimed in claim 20 wherein the manual operating member has an associated releasable locking means enabling its status, operable or in operable, to be selectively determined.

22. A locking arrangement as claimed in claim 20 or 21 wherein the manual operating member can be turned between two positions angularly spaced apart from each other, one of said positions corresponding to said locking member being locked and the other corresponding to said locking member being unlocked.

23. A locking arrangement as claimed in any of claims 20 to 22 wherein said locking member comprises a plurality of collectively operable locking elements.

24. A locking arrangement as claimed in any of claims 20 to 23 wherein the gear determines the positions of a plurality of said rack members.