

Barcoded Plastic Membership Cards

Wellingborough and District U3A first started investigating the use of plastic membership cards as an attempt to reduce the amount of work involved at renewal time. Up to then, new cards were printed on A4, laminated and manually cut up before being distributed. With membership then standing at c.600 this represented several days' work for the membership secretary as well as additional cost in materials and postage.

It was felt that standard plastic ID-type cards would be robust enough to be issued "for life" and would present a better image of the organisation than the current card.

ID card printers are widely available but more expensive than inkjet and laser printers. We are accustomed to being able to buy an inkjet printer for as little as £50 but ID card printers cost upwards of £450, depending on specification.

The links below are based on our experience; other printers are available (and it would probably be wise to look at alternatives given the speed at which technology moves!) We don't specifically recommend or endorse these but they're a good starting point.

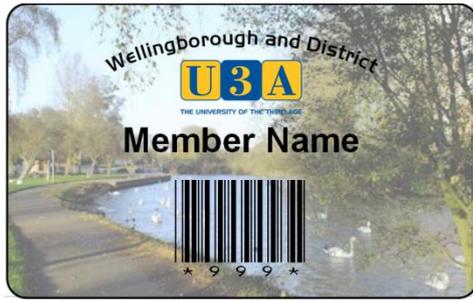
The model we have is an [IDP 30S](#). Current price is around £600 inc. VAT



There's a quite good overview of setting the printer up [here](#) and a not-so-good clip of it in action [here](#).

Consumables required are a [ribbon](#) (£42, prints 250 cards) and [cards](#) (£10.50 per 100) – that works out at a printed cost of 28p per card (assuming no failures!)

Once you have the printer, you need to design your card. Our design was originally done in a Desktop Publishing application called PagePlus (for no better reason than it was a favourite of the then Membership Secretary). It should be possible to do this from MS Publisher, Word or many other applications where you can combine graphics with text and set up a Mailmerge. This is necessary if you want to automate your printing – which you will when you first issue the cards to everyone.



This is our design – a photo of the River Nene at Wellingborough (courtesy of our webmaster), the member's name and number. We encourage members to wear them as badges so we go for large print on the name to aid failing eyesight (and memory)

Because the card is not reissued every year, there needs to be some method of checking validity – how do we know this member has paid? The answer is to be able to rapidly check the membership number against the membership database.

The database is held in a simple Excel spreadsheet. Those from the IT world may sniff at this but it is simply a list of names, addresses, phone and membership numbers. We can sort by name or membership number, extract names and addresses to do mailshots or email communications and look up a member's details from a membership number.

Our monthly meetings typically attract 200+ members and checking used to be done with a card index. We realised that if the membership card had the number in barcode format, we could scan the card and instantly record the member's attendance and check their status (paid or not!). That probably sounds complex and expensive but wireless handheld scanners have become so ubiquitous that they're readily available for under £25. Putting the membership number into a barcode is only printing it in a different font –



Ebay is probably the best source for scanners; search for "wireless handheld scanner" and you'll get a choice of a thousand!

If you plug them into a USB socket on your PC and scan the barcode, it's the same as typing the number in on the keyboard (but faster). We use two of these scanners at the registration table. If a member forgets their card and can remember their number, that can be typed in. Otherwise it has to be recorded manually on paper. Members rarely forget their cards twice!

Every member attending the meeting has their card scanned as they enter the building. Their membership status is checked against a copy of the database and if there is a problem (like they haven't renewed!) there is an audible indication. There is an instant record of who attended each meeting, plus the total number.

A further benefit from the barcode comes at renewal time. We send a renewal form to each member, showing the current information we hold on them (added importance with GDPR!) and ask them to add missing information and correct any errors. These forms are printed with the barcode so, on return of the form we can scan it to jump straight to that member's entry, amend it as necessary and record their renewal.

We also test scan each card when we issue it. This identifies any mis-prints and gives us a record of the cards issued on our database.

Summary:

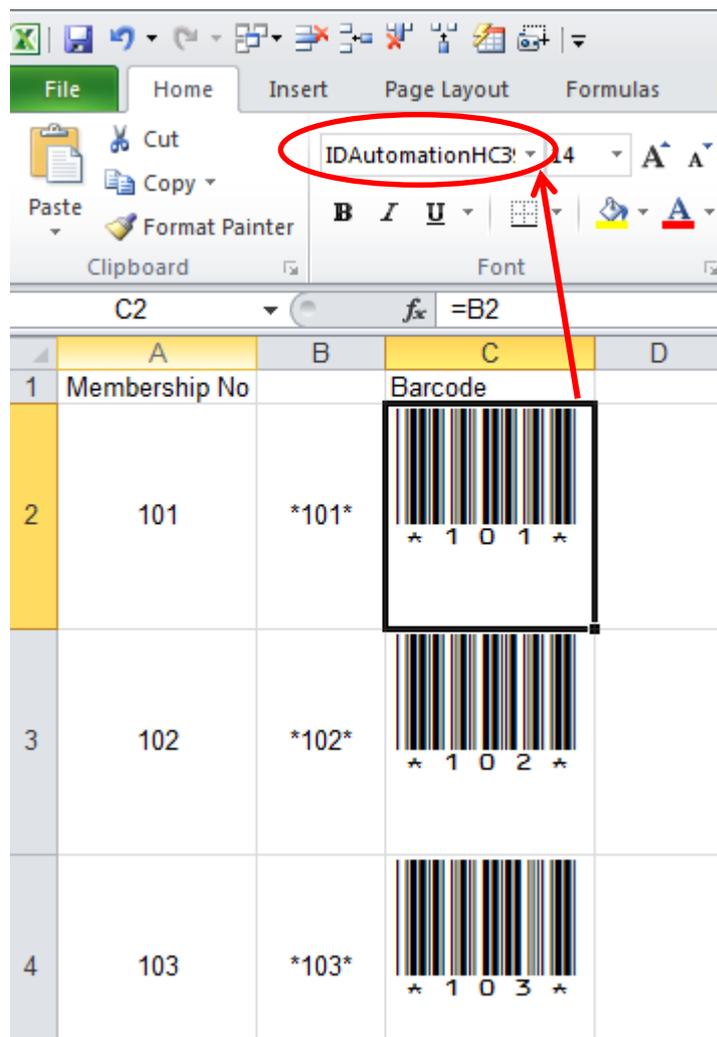
- Membership database on Excel spreadsheet
- Membership forms, mailshots etc generated via Mailmerge in Word using database as data source.
- Plastic cards printed on Smart30S printer using PagePlus software with database as data source (or manual entry)
 - Should be possible to replace PagePlus with Word/Publisher/etc
- Membership cards scanned at meetings using low-cost wireless scanners for validation against database and record keeping
- Renewal process uses barcode to speed up data entry and improve accuracy

How to generate Barcodes . . .

Changing a membership number into a barcode format is simply a change of font.

We use "IDAutomationHC39M Free Version" which is currently available from [here](#). It's free for use by non-profit organisations and can easily be loaded into Microsoft Office by following [these instructions](#).

Once the font is loaded, it becomes available in Excel. The example below shows the membership number in column A. In column B we put an asterisk at the beginning and end of the number (the scanner expects to see them) and in column C we take column B and print it in the barcode font.



The screenshot shows the Microsoft Excel interface. The 'Font' ribbon is active, and the font 'IDAutomationHC39M' is selected, circled in red. Below the ribbon, a spreadsheet table is visible with the following data:

	A	B	C	D
1	Membership No		Barcode	
2	101	*101*		
3	102	*102*		
4	103	*103*		

Once you set this up in the spreadsheet you copy it to each line so it will be automatically generated for each member.

FAQs

Is the system compatible with “Beacon”?

Following our workshop at the 2018 National Conference, we encountered barcoded membership cards produced on the *Beacon* system. These used Code 39 barcodes and were immediately readable by our scanners. Since we don't use *Beacon*, we're unfamiliar with the card production process but it's useful to know that it incorporates a barcoding feature. We are considering future use of *Beacon* and will investigate this aspect further in the coming months.

How do Group Leaders know if members have renewed?

At the end of the “grace period” for renewal, group leaders are sent a list of (former) members who have not renewed. Group Leaders don't have access to the database so couldn't scan members' cards.

What happens if members lose their card?

We reissue the card and charge them £1 (at the Membership Secretary's discretion!)

Can you produce a small quantity of cards?

Yes. We can produce a single card if required. After the initial print run, new and replacement cards are produced as required.