Breakfast in London
Breakfast in London, lunch in New York,

luggage in Bermuda. Of such things are aviation cliches made. Lee Paddon checks out
the check-ins of some of the most modern baggage handlers in Britain.

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s you stand beside the baggage
carousel while a Benidorm 18-30
L tour disgorges its stuffed donkies and
Moorish virility Icons from the 737 charter flight, the intricacies of baggage handling technology seem a little remote. Behind the scenes, however, a battle rages between the purveyors of various baggage handling systems. Will optical character recognition (OCR) or bar code readers win the day? The spur for such a technological leap into the dark for a function previously performed by sweating masses deep in the bowels of the airport terminal has come from the twin oracles of the law and mammon. Recent regulations have made it essential for bags to be handled with greater aplomb than before, and the prospect of replacing the sweaty masses with clean, manageable, and non-unionised computers is decidely enticing. Nowadays, as your bag disappears from sight of the check-in desk, its fate is in the hands of photo sensors, programmable controllers, and pushers or tilters. Auto-

mated check-in starts at the front desk. One of the biggest problems with such systems is the way bags are presented to them. Items must be presented singly. Thus, in a departure hall, an automated system can be recognised by the narrower conveyor beside the desk.
This raises operational problem number one. On some flights airlines charge passengers on the total weight of luggage checked in. The check-in desk is therefore equipped with a weighing plate to determine the weight of each bag, plus a "totaliser" which gives the weight of all luggage checked in by that passenger. In a perfect world this would be a simple system where the bags were fed in one at a time.
What happens, however, if a passenger decides he would rather leave some luggage behind, rather than pay the surcharge? The

Despite all the high technology, baggage handling comes down to plain manual labour on the apron

bags then have to be put on the weighing platform, taken off until the total is known, and then, when the haggling is over, finally placed on the conveyor. Thus some of the system's productivity and speed is lost to indecisive passengers.
Terminal Three at Heathrow Airport is the British showplace for the most recent arrival on the baggage handling scene, OCR. "Nobody believed we could do it," claims Wayne Lynn of BAE, formerly Boeing Aircraft Equipment, "but we proved that we can read over 99 per cent of bags correctly presented. We have a world lead with our system. I am sure that plenty of others are working on such a system, but we have got ours to the market, and we are getting interest from all over the place."
Since the Terminal Three OCR went into
operation, setting a world first, 12 similar
systems have been installed at US airports.
Stansted, and Gatwick's south terminal, will
have systems working in the near future.
To a human being, reading a bag tag is

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