

Audio transcript

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Remembering the
teashop computer

Joining the pioneers

MS: Lyons at that time were developing the idea that computers could be used in business, that computers, which had been purely developed as machines to solve engineering and scientific problems, could also be used for the very different kinds of transactions and arithmetic, if you like, of a business. So they trawled through their business and a handful of people were selected to go onto what they called an appreciation course, and this was a very tough course indeed. What happened is that two of us from the course were selected to join the team, Mary Coombs and myself, and we joined the new team, which was then very small. It really comprised a group of engineers, under John Pinkerton, and a group of programmers under David Caminer.

FS: I was first of all offered the opportunity to go into a new market research section that was being set up, but I wasn't terribly interested in working with people at that point. And it was a few months after that that I got offered the opportunity to see whether I was suitable to be employed by LEO. Learning about how the computer worked, which of course was pretty different from how modern computers worked, really, because it was valves and mercury delay tubes, but we learnt about binary, we learnt about how the actual computer was organised. We learnt about what were known

as the initial orders, which were the instructions which were used to take everything in and set it up on the computer.

FS: And my first job was working in a catering office. At some point I thought, I think I've had enough of bakery sales, I'd like to see what goes on in LEO. And boy, when I got in there, was it different, because all through Lyons you had staff canteens and you were given a 15-minute break to go and have a coffee in the morning. Well, if you wanted a cake or a bun or something, you had to buy it. But in LEO you got it free. Wow, you know, that was significant. You had free cakes in the afternoon. It was great.

MS: Let me say perhaps two things. One is that we were living, doing things, where everything we were doing was new. And so there was that buzz and excitement, which was there nearly all the time.

Working with LEO

MS: They used to ring us every day for an order and they used to say, 'LEO calling,' and we used to give them our orders. And we didn't have a private phone to start. We used to have to ask the customers not to use it at a certain time. It'd ring at a certain time and we'd have it all written down, and then we'd tell them what we wanted and they'd send back sheets of paper with all of it ordered on it.

FS: What you ordered on Monday was probably what you were going to order next Monday and the Monday after, so they developed a system using the punch cards where every day a manageress was rung up and she had to give the variations to a standard order.

FS: I used to work on a big machine called a Siemens-Schuckert machine, and this machine that I used printed out a binary tape. If I made a mistake, I had to punch in 15 and go back over it and punch in 15 so that the next machine could ignore it. Now the binary tape that came out of my machine was then fed to a second machine, the checking machine, where another girl would punch in everything I punched in from the same sheet and her machine pushed out a binary tape of its own and a black and red print-out at the back. Now as long as everything was black, everything was fine, but where she and I had made a difference, if one of us had made a mistake or one of us had just done something and

not realised it, her machine would pick it up and it would print it in red.

FS: They started off, when they were first developing it, with just paper tape, teleprinter tape, going in and out, and at the point where I joined LEO, half the room was filled with these huge reel-to-reel tape machines.

MS: I saw all these machines and this paper coming out. I mean, I had no idea how it was working.

MS: We calculated the production required, sent the orders to the production, the materials that were required, the packaging that was required, and produced assembly orders so that the vans could be loaded up in teashop sequence.

FS: I just, I couldn't fathom out which bits went with which bits, but forever LEO was going wrong and the engineers would have the backs off the cabinets, and you could see all the huge valves and the great big wheels that the tapes went round. I mean, it was huge. And you had to have cooling fans all the time everywhere. It was massive.

MS: The company decided that more than build its own computer, it would supply computers and computer

time to what seemed to be a growing market. And Lyons had many friends in the blue-chip area, big companies like Imperial Tobacco and the steel business, Ever Ready, the battery people, a huge number, Kodak and so on, Ford Motor Company, who all came to see what we were doing and were interested.

MS: It just amazes me what a computer can do, it was the start of something big. I'm proud of the fact that I was there at the beginning.

A time for work and a time for play

MS: Each one of us did a phenomenal range of jobs: software, applications. People came from outside to have jobs done. One of the things I remember very clearly is when the machine was roped off to allow people from de Havillands to come and do aircraft calculations. In fact they were doing calculations for Blue Streak. We didn't know that. But we weren't allowed to see what was going on.

FS: John Pinkerton, I always thought was the boss. I looked up to all of them, but I think he was the overall boss and he was highly intelligent, highly skilled. And I was totally in awe of him, so I didn't dare ever speak to him. I wasn't frightened of the engineers that worked on fixing it, but I was very scared of all the others. They all wore white coats. All of them except us, in the data entry room, everybody else wore a white coat, and that I think in itself sort of set them apart from us.

MS: And we had a very, very hard taskmaster in David Caminer. He was meticulous and he set down standards and if those standards weren't followed then he followed the thing back with you. Lyons was a very social company with sort of social clubs, if you wanted activity there, but it was also a very

hierarchical company with separate lavatories for managers and non-managers, separate dining rooms and canteens for managers, and even senior managers had better catering facilities than junior managers.

FS: With George Manley and Frank Walker and Ernie Enoch, that was a different level from the others. They were the ones that always took the backs off and the floorboards up. But George Manley and I got engaged with an elastic band. But unfortunately he was a rugby player and he loved a drink of beer, and although he would come with me to Sudbury Hill once a month to the dance, he couldn't dance. And I'm afraid that ultimately, when I met the man I did marry at Hammersmith Pally, who could dance even better than I could, that was the end of George and me.

FS: Well, Lyons had a very active sports club, a very good sports ground at Sudbury Hill. Sports day was a splendid day, actually. There was a very keen amateur dramatic society, very good they were too, really good, and they had a choral society, which I belonged to. It was an excellent company to work for. The pay wasn't good, but you were terribly well treated.

MS: One played bridge with somebody up there, or one played chess with anybody. On the whole I think a company which had a fairly content workforce.

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