WCIT Honorary Archivist John Poulter

My first brush with a computer came in 1959/60, when I and a group of fellow students were ushered into the presence of an analogue machine in one of our college's laboratories. Yes, in those days there were analogue computers as well as digital ones - and maybe there are still… The first computer on which I got my hands on was a digital one however. That was in 1960 and it was a Ferranti Pegasus. My programs for it were written in Autocode, a primitive high-level language and fed into the machine on paper tape. These programs were run overnight, if I was lucky, and I soon learned the importance of not making any mistakes, either in the coding or with the punching of the tape, if I wanted to see meaningful results the next day. Programming didn't thrill me though, so when my career in computing began in earnest in 1965 it was as a systems analyst, firstly in Glasgow and then Corby in Northamptonshire. This time it was with IBM 1401 computer, with programs input via punched cards, but they were still being run overnight and the programmers had to be careful not only to make no mistakes but also not to exceed, accidentally, the size of the central processor.

Then, in 1967, I moved into the computer department of a research laboratory which was just beginning to use an IBM 360. There, both programs and data continued to be input (a word minted, I believe, by the computer industry) via punched cards. In fact, both programs and data were punched twice via card machines, once on a card-punch machine and then on a verifier, so that any discrepancies could be identified and corrected before they would otherwise ruin that nights run through no fault of the programmer. At the research laboratory there were two achievements of which I was particularly proud. Firstly, I was responsible for the design and testing of a large database, some years before the term was coined, I believe. When it went live after three years' development, not a single error was experienced with it then, nor, I gather, throughout its entire operational life subsequently. Secondly, I conceived and designed a spreadsheet program for the scientists to use, which some of them did extensively. This was well before microcomputers (later PC's and Macs) came in and began to allow individuals to manipulate their data themselves. Then, after returning for some five or six years into the world of commercial computing, which included several trips to Africa, I moved into consultancy, working with Post Office Counters and then the NHS before retiring in 2004. During these years I sometimes worked with Professor Peter Checkland, using Soft Systems Methodology, and I collaborated with him (in a rather subordinate way, I must say) as co-author of "Learning for Action", the definitive account of this methodology (the book remains in print and continues to sell well!).

I joined the British Computer Society in 1975 and the WCIT in 1990, becoming a Liveryman in 1992, serving on the Court from 2002 to 2004. In joining the WCIT my aims were to give something back and to mix with some of the great figures in the IT world and see how they operated. I believe I've done both and richly enjoyed the experience.