John Handby

Interviewed by

Richard Sharpe

16th June, 2016

At the

WCIT Hall,

32a Bartholomew Close, London, EC1A 7JN

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Welcome to the Archives of IT. It's the 16th of June 2016, and we are in the Worshipful Company of Information Technologists in London.

Most of the standard histories of information technology focus on the supply side, the innovation of new technologies, but that's really useless unless it's actually applied in the public and the private sector. So I am really delighted to welcome into the archives John Handby, who has a long and distinguished career of moving from the public sector into the private sector and implementing IT.

What was your first job in IT John?

It was when I was in the public sector, working for Government. And it was about the early days of introducing computers into the Health Service.

And what were they used for?

Oh, well, originally of course computers were primarily used on administrative tasks, but we set up a number of experimental projects where we were using them for clinical use, which was very unusual at the time, for recording laboratory tests, for tracking patients, that sort of thing. So, it was quite a departure from the early usage of the machines.

[01:12]
And who were your suppliers?

Well, in those days the British Government had a policy of really trying to encourage home-grown industry, in particular ICL. So, a lot of our equipment tended to come, certainly from British suppliers, and essentially from ICL.

And the software?

Software, again, this was a time when there were companies who were building software, particularly those kind of applications. So, there were people like Software Sciences, but a whole variety of people. And in those days quite a lot of the big

hardware suppliers were also supplying software, and had teams building software. So it was, it was a bit different. The industry was to, to split rather more later on.

[02:02]

So you were a civil servant?

I was a civil servant, yes, I was. Yes.

And then I understand you stepped back into a more regular role of being a civil servant, away from IT.

Yes, as they used to say, this was when you were, you were marked out to be a mandarin, which, you know, kind of, senior level in the service. And, so I became involved in all kinds of health development issues. I was involved in, well, for a man somewhat unusually involved in things like gynaecology and obstetrics as well as mental health, cancer services, all kinds of things. And, you know, a lot of support for ministers, writing speeches and all that sort of thing.

So that first job in IT was 1967.

Yes, that's when I started, yes.

Yes. Then you moved back into IT.

Then I moved back later on, and this was really because, in those days the Department of Health as it was was merged with the Social Security department that was handling benefit payments. Obviously, massive computer systems for millions of people, but very dated. And, so, I was brought in with a small team to look at those systems and modernise them. And we set out on a huge programme. At that time, I'm going back now to about 1980, and the programme was worth two billion, which was a lot of public money, and the idea was to totally, you know, put all these benefits systems on to new technology. New technology as it was in 1980, let's put it that way.

And who was your supplier there?

Supplier there, again was, ICL. Because, you know, again, we're still in the days when Government was trying to support home-grown industry. So, so primarily, ICL.

And these were mostly mainframes, 2900s?

Yes, definitely mainframes. These were when you, you would have mainframes in buildings, and the room in which the mainframes were held was the size of a football pitch. I'm not exaggerating, they were massive rooms. And they used to be full of tape drives in those days. The systems that we were replacing were the National Insurance system where you've got a record for, obviously, all National Insurance payers in the country. That was, that was held on mag tape. It took several days to run the file. And you, you had these, all these mag tape, you know, machines around the room. And it was just, it was absolutely incredible. And, believe it or not, there were those who thought, you know, we should keep it like that, and, and you know, this was run by people who were based in Newcastle, and I was up from London, and, they didn't like at all what we said. But we did change it all.

And what did you change it to?

We changed it, it was all, then became disk-based. We put in an awful lot of, you know, online terminals, and then PCs. And so the whole thing became completely different. We put a network in so the offices were linked to the centre, and you could get information instantaneously.

What type of network was that?

In what way do you mean?

It was a bespoke network, was it?

Yes it was at the time. Yes. Yes, that's right. Yup.

This is before Ethernet and before…

Yes. Well, you know, in those days you, there wasn't off-the-shelf as it were. It quickly became off-the-shelf, but, in those days it wasn't. And that's why it tended to be, in the early days of it, it tended to be terminals rather than PCs, because PCs weren't universally available at that time.

[05:47]
Yes. Yup. Then you moved on to the Environment and Transport departments?

Yes, I did. I was responsible there for all management services. So that was interesting. You know, you did things like, operational research and, and O&M and all those kind of traditional things as well as IT. But, but that was, again, different challenges, but very interesting. And part of that was the DVLA, Driver and Vehicle Licensing, and they then, they had big systems there.

And that was at Swansea.

That was at Swansea, yes, that's right.

And you helped implement that?

No, I had a kind of strategic overview of that. I didn't get involved in the detail of that. My involvement in the detail was, was mainly the headquarters systems run by Environment and the Transport departments.

[06:36]
Now you're pointing to success here in the public sector.

Mm.

And, the public sector is a bit notorious for not necessarily being very successful with IT.

No.

Would you like to comment on that?

Well, yes, I think, there is a real problem in the public sector and it comes from the fact that, it's very difficult in the public sector just to take responsibility for something, executive responsibility and do it. There are always checks and balances, and that tends to be the problem. In the NHS it was, it was quite dreadful frankly. The NHS is politically a very difficult organisation to work within, for all kinds of reasons, and obviously, as you will know, not just limited to IT. The NHS, there have been many attempts to look at how you manage it, and whether you manage it in a different way, and how that might be, and every, you know, if in doubt, reorganise. There is the eternal kind of conflict in a sense between the clinical and the administrative. And then, you throw IT in the middle of that. I think that the NHS, and here we're now talking in 2016, could have come an awful lot further. I mean in the 1970s I put together a paper with some proposals on how you create a network in the Health Service, and there is no reason, you know, there's no reason why 30 years ago we didn't have a system whereby you carried a card, you fell over in the street and there was a problem, and you could put it into a mobile device and, and you would know immediately what drugs you were on, what you were suffering from, and all the rest of it. That could have been done years ago. We still don't have that. And that is, that is not about technology, it's about politics, it's about the inability of Government often to move ahead with things. Having said that, more recently I think the Government record is, is a lot better. You know, electronic government I think is, has really done quite well in recent years. But it, it's always, it's always politically very difficult, projects are always enormous, and therefore the scope of things going wrong is very high too.

And one of the most recent ones was the database, central database of records for the NHS.

Yes. Yes.

An appalling failure really.

It was. It was. And why they, why they gave up and withdrew, I don't know, because I mean, you know, I can't, I can't believe… You know, it's almost, you're almost tempted to say, how difficult can that be? I, I have every confidence that a good team of people tackling that without interfering politics, and I don't mean with a capital P, I mean with a small p, could have achieved that, and achieved it quite easily actually.

Why didn't they call on you?

Oh I'm too old for it. [laughs]

[09:32]
You left the public service in 1986.

Yes.

And you went into the private sector.

Yes.

What was your first job in the private sector?

That was with Royal Mail. Yes. Royal Mail had, they had… It was not long after the split between Royal Mail and British Telecom. And, in their wisdom they had decided that, British Telecom was about technology and Royal Mail was about delivering letters, and you really didn't need much technology for that. So, most of the technology, most of the expertise, went into British Telecom. And so, I really, I was, I came into it about five years after the split had taken place; there had been an interregnum, there'd been some moves to think about what might be done, but really, not a lot had been done. So we had to create an infrastructure, because of course, you know, delivering letters, [laughs] as it were, relies very heavily on technology, it did then, even more so now.

And you were IT Director there.

Yes, that's right.

Was that your chosen title, or did you, did someone tell you that's what you were?

That's what one was in those days. This was before the chief information officer title became commonplace. In those days you were known as IT directors, yes.

And you spent four years there.

I did, yes.

What was your major success there?

Major success I think was, building that infrastructure so that we could link all the local offices, the sorting offices effectively, of Royal Mail. Introducing a new track and trace system. That's, essentially, obviously, with all the parcels, deliveries, that kind of thing, you know, this was the initial time of track and trace, it hadn't been done before. So we… And, and courier companies alongside us were introducing track and trace systems and mobile hand-held devices. The other thing was, the routing systems for mail. You have options when you're sending mail, Royal Mail does, they can send it, they can send it, even internal mail, they send quite a lot of it by air, by rail, or by road. What is the optimum distribution between those, those various transport facilities, and what do you do if one of them goes wrong, if one of your airports is fog-bound or whatever it is? And so we had a, a fairly complex routing system for looking after that. So those were the kinds of things that we… We actually gave Royal Mail a proper IT capability, which they hadn't had before.

[12:13]
I remember several years ago asking people what they thought was the most innovative thing that was, came out of IT, and we expected lots of technology things, and one man said, 'The barcode.'

Yes. Oh yes. Absolutely. I mean, it's those, those kinds of things that seem simple, but enable so many things. I think that's, that's the effect of them.

Who were your suppliers at the Royal Mail?

IBM, certainly. Digital. But, but primarily IBM.

So you'd been an ICL user.

Yes.

You became an IBM and a Digital user.

Yah.

Can you contrast the two?

[pause] Yes, I mean I, I once did a presentation. I digress slightly, but I think it's relevant. I once did a presentation to a House of Commons committee looking at IT. I was asked to do a presentation, and it was at the time when all MPs thought it was terribly important to support ICL. And I did this presentation which said, 'Look, here is a chart of IT suppliers in the world. Let me tell you something. ICL doesn't feature on this chart. It is so insignificant. And this is ridiculous, because, we are going up a cul-de-sac. We have to use large American corporations who have the mainstream technology.' And so that was the difference. So you start using, I mean in, as I say, Royal Mail was primarily IBM, and, that was… And, not just IBM but plug compatibles, companies who made things that would operate within the IBM world. But what was crucial was the, the operating, the IBM operating software, that if you had that, then, then you could dovetail so many other pieces of software into it, because it provided that overall, overall harness that lots of other people were designing software to work within.

Was IBM more open with you than ICL? [pause] Did it lift its kimono and tell you where it was going?

Yes, well it, it certainly, it did, it made a, it made quite a profession of doing that. You were always being taken on to executive briefings, and off on study tours, and all that sort of thing. It was all good stuff. But they did share with you where they were going. And IBM was, it was in those days a very interesting company in the sense that, it didn't have one overall strategic direction, it had two office systems, it had, you know, and it had a system whereby, IBM made something if a part of IBM could make a good enough business case to make it. That may sound good in kind of, entrepreneurial terms, but it can be disastrous in strategic and architectural terms. And IBM suffered one or two of those disasters. [laughs] But, but by and large you were working in an environment which you knew was a globally-accepted architecture and set of software, and therefore people could design to it. And you could take advantage of what was going on the States. When we were designing the track and trace system, we went out to Memphis, and, I thought quite generous really of Federal Express, they allowed us to go there and have a look at their operations, which at that time were incredibly impressive. They had taken over half the airport of Memphis, and they had this incredible, you know, system that was getting all the different parcels from one flight to another and all that sort of thing. That all happened in the middle of the night. Now this is all, you know, this is routine now, they all do it, but in those days it was, it was quite exciting, and, and then we adopted quite a lot of that technology.

Did you lease or rent your computers from IBM?

Ah. Mm. I think… We leased… We leased or bought. Yah, we didn't do a… We mainly, we mainly bought. And, and then you would always, you would replace… You bought a, you bought some technology, and then, long before it was time-expired there was a new technology that came along that you could deploy where your service and maintenance costs were that much lower, and always the cost benefit worked out. But it was also, always good fun not, not to necessarily buy IBM. There were companies like Amdahl who again were making plug compatible equipment. And it was always a good bit of sport for us who were IT directors, because… You know, the IBM, IBM's great thing was that they would sew up the board so that, you know, the board would, you know, IBM was a safe bet. And, there used to be the comment that if you went to the board and you wanted another IBM machine, you, you just

needed half a page of justification; if you wanted an Amdahl or something else, you needed about six pages to justify it. And you would know that the person from IBM would have spoken to the chief exec before you got to the board. So you'd have a fight on your hands. But that was good sport, and we won. [laughs]

So you did use an Amdahl mainframe?

Oh yes we did, yes. Yes, yes, yes.

You've heard of the million-dollar mug have you? The red Amdahl mug.

No.

The Amdahl salesmen would give a red mug to an IBM user, and then the IBM user would have it on his desk when the IBM salesman came, and the price would go down by a million dollars.

[laughs] I remember… I'll tell you what I do remember is the fact that, the IBM sales year followed the calendar year, and of course, after the middle of December people get more interested in parties than they do in IT. But the IBM guys were doggedly pursuing their sales before the end of the year. And of course we knew, it was all so obvious that that's what they were doing. And so we pretended to be at more parties than we were, so that, you get to the last day of the year and they'd be desperate to sell this piece of equipment. And of course the price came tumbling down. And that was, that was great fun. [laughs]

[18:25]
Good, excellent. You then moved, again as IT Director, in 1990, to National Power.

Yes.

Now this really is the private sector.

Yes it was, it, it was the time the electricity industry was privatised. And so National Power was then a new company, and at that time was by far the biggest electricity generator in the country.

And, your role as IT Director, what did you face there?

Well I faced, the fact that the, it had been created out of the old CEGB, the Central Electricity Generating Board, which was a Government body. And that was a kind of, cost-plus organisation. Now in the, when the industry was privatised, a commodity market was created for electricity. So basically, you were in a commodity business, and if it wasn't strapped down you sold it, closed it, changed it, developed it. And I'm talking now about, not about the technology, I'm talking about the industry. So we were closing power stations, opening new ones, all that sort of thing was going on. We cut the workforce by two-thirds I think it was in three years, and we did it all through voluntary redundancy. But at the same time, the technology was woeful, absolutely woeful. You would go, where there was technology you would go in, and you would see somebody's desk, and there really were three terminals on the desk connected to different systems. So, so my job was to say, 'Well look, this is, this is rubbish, you know, we need to have an integrated technology that really serves people.' If you think about it, the generating industry's quite dispersed, you have power plants that by their nature are stuck somewhere in the middle of the countryside. It's not a highly centralised organisation. Because they're stuck in the middle of the countryside, certainly in those days, the power plant manager was, was treated like God within that power plant. And, I mean I remember when I got there, I wanted to communicate with one of the power plant managers and they said, 'Well you'll have to write him a letter.' Because there wasn't any email. So I wrote him a letter, and, you know, so that had to go… And in those days it went to the typing pool, they typed it out; it went to the, the manager of the power plant, he looked at it, and he sat down and wrote a reply, and about a week or so later you got a reply. It was absolutely ridiculous. So I, [laughs] I had these guys, and we were going to put a network in, right across, and we were going to put email in. And at one time I had all the power plant managers together, and I said, you know, 'You're going to have to change the ways you work. You are used to running this as your personal fiefdom. That is going to change. Because not only you are going to have email, but all your,

all the people in your power plant are going to have email, and they can, they can send an email to anybody, including the chief executive. You are not going to have the same level of control.' This went down like the proverbial lead balloon I think really with these guys, they didn't, they didn't like it. I can remember we had problems putting this stuff in, you know, we were putting… We needed to put, obviously, physical communications and everything in power plants and all that sort of thing. So, so we had a blitz team and it would go from one power plant to the other. And I, and I do remember, there was one occasion, and this is probably unbelievable to you, but, you know, we, we got these guys going into this power plant, and two days before they were going in they phoned up and they said, 'Well look, we've sent you all these faxes,' in those days fax was the medium of choice in the absence of email. 'We've sent you all these faxes, and we've had no response. And so we're just checking that it's all right for us to come in and do this.' And they said, 'You sent faxes?' This was the, I think the power plant manager's secretary. 'You sent faxes?' We said, 'Yes, we sent faxes.' And she said, 'Oh, well, probably, what you don't know is, there's only one fax machine in this power plant, and it's in an office, and only the power plant manager has got the key to the office.' I mean, that was, that was, you know, it was just absolutely incredible. And of course, things changed. And, I managed at the time to get a, a very disarming bunch of young ladies who had been putting office automation in one of the media companies and the company had failed. And, so, suddenly there were half a dozen of these young ladies, who were very personable, but very determined, and they knew all about, you know, how you got people using PCs and everything like that. And they went round from… And they really were, they managed to get these hard-hat engineers, and they were very disarming and they, they got on very well. And one of the funny stories I remember was, the chief executive, who was a great supporter of what we were doing, one of them was trying to teach him sort of, basic keyboard skills which people didn't walk round with in those days necessarily, certainly not if you were a chief executive. And he went and touched the wrong button, and she just smacked his hand. And I thought, well, this could be… [laughs] I'm very glad to say that he just thought it was hilarious. But, you know, it could have been one of those moments. [laughs]

But she taught him to type.

She taught him to type. And, and then, you know, in terms of transformational behaviour, the incredible thing was that, you know, these power plant managers, you know, they come into their office at half-past eight in the morning and sit and have a coffee and all that sort of thing, and then, wonder how the power plant was doing, and, you know, so on. Well now, the chief executive was at his desk at 8.30 and he knew how the power plant was doing. He knew which generators were on and which were off and everything like that. And so they'd be sitting down to enjoy their cup of coffee and suddenly they'd get a telephone call, 'What's happened to generator unit B? It doesn't seem to be working,' you know. And so, so they weren't, they didn't have their own private fiefdom any more, it had changed dramatically.

So that was a massive cultural change.

It was, huge cultural change.

And how did you really manage that? Because there must have been quite a bit of tacit resistance to it.

Yes there was. We, I said about these young ladies, but we, we created a whole programme, we created a cartoon character, we created a whole way of doing this, you know, a whole… I mean, remember, this was set within a bigger change programme. I do remember the chief executive making this great talk to all the managers when he had them together and he said, you know, 'I've got, I've got good news and I've got bad news. And the good news is, that everything's changed, and we're now, we're now in a period of total change and we're immersed in total change.' And he said, 'The bad news for some of you is, if you think we're crossing a river and we're going to get out the other side, well I've got news for you. We aren't. This is, this is now a state of perpetual change. This is, this is what we are, this is what we're going to be doing.' So, it was within that context that we set up this whole fun programme, as I said, we had a cartoon character and everything like that, and we, and we had these fun little kind of rallies and things like that. And it, and it really worked. But it was about, you know, leading people and getting them to understand. At the same time, we took out whole layers of middle management that

were fairly obstructive. So that again, you know, you start to de-layer the organisation, and that helps too.

And you said you went down, they went down in size two-thirds in terms of manpower?

That's right, yes. Yes. Yeah, it was a massive change.

[25:58]
Massive change. So you were three years there.

Yah.

And then you moved to be Group IT Director at Glaxo SmithKline Plc.

Yes that's right. Yeah.

In 1993.

Yeah. Yeah.

Who were your suppliers there?

HP was one of the big suppliers. And they were, they were the main, you know, the, the, really the, the kind of lynchpin if you like, the lynchpin supplier on which we relied.

And can you describe your relationship with HP, you being the user, them being the supplier?

Yeah, no, it was, it was a very interesting relationship actually, because, it was a situation where, we developed the strategy of what we wanted to do, and again, GSK at that time didn't have an international network of any kind. It was, it was pretty dysfunctional. It was a multinational company actually, it wasn't a global company.

And there were quite a lot of politics that got in the way of many things. But we would, what we would try and do was develop a strategy that would link it all together with common technologies, common software systems and all the rest of it. So obviously, we wanted a common platform. And we decided that the best common platform for the kind of thing we were doing was HP. And this was one of the great instances where HP, they had a foothold in the company but not more than a foothold, where. The salesman came in one day, and I sat him down and said, 'We're going to buy HP.' In other words, he didn't sell it to me. I said, 'We have looked at this strategically and we're going to buy HP.' Now, what kind of deal? [laughs] You know. And, and we started that discussion, and it went very well. And, we got to a situation where we really did have a very good partnership with them, and I use that word carefully, because, you often, it's very difficult to have a partnership with suppliers, but, but we got them on the same page as us. We explained what we wanted to do and why we, why we thought they would be the right people to do it with, providing we got the right deal, which we did. And then we had a situation where, I had my guys getting on planes, and, and me too, going to different subsidiaries around the world, explaining the IT strategy. And a week or two later the HP man would come on the plane, and we had, we shared with them our programme of going round to the different subsidiary companies so that they could plan their trips. And so that's, that was a pretty close piece of cooperation.

And it was good technology?

It was good technology. Because they had gone on to Unix, which in those days not everybody was on. So they had got good universal technology; again, you could blend software in with it very well. And it was good because, the company wasn't a highly centralised company, it was a distributed company with, with important subsidiaries in, in many countries in the world. And therefore it was, it was important to have a good sort of, mid-range technology, not a centralised IBM type technology.

And so you were tackling sales and research, right the way through the organisation?

Yes we were. Yah. Yah. I mean, you know, the research was primarily, the research base primarily in the States and in the UK, clinical trials a bit more widely than that.

Sales obviously in every geography. So, you know… And, I mean, you know, there's a sort of, there are lots of myths about the pharmaceutical industry, you know, but, but it's, it's all about, it's all about research and marketing; the rest of it is inconsequential. Manufacture, they took great pride in the manufacture, and the manufacture, obviously you have got to be making your drugs really well, and you can't have impurities and all the rest of it, but the things that set you out are, the quality of your research and how you market it.

[30:19]
Did you use consultants?

Yes. Yes.

Who did you use and what did you use them for?

We were using, at that… Do you mean specifically at GSK?

Yes.

Yeah, GSK, we used Accenture, we used, a few companies, but we didn't…   We didn't use as many consultants there as we had in some of the other companies I worked for.

Later on?

Before in fact.

Oh right, OK. OK.

Yah. Yah, my biggest use of consultants was at National Power I think.

[30:54]
We see a pattern here of you going into a job for two or three years, and then moving on.

Yah.

What's that pattern about?

I think it's… It's about fixing things that are broken. You know, that thing, if it ain't broke, don't fix it. Well all the companies I went into, it was either broken or, or it simply wasn't there. Remember, you know, we're talking about a period in which, IT was going from the back room, the basement, the accounting systems, the administrative systems, into becoming an integral part of the way in which companies operate. So, the whole dynamic of IT was changing. I find change absolutely fascinating, and, you know, do not… I don't just mean the technology, which itself is, is fascinating, but also the way in which you can use it to change the way in which business operates, the way in which people do their jobs and all that sort of thing. So, I, you know, I think it was a, it was a fascinating time. And I tend to be the sort of person who loves a challenge, is a very determined kind of person to achieve something, and then when that's achieved, I quickly get bored actually. [laughs]

[32:19]
Change is very challenging for people, it scares a lot of people.

Yes.

How do you overcome those fears that they have? You're not worried by it; they are.

No. No, but you're absolutely right, most people, all the psychological studies show this, most people are really quite concerned about change. I think, I think you, you have to try and bring it in in a way that is not threatening. I mean I talked about the National Power, the way we created this cartoon. We knew we had an issue. We had a very traditional workforce; how did you get them to come round to that? And so, so we did a lot on that. And I think, you, you've got to carry people with you, you've got to try and understand what motivates them, and what they have been used to, what, what concerns them about change. And you've really got, you can't thrust it in front of them; you've got to sit down very carefully with them, and you've got to

understand their concerns, and then you've got to design an approach to introducing it which, which they feel more comfortable with. I mean there are some people who are never going to like it. And we see that in our private lives, you know, that's always true.

Is it possible to get them to own it, so to speak?

Yes, I think it is. I think it is. If you… You know, and that, that of course is, you know, a lot of consultation when you're designing systems, making sure you take people's ideas on board. Don't try and thrust a system at them which you think, you might think is good, but, but doesn't, in fact isn't good because it doesn't reflect the reality of their working situation whatever it is. So if you, if you bring them in, if they're part of the design process, then I think they, they're much more amenable to the systems that emerge.

[34:48]
So you did your two years at GSK.

Mhm.

And you got bored there.

Mhm.

And so you put a portfolio of work together for three years.

Yes I did. This was, this was, you know, this was again, if you think of starting out as a civil servant, which is about, you know, it was about the safest job you could have when I started, and so, so I'm getting more and more, you know, towards the fringe as it were. So this was, Charles Handy, you know, had coined the term about, you know, the three stages in life and all that sort of thing. And, and so going to the portfolio was, was just, another movement on, so doing several different things at the same time. And that was great fun, because you, because that's very difficult, to get bored in those circumstances. And, and then, you know, part of that was, was advising a

major power utility on its IT, so acting as a… And they didn't, they had outsourced it all to consultants, they had outsourced it all to Accenture, and they had nobody to keep the fox out of the hen coop, you know, I mean, [laughs] so, so that was my job really, advising the board on that. But at the same time, I was part of a group of guys, the information group, and we were, several of us who were former CIOs and IT directors who were helping the big companies understand how to, how to market and sell into the user organisations. So we worked with Microsoft and IBM and, HP and all these people, on mentoring their salesforces and that, which again, which was interesting for me because I was then seeing the other side, and seeing their perspective. So, so a different take on life.

[35:56]
So that was from 1995 to 1998.

Mm. Mm.

So we have a three-year stint there.

Yah.

And then you moved on.

Yes I did.

And got your first title as CIO.

Yes. Yes.

And that was with whom? Merial.

A company called Merial. And, Merial are known, not so much by their name but by their products in the animal health kingdom. They're, they're the largest animal health pharmaceutical company. Interesting market, you know. All pharmaceutical companies, nearly half, whether they're human or animal, nearly half their revenue

comes from the States. And, there were many amusing comments about, you know, the amount of money that the Americans would spend on keeping their pets alive, you know. They spend more on their pet than the husband, sort of thing. But… [laughs] The other market, completely different, which is large herds of cattle and sheep in the outback or, you know, Australian outback, which was, which was quite fascinating. So I, you know, did lots of, you know, again, travelling around the world and, and, it was quite, you know, I can remember being on a, you know, a massive sheep station in Otago in New Zealand, South Island, you know, going round in a Jeep with the farmer and, you know, great fun, completely different.

You were their Vice-President and CIO.

Yes that's right. It was a, it was a great company, it really was. It had a, it was a Franco-American company, because it was jointly owned by Merck and Aventis, what was Rhône-Poulenc, became Aventis. So, it had a, although it was American it had a British chairman, it was headquartered in London as kind of neutral territory, it had a British chairman and a French chief executive. And, they got on extremely well. It was an amazing company in the sense that there were no politics. The chief executive and the chairman, I never saw them disagree about anything. And they wouldn't tolerate any disagreement within the organisation. They would tolerate plenty of debate. I was on the global management team, we would meet up on a regular basis; anybody could have a view about anybody else's patch, but the person who had been appointed to run that patch was responsible for it. And, and I had to be, I ended up having to be careful with the chairman because, I worked down the corridor from him and, and he would escape into my office to avoid his telephone quite often, and we'd talk about all sorts of things, but if I happened to mention I was having a problem with anybody, you know, anywhere, he'd say, 'Who is it? Right, I'll give him his P45.' [laughs] Exit from the company. So, so I had to, you know, he was… [laughs] But, but they really wouldn't tolerate the kind of politicking that goes on in so many companies and I think detracts from achieving business objectives. So, it was a, it was a very, it was my last corporate job, and it was a, it was a breath of fresh air actually.

You reported, I understand, straight to the chair.

I did, yes, I did.

And that gave you considerable power.

Yes it did. Yes it did. Oh no, no question, no question.

[39:26]
Who were their suppliers, of technology?

Yah, it was, largely Microsoft of, because, again, Microsoft had developed as a company, developed its products, its software products, it had developed the, you know, a lot of, it had developed its server, so that you could do a lot more with Microsoft. So, we decided to go down the Microsoft path.

And what did you face when you first went there?

Again… Well, you had, you had two companies that had come together, which in themselves had been an amalgamation of more than one company in several cases, but, two companies had come together, one American, the other French. Now I had some lovely French colleagues, but you couldn't call their technology functional. I mean it was just unbelievable, and the person they had in charge of their technology was quite unbelievable. So, so it was a question of putting a global network in place, which just didn't exist, and that was, that was a significant challenge in itself. And also, having within that, you know, all the technology that we needed, common systems and everything like that. And, and bringing the French with us. So, the French were the big challenge, and… I mean, it was, it was great fun. One little anecdote from that was, I, a person I had worked with closely at National Power, who was a senior project manager for me there, I was having some problem with the French, and, I'm not a fluent French speaker, I can speak a bit but not a lot. In fact strangely, my interpreter as it were with the French arm of the company was an Irishman married to a French lady who was on my staff. But, anyway, this guy who had been a senior project manager for me in another life as it were, it so happened he was a very fluent French speaker, because in the war, he was a bit older than me, and

in the war he had been, his father had been a diplomat, his father had got out of France in time, but his mother and he and his brother had been trapped in Vichy France. And the French had been really nice to him, he was a great Francophile. And, but he could speak perfect French. But he didn't look as though he would speak perfect French; he looked every inch the Englishman. So I took him down when I was having problems, and they would gabble away in French, and I just took him down. And he just sat in the room very quietly and everything like that, didn't really say a word for, [laughs] for most of the meeting. And then at the end just turned round and talked to them in perfect French. And the effect on their faces, [laughs] because I got a dump [debrief] afterwards of everything they had said, was, was interesting.

I was once on a project which was a multinational project, and the French contingent said once, 'Yes, in practice it will work, but in theory it won't.'

Yes.

And the English said, 'I don't quite understand that.' As you can imagine. So what was size of your budget?

Oh, I don't remember how many million now. I, I really, I truly don't remember. It's, it's too long ago.

Again, you used consultants?

Yes, we did. There was one particular company that we used, was actually a British company, a smaller consultancy. But they were very good, and they supplied quite a lot of people and expertise, particularly on the networking side.

[43:00]
How do you select a consultancy?

Well how you deselect. [laughs]

How you deselect.

[laughs] No, I think, I think you, over time, over the years you get used to working with, you get used to… OK. The crucial thing about consultants is, where they when the chips are down? Now, they all have their different styles of working and the way they operate and so forth. But, the crucial thing is, if you hire a team to do something for you, and something goes wrong, and things do go wrong from time to time, what then happens? Does that firm of consultants sit down with you and say, 'Oh my God, something's gone wrong. This is what we're going to do to fix it. This is, we're going to stay and we're going to do this,' something like that. At pain to themselves, i.e., they're going to lose money. Or do they reach for the contract and say, 'Well actually, all we're obliged to do is this.' That's how you deselect. I mean there is one very large company that always sat on the same side of the table when the crunch came, and, you know, and therefore, I guess I've employed them a number of times over the years, usual love-hate relationship, but, they've always, you know, stuck by me at times of trouble. Another very large company I employed several times until one time they reached for the contract, and, I didn't employ them again. And that is as simple as that.

Who was the good one who sat beside you?

[laughs] I'd have to say, for all the stick they gave, was Accenture. Accenture at the end of the day, certainly in the time I was dealing with them, they were very good, and I, I saw occasions when they lost money, and they would do it because… Accenture had this very good philosophy, I think, frankly, and it was one that IBM used to have many years ago, that if you, if you treat the customers correctly, it will generate more business. And, almost particularly if it costs you in the short term. In the long term, it makes sense. And they always had, you know, once you came into their, came to their notice, however it was, you know, as you rose through the ranks, you came to their notice, they did have a little black book. They would know, they would track you where you went, and as soon as you went there, you were, they would, they would be there to, you know, help you. And, they reasoned that they could get more than one lot of business out if they cultivated that relationship with

you personally. And, you know, there's nothing unethical about it, it was totally professional, but, you know, I think it's a, it's a very sound way of doing business.

[46:05]
The relationship between supplier and user, it always seemed to me it was somewhat imbalanced, because, if the supplier was the supplier of the technologies. And suppliers often, if they're small and innovative, they want to create turbulence in the marketplace, knock out the established people. So this creates turbulence for users. How do you generally characterise the relationship that you have had with these many posts between the supply side and the user side?

Yah, I think, this issue of turbulence is, I mean that's a difficult one because, you've got, you know there's a sort of safe way with the large guy, and it's, it's less safe with the smaller guy, but they may well have something that is innovative that the large guy won't have. So you've got a trade-off, you have to balance, you've got to have some kind of, assurance, commercial assurance about the smaller guy that they're going to be there. Which is always limited in the IT field. So then you resort to escrow. So you know that if it really, the worst happens, you have some way back.

Can you explain that? Escrow.

Escrow?

Mm.

Yeah, where you've got a copy of the software or whatever it is which is held by a third party, and you can only get at that, you know, in the event of the failure of the company. So they put it into escrow, I mean it's a, it's a universally accepted system. And you know that you, you know, you're not totally lost, although it's, it wouldn't… You know, I've never had to resort to, to getting something out of escrow, so, it was all… But it's, it gives you a feeling of, of some safety. But I think that, I think more generally the relationship between suppliers and customers, you're really looking for a partnership. And it's got to be a win-win partnership. And these things are easily said, and people say them. But, one of the things I did when I was mentoring

suppliers was, was actually, you know, talk to them about how they generated partnerships, and actually, actually developing agreements that they might use, and going with them on customer sites, when I was doing that work, and, and going through how they might do that. Because, if you… The thing is, if you've got… Let's say you've got a major strategy, a major project you're doing. Now you can go to suppliers and you can beat them all up as hard as you like and then harder. And you can come out, as I saw some of my peers doing, they would come out of a negotiation and say, 'I've got half a per cent more discount from that guy than anybody else in my industrial sector.' And my reaction was, well what do you think's going to happen now? And to me, the answer was obvious. I mean don't get me wrong, I, I want a good commercial deal, but I want the supplier to make money as well. Because, if you've driven them to the point where they're really not going to make much money on it, well what's going to happen? First of all they're going to cut corners; secondly their best people won't want to work on it, they'll put their second team on it, and all the rest of it. And it won't be a success. If you have a situation where they're making money as well, not too much money, but they're making money, and they're getting a good name, because it's a, you know, it's a good project and all that sort of thing, then it truly is a win-win situation. So it's not an idle comment, but there is a real opportunity if you get it right.

[49:51]
So you spent 33 years basically implementing systems, moving on, implementing systems. And I wonder whether, in retrospect, you look at the types of technology changes, whether, like me, you may think that, actually, much of this technology is about fashion, rather than about the most effective technology. The fashion was, centralised; the fashion became, client server; the fashion became, everything must be on the desk; the fashion is now, the cloud. And we have these waves of fashion which haven't got very much to do, perhaps, with the, the best ROI of investment.

I think they're related to ROI, but… I totally agree, there's a big fashion element. And obviously, it's like anything else, you know, it's like the fashion trade itself, how are you going to make money? You're going to make money by selling people something different. This year there's got to be something different. And if it really isn't different, you've at least got to think of a new name to call it. And the industry

for many years has called things new names which are essentially the same thing dressed up in a different way. But, all the things you mention are also the result of technological progression. You couldn't have done cloud computing 30 years ago, you know. And so it goes on, you know, there are things… The fact that you can, you can do the whole thing, a client approach, the fact that you don't need that centralisation, in fact centralisation, you know, flies in the face of the sort of, flexibility and mobility and so forth that you want. So, I think, I think there's a lot of fashion, there's an awful lot of, you know, inventing names for the sake of it, and all that sort of thing, to appeal, but I think underneath of it all, there is, there is a substantial move as technology develops. I mean just look at, just look at the incredible advances in the power of technology, you know, it's, it's amazing.

[51:50]
And during this period as well, do you think that there should be, as a result of your experience during this period, do you think that there should be some degree of formal requirement on the COI , just as there is a formal requirement on a chief executive, or on the chief financial officer? Should there be some legal requirements?

[pause] That's a very good question. I think I'd say no. Simply because, you look to the CIO to find ways of improving the way you do business, of effecting change, of making your company more competitive. If, if he or she is hidebound in a load of regulations, they're just not going to do that. The whole nature of change, the other word that goes with change is risk, and there's going to be risk. However well you manage it, whatever you do, you're still going to have, there is the risk of change. But you have to have somebody out there, the bridge builder, the bridge builder between the technology and the business, the person who can interpret the latest technology and how you're going to use that effectively in the business. And I think that person has got to have a good deal of freedom to introduce change. And as I say, sometimes, it won't always work.

[53:23]
Talking about not working, you have experience of the private and the public sector for 33 years.

Mm.

And we have some very notable and big failures that are public, in the public sector.

Yes.

Because, they're public and they have to be accountable.

Mm.

You have a great experience in the private sector, and also I'm sure you're a great networker among the other CIOs. Do you think there are as many failures in the private sector as we seem to see in the public sector, in IT projects?

There are more failures in the private sector than we know about. Because, for obvious reasons companies hide them, they don't, they don't sort of parade them. And they don't have people sitting round waiting to, watching for them to fail, which you do in the public sector. And I think, I think, you know, Government has an issue there. But, I think there is, there is much more of a problem in the public sector, and it's all to do with… You know, the difference in the private sector, having experienced both, is, in the private sector it's very simple. Here is the task, apply the technology. If it works, that's OK; if it doesn't, you're fired. And that's a very simple philosophy and I can understand that. Most people can understand that. And it works. In the public sector, no, it's not like that, you know. For a start, when you develop a project, the world and his wife – story, that's a bit of a, I don't mean, you know, that's a bit of a sexist comment I suppose, but, you know, the whole world is going to walk across it, examine every, every aspect of it in the public sector. There are all kinds of checks and balances, and because, because it's, you know, when something fails, the Audit Commission get involved, and all the rest of it, and it all becomes, you know, people don't want that. So I think, it's almost, the failure's more built in because you, you don't say to one person or a team, 'Here is your remit and go away and do it,' and accept that nine times out of ten they'll get it right, and one time out of ten they'll get it wrong. And, and I think that's the problem in the public sector, and that's what holds projects back. And also, the politics of the, of

organisations, you know. I worked with the NHS for, for quite a few years, both within IT and in, you know, policy development, and it's bedevilled by politics. The problem now in the NHS is not, fundamentally not cash, is not about lack of funding; it's about the dire politics that exists, and it's not… and that's politics with a small p. And that makes it very difficult. There are, there are things we could have done in the Health Service by now which would have improved the service to patients, and they haven't been done because of the politics. So, I think it's, I think it is those politics in the public sector that cause the problems. But you mention, but you mention the failures. I would need to say that I think, in more recent years I think the public sector's done rather better than it's been given credit for with its IT developments. I think there are some very successful ones.

[56:35]
You say as a CIO that, you get it right, and if you get it wrong you're fired in the private sector.

Mm.

You weren't fired.

No.

Ever fired.

No.

What's your secret?

[laughs] I think, you… [pause] You have to, you have to make sure you're self-motivated, very determined, and you have to be a good leader of people.

How do you lead people?

Well first of all, if you have the opportunity to select your team, go out and find people that are better than you. And you'll be amazed at how many people feel threatened by that. They'll go out and find people who aren't as good as they are. Why would you do that? You know, if, if I've got to, if I've got to build a network, I want to find somebody who knows more about networking than I do. I don't feel challenged by that, it's great. I'll have a discussion, but I know I've got the good guy for the job. But also, within, creating an environment not only do you try and attract good people, but you create an environment where you, you listen to people, you pay attention to what they're saying, you give them encouragement to develop their ideas. I'm not talking about consensus management. I don't believe in consensus management. You're paid to be a CIO because, you take the rap, you take the responsibility, and it's your job to get it done. Now I think, I think most of the people who worked for me would agree that I used to listen, and then I just say, 'Well, OK, we're going to do it.' You also have to have a faith. I mean I say listen, but, but there was one occasion when we were looking in an organisation to get a universal sign on and so you could get straight into your system, something like that. And this was when this was, was a very new concept, and people used to have to sign into different systems. I said, 'No, I want universal sign on.' And, there was some discussion about it, but I said, 'No, that's what we… We are going to do a universal sign on.' And we did, we developed systems so that we a universal sign on and it all worked smoothly. And afterwards, one of the guys said to me, he said, 'You know, when you said we're going to have a universal sign on, none of us believed we could do it. But none of us was going to tell you. So we went away and did it.' [laughter] And I think that's a, there's a kind of, there's a trick in that too.

[59:08]
So in the year 2000 you left being Vice-President and CIO. You became Chief Executive of CIO Connect.

Yes.

Tell us about CIO Connect.

Right. CIO Connect was the brainchild of several of us who had worked as CIOs. I mean one of the things about CIOs then, I think it's still probably, is less true now, but as technology becomes more ubiquitous, but certainly at that time you were in charge of the black arts department. You were in charge of the black arts department in this great big gaping hole that kept taking money, you know, they just, the board kept pouring money into this thing and you kept going back and saying, 'I need more money, I need more money.' And it didn't make you very popular. And so, we set up this organisation where I used to say, 'This is so that CIOs can come together and huddle together for warmth.' And we used to basically [laughs], enable these people to come together and have discussions about all kinds of issues that they were facing. And, and it, you know, it was incredibly useful. We ended up with, pretty much all the major corporations and Government, all, all represented on this thing. Commercially I have to say it was very successful, because you didn't, the individual didn't join, their organisation joined, and therefore, the membership fee was a lot higher. And we always, we always used to have meetings in all sorts of fun places, you know, that you, the public can't get to and all that sort of thing. So, so there was a whole kind of… You know, these people have huge budgets you know. So, it was, it was actually quite fascinating, pulling this lot together.

What's the significance of the title of CIO, chief information officer? Why not, data processing manager, IT director, or chief technology officer?

Well I think it's, as the, as it's, as the industry has developed, from a user perspective, if you go back to the times of the, you know, when it was essentially an admin function, you'd probably have an IT manager or something like that. And IT was something you managed and then directed. Or, you know, as you say, you'd have a, you know, a technology manager or whatever. The whole emphasis of it changed. The CIO is really concerned about how you deploy the technology for business purposes. They're driven by business considerations. I wasn't… You know, I said about getting a team together. You get good people around you, you certainly get people who understand the detail of the technology. I think it's crucial that the CIO understands technology at a strategic level, but he or she doesn't need to understand the detail of it. But, you know, I think… So I think, I think it's emerged as, as the job has changed, and as people are now very much… And you look at the position, the

position is, tends to be on the board or the top management team reporting into the chief exec, or the chairman or whatever, and that's, the whole thing has changed quite considerably. So it… And, I mean I, I, you know, the last job I did at Merial, last corporate job, you know, I was very much involved in all the management issues facing the company, and, yes, I, I obviously lean on IT, but I'd contribute to all kinds of discussions and, and debates.

[1:02:43]
And in parallel to being Chief Executive of CIO Connect, in 2001 you became consultant adviser to the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency.

Yes, that was fun. Remembering that I, I had worked in the Department of Health, and then I had worked in the pharmaceutical industry, and they were going to introduce… You know, the whole regulatory process, in terms of getting drugs to market, it's a tenure process, it's a very exhaustive process, and there are an awful lot of, research data, papers, everything like that, all have to be considered by that body. And they, they thought the era of paper was coming to an end [laughs], quite reasonably, and they wanted to do all this with technology. Without being rude, they were scared witless. And so, the chief executive asked me, would I come in and advise the board while they went through this process? Which I did. I mean they had, they had their own IT director, but I mean, you know, she was a lady who really hadn't spent, she had a reasonable knowledge of the technology, wasn't immersed in it, and, I think needed a bit of, a bit of assistance you know. So, so that's what I did. So, that was, that was very interesting. And that was very much about the management of change. How did you take a bunch of pretty traditional civil servants and get them to the point where they would embrace all, this screen on their desk, and doing all this stuff in this way, you know, and signing it off. And these were, you know, some of them were doctors and so forth, and how do you get all of them using it? They did.

[1:04:32]
Thank you very much John Handby.

You're welcome.

[pause in recording]

[1:04:37]

And we're back with John Handby, and we're going to look at his personal background, and also his opinion of the state of the industry at the moment and in the future.

John, I understand that one of your grandfathers was a dock worker.

Yes he was. He was. [laughs] Very different kind of life to the one I've enjoyed.

Indeed. What did he do?

Well he actually used to clean out the barges, and I can't believe how tough that must have been. He didn't retire until he was 70, and as a little boy I can remember him walking down the road to his home with a smile on his face. And, you know, that's, I mean that's a reality check for me.

It is indeed. And he was your father's father or your mother's?

Yes, no, my paternal grandfather, yes.

Right. What did your maternal grandfather do?

Right. He was a charge hand in a whisky distillery. Because I'm half Scottish you know. So he was a… So, so yeah, he was, he was a tough old thing, he was, too. I mean he had risen to become a charge hand of a whisky distillery, over the years. But he, that had been a tough, you know, my mother grew up in the Edinburgh tenements. She was always very proud of the fact they were the Edinburgh tenements, not Glasgow tenements, you know. [laughs] But they were still the tenements.

And your parents.

Yes, so, my mother grew up there, and, she had a, you know, a pretty, pretty tough childhood. And, then, she became an office worker until my father turned up. And, the thing about my mother is, she was proudly Scottish, but I notice that she didn't live there after she became 22 and married my father. My father was, my paternal grandparents were living in London, off Shooters Hill, and so my father… My father fancied himself as a bit of a man-about-town. I mean his parents were living in a council house, hadn't got any money, but, you know, he had a silver top cane and all that sort of thing you did in the Thirties. Actually I've still got his silver top cane. And, so… But he became an insurance clerk, and that essentially is what he was during life, you know, he didn't, he didn't rise up. I think he was a bit, a bit of a rebellious spirit, I think that's probably why he didn't rise up the hierarchy, why he remained an insurance clerk.

[1:07:07]

What did your parents tell you, teach you or show you that has helped you in your career?

[pause] A very good question. [pause] Self-sufficiency. You know, like, if I wanted, if I wanted anything more than a very very basic level of pocket money I'd better get out there and earn it. I was earning from the age of, I think about twelve or thirteen I was doing part-time work, which developed over time. So, so kind of, self-sufficiency, self-reliance, don't whinge about anything, just get on with it. My mother, if I went to my mother and thought, I had a problem, or there was some injustice… I mean I can remember going to her, you know, coming back from school and thinking that I had been dealt with harshly, and my mother's reaction was, 'Well I expect you deserved it.' There was never any… You know, when you, when you hear these days about parents going down to the school demanding this, that or the other, my parents were quite the reverse, you know. 'You deserved it I expect.'

Where do you get your determination from?

Both my parents. They were both very determined people. [laughs] Sometimes I would say obstinate, but determined certainly.

[1:08:32]

Where do you think you get your management skills from, in leading people?

Oh. Well I had an early experience, and this was in the days of youth clubs. I belonged to a youth club, and probably, you know, nowadays youth clubs are not what they were, but, in the 1960s youth clubs were really big, big news. And, I was in this youth club which was in danger of folding because the, whoever was the youth leader had decided, you know, was packing up. And I thought, well I don't want this to happen. So, I was the grand old age of nineteen at the time. And so, we decided we'd advertise and get a new influx of youngsters coming into this, and I would take on the job of being youth leader, with a bit of help from my friends. And, it was on a fairly tough council estate actually. And it was a, it was a tremendous introduction to the realities of the world, you know. I mean, when you're faced with, with guys who are bigger than you who, who do not intend you necessarily eternal kindness, you quickly learn psychology. And we had some, we ended up, I think we had about 300 members in the club, we had some big rock bands would come there and play and all that. So it was, it was a highly successful youth club. And I later on met the then coach to the England team, England football team, and we were doing a joint presentation somewhere, this was years later, and we both found we'd had the same history where, as youngsters we had both run youth clubs and found it an enormous help in, in really leading people, and getting, you know, some of those, those kind of fundamental management lessons, you know. How do you, how do you… You know, don't go and ask somebody something. I mean, the youth club was actually, believe it or not, it was actually basically a church youth club; the church was, [laughs] not entirely happy with some of the things we did. But we, one of the things we did at the time, you know, we thought, well we'll do a rock Nativity, and we did, and it went on and it was successful and, you know, and we went on television at the end. But, I remember there was one guy who was a real pain, and he was always causing problems, but he happened to be a chippy. And so, we were, we needed to build scenery for this play. And so I had a conversation with somebody else that I knew perfectly well was within his earshot about the fact that we needed to build scenery, and we hadn't got anybody to do it. And guess what, you know, he built the scenery. And it's, you know, it's that's that kind of thing where you engage people, kind of on their own terms, and you involve them in something.

[1:11:20]

Where and when were you born?

I was born in 1944, July the 15th. When I went over to France and I looked at the, some of the gravestones there, following the D-Day landings, it really brings it home to you that they actually died for you, you know, that you… And you know, and that, it still chokes me up when I think about that. So I was born in 1944, and I was born in Tenterden, in Kent.

And your parents were settled there?

Well, sort of. [laughs] They were there at the time. They moved around a fair bit.

Right. OK. And brothers and sisters?

Yes, one of each. Yes.

What did they do?

My brother, engineer, and he, he ended up kind of, with his own manufacturing business and things, that sort of thing.

And your sister?

And my sister, a teacher.

And they're older or younger than you are?

Brother older, sister younger.

So…

I'm, I'm the, I'm the classic middle child, rebellious, difficult, obstinate, determined. [laughs]

All of those things.

All of those things.

[1:12:37]
Where did you first go to school?

I went to school, Shalford Primary School, which is just outside Guildford.

It's a small village outside Guildford isn't it?

Yah, quite…

And your parents were living there then, in Shalford?

They were there, living there then.

Right, so they had moved from Tenterden to Shalford?

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Quite bucolic, quite…

Well, I mean I, the piece I haven't said is that my father was actually a conscientious objector in the war, so, so rather than out in France fighting or something like that, he was actually working on the land in that time, and so that's why they moved around a bit. And after the war we had, we were, actually we were pretty poor. I mean, we were living in a caravan at that time, when I was at Shalford, and that caravan was, wasn't even on a site, it was in the middle of a wood. And all the water had to be carried in pails from a pump well. So… And we had an Elsan toilet. So I do remember the other end of things as it were. [laughs]

So, Shalford Primary School, and then?

Then the classic grammar school boy, Woking Grammar as it happens.

Woking Grammar. So you passed your Eleven Plus?

Yes I did, yeah. Yah. Yah.

And what did you get from Woking Grammar?

[pause] It was, it was a school that was very focused on discipline and excellence. Very high standards. And, and I, I suppose, I learnt an awful lot from that. You couldn't, you couldn't do second best, you know, you had, you had to be… And, and the teachers there were, I mean people criticise teachers but I actually had some, some incredibly intelligent and dedicated teachers at that time. So… And I'm very grateful to them. In fact some, you know, in my, outside of work my life interests I suppose, I've always loved travel and that sort of thing. I had a wonderful geography master there. And a lifelong interest in history, a marvellous history teacher, you know. And you… These things, they do, they, they carry through.

And you decided to not go to university?

Yes. Yes, I didn't… Back to the rebellious bit, you know, I didn't get on terribly well with my father. [laughs] I was far too rebellious, and I, you know, this seems… It's amazing. Nobody explained to me at the time, in the Sixties, that, that university was all about fun and having a great time. I thought you went to university to work. I was clearly mistaken. But I didn't realise that. And I, at the time I thought I'd like some wheels, and I'd like to be involved with women, you know, and that was, those seemed to be the great priorities. And that meant you had to go out and get a job and get some money. And that also would give me independence from my father. And so those, those were the kind of, that was the thought sequence. So I didn't go to university.

[1:15:30]

So what was your first paid job? You were being paid for odd jobs earlier on, but…

Right. No, so my first… [laughs] You really want to know? My first paid job was, was as a grave digger [laughs], working for the local Council. You know, they just took people on. You were doing maintenance at the big town cemetery, and then you, you know… And then a builder-labourer. And then I became a civil servant.

So, where was the grave, where were the graves?

At Guildford. Yeah, in the big cemetery in Guildford.

Oh right. OK. Yes. And then you became a labourer.

Yes.

On a building site.

Yes.

And you decided, what? This is not the job for me?

No, these were, these were fill-in jobs, these were fill-in jobs.

Right.

And they, they taught you an awful lot about Anglo-Saxon vernacular, but I'm not sure about anything else. [laughs] So, no, and I was applying to go in the Civil Service, yah.

And you got in?

I did.

Was there an exam?

No. I got in on the basis of my A Level qualifications. I didn't have to do an exam at that stage. I did an exam later on, but not at that stage.

And, what was the highest grade that you had in the Civil Service?

I was… Well that's, that's slightly difficult to explain, because, they have, they have titles and then they have numbers. And a permanent secretary is a number one, right, and it comes down from there. So I got to number four, which was not, didn't have a title, it was, you know, it was set as, certain jobs were graded as that. So, so that was when I was at Environment and Transport. That was the highest point, that was a grade four.

Were you an executive officer, or an administrative officer?

We, I got… I said I did… I went in as an executive officer. I had been there a few years when I got fast-streamed, and that was an internal exam system and then interviews and so forth, and I got fast-streamed. And went up, you know, obviously went into the admin class, yah.

[1:17:32]
Do you have an interest in sport?

No.

Not at all?

Not really, no. Formula One, that's about it. Because I like cars, love motorcars, you know.

What cars have you had?

Well in, in… For many years mainly Jaguars.

What's the best car that you've had, in your opinion?

My current car probably.

Which is?

A Bentley. [laughs]

A Bentley. A Bentley Continental?

Yes. Yeah, yah, a Continental GT, which is, quite amazing actually.

Do you think your father would be proud of you, riding around in a Bentley Continental?

[pause] I don't know. I have no idea. [laughs] No idea. [pause] No, I don't know.

[1:18:16]
Do you have children?

I do, yes. Yes. I've got two sons, yah.

And what do they do?

One is in the IT industry. He is a, he programs websites essentially and that sort of thing. And the other one is a technical journalist. And so again, related to the IT industry. He doesn't, he doesn't only do journalism within IT but quite a lot of it has been within IT.

Do they have your determination?

No. No. Interesting isn't it, they don't…

Are you sad about that?

Yes. Yes, they don't have it at all. They're quite different. They're quite different.
It is just, you know, they just don't have the drive.

Where do they get that from?

Probably my ex-wife. [laughs] No, I think there's, there's quite a lot of her family in
their make-up.

[1:19:15]
OK. Now, when you look at the industry nowadays, and particularly at the
application side, the user side, what do you think of it?

Well, obviously, it has changed, it is changing all the time. You look at the, just the
ubiquitous nature of technology now, you know, I, I went through the period when it
was, in the back room, and gradually, you know, and was, admin functions, and
gradually came through to a situation where it was impinging more and more on the,
you know, on the activities of the company. And obviously the technology was
carrying it there, firstly the PC, and then mobile hand-held devices, networks
available, you know, the Internet, the rise of all those things, has changed it quite
dramatically. It's made many things possible that weren't possible. The attitude of
people has changed to it, people, you know, we were talking earlier about people not
wanting change, and that is true of a lot of people, but you, you look at it now and it's
not so much wanting change, it is that, that it's all around you, you can't… It's very
difficult to opt out. And, some people, some people do but most people go along with
the fact that, that the technology's there. So, the industry has changed quite
dramatically. The challenge I think now, currently, in the industry is, is, how do you
make use of some of these technologies in business? You know, social media and all
that sort of thing. And various attempts to harness that for, for business purposes,
how do you do that? And I'm… You know, that, that's not always obvious, and it
hasn't been to companies, they've been, they've been thrashing about a bit on that.
But that's nothing to what's going to come, you know, you…

What is going to come?

I haven't the faintest idea. [laughs] But, well, I say I haven't the faintest idea, I mean you can see the way in which it's, it's obviously going to become more ubiquitous, more embedded. The smaller, faster, cheaper thing is just going to carry on. And not always good. Some of it, some of it is good, you know, you can argue about the merits or demerits of social media and things like that, but that's just the beginning. You then start looking, you look, in defence terms you look at cyber warfare and you look at what is happening now, and it's not just, it's not just warfare, it's just like, pinching commercial secrets and all sorts of stuff. You look at miniaturisation, and what that's going to mean on the battlefield, I mean, there are things… I don't think the future's necessarily going to be good. I mean technology is neutral, and it's about how we use it. And, in a sense, you know, if you had a big IBM centralised mainframe, you kind of knew where it was, and you had some chance of controlling it. The more it becomes smaller, embedded, and all the rest of it, it's everywhere; how do you, how do you control that? So, so I think there are some, some issues there. And, what society makes of it in the future, I don't know. Well, you know, you can argue the Internet… Marshall McLuhan used to argue, back in the Seventies, about the global village, and, and I used to scratch my had a bit and, you know, I thought I was a fairly good strategic thinker, but I wasn't quite sure what he was on about. Well now we all know. Because you can, you know, how many friends and relations do you have around the world that you communicate with by technology, just regularly, on, you know, whether it's Facebook, whether it's email, whatever it is, it's so much easier. Just, the way in which you can, you can speak to people on the phone in any part of the world. I mean that, that seems old hat to young people now, but it wasn't old hat when I was a kid, you know. There's been a tremendous change in these things.

I shouldn't think you had a phone in your caravan.

Absolutely not. Oh no, the phone, no, you went down the road to the call box, you know, if you, on the very few occasions you ever made a phone call. I mean it was just…

[1:23:28]

Do you think the robots will take over?

[hesitates] Yah, I'm inclined to think they might actually.

How do we stop that?

[pause] I don't know. I don't know. I'm not sure that, I'm not sure we human beings are bright enough to do it. Human beings are very naïve, incredibly naïve about lots of things. And certainly in democratic societies, incredibly naïve. Not vigilant enough about doing things to protect society, I don't think. And so, I don't think… I, I think there is a real concern about alien life, you know – sorry, not alien, artificial life forms, taking over. I think that's quite, I think that's quite possible.

[1:24:10]

You say you love history.

Mm.

If you didn't live in this period, what period would you like to live in?

[pause] Probably the Napoleonic period, or the Jane Austen period, however you want to describe it. That sort of time, early 1800s.

Why would that be?

Because, there's a wonderful romanticism about it. I am a romantic, amongst other things. I mean I'm a great fan of Jane Austen. And, which is probably odd; most blokes aren't. I mean, I'm also in touch with my feminine side, [laughs] as I tell my wife from time to time. She's not sure about that. But anyway… [laughs] I think, I think it's… I'm fascinated by the Navy of that time, and the Army, you know, people like Nelson and Wellington and that, I mean, amazing what they achieved. I'm fascinated by the depiction of life by people like Jane Austen, because there is a lovely romanticism that runs through it. And you know that for most people it wasn't

like that, and we've already discussed my family background, so it wasn't like that for my family. You have to go a long way back with my family, if you go back far enough, we did have money, but we lost it all when the wool trade collapsed, you know. But, you know, so, I don't know, I think, I think that's a, that's a lovely period. I don't think I'd want to go back, I wouldn't want to go back to mediaeval times, that was, mediaeval times, that was just brutal and violent, and just horrible, the levels of intolerance and all the rest of it. Dreadful. But if you take, if you take the eighteenth and into the early nineteenth century, you sort of, the Age of Enlightenment and all that sort of stuff, it's fascinating.

Do you have a fascination with war?

No. No. No, but I, I mean, I'm… I find, I find military history interesting, yah. I don't know, I wouldn't say I had a fascination with it.

What would you say was the impact of your father being a conscientious objector in the Second World War on you?

[pause] I was a member of CND when I was sixteen. [laughs] And so… But I, I, I didn't, I don't agree with him, you know, I mean, I've never, I respect his views but I don't agree with them. I... [pause] I don't, I don't know that it's had a big effect on me. I, there are several things. You know, when I was young, I don't, I don't want to go on about this but you… My parents… You know, so, living in this caravan without a lot of money, and with not very many good clothes, and my father being a conscientious objector in the war, and they didn't vote either Labour or Conservative, so, in the school playground when the Election came up, 'Are you voting Labour or Conservative?' you know, and your parents, you know, all the issues in *Lord of the Flies* apply. If you're different, you'd better learn how to fight. And I think that's… And so you talk about where my determination comes from, I think that's part of the determination. If you're different, you've got to, you've got to be prepared to defend yourself. Because, *Lord of the Flies* was a very accurate portrayal of the way children are.

[1:27:50]

So you're focused. You're determined.

Mm.

You're in your early seventies.

Mm.

How do you keep boredom at bay?

[pause] Well believe it or not, having, as I said, been in CND when I was sixteen, I am now Chairman of the Patrons Club for the Herefordshire Conservative Association. [laughs] Which is, which is, as they say, is a bit of a journey. It's a bit of a contrast. We're also, my wife and I, very enthusiastic gardeners. And I'm now, part of the historical thing is, I love old buildings, so, I'm chairman of the fundraising committee for our local church which is 800 years old and a Grade I listed building down by the River Wye. And, I've just been made a trustee of the Herefordshire Historic Churches Trust, so, look after more churches and, give grants to keep them together and so forth.

Are you interested in churches because they're buildings and they're historic, or because of what goes on inside them?

Because of the first, because they're buildings and they're historic. No, I'm not religious. It's a bit of a joke locally, you know, [laughs] people who know me, that I'm doing this. I'm not remotely religious. I think religion of all kinds has got a lot to answer for.

Thank you very much John Handby.

Thank you.

[End of Interview]