Bob Harvey

Interviewed by

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Welcome to the Archives of Information Technology. It's the 28th of November 2017, and we're in London, at the BCS offices. I'm Jonathan Sinfield, an IT professional and interviewer with Archives of IT. Today I'm talking to Bob Harvey.

During Bob's early career at Ferranti, he worked with Stan Gill, famous for his work at Cambridge in development of the EDSAC 1 programming system, and Conway Berners-Lee, an English mathematician and computer scientist, who worked as a member of the team that developed the Ferranti Mark 1, the world's first commercial stored program electronic computer. Conway is the father of Tim Berners-Lee, the inventor of the World Wide Web. After Ferranti, Bob joined the Wellcome Foundation as a systems and programming manager. Subsequently he worked with Unilever for 22 years, and the children's charity Barnardo's for fifteen years as IT director. In 2012 Bob was elected President of the BCS. Welcome Bob.

[01:12]

Morning Jonathan. Yes, going right back to those very early days, I did a maths degree, and, those days sandwich degrees meant you did six months in uni, and six months in industry. I was very fortunate in getting placements in Ferranti Computer Services, which gave me a real taste of what programming and the IT world was like, but also, made me realise that this was something that I was thoroughly enjoying, and finding very stimulating. It's probably worth saying that I am dyslexic, and that had caused me quite a challenge up to that point in exams and getting the grades I needed at school. So, at the end of the time with Ferranti, they had indicated that, hopefully they would take me on the permanent staff. Unfortunately, they were up for sale, something that's gone on through all the decades in the computing industry, and they could not take any more new employees. So I got a job with Wellcome Foundation as Systems and Programing Manager. We started with an ICT 1202, which was really a development from a card reader type machine with drum storage, and complexity, that you had to store things in the right place on this drum, et cetera. That developed in getting one of the early 1900s, and we very much focused on stock control as being a pharmaceutical company, forward planning, and all the obvious office routines.

[02:41]

Mm. Thank you Bob. What I would really like to do is take you back even further than that. So perhaps you could tell our listeners when and where you were born.

Indeed. I was born in Woodford in Essex in 1941. Dad was seconded down to a ammunitions factory, or munitions factory I should really call it, in South Wales, so, in late 1941 my mother and I joined him down there, into a brand new bungalow that had been put up so that all these extra workers had homes. And we stayed down there until the end of 1945, when we returned to London, going then to Petts Wood in south-east London/Bromley Borough.

Mhm.

After that, I went to a local primary school, followed on then by a secondary school, St Dunstan's, Catford, which is one of the lesser public schools, but I wasn't there as a fee-payer, at that stage Kent County Council used to pay for quite a lot of the places. That took me through to struggling to get, as I said, I am dyslexic, to A Levels, maths and higher maths. But a good example of where it affected me was, dyslexia in English. It took me five goes to get my O Level, and in the end I had had to treat it like a mathematical problem.

Mhm. And, yes, at that juncture in time, probably dyslexia not recognised in the same way it is today.

It wasn't even recognised, it wasn't… All it was, he isn't working hard enough, and, looking at the work et cetera, you know.

[04:20]
So, so you mentioned St Dunstan's College. And you say… Your A Level subjects that you did there?

Well maths and higher maths. And we were very lucky to have Dr Geoffrey Matthews, who was one of the innovators in those days of how you taught mathematics, and he very much I think encouraged a lot of us to think spatially,

outside the traditional way of doing things. And that probably was some of the grounding in my own thinking that affected my whole career thereafter.

Mhm. And, at St Dunstan's College, happy memories, and…?

Happy memories. I actually used to retreat to the craft shop, because I thoroughly enjoyed working with wood and making things. Although nowadays there isn't the time for that sort of thing.

[05:11]
And, and you mentioned your, your parents. Just, I say myself, for completeness. You knew your grandparents as well?

Yes.

What occupations were…?

It's interesting, I think, to look at that. You look at a sort of, family set-up. My father's parents were both teachers, I knew them both well, used to go and stay there. My mother's parents, grandmother then, never worked after my mother was born, those were the days where the mother stayed at home. As did my own mother. But Grandfather was head gardener of an estate in Leicestershire, which fell on hard times, the estate did, and of course that affected his whole life.

[06:00]
Right. Well thank you for that. And, now taking you back to school. You took your, your A Levels, which presumably was a two-year course.

Two-year course.

Yes. And then what happened after A Levels?

Two-year course, then, interesting, I had hoped to go into the furniture industry, because of my interest in wood et cetera. That course was cancelled. So I ended up going to Chelsea College of Advanced Technology to study maths with statistics.

Mhm. And, was that a three-year course, or, or what?

It was interesting. It was the very early days of sandwich courses, but, no long holidays for the way that course was structured, two terms in uni, third term and the summer holiday in placement, for each of the four years. That's where I started to get involved with Ferranti.

[06:55]
Mhm. And, yes, you were involved with Ferranti, a leading light at that juncture in time in what we would today call the information technology business. How did that relationship come about?

That came about quite simply by, a student placements member of staff finding Ferranti would take at least one, I don't think there were any more from Chelsea College, student placements. I thoroughly enjoyed it, very culturally, nice people in a very real sense, to work with, very helpful. And, that was the beginning of the journey.

Right. And so you had several stints at…

Ferranti.

…Ferranti, as part of your, as you say, what subsequently we called it, a sandwich course as it were.

Yes.

[07:50]
And… So… And it's there that you, you met Stan Gill and Conway Berners-Lee.

Yes. I think, Stan Gill I looked up to in awe. And it's interesting, doing this interview in the Stanley Gill Room, and sadly, as everybody knows, he died early, he didn't live for many years. Conway Berners-Lee was very much guiding me and others in how to do programming. But we were also left to do our own thing.   The computer I was using, the Sirius, which is one that is long since forgotten. And I well remember we couldn't find what was wrong with one program, so the only solution was to actually, put the program in, make all the parity checks on the machine, and that meant going round the back of the computer and pulling out the cards and pushing them back in again. And then try to run the program. That found where the problem was. Things were very different then.

Mhm. So, to be very clear. You had, I say, a one-to-one involvement with both, both, well both Stan and…

Yes. Mainly Conway. Stanley was more held in awe as somebody I would always look up to.

[09:05]
Yes. Yeah. And, it's rare that we have an opportunity to interview people who, who have worked with such, such renowned individuals. What were the, how would you describe them and, and their style of management or helping to develop someone like yourself, a youngster, you know, just starting out in his IT career?

I, my memory of it, and it is a long time ago now, more than half a century, is very much encouraging me to do things, not rules and regulations that you would find in traditional business, but very much, this is the task we've got to do, and encourage one to solve it, and helping where appropriate.

Right. And you mentioned Ferranti's Sirius computer, which I think was, what, first released in 1961. But, held in good regard at that time for its price/performance ratio I understand.

Yes. I think in actual fact the truth more was probably, the salesman decided on a price that was less, I believe, than the cost of manufacturing the computers.

Mm.

My one sadness at that stage, having worked on Sirius, which was not a valve machine, in the same computer room in Newman Street, Ferranti's, was a Pegasus, and I never actually worked on a valve machine. My only regret.

Right. OK. Because that used… Well, am I right in saying, that used decimal arithmetic rather than binary?

That's a question. It's difficult to remember. Because we did in actual fact go down to binary level if we had to.

Oh. OK.

But, I think it was, in terms of programming more than decimal. We were beginning to move away from absolutely everything was being done in simplistic code.

[11:07]
Mm. Well thank you for that. So, so you're… You obtain your degree from Chelsea, Chelsea College.

Yes.

Yup. And… So… You already alluded to the fact that, unfortunately at that juncture in time there were no permanent roles there at Ferranti.

Yes. And my plan had been… I thoroughly enjoyed the placements in Ferranti. The idea was to go there and get a permanent post. Unfortunately Ferranti had been put up for sale, and consequently, they were under a ruling of taking on no employees extra. Consequently, I looked around at the local opportunity, and Wellcome foundation in Dartford at that stage were in need of, effectively a team leader. At the age of sort of 22, I don't know how much I was really good at team leading, or more, just understood technology. Their computer was very much of the old first generation, an

ICT based on the 1200 series, 1202, where you had drums that you had to program, very much took you right back to basic thinking of the industry. A good grounding for a couple of years, before we then moved on to the 1900 series, one of the very early 1900s. That was in Euston Road, the head office, that that was positioned.

Right. And just, I know, I realise that some of our listeners will, will know about this, but the… I think in the, in the Fifties, and I know that's before you started at the Wellcome Foundation, the ICT 1200 was one of the UK's best-selling computers by volume at that juncture in time.

Yes, I can understand that. Because it was a very good transition. Although it was a computer, it carried forward a lot of the thinking of, punch card machines, sorters, collators, et cetera, and plug boards. So that was a, a good link for people as they moved forward. And that probably helped its sales. Plus good selling by ICT.

And then, ICT, which subsequently became ICL, produced the 1900, which you say was, was adopted by the Wellcome Foundation.

Yes. Well you had a mixture. We had the 1202, and a lot of punch card systems. They were in London. And we decided we'd transition it all over time to a 1900.

[13:44]
You spent five years at the Wellcome Foundation, from '62 through to '67, 1967.

'63.

Oh sorry, '63 through to '67. And then you chose, chose to move on.

Yes, indeed. Both my parents had worked for Unilever. Dad was still working for Unilever at that stage. And, what I knew was, from various friends, Unilever culture was very much the Anglo, and is still to this day, the Anglo-Dutch culture of caring for people. Also they had established a few years previously a computer services centre known as Blackfriars Computer Services, in Unilever head office, doing a lot of work there. And I got a job there as a project manager in the middle of '67.

Mhm. So Unilever, one of the largest companies in Europe, and still today operating in several hundred countries throughout the world. And you designed what was called… Sorry. You joined UCSL, Unilever Computer Services Limited, which was providing services both to Unilever companies and outside, or…?

Yes. Let's give a bit of the evolution there.

Yup.

[15:07]
I joined Blackfriars Computer Services in '67. In '69/70, the decision was made to bring Blackfriars Computer Services and the computing unit from SPD, which was a transport company, within Unilever group. But also did a lot of computing for people like Bird's Eye Foods, and, Van den Bergh's and other companies, brought together into Unilever Computer Services as a group, wholly-own subsidiary service company. That meant the whole unit grew in size. We had activities in Unilever House and in Watford, and subsequently Stonebridge Park, but we were servicing across the whole Unilever group. Unilever companies always had then a choice, did they do their own computing in-house, or do they use the group services facility? So we had to compete for work, and, actually do it on a cost-effective basis. Lots of very different experience with different types of companies. Things like food flavours, perfumery companies, animal feed companies, doing all sorts of systems.

[16:22]
And during your, your time at UCSL, the decision was made to concentrate on core areas by, by the head office at the time, and they decided to, to sell on UCSL

Yes. This is… Through the… We were steadily building up a business in computing. We had gone into computing for non-Unilever companies. Two reasons. One to make more money, but also to prove that we were competitive in the open market. And that was during the 1970s, when the whole name of the game was basically, sharing of capacity on very large computers, so computer centres. A little bit like the cloud is nowadays. Things go around, come round. Unilever was selling

off dozens of its, what it called its non-core companies, so those are the main non-food, be it human or animal food, companies. And we were one of the very last. We were up for sale for many months. EDS looked at us in the May, and went away again because they became acquired by GM. And then, in the December, very rapidly, Unilever sold UCSL to EDS, to form the core of a UK English company for EDS, and that basically was the end of Unilever's culture, and was the evolution into an America style culture. Very different, very interesting, one learnt a lot.

So this was EDS's first acquisition in, in Europe at that, at that time.

Well, they… It's interesting. As I said, they had been acquired by GM, and as part of the GM acquisition they acquired all the GM computer units, but beyond that, they had had a couple of contracts in the UK, one in the banking world, and, they really wanted to form a UK business. So we had a very interesting culture. You had got 300 people ex-GM based out in the factories of Vauxhall cars as they were then, and you'd 300 ex-UCSL; 100 expats from the States were brought over. So we had this very strong Texan type culture come in, which was very very different from the Unilever culture.

Mhm.

[19:00]
I worked quite happily in it, but was still… As you go through your forties, you begin to grasp a bit of, well what's life all about? The IT world has always paid well, never grumble about that. But I really wanted to produce something that wasn't just profit. So by the middle of… Let's get the years right. '69. No. Let's get it right. I don't want to get the years wrong. So by '89, I went to a small start-up consultancy group, Diagonal, where I knew the principal well, but… He was ex-PE. But, basically, a recession came. I spent 22 months there, thoroughly enjoyed it, but, and it was a very good contrast, getting back to a true English company after EDS, but very much I was still looking for a job in life with maybe the thought of working a few more years. Interestingly, in Unilever I would have retired at 55. When EDS took over UCSL they moved the retirement age back to the normal retirement age.

Right. Which would have been 65.

Exactly.

[20:16]
Yes. So… So, perhaps you can advise our, our listeners, when did EDS actually take over UCSL approximately?

It was December '84.

'84. So, then you had a further five years under, if you like, the EDS umbrella. You've talked about different culture. You talked about Unilever being a, if I understood you correctly, a caring organisation.

Oh very much so.

Presumably, for their staff and the stakeholders are they?

Very much caring, where EDS were in it to make the money. And I think the sort of differences I noticed was, with Unilever, we would think about how we were going to do something, think about the consequences at the end of that project, if this happened or that or the other happened, how we dealt with those situations. With EDS, you just got on with a project, and you just kept course-correcting, put your foot in the water, change, change and change again. Very very different. And the whole approach to people. People were much more a commodity to be used, where Unilever was a caring, paternal organisation. And it still is to this day.

[21:35]
Yeah. And thinking about that, what, almost, fifteen years effectively, UCSL, and then a further five at EDS. If we take UCSL, and the EDS stage. Can you think of one particular project that, from both those periods that sticks in your, in your mind? If we take UCSL first.

Yes. In UCSL, I had got the job of project managing Unilever Plc accounting system replacement. And that was very interesting, because, we were really grappling. That was the days where storage was basically box storage, was tape, not disks as we would think of it now. It's so, so different. So, we devised a system with double passes of tapes every night, to actually enable us to store the amount of data required. That was an eighteen months project. It went very well, and really stood the test of time, carrying on for many years. And that really got me into major project management and culture change. And in those days… That's typical of Unilever. They didn't just have the client use a project manager; he was given two assistants to make sure there was adequate resource to do the job thoroughly professionally.

Mhm. And how much, in terms of project management, compared with project management today, how much emphasis was on return on investment at that juncture in time?

I think it wasn't so much return on investment. What we were looking at, and remembering that the IT industry has always had a mixed quality of output from its systems, was really making sure that we delivered the systems that helped the operating companies in Unilever and head office departments achieve their objectives. It was their judgement of whether the investment was valid or not. Our aim was to make sure they really were… Things like animal feed systems. We had two Unilever companies, one BOCM Silcock – sorry, BOCM, the other Silcock. They were separate companies, Unilever group, highly competitive with each other. We were looking after the IT for both companies, doing feed formulation. The only stipulation was that the two teams were not allowed to mix and talk about what they were doing from the other company. But that's where the benefits and return on investment was very much, with those operating companies, that they got the right value out of what they were investing.

Right. So, definite Chinese walls then.

Oh very much a Chinese wall. And, it worked well.

[24:18]

OK. Again, that period, is there… If you could look back over that time, is there anything you would have done differently, and if so, so why?

Can you just put it on hold for a moment?

[pause in recording]

I think if I'd have done anything differently, I would have focused more on how my career developed. But as you will see, I moved through in UCSL right through to senior management in Unilever terms. So I had got to the ultimate goal I had set myself by the time I was in my fortieth year. That would have been the only thing that I would have probably done differently. But because I tend always to focus on delivering what's got to be delivered, and, my own benefits come as a secondary aspect to what goes on.

[25:04]

Mhm. And now looking at the five years you were with EDS. Perhaps you would like to pick up a, tell us about one particular project in that time that sticks out in your mind, whether it be successful or, or not so.

Well I think, one of the… It was a minor part of another project. We had a bank, investment bank, in Japan. We decided that we would in actual fact do the computing in the UK, and we would put together a network for remote access from Japan. That was a good example of EDS selling something, then we had to actually work out how to make the network work, connecting cross the Indian Ocean, early days of satellites. We did in the end succeed. But that was a good example of where projects were not fully thought through before the actual deal had been done with the customer.

Right. OK.

I don't think I'll be sued now. [laughs]

[26:15]

Thank you for that. Would you say that there are lessons from, that you learnt during your education, your early days, that benefited you for your time at Unilever?

I think the thing that I really learnt was the whole way of thinking from Dr Matthews in the sixth form and in the early years there at school, where he really encouraged us not to work within the boundaries that were the obvious boundaries, but to think spatially about everything we were looking at. A good example he had done for teaching was, instead of there being dozens of formulae we had to learn about various things, he scaled the whole thing right down. So very much, think differently, think outside the box. And that influence is with me to this day.

[27:05]
Thank you. And as you mention, you moved on from EDS, and joined Diagonal..

I joined Diagonal. The group CEO and some of the other directors I knew well, and thought, this is a good opportunity. What I hadn't really sensed was the effect of a recession. I had a good time there for, just on two years. But it caused me again to reflect on, what's life about. And I was really looking for somewhere to work where the end product wasn't just the profit, albeit it was a very good post-EDS, getting back to a British, UK type culture company. The company developed well in that two years, despite the recession, and subsequently, about, when it was about five, six years old, it was duly sold.

[27:58]
Right. And after Diagonal, you joined…

Well, I went to Barnardo's. And this is really where, life was quite different. I'll start… I went to Barnardo's. I could retire at the age of 60, so I knew I had got ten years and ten days to precise to my retirement. I got there. I knew it was in a very much simplistic state. It was part of internal audit, but the agreement was that, it would become separate within a few months. They had six IT staff. The philosophy had been, if you use supplier A, or technology A, for one system, you wouldn't use that for the next system, or the third or the fourth system. So when I got there, I found that we had a payroll being run on a four-weekly cycle, offset from the financial

accounts on another four-weekly cycle by two weeks. You can guess trying to run a mega charity with your payroll not coinciding with your financial accounts. They were both bureau operations, separate bureaux. We had got a, regional fundraising systems, which were based on minicomputers, one in each of the regions, with another company involved with the software. We'd then gone for a central fundraising system for those fundraising; that was done by a company putting it on a prime computer. So you had got this complete mishmash. And, children's services… And just to remind people. Barnardo's is all about caring for children and young people. And children's services had thought, let's try and be really the leading edge in how we use computing to record what we do with children and young people, on a case by case basis. So they bought a couple of PCs, nothing to do with a central IT function, and were piloting this. They hadn't gone live, they had written a few programs. That's what I inherited. We then realised that the world of the PC with a printer was things that lots of children's services projects, which were well over 300, wanted.

[30:30]

So one of our very first steps, to try and bring some sense into what was a desperate set of different approaches… Incidentally, if you wanted to have electronic typing, you had to have, an Olivetti typing machine was electronic. That was the policy. So we scrapped that policy pretty quickly, and we offered projects a PC and a printer. Those went in like wildfire. So, the demand was there. Now the key was how to harness all that potential. Jumping on about three years. We had grown the IT department, and, there was no real restrictions; as long as I kept within budget constraints and we were delivering the goods, that's what mattered. So we developed a major corporate approach to children's services. Great believers in Barnardo's, because of the very nature of the work with children. You're trying to improve the lives of children; you may not always work the first time. So it had a real culture of piloting things. So we got going on a good, long-term project to pilot recording of work for children and young people. That was one thread. The next thread we tackled was, what do we do in parallel? This was about all these growth of computers on a national basis, Barnardo's operating out of nearly 400 sites at that stage, where there were groups of staff, a lot more home-based workers. Incidentally, Barnardo's was turning over somewhere in excess of £200 million at that stage, employing about, 5,000 staff. Not a small operation.

[32:21]

The next area we tackled then was, how do we start to develop email and networking?
So we went with…. Oh, the PCs, we put WordPerfect on, because, at that stage, in
1991, that was the preferred, Microsoft were dominant, dominant. We then put in
Novell servers on something like 200 sites, and connected those all back to the centre.
The centre evolved progressively into digital equipment. We didn't go down the IBM
route. ICL of course had ceased to exist by that stage. But basically, then we evolved
on again, so on a fifteen-year- period, you've got several evolutions. So that we
evolved to having the second generation of childcare system, having learnt from the
first one. We developed the fundraising systems. We had obviously rationalised
everything back to central servers. And, the endgame was, that everything was stored
at the centre. There were no file servers left anywhere across the country; everybody
had access straight through to central systems. And that provided us, using Microsoft
technology, a well-justified, I'll say well run, why I say well run, we had a new group
CEO, about six months before I retired, and his comment to me was, and he had been
previously the head of the Prison Service for the Government, 'This is very well run
IT. This is one thing I do not need to bother about doing anything with.'

Mm.

Which was a real accolade, you know. That was nearing retirement. But, we'd gone
and we'd brought payroll in, we'd put in financial systems. We'd gone through the
whole gambit. We resourced IT up to 150 across the UK. We brought that back
down to just over 200, just over 100. As we rationalised the servers, we got rid of the
need for support. Everything could be in Barkingside.

[34:42]
Mhm. And IT spend, approximately?

IT spend was running, I think from memory, about £9 million when I retired.

Right, yes.

It was actually interesting, nearly £2 million when I joined them in fragmented systems. It was very uneconomic.

Right. Is there any rationale in the fragmented systems when you, when you joined?

Yes, there was a rationale. It was part of audit. It was about risk reduction. [both laugh]

So, risk was considered but not reward.

Exactly. [laughs]

[35:14]
OK. Right. You mentioned a couple of systems in there. Some of our listeners won't necessarily be familiar in these particular areas. But you, you said about, childcare systems, and you talked about one system and then it evolving to another. So is that a system that would record interaction between…

Yes. This records… Basically, a large amount of care work is done by one-to-one or one-to-groups, but mainly one-to-one. So it actually records all the details about that session that are pertinent, particularly clearly setting objectives, recording those objectives, so that the next time when they meet with that child or young person, they can then see how they've progressed against those objectives. It also records all the other contact information about the social workers, the parental situation, or foster parents, and everything. So you've got a complete record of that child. This enabled us, as Barnardo's, to be ahead of all the competition in our quality of children's services work.

Presumably, prior to this, was either disparate systems, or paper system.

Or, nothing recorded.

Ah, yes. So, dramatic effect, in terms of the service that Barnardo's were able to deliver.

Correct.

[36:47]

And, and you also talked about fundraising systems.

Yes. With fundraising, Barnardo's had over the, whatever, 100 years of existence, got into fundraising in many different ways. So you'd have your central mailing out sort of things we all receive now through the post. You got your legacies. But you also got a lot of local appeals going on. You got shops selling, as they still do to this day, donating goods. More recently you've got people stop you on the street to get you to give regularly, say, £3 a month. So, what was vital is to have a very efficient record of all these different activities, particularly as obviously, cross-selling between one method of fundraising, once you had got the person's detail, and another, particularly using postal mail-outs, was a key way of getting growth.

[37:46]

Mhm. Do you… I don't know if this would have come into your area, but, as you were putting the fundraising system in, were you able to see, or was Barnardo's able to see, the tangible benefit in that in terms of, donations?

I, I think we both saw tangible benefit, and we knew that if we did not run efficient fundraising systems, we were not being efficient as a charity in obtaining those funds. And then of course in the children's services work, the spending of funds, it's probably worth saying that, for every pound of donated money we spent in children's services, we used to originally get a pound from local authority social work grants et cetera, Lottery funds. That steadily increased as we were recognised as a good place for organisations to give money to.

[38:41]

So, and thinking about the wider charity sector, when you joined, when you retired, and perhaps even today.

OK. Let's take the sector as a whole.

Yup.

When I joined in '91, there was very little computing going on. What was going on was of very poor standard. One national charity had got a, I won't say which one it is for obvious reasons, had got a major fundraising system they were trying to put in which had to be totally scrapped. And think, that was donated money being given for investing in that charity's work. What we also found, I particularly found, is that, the attitude of suppliers to charities was not healthy. 'Oh it's only a charity. We don't need to bother to do that properly.' Or, giving charities a load of junk equipment, companies used to do, that they would have to pay for getting rid of as scrap, they give it to a charity, thinking the charities could use this. We became very shrewd, making sure if we were offered anything, we got them to tell us its age, what it was. And always, virtually without exception, declined the offer. But it was, back in '91 it was a very underdeveloped market for the IT industry. Gradually we began to get a generation of competent IT managers in the charity sector. Probably around the mid-Nineties we formed a charity IT user group, which began to get cohesion. We'd meet regularly, we'd share what was going on. And, by the time I retired, after fifteen years in the sector, because I did stay more than the ten years, I stayed till I was 65, at the request of the charity, the sector was beginning to become quite professional, and really had been matured a lot more than just the fifteen years I had worked in it.

[41:06]
Mhm. Are there any particular obstacles you came across at Barnardo's that had to be overcome? We're talking about, I think, a change of culture almost from an IT perspective, but…

Yes. I think what was very interesting, Barnardo's had three cultures within it. I had got used to different cultures fortunately between Unilever and EDS, so I began, then back to Diagonal. You had a care culture in children's services. You had a hard selling culture in fundraising. And then in what we were part of, corporate services, where we had HR, property, finance and IT. We were seen as the service to the other two units.

Mhm.

So there were definite cultural gaps. And I had to learnt two things very quickly.
First of all, if you had a meeting children's services, people used to quietly tip the
wink, 'We don't expect to make any decisions Bob. We just go and talk about
things.' That was one. And the other was that, if you had a meeting about, say,
fundraising in the morning, where you would be really focused on a very sharp type
culture, and you had one in children's services in the afternoon, you had to completely
change the way you worked.

*Mhm. So your knowledge of what was probably called internal politics was greatly
improved.*

Oh yes. [laughs]

Knowing who you're speaking to is always a good, a good start.

Oh it is. But it was very real, that difference.

Yup.

That did over time change, as the whole organisation became more a single culture,
recognising each other's differences.

[42:50]
*Mhm. Now, I asked this question re your time in Unilever, so I'll ask the same about
your time at Barnardo's. What key decisions, positive and negatives, you made, and
what difference did that make?*

I think, a number of the things, and obviously over a long period of leadership there
one was making a series of decisions, the first thing, I always used to try and make
sure that we were in, this year we would be planning what we were going to do next
year, so as that we got that delivered by year three, to get the benefits going through to
the charity. So there was what I called sort of, two- to three-year planning window

going on. That proved very beneficial, particularly with the evolution of technology, and where we could make substantial cost savings, like getting rid of all local file servers, and going to a central document management system, by having a key playing. That was one thing I think. The second thing that I remember, to grow IT rapidly, one obvious way was to bring in a considerable number of student, ex-students, just had their degree, or two or three years into graduating. They proved a very good workforce, as long as you gave them adequate, mature management by bringing in a number of experienced people. But we got… And we did manage to very successfully develop them into senior roles over a fifteen-year period, people that started as a graduate, and were holding senior management roles by the end of the fifteen years. Another significant thing, developing people. Which I, incidentally, always believed very strongly. The next thing I remember is very much the way in children's services we did achieve what we set out to do, which was, to really record the work with children and young people, and thus the benefits. And the fourth, and the last one, for every pound I saved on purchasing hardware or software, that freed up that pound for work on children and young people. So, within the culture of being ethically correct, but being pretty hard-nosed, I was quite ruthless sometimes about what I was prepared to pay for for services of hardware and software, but the one thing I never skimped on was buying in quality professional staff, and consultants.

[45:19]

Right. And you, you mentioned there the importance of development of staff under you. You've talked in this interview about how you started with a relatively small organisation, a very small organisation, IT-wise; grew it up to 100, 100 staff plus. So, it would be good perhaps if you could share with our listeners how you, go into a bit more detail about how you developed key colleagues in your organisation.

Yes.   Probably about four to five years in, we decided we needed… We were developing by trainee course et cetera. But to adopt the BCS system of classifying people into various grades, all the way, the industry model, from level one to level eight. That was one thing. We brought in in the standard BCS model. We also made it clear that staff could go through the grades of that model, depending on their own ability of competence and delivery. So up to level five, they would get promoted and the salary benefits of that, which was taking them up project manager level, without

having to wait for dead man's shoes. That really enabled us to bring through the more capable people quickly.

Mm.

And we found that the BCS system was absolutely first class, and, although a relatively small unit, it really helped us.

[47:57]
Mhm. And, you're mentioning in the interview BCS for the first time. Do you remember when you, when you joined the BCS?

Yes. I joined BCS, I think it was the May of 1963, thinking that, well, I've graduated, I'm going into the IT world; maybe BCS will mean something. Well, looking back over those, is it 50-something odd years now, BCS has come on in incredible leaps and bounds. I mean things… It was just a BCS membership then; we've had fellows, we've had chartered IT professionals, we've done a lot towards that. The only one thing that I sense is that in the last five years our membership numbers have plateaued, and, it's quite ironical, our local Sussex Branch was, collapsing. And a number of people persuaded me to stand as chair at an EGM we had earlier this year, to really try and get this back on its feet. And it's absolutely fascinating, when you're back at the ground floor of an organisation, looking in on it, and what we could and should be doing to really facilitate the growth of engagement at the level, branch level.

Mhm.

So, I started in '63. I went to a number of local branch meetings in Kent. And then my interest waned, until I joined Barnardo's. And the one problem I found in Barnardo's was that you had no other senior IT colleagues around you. You were at the top of a pyramid. So, after two or three years I joined BCS Elite, which is an SG aimed at the IT director field. I found that extremely helpful. And was on the committee there for a number of years. I kept my head below the parapet when new chairs were being looked for. But then, on retirement, and somebody at BCS had

clearly made a note of when I was due to retire, within three weeks I got an email asking me to do… Actually it was a paid job. I turned it down. I then, a few weeks later, got another email, would I become chair of the new Ethics Forum? And that was the beginning of a journey which will come to the end in the next AGM, 2018, when I finish as independent adviser to the Trustee Board. So, I've gone all the way through, worked my way up. And now, as I've already said, I'm back at the grassroots as a, Sussex Branch Chair. BCS also did, worth me saying, that, eight and a half years ago I sadly lost my wife, so, it was something that I had got the time and opportunity to get involved with.

[49:57]
Mhm. And you mentioned, I think, past your retirement from Barnardo's, the first main group you were involved with was the Ethics Group, and carbon footprint?

Yes. The first thing, I took over as… We were forming forums at that stage. I led the Ethics, and we then got asked, would we look at the carbon footprint implications, what should we be doing as an institute about it? And, we then set up a working party, with some eternal consultants who were not being paid, but out of it they developed software to start to monitor and trend carbon footprints. What was interesting, this was a time when the Government thought, it was the fashionable thing, carbon footprints, how to reduce carbon footprints. What was very clear to us, that the EU directive was being developed by our Continental colleagues, and we sensed it was not going to be to the UK's best interest. So, one of these groups said to me, 'Well Bob, is there a reason why we can't do that here in the UK?' So, some nimble-footed work took place, to get the UK developing the EU directive on carbon footprint as it affected the IT industry, a good example of something that we got right for us here in the UK all those years ago. Obviously, carbon footprints and that sort of thing is less significant as it is nowadays. What was a bit frightening when we realised, is that the IT's power consumption and carbon implications was not dissimilar to the airline industries.

Right. [laughs]

But we didn't say much. [laughs]

[51:52]

Oh, right. And, and of course your, your career through BCS progressed, and you were subsequently nominated for President.

Yes. I was Chair of Ethics Forum, and that put me on to the BCS Advisory Council, the BCS Council as it's often known. And, all the other members then, I think I might have gone on… Yes, I did go on to Trustee Board as a Council representative. In actual fact, there should have been four or five of us. I found, by a series of events, I was the only one left. But obviously people were reasonably happy with me, and, it was just, 'Well Bob, why don't you stand for Deputy President?' Because there's a process. I thought about it. I was, by this time I was widowed, so, it wasn't going to be such an impressive increase in workload against and affecting anybody at home. Consequently, I stood… I was the first general membership nominated candidate to go forward ever. Because there were no procedures in place, we found, into the process with Nominations Committee for going into Council to choose me as Deputy President. After Deputy President, you de facto then become President, unless you completely screwed, up. Nobody ever has. But that led to… Then, after finishing as immediate past President, we had been having a senior trustee to really advise and deal with the tricky problems. Because in any organisation, we've got a lot of volunteers and staff at the highest level, life doesn't always sail smoothly.

No.

And, I was asked, would I mind taking… We changed the role slightly to independent adviser. Had the benefit, I don't have to attend trustee meetings, I can if I needed to. And that was a three-year, not a one-year. And, without saying what it was about, the first year, it was a very busy year in that role. Running into year two, touch wood, it's been absolutely silent recently. [laughs]

[54:12]

Right, OK. And of course you were, you were President 2012 to 2013. I'm aware that, presidents certainly in, in recent times, have had a theme for their year. Perhaps you could tell us about yours.

I think, my theme was very much trying to really get us to look forward. David Clarke was coming up towards his retirement. We were not looking forward very much. Membership had plateaued. And the theme was just trying to encourage us, not just specifically to see the deliverables, but try and put our focus more onto the future.

Mhm.

Within that looking forward, one of the things particularly was continuing to support the development of professionalism in the IT industry, and, this is steadily happening. And one of the key things that as President I was instrumental in making happen was the beginning of the programme that has led to the apprenticeships in IT. That was an interesting problem, because, other organisations wanted to drive it their way, and, I will never forget going to one particular meeting with the other organisations, and I had agreed with Trustee Board beforehand that if we could not get sense out of this, were they happy for us to do it ourselves? And I got a unanimous vote of support.

Mhm.

The fact that we decided to do it ourselves, was great, because we then got Sainsbury charitable funding to help us with that project, which is, had another review charge running into several million pounds.

[56:06]
Mhm. And, were you conscious at that time as you were President, you were, you were, presumably you were conscious actually, following in the footsteps of someone who influenced you in your early career at…

Well it was interesting that.

…Stanley, Stan Gill.

Yes I, I think, yes, there was something there. And, we're doing this interview in the Stanley Gill Room, actually at BCS, Southampton Street, at the moment. I never thought in life that I would be anything like the sort of person that could ever become a president of BCS. And what I would say is, the way other people always helped and encouraged me, over the years, and in that time, when I was President. The support one got from BCS, particularly the staff, was absolutely excellent. But certainly, when doing it, you thought, I, really, can I do this job? Yes you can. You get on and do it, and you're helped in doing it.

So did you enjoy that year as President?

Thoroughly enjoyed it. It was great. And, what was interesting, to be one of a whole series of presidents that I know, preceding and succeeding, to see how we all in our different ways have endeavoured to move the institute forward.

[57:22]
Mm. If you could point to on particular success during that time, is there anything that sticks out in your mind?

Yes. I think the success story was the one I have actually already referred to, was that we did actually get a project under way to develop apprenticeships, and, it's level three I think the qualification goes with it, for the institute. Because that really is getting people able to come in to our profession, and develop themselves, without all having to go through degree course.

[57:55]
Mm. You mentioned previously, as we sit here in the tail end of 2017, that membership of the BCS has plateaued. What do you think, do we need to do collectively, BCS members do, to, to push things forward?

I, I think we have a very real problem in the profession, and if I take our branch. The bulk of the branch are mature years. I think where we have been successful in growing membership over the decades, not centuries yet, is where we've engaged with local people and been able to be relevant to local people. And local people isn't

just about putting on a lecture. It's about the networking, it's what they learn, who they get to meet et cetera. As I said earlier, when I joined Barnardo's, after a relatively short period, I joined the specialist group ELITE, to meet fellow IT directors. And I think, where my thoughts are at the moment, and it's very relevant, because, as the Chair of Sussex Branch, I try to think, what can we do? The branch had virtually collapsed, it had only had two meetings in the last year until this autumn. We're now going to have a meeting every third Wednesday, that people put in their diaries, and it won't be, is there a meeting this month? Yes there is a meeting. We have agreed to take August off. We are trying different kinds of speakers. We're trying food again at the beginning of the meetings. But what we're also doing is trying to link up with the other groups that have been formed in localities, and with the meetup functions, and with Brighton being a particularly vibrant technology area, we're looking at forming chapters in the two universities there, and ask me in a year's time what's worked and what's not worked, and I'm happy to say, but in essence, I believe, if we're going to grow the membership, we've got to make it relevant and engage with the grassroots of our profession at local level.

[1:00:12]
Mm. Thank you. Thank you for sharing that with us Bob. Bob, you mentioned challenges to the BCS at the current time. The BCS is the Chartered Institute for Information Technology. Do you see there are other bodies competing with the BCS currently?

I don't think there's another body competing on the same piece of turf. Obviously, the engineering world in its widest context tend to see IT as part of their domain, but I think we've got a totally different type of competition emerging, which is, if I can use the phrase, meetups. The ability to create a local group, which in actual fact is of like-minded people, about any subject; it could be walking, it could be IT, it could be some technology language. And I think what we've got to do is to encompass the culture that meetups bring to avoid not a single competitor to BCS, but dozens of little organisations which meet the needs of the IT profession. Because one of the big things I think in the IT profession is, we do successfully use people that have different types of, I'll use the broad phrase, disability in communications. And, thus I think that where we've got to be to retain our position as a number one, and the only

professional body, is, we've got to encompass the evolving hundreds of thousands in the UK of local people wanting to be more engaged with their profession.

Mhm. And I think it's… Yeah. One word that sticks out is, is engagement, and the importance thereof. Yeah.

Absolutely. I'll use the example. I deliberately went, having had my arm twisted, that, 'If we have an EGM for the Sussex Branch, Bob, will you please be chair?' I said, 'Yes, I will,' quite conscious, I'll give it about eighteen months. So I thought, well let's actually go out and join the competitive groups. See what they're up to.

Mhm.

And it's an eye-opener. I'm in my seventies. I can be the father or grandfather of a lot of people attending those meetings. Totally different age range, totally different environment, building, from what we use. We have a super lecture theatre we use at Sussex Uni. Totally different types of speakers. And I think what we've got to do, as BCS, is, reinvent probably, this came to mind now, the branch activities, so that they are relevant to the local community. But these local groups are flourishing. They've come up very quickly. They're talking about highly relevant subjects, and certainly in the Brighton area, engaging very well with the local people.

[1:03:20]
Mm. Thank you for sharing that with us. Looking at the IT industry as a whole, what would you say is the biggest challenges and opportunities, say, in the next ten years, as you see them?

I think the biggest challenge in the IT industry, actually is to make it easily, much more easily available to the individual person at home. We say it as BCS, very much we're focusing on IT and its usability, if I use my own words. The laptops, the PCs we provide as an industry to the home user are far too complicated and far too unreliable, and I think if we're really going to move forward, we have got to get that type of device. The iPhone actually is a much easier phone to, easier device to use, because it does seem to be better managed.

Mhm. And when you say better managed, in what way?

I mean in terms of the software, the way it works et cetera. It doesn't fall over as often. It's not relying on Internet Explorer. I know that's old technology now, but lots of us still use it. It's not relying on the capacity of the broadband circuits in the same way. And despite having fibre at home, it's still not a very good service.

[1:04:46]
Mhm. And, what about opportunities for individuals for looking for a career in IT, any area of concentration that…?

No. No area of concentration. But this is an absolutely true example. I moved here, I'm now in East Sussex, five years ago, and went to our men's hairdressers, and it's, he must have been about, 20 then, nice, young man. He had got a girlfriend. He's got married, he's got two kids now. But somebody had spotted in him, and I hadn't spotted, a real techno freak at home, with all the equipment he was buying via eBay to use at home. He's now actually coming in, somebody else, another of his clients, spotted this, and has got him a job in a company, in IT. It's typically the sort of people we need to pick up. Keen on technology, excellent personalities, but had never been given the opportunity in life. Ordinary lad, he left school at sixteen. What do you do at sixteen? You become a hairdresser. And I just use that as a living, current example of where we've really got to get through to young people in schools that it's not a geeky thing. Certainly, he's not a geek, but so many of our colleagues sadly are seen as geeks.

[1:06:07]
Mhm. And picking up that, about advice. Would you… What advice would you give to someone entering the it industry today?

I think today, my advice would be, first of all, go for it, it's a good, it's a growth industry. But then I'd say, if you're not happy in the company you're in, take your own time to find somebody else you can go and work for. Make sure you're doing enough online learning to keep your technology up to date. Don't get stuck in an old

technology and become unsaleable in years to come. But I would strongly advocate, look after yourself.   But a point I made a lot earlier in this interview, I probably was not very good at my own career management. It happened. I didn't, wasn't slow sometimes in going for opportunities, but, I think it is about your own technology and career development.

Well Bob, well thank you very much for joining me today, and giving this interview to Archives of IT. We wish you well in your retirement, although it doesn't sound as though you're, you're retired, for all your efforts at BCS are continuing.

Well BCS. Well the thing I've not referred to, back in 1991 my late wife and I bought some land and barns next to us. That got into, has got us into sheep. Five years ago my daughter, son-in-law and myself bought a farm. I am now technically a farmer. It's a very different profession. We are bringing technology into farming, with considerable changes taking place in crop management, in weed killer sprays et cetera et cetera. But the area that interests us, because it's pure grassland, is, sheep, cattle, pigs, poultry, and, the only area that we seem to have got any real grasp of technology is in sheep actually, where there are now monitoring systems of how sheep are performing to get the best breeding sheep. So in a sense I'm now on the receiving end of technology in terms of how we could apply it.

[1:08:25]
Mhm. Thank you. Actually, just, remiss of me actually, when asking you about opportunities and, and challenges to the IT industry. The charity sector. Anything specific in that area?

OK. The charity sector, I've been retired now eleven years. My belief is, the charity sector is a good opportunity, but don't expect charities to pay over the odds for fancy things. They're not needed. Don't try and sell them to them. But it is a good, steady growth sector.

Mhm. Thank you Bob. And, I won't wish you well in your retirement, because you're not retired. [laughs]

I'm not retired.

I wish you well with your life.

Thank you.

And a long life. And, success in your farming, and, success in rejuvenating the BCS in your local area.

Yes, thank you. And that particularly, it's sort of, full circle for me. Here I am, fifty-odd years from when I started, right at the grassroots of BCS, trying to see what we can, what we *will* do, it's not can we, we *will* do, to get an effective local branch operation. And I think that goes right back to the training and school and spatial awareness, thinking outside the traditional way of doing things, and, I sincerely hope that BCS goes on for many decades and centuries to come.

And on that positive note, that concludes our interview today. Thank you very much Bob.

[End of Interview]