



Ian Watmore

Interviewed by

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Archives of IT

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Welcome to the Archives of Information Technology. It is Tuesday the 4th of June 2019, and we are in central London, the headquarters of the British Computer Society. The Archives captures the past, and inspires the future. My name is Richard Sharpe, and I've been covering the IT sector since the 1970s.

[00:22]

When Ian Watmore, making his contribution to the Archives today, entered the computer industry in the 1980s, it wasn't really the computer industry, he was a consultant, when he entered the industry in the 1980s, the industry was about to turn on its head in many ways, and to create a huge amount of disruption for users. Pretty well until Ian joined in 1980, although we don't blame him for this, people, could stay with their vendor, be looked after by their vendor, and classically would not be fired for buying IBM, and the other companies were trying to do that. But very soon afterwards we have the entry of the IBM PC, and we have the entry of new ways of computing, and a lot of what could be called chaos in the user community. And one of the big roles that Ian played was trying to sort out that chaos, and help people find a way through all of that. Before we get to that, we have to have Ian's birth.

[01:24]

Ian, you were born in Farnham, in Kent, was it?

Farnborough.

Farnborough in Kent.

Yes, in Bromley, Borough of Bromley.

In 1958.

I was, indeed.

And what did your parents do?

So my father was a GP, and my mother originally was a, what would have been called a shorthand typist.

Right.

And... But, my father's, my grandfather on my father's side, my father was born in real poverty in Bermondsey in London, which was a very poor area in those days, and his father was a gas street light lamp lighter. And, my mother was brought up in a children's home in, in and around Bolton, having been born in Kent, where her mother abandoned her as a baby.

Right.

So... So they had quite difficult upbringings, and... But by the time I was born my father had somehow or other struggled out of his difficult background and got a medical qualification at Guy's Hospital and became a GP in Bromley, and that's where I was born.

So he was well integrated into the community. A GP is a person of considerable standing within the community.

Yes. And, I think in those days, you know, the doctor was, was kind of a, a pre-eminent figure locally. You know, people were very, I don't know what the right word is, but, not subservient, but they, they were, yes doc, no doc, three bags full doc, you know, it was that kind of attitude. Whereas today, I think people are more challenging.

Could hardly have asked for a second opinion.

Certainly not. But he was a very good doctor, my father. He had his problems. Like a lot of doctors he drank too much. But, as a doctor he was absolutely, first class.

[03:11]

What do you think you got from your parents that has made you a success?

Gosh, good question. I... I had a lot of stability, I think, in, you know, brought up broadly the same place, and, although my parents separated after I left home, you know, we had a good solid nuclear family at home. I was instilled with a lot of ambition, which I think my father had in him – well, both my parents did, they both came from difficult backgrounds, and they, and they made something of their lives, when a lot of others wouldn't, a lot of people they knew didn't, from that background. And, and I think they, they carried that on in me. I think, in different ways my parents brought different characteristics. I think, my mother was a very calm person, and I think that's something I think I have in me, and I think that stood me in good stead. My father taught me at a young age to stand up to bullies, and, you know, which doesn't mean be a bully, it just means, don't be bullied. And I think, that's something I've carried through as well. If you think something's right and people are trying to bully you out of it, you have to stand up for what's right.

[04:37]

You moved to Croydon quite early on?

No. I... I... When it came to secondary school time, the secondary school system in the Sixties was obviously quite different from today, but there were, schools that we would regard as independent schools today were mostly state-funded, a lot of what they call direct grant schools, and they ran entrance examinations, and, I took the entrance examination at Trinity in Croydon, largely as practice for the exams that I was going to do for the ones of the schools around me, places like Dulwich or Alleyn's or one of those sorts of schools. But, I was given a free place from, on the back of the exam I took. And my father just said, 'Where do I sign?' Because he realised that, you know, that that was, that was a once in a sort of, lifetime opportunity.

Did you enjoy school?

I did enjoy school. I was... I... My, my memory of school is kind of, neutral to positive. I mean, in hindsight I didn't like an all-male school, and I was quite... or single-sex school, single-gender school. I was very keen that my kids went to a mixed school, which they did. I learnt a lot from very good teachers, but there were things

about the school system that I rebelled against. I was a bit sort of, politically rebellious. By the time the sixth form came round, I think in 1974, there were two General Elections, and the school ran a mock election, and the one in February was, it was a nonsense event where everybody voted like their parents. So by the time there was another election in October, I and four or five others founded a party which was, I think we called it the Committee for Educational Reform or something, but it was, it was basically anti quite a lot of the things the school stood for, like the Combined Cadet Force, and sort of, militaristic type stuff that was going on. So, it was kind of rebel without a cause type stuff, but...

Did you win?

We came narrowly second. But, all the young kids voted like their parents, and we won the senior school vote massively, and it was very close. But it was... So... And I've been back there since to hand out the prizes at, you know, prize-giving, and I have a good relationship with the school. But it was... So... But it was, it was not something I look back and say, wow, that was a dream, a dream era of my life.

[07:17]

What did you study there?

Well my main subject was always maths. And, at A Level I did maths and physics, I did pure and applied maths and physics. And, the other thing the school was, was very far-sighted on, very relevant to this, was, this was, we're now talking 1973/4, they decided that computing was something that they thought was important for people, and, they make a link-up with one of the London university colleges, I think Chelsea College, from memory, and we were able to, to write computer programs and submit them to be run in batch, sort of, somewhere like 3 a.m. when the machine was, you know, under-utilised. And, I can remember doing a program on punched cards with the sort of, the old keypad things, and then, later in, on, with some sort of online terminal in BASIC. And that was all, as I say, as a sixteen-year-old, round about 1974, so quite, quite avant-garde for schools in those days.

What was the programming language?

Well, the, the first, the punch card stuff was all in FORTRAN, and then when they upgraded to an online terminal it was in BASIC. And I remember a great lesson, I remember being, doing maths, I had some probabilistic formula for calculating pi to large numbers of decimal places, and it was all to do with, you know, simulating dropping a needle onto an infinite grid of lines or something, and where it cut and where it didn't was, the ratio was some factor of pi. So I ran this thing for hours, probably burnt the computer at the other end. But I forgot to format the output to two decimal places. So after running it for about ten hours it came back and said pi was 3.14, which wasn't very helpful. But, but it was that kind of stuff. And of course with the punch card thing, and then having to mail it in to be run, you make a single mistake, that was a week, you know, because it was a week of turnaround.

Yes.

So, you were, a) very careful on your punch card entry, but b) you were extremely rigorous at desk checking your program. Well of course later on...

Have you kept that quality?

I think so, yeah. Because, because it's just in me really. I try to... You know, it's a kind of, get it right first time thing. I'm much less likely to just throw things at the wall and see what happens, and then... You know, I like to think it through and make sure it's right before submitting it. And I suppose that's a, it's a characteristic.

[10:03]

You got your A Levels.

Mhm.

And, you went to Cambridge.

Yes. To Trinity College.

For maths and management.

Well I did maths. So maths was the subject I went to read. I got an exhibition to read maths at Trinity, which, in hindsight, was more of an achievement than I thought it was at the time, because Trinity of course is the, probably the pre-eminent place in the world for mathematics, certainly in the UK, and it's where most of the top mathematicians go and come from to this day. And, so, you know, it was obviously quite an achievement. However, when I got there, it was the classic case of realising, you thought you were really good at something, and then coming up against world class people and then realising you're not. I was fine at it, but I wasn't in the top, top tier. And, so I discovered that, in the third year it was an option to switch to a course that was, that was euphemistically known as management studies. I think its actual job title was engineering faculty option F or something. It was some of those obscure things. But it was a broad amalgam of disciplines that latterly were, that became the Judge Institute of Management at Cambridge, so it's now a formal institute and this was the forerunner to it. So I did things like economics and sociology alongside statistics, operational research, that kind of thing. A lot of practical stuff, so, computer simulations, simplex algorithms, those kind of things. But as well as having to write essays for the first time, you know, writing industrial sociology essays on the rise and fall of, you know, communism. So, you know, stuff like that. And, and learning economic theory, which of course is a, can be quite mathematical in its bent if you want. So, it was a broad array of topics, which constituted a management studies degree. And I did that for my final year. So, that's why I call it maths and management, because it was maths for two years and then this for the third year.

[12:16]

This forced you really to broaden out an awful lot.

It did. It broadened me out from a narrow... Because maths at that, at Cambridge at that, at that level, is very, obscure is the wrong word, but it's very sort of, niche and esoteric. And, and this was much more going back, I was almost going back to first year undergraduate in some areas, because I mean, I hadn't done economics ever, so I had to go from the beginning again. And so, it was, as you rightly say, a broadening of the, of the base. And, and it had a lot of computing in it again, and it had a lot of

practical work, so, I think, we did stuff in the university during the terms, but I think over Christmas I went to what was then called British Rail, I presume now would be Network Rail, doing operational research type projects to simulate traffic on the railway system and particularly rerouting options and, and signal changes and that kind of stuff, to see where bottlenecks would build, and where, where they wouldn't. And, and pick out... So it was that kind of project. And...

So, to use a derogatory term, this was not ivory tower.

No, not at all. No. Very practical. And, very importantly, one of the guys who was brought in to give us a sort of lecture, I can't remember, I presume it was on one of the operational research topics, was a guy called Paul Klemperer, who latterly became a professor of economics at Oxford I think. But he had done the same thing two years previously, and gone and joined this company I had never heard of called Andersen Consulting, and was doing, you know, this kind of work in, quotes, 'the real world', for his career. And I thought, well that sounds interesting, I'll look this company up. And, I did, and that became my single job application, which, they offered me a job, and, and I stayed there for 24 years. So...

And you joined in...?

1980.

1980.

So I graduated in the summer and joined shortly after.

[14:31]

So this is where we come to the turbulence in the computer industry.

Yes.

You've already looked at the applications in the then British Rail. You've been using computers quite a bit. IBM by now is planning the launch of its PC in 1981.

Indeed.

And, it goes a completely different route. Instead of being vertically integrated and making everything, it gets the chips from one place, the printer from another place, the software from another place. We're talking about, Intel, Epson and, and Microsoft.

Yes.

And bundles them together into this, into this PC, which the micro people who are already around were not very enamoured of, thought it was a bit clunky, but it set the standard, became a...

Yup.

...a very important standard. And that created a lot of turbulence in the marketplace, not only in terms of, did companies have any vertically integrated, in terms of supplier companies, but also, what should users do with this?

Yup. Absolutely. Well, I mean you said it already there, but, you know, the day I joined, which I think was, December 1980, the IBM PC was not even announced, right, it was a complete, mystery. The only things was that we had access to that approximated to that were things like Superbrains and Commodore PETs and computers of that ilk.

Yup.

I think... I can't remember when the first Apple machines came out, but it was a similar timeframe. And, anyway... But computing, as you rightly say, in those days was, you know, a procurement was, which IBM mainframe are we going to buy? And maybe, what did they used to call it, a minicomputer, the sort of, mid-range box. That was the, that was computer procurement. And certainly was in the States. In Europe, it pretty much was across the commercial sector, but if you got closer to the public

sector, and actually got into government healthcare and so on, then you immediately tended to get exposed to the national computing vendor, so, in our case obviously it was ICL; in Italy it was Olivetti; in Germany it would be Siemens; in France it was Honeywell Bull, et cetera. So, you know, there was a broader range of manufacturers, if you were in that space. But if you were in the States, or if you were in the commercial sector, it was, which IBM, and hence the famous phrase of, nobody got fired for choosing IBM. However, I think IBM judged that the desktop computing environment was coming, they could see these things like the Superbrains and the PETs and so on, and so they decided to get into the market. I don't know how well they thought through the strategy, it was completely different. As you say, they, they effectively, instead of owning the intellectual property in the software, which they obviously did with MVS and things like that, they, they allowed Messrs Gates and co to get very rich on that. Instead of manufacturing the stuff themselves, they not only allowed other people to manufacture it, they also made it copyable, hence the rise in the Dells of this world and, and other people subsequently. So, was it the right strategy for them? I don't know; probably was. They would probably have died if they hadn't modernised, but, but it did, they did lose that sort of, lock on the market as a result, even though they, they generated the change.

[18:19]

And... And of course the other thing it did was, it brought new styles of applications, and, in particular my memory is, things like Lotus 123, the forerunners to, the early spreadsheets. You know, I became, it's probably one of those skills that you, that you think at the time is really important, and of course is redundant really quickly. But I could write Lotus 123 macros for, you know, I was Olympic class at that, you know, and, because I was at the right level in the company to, to be very hands-on with that sort of computing, using it for a lot of data analysis as we started the sort of, using the computer tools to do the sort of analytical type work that the operational research part of the company was doing.

[19:12]

What drew you to Arthur Andersen? It's an American consultancy.

Yeah. So... Well the main... As I said, the main, initial draw was the, was Paul Klemperer coming to lecture. He was a very good lecturer. He made what he was

doing sound very good. It seemed a logical connection with, with what I was doing at university. It had computing in it, which I was very, which, you know... So, so I think you said at the beginning, I was a consultant, but, yes, but, we did, we didn't sit there and advise; we wrote computer programs and tested them and installed them and, rolled them out, and then handed them back to the customer. So, I did a lot of programming in my early years at Andersen.

What type of applications were you programming?

Well, for example... So probably two broad ranges. One would have been analytical tools. I think the very first thing I wrote was in an obscure ICL-based, in a sort of language-cum-tool called Filetab. Does that ring any bells? I'm pretty certain it was called Filetab. Anyway, it was... But it was, it was, we were doing a project for the Department of Health, looking at how to allocate resources to the health and social care sector. You know, nothing's changed, has it, and it's still a big challenge today. And so, we were writing, we were doing it in those sorts of areas. And then, you know, later on, using Lotus and things like that. So that, they were the sort of analytical things. But the big commercial sort of systems that we were involved with, so, I was, with Lloyds Bank I wrote some very, very sophisticated software for their leasing system in a language called APL. Does that, do remember...?

APL?

Yes.

Extraordinary language.

I know.

An extraordinary language.

It stands for A Programming Language.

Indeed. And it was a book by a man called Iverson.

Yup.

Who was in IBM, and who said, 'Oh, I'm going to write a book about a programming language that I would like,' and then somebody in IBM announced, 'OK...' I think his name was Bill, wasn't it?

I don't know.

Bill Iverson? He said, 'OK, we'll run an interpreter for it.'

Exactly. And it was... So... Very good knowledge. So the first thing about APL was, it was a hieroglyphical language, and secondly, it was interpretive. And, and Lloyds Leasing, which was the leasing division of Lloyds Bank, adopted APL as its core system, opposite the IBM software.

Why?

Well presumably the IBM salesman was, was incentivised to sell APL, and, they, they signed up. But, I think... They probably had a bit more logic to that, but, the reason why they liked it was, the leasing part of the bank was fast-moving. It was in an era when interest rates were ridiculously high, fifteen to twenty per cent. There was, the economy was tanking. This was, this was early Thatcherism, and Geoffrey Howe was Chancellor, and he was pumping regional development grants into the economy and things like that. And lots of special tax breaks for buying North Sea oil rigs, or aircraft carriers, or whatever it was. And, the leasing boys decided this was a way to make money. And in fact, in most of those years they contributed something like twenty-five per cent of the profits of the entire bank from this tiny leasing division.

Right.

But that required them to be continually writing new software for these new financial products if you like. And APL was quite good for that. I mean it was a nightmare for other things, but it was actually quite good at fast coding, and because it was

interpretive you could take the approach that if it, you know, if something broke, you stopped it there, fixed it, and carried on again. You didn't have to go through this ridiculous... They could recompile and re-mix it and all the rest of it. So...

[23:14]

Yes. So very little systems analysis really.

Yes.

And, not a waterfall process at all.

No, absolutely.

But, OK, let's bung in a piece of code and see what happens.

Exactly.

Mm. That broke a bit. Let's bung in another piece of code, let's patch it up.

Exactly.

So it's much more iterative...

Exactly.

...with rapid application development.

Exactly. And, and because of the nature of the language, it lent itself to people with a mathematical background, because it was the hieroglyphical sort of interpretive matrix-y type approach.

Yes.

So anyway, that was one. Ditto, in another, I can't remember which other financial client it was, probably Williams and Glyn's Bank. PL/1, the sort of, sort of, IBM's sort of COBOL, Programming Language One as I remember. Obviously COBOL. BASIC. So I wrote programs a lot in, in, you know, sort of, analytical support programs, or commercial transaction process systems.

Right. PL/1 was an attempt to amalgamate FORTRAN and COBOL.

Yes.

And launched in 1965 by IBM for its, for its mainframes. It didn't become a universal language. IBM hoped it would.

Yup.

But it didn't.

Yup.

So this is a, a really broad range of languages, and, and of applications.

And Assembler of course, which I was trained in.

And the...?

And Assembler, Basic Assembler Language.

Yes.

So, apping and zapping and things, you know, whatever the coding terms were. So... This was probably... So after the university year, this was all sort of, 1980 to '83, 4 I think, kind of thing.

[24:51]

Right. Andersen was quite well-known.

Yes, so, that's why you asked me about Andersen

Oh yes, sure.

Combination of those factors really.

*Yeah yeah. Andersen was quite well known, and maybe this isn't, this is warranted.
Andersen was quite well known for a high level training.*

Yes. That was another aspect that attracted.

Yes. Did you go to America for that?

Yes. And of course, these days kids go to America at the drop of a hat; in those days it was, it was a real wow factor to get out of Europe. And, and so to be offered the chance to go and train in America was, was a very big draw for a company like, like ours. So, yeah, so I... I think I did my very initial training in Geneva in Switzerland, but almost all subsequent training was done in St Charles, which is just outside Chicago.

But that training, like the training of IBM, also, there was an accusation that it produced people who were quite robotic.

Yes. Yes, well there are all the jokes about the androids. The methodology that underpinned the way the company did systems work was called Method One, which of course, if you run it together as a single word, becomes methodone. And... [laughs] You know, so, you were either robotic and android-ish, or you were on some form of corporate drug, you know, that, they were two jokes. The reality I think was that, the methodology, at that era, gave, not just a structure but it gave a common language to people working on very large projects, and it enabled people in different parts of the globe on very different aspects of a huge project or program to still work together and share a common language and a common way of doing things. And,

most people pooh-poohed it, for the reasons that you said, but then tried to copy it and emulate it later on. In fact I remember, the Government created its own versions of it, and subsequently adopted things like SSADM. So, it was, it was... It was an important way of doing big complex projects. As an individual, we, the Brits, were pretty cynical about the US sort of, spoon-fed training. I can remember one of my rather sardonic Scottish colleagues was sitting in her room, in St Charles, and this female teacher bounced in and said, 'Today we're going to do a training course on listening. Listening is one of the hardest things we as human beings ever do.' And this guy put his hand up and he said, 'I've heard designing cathedrals is quite tricky.' You know, and it was that kind of, cynicism towards what was there. Having said that, we all enjoyed it, because we were out of the country, we were meeting people from right across the globe. I mean, you would be sitting in a room of 40 people and have 25 different nationalities, and the other fifteen would be all Americans from different cities. So, it was a very uplifting experience as well. But we were able to pick and choose from the bits that, you know, we wanted to use, and the bits that we thought were over the top and a bit Billy Graham-ish we, we just ignored.

[28:19]

It was an East Coast American culture, was it not?

It was, Midwest. It was very... It was Chicago.

Right.

Arthur Andersen himself, though he had a, Norwegian? anyway, Scandinavian heritage, Andersen being spelt e-n...

Right. Right.

...he was a Chicago accountant, and, auditor. And he formed the company there. So Chicago was its centre, and it's a very Midwest culture. I think there were two rules in the book I signed on the day I joined. One was, men working for Arthur Andersen will not have facial hair, it was just outlawed, you know, it was kind of... And the second was, it is OK for two people from Arthur Andersen to marry; the company is

neutral as to which one leaves the firm on marriage. [RS laughs] You know, this was 1980. And so it was that kind of, Midwest, white shirt, no facial hair, no married relationships in the office type of culture, and, they tried to spread that round the world. Obviously, the further you got from Chicago the more it was honoured in the breach, but that was...

[29:35]

And there were two parts to it. There was the accounting part, where there were auditors doing people's accounts, and there was this computer part...

Yes.

...which included consultancy and computer programming.

Yes.

Yes? Those two parts.

Yes. Oh, I think technically, at the beginning there were three, so there was an accounting part, but did auditing; there was a tax advisory function; and there was the consulting business that we called management consulting in the UK; in America it was called management information consulting. And as you rightly said, that third part was the bit that combined what you might call my Cambridge type of consulting, the sort of, operational research analysis, strategic type of consulting, with the systems work, and the big projects that were starting to emerge. Later, the accounting and tax people fused together into a single business unit which became known as Arthur Andersen, and the management consultancy piece fused into a single business unit which became known as Andersen Consulting. And therefore... And those two things were then bound by a holding company called Andersen Worldwide, which was a very small entity but effectively held the legal powers over the previous two. And that became relevant later on when the corporate divorce war started in the Nineties. So...

[31:00]

You came back to the UK, although going back to the US for more training, and you were basically based in the UK. Is that right?

I was, yes, for most of the Eighties, and through to the mid-Nineties, I was pretty much UK-based, apart from travelling in...

Right. How did your career progress within Andersen?

Well, I, my... The guy who recruited me said, 'You're going to have to ride two horses at once.' And he said, 'You're going to... Because I want, I want,' I, the guy who recruited me, 'want you to you do the operational research management consulting side, but in order to progress you're going to have to be able to do the computer systems side as well.' Which actually was what I kind of wanted to do anyway. So he said, you know, 'You're going to have to flip-flop between the two. So there'll be some projects more like this, and some more like that. And other people will just pursue a path through there. So you're going to have to run twice as fast to keep up,' sort of thing. He said, 'But, if you do that, I think when you do become more senior, you'll find that the benefits of having the broader consulting understanding, understanding more about business and, and change and strategy and so on, and being able to do big systems-based projects,' he said, 'I think that will hold you in good stead.' And that's kind of how it went. So, when I was doing the more general consulting, that tended to be in the early years in the public sector; when I was doing more of computer programming type, commercial systems, at that time it meant the private sector, which also was quite good, because it gave me a balance.

Mhm. Absolutely.

[32:32]

They then converged, in the late Eighties, with the largest programme Andersen had ever been involved with worldwide, happened with the Department of Social Security, or originally DHSS as it was, in health, and, was split off to the Department, DSS, DWP as it would be known today, which was the computerisation of work and pensions, and unemployment benefits and all of that sort of stuff. Which, at that point, was largely manual. That's not entirely true; there were a couple of huge, very

very old batch systems created in ICL, VME type systems back in the, Sixties and Seventies, that, one held people's National Insurance records, and secondly, calculated pension entitlement.

Right.

But, they were... But there were, all the rest of the Social Security benefits were calculated by the people in offices with calculators. So if you went into an office unemployed, they'd work out the dole by tapping away... They'd probably get a download of your National Insurance contributions, and then they'd beaver away and work out that you were entitled to £33.48 this week, and bang, write you a cheque for it. I mean it was, it was like that. And of course, the Thatcherite changes to the economy, whatever you think of them, one of the by-products was a huge surge in unemployment, and dependency on the welfare state, as great swathes of industries were effectively consigned to the history books. And so, when a million people unemployed had been a big number, and a political scandal, suddenly we were above three million, and rising to four. And that was a political challenge, but it also was an operational challenge; they couldn't keep up with the Social Security payments and the system of managing it. So they decided to computerise it.

[34:35]

And, and the second thing that was political and relevant about that was the, most of the computing capability in government at that time was up in the north-east, around Newcastle and, famous locations like Longbenton, and, they went on the political strike in, probably, '83, 4-ish, where they stopped producing old age pension books, and tried to bring the Thatcher government down on the back of, focused on people's pensions being paid. That would be, that wouldn't last for, you know, society would rebel quite quickly. And, what Thatcher did was, honour to pay people's pension books, even though they were way out of date. So it was riddled with fraud and so on, but it was more important to them to break the strike than it was to be financially rigorous. And eventually, after a year or so, the strike broke, and went back, but she said, 'We're never putting any work in that place again.' So when they then decided about two years later to do the massive computerisation of the rest of Social Security, she said, 'I'm not putting it in Newcastle. Where else have we got computing capability?' And they said, 'We've got this small place on the north-west, we've got

the Premium Bond place, ERNIE, and we've got some small benefit sort of systems,' I can't remember, war pensions, things like that, 'around Lytham and Fleetwood and those sorts of places.' So she said, 'Right, that's it, we'll do it there.' So suddenly this little bubble of the Fylde coast near, up in the north and south of Blackpool, suddenly became the centre of the IT industry in this country, and possibly the world, because people literally flocked there from... We, we had the big consulting contract, but IBM were involved, and ICL were involved, and BT were involved, and so on, and all these techies coming from, and lots of software companies, all these people just sort of flooded in to this rather sort of, retirement place on the west, north-west of England. Which is, I got assigned there, and cutting a long story short, I eventually relocated to the North West, and I lived there to this day. So, I found I really liked that part of the world, and, my wife is now vicar in that part of the world. So... So that's the, that's, that's how the two converged for me in the Eighties, it became a public sector thing and a big IT thing.

[37:06]

And in the early Eighties, you've got a nearly unique, can you have nearly unique? I suppose you can, now...

Probably not, but yeah. Yes...

...you know what I mean...

Yup. Yup.

...view, which is, you are able to see the public sector and the public sector at the same time.

Yes.

It does seem that there is a story around the inability of the public sector to often seize IT adequately, and when it does seize it, it often messes it up. Is that... And again, of course later on you're the first CIO of Government.

Yah.

Is that your impression?

[pause – drinking] Well, I mean, any history of government computing is not going to paint it in a positive light, because, there have been far too many projects that have, that have gone wrong and become public scandals. I would say, three things positively and one thing negatively. So the three things positively. The first is, I think Government has been an amazing, I don't just mean the UK Government, governments around the world, but we'll stick with the UK Government, been a major force for good in breaking monopolies of IT. So, for example, without Government, we wouldn't have had an ICL industry that lasted, it would have all been IBM. Certainly without Government, we would never have got into the Unix revolution, which I think fundamentally changed the dynamic again in the Nineties, and brought, you know, all sorts of companies, like Oracle and so on, to the table. Because, you know, it was, these were open platforms and open computing and open drives and so on. So, I think Government's been a big force for good there.

[39:04]

The second thing is, there is no doubt that government projects are miles more difficult than private sector equivalents.

Why?

And they're miles more difficult for two reasons. One is, they have to serve the entire public. Whereas, if you have an awkward set of customers in a particular... Well, I don't mean awkward as in people; I mean, just difficult to serve a group of customers. In many businesses they just say, 'Well we won't serve them,' and, 'They're not for us.' Whereas Government can't afford that. And, and so, you have everything from... And, and you're skewed towards them, or disadvantaged in society, and therefore, people with real problems in their lives, and, and more, you know, less, less nuclear ways of living, and, and simple ways of working and so on. So, you've got that. The second thing you've got is that the underlying products, if I can call it that, are more complex, and they're more complex because they're complex for political reasons. So, if something gets too complex, in the financial services world they, they

tend to simplify it, to make it implementable. In Government, they do the opposite. They add complexity to make it politically saleable. So you're ending up with a broader range of customers than anywhere in the private sector, and you've got more complicated products. And because, particularly they're doing things like health and social security and those sorts of things, you are serving databases of 60 million people, which, in those days, you know, a big company might have a customer base of five million or something, you know, and suddenly you're trying to do it 20, 30 times, ten times as big, whatever it is, and, and so you've got complexity scale and breadth, makes it much harder.

[40:58]

And a third thing I would say in defence of Government computing is, you very very rarely hear about the many, many, many projects that go well. And a light is then shone, not just once but about 25 times, on the one that didn't go well. So I appeared before the Public Accounts Committee, I have no idea how many times, more than almost anybody else probably, but, 20, 25 times, and, each time they... They quite often had a, a go at the same project through a different way, and tried to present it as new news, you know, new scandal. And I once said to them, 'Look, you know, there are dozens of projects that, that we do well, and you never report those.' So they said, 'All right, we'll commission a report on those.' And, they did. And in this report, in one year's projects, they had more projects went well than they had ever had in the history of government computing gone badly. And it was a report that got zero column inches, no public interest, sank without trace. And then people would go on about, I don't know what it was, Rural Payments or, NHS IT, or whatever the causes célèbres were for the day. So... So I think, you know, Government's a force for good, has a much harder job than the private sector, and actually, 95 per cent of the time really achieves its aims, but the five per cent get magnified out of all proportion.

[42:30]

Something else happened in 1987. You're seven years into it.

Mhm.

Around 1987, what position would you be in, in Andersen?

So, I was probably... I became a, what they called a manager grade in, in '85, and became a partner in 1990. So, if there had been a formal middle, sort of senior manager grade, I'd have probably been on the cusp of senior manager, whatever.

Right. And as a manager, you had to manage people, did you?

Yes.

That's new to you, is it?

[hesitates] Not especially. I mean, I think, the first people I had working for me were on my second or third project, you know, and, and that was part of, that was another part of the attraction, we were trained in technical stuff, but you were also, and methodology, but it also trained people in management skills. Becoming a manager was a grade name that meant you were more likely to be managing a big team of people, but it also meant you were starting to get into the commercial aspects of a project, from an Andersen point of view, in other words, you were part of the sales force and, managing the money, and the, and the fees and the client relationship, as well as managing people. So...

[43:53]

What type of a manager of people are you?

Me? I... Oh gosh, that's a good... I, I've... Right. I've never had a problem in my career with people saying they did not enjoy working for me. I mean obviously the odd person you can fall out with, but, I've managed thousands of people in my career, and people have enjoyed the experience. Part of the reason for that is, I look after the interests of the people above, and the people above might, back to the bullies, don't always stand up to bullies. I could, there are more people who will say that, from above, it wasn't a comfortable experience [laughs] having me in there, because, he would challenge us and he would defend the staff, and he wouldn't dump on them, and so on. So, I think I'm a, a manager that, that motivates and inspires people, and if they, if they show the right attitude and do well, I'll defend them through thick and thin. If they're not, I'll give them the chance to improve, if they're really... But, but

ultimately, if it's an attitude thing, if the attitude is, is just not right, then, you know, we have to move people on. But when I'm dealing with people above me, I'm more, or around me, and opinion-formers and so on with whom I disagree, then I can be more robust. So...

[45:14]

What's your biggest management mistake that you have made?

Oh, undoubtedly... I have two major... I have three weaknesses in that sense. One is, there are times when I should have just sucked it up from people around me and not...

You trust people too much?

No no. I mean, not people below, but people I've... I've, I should have just taken some flak, and, using a swear word, I would have taken the shit that's dumped on me, and just, instead of pushing it back, I should have just sucked it up and said, it doesn't matter that much, you don't have to fight. They're wrong, but you don't have to fight about it. So... But, I probably should have just absorbed that, a bit too much. Secondly, I tried to do too much too quickly, definitely, in certain eras of my life. So, when I was at the Football Association, for example, there was so much wrong that, I tried to fix it all in a year and ended up doing none of it – well not none of it, but too much of it got blocked, because the organisation wasn't ready for that sort of change.

But you don't seem like an impatient man.

Well not impatient in, in a personal, personality sense; I am impatient in an intellectual sense. I mean, when you can see that something's wrong, you want it sorted, you know, and if you see the world clearly, and, you know, you just want to get on with it. And I suppose the, the third thing is, I'm definitely... I've done... I'm not universally like this, but I'm a starter... I'm much better as a starter than I am a finisher. I mean I think... I'm good at... I have done some roles way beyond a time when I probably, from my own benefit, should have done it, you know, because I wanted to see it through. So I'm not saying I run away from things when it gets

difficult, but I'm much better at, it's all messed up, it's a problem, it's a... It's difficult. Lob me in. I'll unearth how horrendous it really is, try and sort it out, get some coherence and structure to it, move it forward, get some progress, and then it's probably time for somebody else to take it to the next level. That's probably my sort of management style.

[47:45]

In terms of managing people, I'm... I don't have many regrets there. I probably have a regret, like most people would, if they saw videos of themselves and the culture that they were part of in the Eighties, it would feel very, Jim Davidson-ish, you know, sort of, almost Trump-ish, you know, in terms of... Because I suspect, without meaning to be, it was quite, you know, sexist, macho. I wouldn't say it was racist, but, you know, I mean, it was probably, the culture would look, you'd look back and think, ooh, I'm not sure about that. But of course, in a given era, I always thought I was pushing the boundaries the other way, so, you know, I've always been anti, anti-racist, anti-sexist. I've always had a very strong track record of trying to support women in the workplace, even when it was a very difficult time for women in the workplace, which the Eighties was. But even... But I look back on it, and I'd probably go, ooh, you know, I'd probably, be really embarrassed if you saw videos of what, what was being, then. But I suspect that's true for lots of people.

And it was quite a competitive environment, was it not?

Oh very, yes. I mean it was competitive in, in a, in the sense of, there was a high standard against which you competed. It wasn't particularly competitive one person against the other.

OK.

Because the company was growing so fast, if you demonstrated you had the ability, at this level, to do that level's job, there was space to do it, because, the thing was mushrooming, you know, there was an escalating... I mean, there were 200... My little intake of people in Andersen's in 1980 took us through the 200 people barrier in the UK, and when I left in 2004 there were more than 10,000. So, there had been that growth to grow on. So the competitiveness was, or competition, was, were you as an

individual up to the standard that was demanded of the next level? If you were, you got it, not because somebody resigned or debentures or whatever.

Right.

And that was part of the attraction, to be honest.

[50:06]

Was it a paternalistic organisation, in the sense that, it looked after you and it tended to map your career?

I would say... Paternalistic is an interesting word. Certainly, it was a very supportive culture. If you, if you were... You know, the inverse of all the android-ish jokes and so on was that, you know, you were in, it was a very collegiate feeling. Make a lot of friends. People would... The culture was, if somebody's in trouble, go and help them. Don't, don't watch them fail and then step in. Go and help them. The profit-sharing amongst the partners was worldwide, so, if some bit of, wherever, you know, I'm making it up now, but, Texas or somewhere had a problem, you didn't just watch it sink and let the American partners sort it out, because ultimately that would wash back into the UK. You know, if you had a skillset in the UK that could help the guys in Texas, you sent it, and vice versa. So there was this whole, they called it, it was a very American phrase, they called the one-firm concept, but it was very, it was like that, it wasn't a series of partnerships around the world that all did their own thing and sort of loosely federated. It was one integrated firm. And that meant the culture was very supportive, from, right across business lines, you know, financial to government, UK to the US, et cetera.

[51:35]

We also had strong mentoring. Mentoring was a key factor. And, mentoring always done by people in the company but not in your immediate line. So, people would... So, you know, really, you know, 'I really don't think...' 'I know this bloke, or this manager, wants you to do that type of project, but I don't think that's in your best interests, so I'm going to tell them that.' And, 'I think it's now time for you to do this sort of project for your own development.' So the short-term interests of a particular

managerial need were trumped to the bedwood by people who had a much more strategic view.

[52:15]

The other thing that's worth just touching on in the Eighties computing-wise, back to computing-wise, was, I did a project just prior to going to this big Social Security project for the Department of Health. And, when I think about it now, it was 1985/6, it was really the forerunner to the modern-day Internet. The actual idea was, there are a thousand pharmacies up and down the land who, in every day, people take their prescriptions in, they get their drugs doled out; the pharmacist then has to get that prescription repaid by the Government. And so, at the end of the month, they would batch these forms up, they'd send them off to this place in Newcastle where, something like 600 people, nearly all female and under the age of 20, sort of, very very high female, young age, first job types, would sit there all day and pick up a script and key-punch, you know, one after the other. You know, they'd look at it, they could read that that was prescription, that was penicillin of this type, plonk, they didn't need to look the code up. And they'd pick the next one up, and it was, I don't know, something else. And you know, so on. And, at the end of that, that would, that would calculate the price of the drugs. Now, somebody spotted that in the pharmacies they were beginning to introduce these microcomputers as they were known to do stock control, and stock labelling. So they would, they would, it was printing the little labels that go on the bottle. And, so somebody said, 'If we can capture that data, and then automatically transmit it to the centre, we can cut out all this data entry stuff.' So, pilot project conceived. We won the project to do it. And of course, the technology, the idea was there, and it's probably what they do today, but, the technology just wasn't there. But we ended up having a BBC Micro, which was in two-thirds of pharmacies, and, a pharmacy, a pharmacist had made his own business out of doing it, a guy called John Richardson, based out of Preston. I think there was an IBM PC and a third type of machine that wasn't... Maybe two IBM PCs, but the other two were different companies. And, we had to amend each of those systems to syphon the data off to be able, that was relevant to the prescription. And then we had to do, effectively, an Internet upload. And the only thing that existed was an ICL national network, which was known as the value-added network, or the VAN, that was used by retailers for distributing retail data around. So we kind of, hooked onto, to that. And then up in Newcastle they, the machine that they did all this number

crunching on, I think was a Honeywell Bull machine. So, in 1986, I've ended up with a BBC Micro, an IBM micro, an ICL value-added network, and God knows what sort of software on it, and a Honeywell Bull thing in the middle. And that was as fragile as hell. But we made it work, and we got it to the point where it worked, as in, you could get data from one end of the country to the other, and, accurately, and pay, but, the fragility of the technology was such that it would never have robustly lasted for millions of prescriptions. And, and therefore the cost, it just wasn't cost-justified. So we declared the pilot a success in both ways, technically it worked, but it proved the business case wasn't there, and we sort of said, it may take another decade before the technology improves. And it was almost exactly a decade later that the Internet started to emerge. And so, it feels to me like I, you know, my history, I kind of did what I think of as an early Internet project without, without the Internet, even though I know the Internet existed at that time, but it wasn't in ubiquitous use.

[56:14]

1987, IBM makes a catastrophic mistake in their launching what was called the PS/2.

Yes.

With the new operating system OS/2.

Yup.

And a proprietary connection called MCA.

Mhm.

And a proprietary new video connection.

Yup.

And tries to tell Compaq, their established, and Olivetti, then major vendors of IBM compatible PCs, that you have to pay us for this.

Yup.

And they say, 'No, we're not going to.'

Exactly.

And IBM loses control.

Yup.

And the same year IBM announces something that it cannot deliver, and is unable to deliver, called systems application architecture.

Oh yes, it did. Mm.

The idea is, to create a complete architecture able, to enable people to write programs faster, because there's a great shortage of programmers. Two enormous failures by IBM...

Yup.

...in the late Eighties, which really set it on a, on a downward path. That must have had ripples inside the user community in those times.

It did. I mean personally, I was so busy in that era, working on DSS business, we were knee deep in ICL VME, 2900s, 3900s?

Yes, 3900.

Yes. 3900 was it? I don't know.

Mm.

I'm dredging...

VME 39.

Dredging, dredging numbers from my head here. But, you know, we were working on that technology. And, so, my American colleagues, private sector colleagues, were probably more experiencing the IBM car crash at that period. From what I observed, it's that kind of, it was that shift there that really gave the Unix world a massive turbo charge. I mean it's not identically, mapped one to the other, but people were getting fed up with the IBM monopoly. IBM had now let them down. So you *did* get fired [laughs] for choosing IBM on that occasion. And so, people started... So the whole open computing environment got a significant new shift. And, DSS became another power player in that, so they were one of the world leaders in that. They were one of the first people to take Unix systems on an industrial scale, and make them right throughout. And so, again, we had a new wave of technical staff, people coming to Lytham. And I actually got seconded to the DSS for a year to be their director in charge of that programme, not as a consultant working in that environment but as a line manager of it. So it was quite, that was quite an interesting year.

[59:12]

In fact, of course, added to that, just to reinforce your, your observation, you're quite right, 1986, Oracle introduced a client server relational database management system.

Yup. Exactly. And, and there were two flavours of Unix, weren't there, from memory.

Yes.

Which kind of, complicated things.

Yes.

But, they eventually fused. But... And we had other relational products, like Ingres.

Ingres, indeed.

And...

And IBM had its relational...

It did, indeed. And so, all this was playing out. And there was a, there was another software product that I can't remember. Anyway, it doesn't matter. But there were, they were all playing out. And suddenly these new players were, the Ingreses and the Oracles of this world, who people had never, we had never heard of five years previously, were suddenly becoming corporates. And, and... And of course IBM then had to get into that space, that was their way out of their messes, was to get into the Unix environment. So inside DSS we ended up, I think, from memory, we had ICL digital and IBM Unix boxes interchangeably rolled out across, across the... And I think we started on Ingres, and then moved to Oracle. Because Ingres, I don't know what happened to Ingres in the end, but...

[pause in recording]

[1:00:36]

So in the mid-Nineties, I was given responsibility for a number of other countries as well as my role within the UK at Andersen's, or Accenture as it became later, and one of those was the Government practice down in South Africa. It was shortly after President Mandela had been elected. People may remember when he was elected that the South African population, particularly the black population, had never voted before, and the voting systems were, were rudimentary to put it mildly, people queuing for half a day. And, Mandela said something like, 'This is a great day for democracy, but never again will we have an administrative system that's quite so poor. So in '99 I want a modern electoral system for people to vote in.' And, so that, that was kind of the backdrop to this. I had visited our colleagues down in South Africa. They were doing lots of worthy work, but in financial terms, they were being paid in local currency, rand, which translated to very little US dollars in worldwide sense. And so, we took the... I said to them, 'If you want to get us to invest in your practice down here, it's got to have a value other than financial, because the financial

value's too small. And the really exciting thing about being involved with South Africa here is, we have an opportunity to help build the modern democracy, which is, which is South Africa. So, let's, let's do work that's revolving around that, not the rather tedious stuff that you're doing.' And to cut a long story short, they came back with this tender to implement a new electoral system for the, I think it was called the Independent Electoral Commission in South Africa, the IEC. So we did try it, and, we won it. It was then a very exciting project, lots of very interesting technology at the heart, particularly based on things like geographical information systems, which is, mid-Nineties, quite, quite advanced stuff; you know, today would be all done on Google Maps or whatever, but at the time was, was new and innovative technologies. But much more importantly, when they ran the election in '99 it went very smoothly, and, and there were no repeats of the long queues. And subsequent to that, we were awarded a Smithsonian award, a global award by the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, for our contribution to public service and democracy, which was, which was very very exciting.

[1:03:19]

You've now seen, we haven't come to the end of your career yet, but you have now seen so many different turns of technology.

Mhm.

May I make a suggestion to you, and you can shoot it down.

Yup.

It's probably more to do with fashion than necessarily about the technology itself.

Er... [pause]

It's, Oracle... Now let me take positions up[?]. Oracle, newcomer. What does it do? Try and go directly against IBM, Db2. No no no.

No.

What it does is to create turbulence in the marketplace...

Yeah.

...by entering in a different position. And that's what of course all new vendors want, turbulence in the marketplace.

Yes, disrupt.

Creating fear of disruption. And that becomes a new flavour.

Yes.

And people move to that, whether it's appropriate for them or not.

I think, up until this period we've talked about and beyond, I think your statements are half true and half not. In other words, I think, there have always been fashions and modes in computing, and people get carried away by them, and we must, they move like a shoal of fish from over here to over there, and there wasn't really any reason for doing that. But, I also think, if you think, if you think back, the underlying technical shifts have been massive, from, you know, we're talking about a twelve-year period, but if we take a 30-year view, you know, back in 1980 when I stopped work, almost everybody who has an online terminal, which isn't the vast majority of the workforce by then, lots of people still submitted things to other people to put online, but the online terminal was a dumb terminal here, with a very very thin network to a huge machine somewhere over there, that whirred away at them and, and came back. And, and nowadays, you know, we're on very powerful hand-held devices, like smartphones and whatever, multiple versions of the same device, owned by an individual; networks, you know, getting more ubiquitous by the day, where the, the computing power is now squillions of much smaller boxes bolted together in arrays running open software environments with applications on top. It's a very very big shift. And each one of those shifts happened incrementally, you know, different periods, the introduction of the IBM PC, or the move to client server, or the

introduction of open computing and Unix, and, then subsequently the Internet, and then, mobile networks, and, smartphones and the rest. You know, each, each one of those has been significant in themselves, and they have shifted, and they have changed fundamentally the way in which we live our lives. Against that, there's been lots of fads, and, you know, this one's in, that one's out, et cetera et cetera. And, at the end of the day, they all kind of did the same thing.

I'll go further and say that the consultants are often the worst in promoting the fads, because, things, people become reliant on them.

Yes, I, I think that's possibly true. I mean, it, it's a classic case of who leads who. Are the consultants leading the market in order to feather their own nests, or are they sniffing where the market is moving, and putting themselves into, you know, the, the leading space in that market? You know, you can argue it both ways. I would... At the time, I would have always argued the latter. You know, if something, if a client server was the coming thing, we'd make sure we trained ourselves up on client server, and then we went, other people would argue, it was people like you that went in and told them client server was the coming thing, so they all did it when they didn't need to. And, you can play it both ways.

[1:07:22]

Right. Right. So, you became a partner then.

Yes, 1990.

1990.

Yes.

One of the youngest partners ever.

Yup.

Partner means you are getting parts of the profit.

Yup.

And you have some degree of liability as a partner.

Yup.

But interestingly, that has been limited. Now partnerships previously meant that, you're all partners together, you share the profits, as you wish to, but you're also liable 100 per cent.

Yup. And that was true when we were there.

That was true when you were there. But then, something came up called a limited liability partnership. That was much later.

After my time.

Oh right. OK.

So, the whole time I was a partner, I had unlimited liability.

So you could have been done personally for any of the losses.

Yup.

And one of the losses came up quite large on the accounting side, which was Enron.

But after we had left.

After you had left. OK. So you're still combined together, till 2004.

So... So, in terms of the way it worked, when I became a partner in 1990, I had unlimited liability, zero salary, and my only income was the share of the worldwide profits at the end of the year.

Right.

Now, the reality was, that we were pretty well financially insulated against downsize, because we had reserves in case. We had fairly good projections of what the worldwide profits were going to be in a given year. We paid out something like two-thirds of that during the course of the year to give yourself a monthly salary, and then at the end of the year you got what was left, when the accountants had added it all up, and, so you got these surges of cash at the end of the year. So you learnt to live on the, the two-thirds or whatever was paid out during the course of the year, and the rest was treated as a, as like a bonus, which, you then, put a new roof on the house or whatever you did with it. But you also had in the back of your mind that there was this unlimited risk. The reality was, it never came to pass. However, if you're interested in the realms of the Arthur Andersen side, we had an arrangement that we shared our own profit pool, and they shared their profit pool, but under this holding company arrangement, if one of these profit pools got out of line with the other, so if one became vastly more profitable than the other, there was a transfer payment from one to the other to sort of equalise.

One company.

And... Yeah, well... And, we, we were, we were on the rise and they were in a more mature market. So, we were just massively more profitable. And it was capped at fifteen per cent of the income. And every year we paid them fifteen per cent, it kind of became like a VAT, VAT was fifteen per cent at the time, so we used to think of it as like VAT to Arthur Andersen.

[1:10:18]

And it was, it, it stuck in the craw a bit, but, where it really, really, really got up our nose, they created a consulting firm with the money that we were paying them, and started to go out in the market. And we were selling as Andersen Consulting and they were selling as Arthur Andersen Consulting, and the market didn't know the

difference. And we'd rock up at the same client with two different pitches from two different bits of the business. So, we tried to separate, and we said, 'Right, we think it's time we just left and went and did our own thing.' They said, 'You can't do that, under the legal arrangements. You have a contract with the Andersen worldwide, and any member firm can leave that contract, but they have to pay one and a half times their last year's revenues as the exit price.' Revenues, not profits. So, at the time, I can't remember, we were a ten billion a year, US dollar, market, industry, worldwide. For us all to have left would have cost us fifteen billion. And, so we started to negotiate the price of the exit. You know, we wanted to go out at nought, they wanted fifteen billion. I think we got to the point where we offered them four billion and they turned it down. And we, as individuals, judged that we couldn't get any further than that, because to have gone with paying four billion we'd have genuinely had to go and get some cash out of the... We'd have all taken on personal debt to do that, in order to be able to do our own thing. And then somebody very smart discovered that the contracts that bound us to this thing up in the sky potentially had been breached by the other side with their, with their creation of the competitor. So, we said, 'Right, we're no longer negotiating on this, we think you've breached contract. We now want this contract set aside. We're off, and by the way, we're not going to pay you the fifteen per cent any more, till you agree.' So... 'But we'll put it in escrow.' And, so, huge legal row. Corporate lawyers all over the place. And then, people said, well where does a dispute get heard? It gets heard in these obscure clauses in the contract by the International Chamber of Commerce. And the International Chamber of Commerce has to appoint an arbitrator to hear the case, and that arbitrator has to come from a country in which neither of the two protagonists does business. [both laugh] So, we're going, hang on a minute, I mean, we're pretty global, Arthur Andersen are pretty much everywhere. But to cut a long story short, the International Chamber of Commerce picked a Colombian, because neither of us did business in Colombia, because of all the drugs problems and security problems. This guy was a Harvard-educated lawyer, so I mean he wasn't, he wasn't, you know, a Colombian farmer or something. Dr Gamba. He spent three years listening to the case, and, a matter of months, or, probably leaping ahead, I became the UK head. I was the last UK head of the old Andersen Consulting partnership, within a few months of me starting he announced his judgement, and he found 100 per cent in our favour, that they had breached their contract. The contracts were set aside. So not only did we get to go,

we didn't have to pay them anything of the four billion that we had already offered them, and the only thing we had to pay them was the money that had been held in escrow up to that point. So...

[1:13:58]

So you were UK MD from 2000?

Yes.

You must have been, before that, very happy about Y2K.

Yes, Y2K was an interesting one, because, obviously the company worldwide made an absolute fortune out of it really, mainly because, not because of Y2K itself, which, we did very very little actual Y2K work, but because companies used it as the excuse to modernise their systems. So all the CIOs of the world said, 'Y2K. Need a new suite and systems,' and, and boards of directors said yes. So there was this massive splurge in, particularly enterprise systems, and of course SAP and Oracle were dominant things, but... And, and so, also, we started to get into CRM systems, with Siebel and so on.

And ERP and, all of those three-letter acronyms came rolling in.

Absolutely.

SAP, and...

Yeah. Yup, SAP was the German company, Oracle was, Oracle, but it was, it was Oracle's financial systems built on an Oracle platform. ERP, which I don't think we had ever used as a phrase, suddenly became an acronym. And... Anyway. There was just a huge boom in that. Again, it didn't affect me personally that much as a, as an individual, because the kind of work I was doing was still highly customised, and, I was either, I had been working a lot on Government systems, but also internationally, places like South Africa, which we might talk about briefly, but also, at the London Stock Exchange, which were, as a company we had the, we had the outsourced

systems for the Stock Exchange, we built the platform from scratch. So, I was working on custom systems. The Y2K boom really affected package-based work, and so my colleagues were the ones that... So as a business, you're right, we, we definitely boomed off it; individually, it made less impact, apart from my role in the wider business.

[1:16:06]

A lot of finance directors in the private sector by now are saying, 'I think we're being dragged by our short and curlies around this table by our IT directors or CIOs or whatever you like to call it, for so long, and they've given us a real technical bull,' and said, 'We're going to outsource this.'

Mm.

And outsourcing became a, a massive business.

Yup.

I have heard it characterised as the finance directors' revenge.

Yes.

Which in some ways it was.

Yup.

Andersen didn't really get into this?

Yes, no we did, quite big time.

I thought...

Yes, and especially in the UK actually.

I thought you were a bit late though into getting into it.

No.

No?

No no.

OK.

Well not in the UK. The UK kind of led the outsourcing market, inside the firm.

OK. Yes.

I think the US got into it a bit late.

OK.

But no, definitely. Because, in fact, I think it was in 1992, I'm guessing now, I think it was '92, we had a bit of a, a bit of tension in the UK partnership about the direction of, of where we were going, and so, an internal project was, was commissioned to look at, you know, a strategy for the company. I may have got the dates wrong a little bit, but it was in that sort of timeframe. And I, I played a role on that, not the leading role, but the bit I played the leading role on was the marketplace, where's the market going. And I coined the phrase that we, you know, there's a consulting world out there and an outsourcing world out there; you can play in either market, but the real market to be in is the consulting and outsourcing market. In other words, you take over what the company has currently got, and, you then re-engineer it with your consulting. So you run it as an outsourcing but re-engineer it with a consulting capability. It might have been a bit later than '92, more like '95, thinking about it. Because, the Stock Exchange was probably one of our best example for that. They tried to rebuild their platform as a stock exchange. They collapsed in a heap. What was the project called? It had a name. It was, it was probably the most famous private sector IT disaster project. It was Project X. I can't remember what it was

called. If you look it up. Anyway. And it turned out to have an emperor with no clothes, and the chief exec lost his job, and, da-da-da-da. So we were brought in, and the deal we put on the table is, we will take over the systems that you've got, which cost you n million a year, and we won't charge you any more than n million a year, but we will make savings out of the operational side, and we will reinvest the savings in, in building a new platform. So we will keep our own mouths busy, building a new system, and at the end of it, for your n million a year, you will, you will not only have an operational system but you'll have a brand new system, what became known as SETS.

[19:14]

Was it called Taurus?

Taurus. Well done. God, you've got a good memory.

Well no it just popped up.

Very impressive. Project Taurus, exactly. It was, it was a... And we came along after that and picked up the pieces. And so, it became the classic example of, if you're spending this money as a company already on it, and it's kind of clunky and not really working, if we can, without increasing the spend, can re-engineer it under the... that's a very good business case to, to the finance directors. And so, it was the consulting and outsourcing pitch that we pushed.

Right.

Whereas somebody like EDS was broadly pushing, was broadly pushing an outsourcing pitch. And, that was the differentiator we tried to make in the market, which meant we very rarely went in for the big straightforward outsourcing deals. We went in for the re-engineering with outsourcing deals.

IBM was trying to push more hardware. EDS was trying to push the services side.

You were in the, trying to blend the two.

Yes.

[1:20:15

That was your USP in the marketplace. Something happened, something quite interesting happened in terms of the end of John Major and the introduction of, of the Blair–Brown government, and in you making a radical, radical move, after 24 years in Andersen, and what became Accenture, and become the first Chief Information Officer of the Government, in September 2004.

Yup. So, how did that come about? Well the first thing was, I had obviously done quite a lot of computing work in Government, but probably, the bit that I thought you were going to mention was, the whole Nineties became dominated by the so-called Private Finance Initiative. And initially, John Major's government brought the PFI in, and it was intended, I'm not quite sure what its original intention was, but they, we... It got pushed as a solution to big spend on IT. And we took on the first IT project as a company, the National Insurance project, which became an absolute disaster, and we, we got it, we got it so badly wrong financially, and everything else really, that... We were awarded the contract because we had, we were miles cheaper than anybody else, and, and within a matter of six months it was obvious this project was going, was just, disastrous. And I got sent in to sort it out. And I spent four years of my life in absolute misery sorting this thing out. We became pilloried on the front pages of the newspapers, I got dragged in front of chancellors and goodness knows who else to, you know, red hot poker inserted. And, it cost us about 100 million quid to sort it out. It was a huge financial cost. But, the point was, at the end we had sorted it out. We took our medicine, we delivered a working system, and that system to this day still runs large portions of the tax system. So... And... But that exposed me to a lot of people inside Government in a way that I hadn't seen them before. These were the people who dealt with, you know, problems, permanent secretaries, directors-general, as opposed to sort of, as opposed to sort of, regular project manager types who I'd been working with. And, so that was, that was probably where... And then I became the UK head off the back of that, and we then became Accenture, because of, the one thing we had to do when we left Arthur Andersen was give up the Andersen name, and, the Accenture word was born.

[1:23:04]

And, we then floated on the Stock Exchange in 2001. We then had a recession in 2002 which was a kind of mixture of the delayed post-Y2K reaction and a dotcom collapse with...

Lastminute.

With, Lastminute, et cetera failing. But then we resurged from that. And so, from a career point of view, I kind of got to the point where... You know, and, I don't know how relevant this is to your archive, but, we had, two of our staff were killed in the Twin Towers as well, which was another extraordinary episode. From our UK staff, two people flew for a conference in the Twin Towers that day. Wiped out. Two young families et cetera. And, massive outpourings of grief, and everything. And the company said... I had a most dramatic four years in my time. I mean, we split with Arthur Andersen, renamed and rebranded, two mini recessions, a crisis of, you know, from the Twin Towers deaths, a public flotation of the company, a rebuild of the market. I mean, you know, it was all going on. So it was a, it was a dramatic four years. In parallel with that, the Government had, initially under the latter days of Major but really driven by Blair, had given the Internet a big shove.

Mhm.

And, they appointed the first [inaud], and, and so on, miles ahead of the rest of the world in doing this, probably Canada were the other place that were out there really riding the Internet wave. And, it started off well, and then it got a bit stuck in the early 2000s, and, so they decided to make a slight change of direction but bring somebody new in from the outside to lead on that eGovernment charge, but also, become more broadly based on the CIO. And, the two things came into collision.

[1:25:13]

My career point, I had kind of reached a point where, what else was there for me left to do in Accenture? I didn't want to go on with global travel, and, young kids and all the rest of it. Secondly, they needed somebody from the outside, and I was a known quantity, you know, they had kind of decided...

So in you came.

So... Anyway, I interviewed for it, and, didn't think I'd actually get it. And suddenly found myself in Number 10 talking technology to Tony Blair, which was quite, weird. Probably the big driver behind it at the time was John Birt, if you remember John Birt, ex-BBC John Birt.

Mhm.

Who was Blair's blue skies adviser. He was very strongly behind the shift.

[1:25:57]

What's your biggest achievement as CIO? Because you were only there for sixteen months, something like that.

Well... Yes and no. I was, I had a responsibility for it for a lot longer than that.

Yes. Well you became a delivery unit.

Yes, but I absorbed the CIO responsibilities within that. So, I was still... I, I went from Director-General who was the CIO to the Permanent Secretary who had the direct-general and...

Right.

I mean, overwhelmingly I think three things we did. One was, we brought the heads of IT from Government together. They were operating in silo A, silo B, you know, that never met. Suppliers were dividing and conquering. People weren't learning from each other, so on. We created what we called the CIO Council. It wasn't a line management thing, it was a, it was a collaborative venture, but it was intended to get people to, to become a team inside Government, whether they were head office, DWP, wherever. And, support each other, have some common things that they were trying to do together. Of course each department's different but there were some things that were common. And, you know, to, and to stop the supplier community dividing and conquering. So that was the first thing, and it worked really well.

[1:27:22]

The second thing was, as a group we produced what we called our Transformational Government Strategy, which had broadly three things. One was user-centred design of systems, rather than producer-created designs. Secondly, was, I was going to say shared systems. Probably the wrong phrase. But, enterprise systems. But, to do so, instead of... What we would do in Government is take an Oracle, and effectively rewrite it into a custom system in order to make it fit a department, and we, we were trying to say, no, Oracle's Oracle. Change the department to fit Oracle, not the other way round.

Right.

And I used a phrase that said, you know, the system's vanilla. When I mean vanilla, I don't mean with a chocolate flake in it, I mean vanilla vanilla, you know. Keep it simple, keep it to the core product, and then, let Government implement that. And the third was to build the profession of IT professionals inside Government, so that we weren't totally reliant on outsiders and/or being ripped off by outsiders. So they were the three big things of the strategy.

And you think those were all a success?

Well, the strategy was right, and, I think, each of them had positives. I think probably the middle one had less success, although, it slightly, it improved, but I still think when push came to shove departments tended to customise rather than go vanilla.

Mhm.

We built a lot of capability, and a lot of the leaders today inside Government started as, from, from early, you know, acorns in those days, they're now the oak trees. So there's a lot of good people come through. But, but undoubtedly, the first was the big success.

[1:29:08]

It must have been like trying to herd cats.

Well it was, but, the cats wanted to be herded.

OK. Well then, you had an advantage.

A little bit. Because, because, they're quite lonely roles, these. If you're the CIO in, I didn't pick the Home Office, any other... But it's just, a department. You're enormously important to that department in one way, but you're almost, you're politically irrelevant to it until it goes wrong. So all the issues of the Home Office are about crime or, immigration, or, whatever, national prisons or, this and, you know, da-da-da da. But of course, you know, a lot of the issues that sit behind all those, passports and immigration, are going to be based, because your case management system isn't working or something.

Yes. Yes.

So you're hugely important but almost, but almost irrelevant.

Unless you mess it up.

And, you're not one of the people at the top table all the time. So it's quite a lonely job. So actually, having colleagues around you who are in the same place became a source of big strength to people, and I think that was really important.

[1:30:12]

But the, but the user-centred thing was, was absolutely, eyes shut There were... My predecessor had lots of good ideas and spawned lots of investments, but the money had dried up, and there was no way they were going to fund. So I killed off everything except, and I pooled the money into one thing, which was Directgov. And Directgov, when I took it on, had just started, it had about 100,000 people in the general public using it for random few enquiries a year sort of thing. By the end we had 25 million people using it, out of our 60 million, 25 million different people, not 25 million repeat users. You and I have all used Directgov without probably realising it, doing things like registering car tax online and things of that ilk, you know. That was, that was the big tangible achievement in that period.

I did, I did do one, and I thought, oh goodness me, that actually, they're actually getting out of their silos. And I had to apply for a new, a new driving licence, that was it. And they said, 'Do you have a...'

Have you got a passport photo?

'Do you have a passport?' And I said, 'Yes. This is my number.' 'OK, we've got your picture.' I thought, oh, well done chaps. That was you, was it?

That's... Yes. Well you know, the concept... I didn't do that particular system.

No no, but it comes from...

That's the concept, yes.

Yes.

That's by putting the user at the centre, not the department.

Yes.

Right?

Yes.

And...

But, but, but. I have a set of medical records in my hospital which cannot access the set of medical records in my GP, and vice versa.

Well, the NHS is not Government.

It is Civil Service though, parts of it.

No it's... No. No no, the NHS is outside the Civil Service.

Oh OK.

And that's a completely... You know, this is... There are, the public sector has, is a sort of, series of concentric circles.

Right.

The Civil Service... So there are six million public sector workers. There are 400,000 civil servants.

Right.

And the vast majority of the rest are, in the NHS, in the armed forces, in the police, and in local government.

OK.

And, we could have an influence over those, and obviously the Department of Health was part of the Civil Service, and had an influence over the NHS. But the NHS systems were completely out of scope from what I'm talking about. I'm talking about the things that were core Civil Service driven.

[1:32:41]

And, Directgov definitely was the crowning achievement of that strategy. It then timed out a bit, because it, you know, like, we were talking earlier of things coming, waves and so on.

Yes.

By the time the coalition government came in in 2010, I mean they were obviously entering in the spirit of, everything that had gone before was a disaster and they were here to help, sort of, you know, as all new, changes of administration do. So, when

Blair came in in '97, it was ground zero and now 2010 was a new ground zero. But, the coalition government had the same broad idea of, of user-centred computing for the public, and, you know, efficiency and all the rest of it, but better service. But what they wanted to do, they, they got, we got Martha Lane Fox in to do a report, so Martha basically said, 'What's there kind of works, but it's looking very Web 1.0, and we need Web 2.0 now.' So... So she and I sat down and said, yeah, OK, so let's, what are we going to do? And so we created the Government Digital Service, GDS. And went out and appointed Mike Bracken to lead it, who was the first head of GDS. And that suddenly created a new surge. So, he took the platform that was Directgov and completely sort of, Web 2.0'd it, and put it onto the current platform which is GOV.UK.

Mhm.

And, and this was where he was, he, he produced the next wave of success. He pulled... Although Directgov was a cross-Government platform, it was still largely done by government departments to a standard, he pulled it out of government departments and did it centrally. So.... And, for example, there isn't a single government department now that has its own website. They all run off GOV.UK. So, so pre my arrival, there were lots of good intentions, but, but nothing concrete. I then got Directgov going, broadly, and Mike got GOV.UK going. Those are the two big achievements of, of that era.

[1:35:05]

You were five years basically there, weren't you?

Yup.

Because you also became Permanent Secretary, yes?

Yes So I became the Permanent Secretary inside the Cabinet Office, who had responsibility for a number of roles. Then... But then, I did leave that central world and go off to be the Permanent Secretary of another department.

Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills.

Yes. Which was essentially, the department that, the department for business really.

Right. And you, your Secretary of State was John Denham as it was.

It was. Yup.

Good?

Outstanding, really enjoyed it. Really cared.

[1:35:43]

What's the quality of the top people in Government? This, what used to be called the Rolls Royce, the Civil Service[?] [inaud].

Yes, I... I don't like, I don't like that phrase, because Rolls Royces sort of, conjure up, gas-guzzling, very expensive luxury owned by...

Right.

And by, people who have flats in the Bahamas. But, but the point about the Civil Service is, it has fantastically high quality people. And, it recruits them in, at, straight out of university, through the Fast Stream and other sources. And although a number of them go elsewhere, you know, you pump them in there, you give them a great experience. 20 years later they're running the country.

Yes.

And whenever we have periodic crises of, oh lots of people are leaving, or whatever, you know, policemen are looking younger et cetera et cetera, the next wave of talent comes through and everybody, within six months everybody's going, well, they're obvious first-class.

OK.

So there's, there's no shortage of underlying talent. And in that way, it's a bit like a professional services firm. It's a bit like an Andersen or a, or a, you know, Magic Circle, [inaud], whatever. Hugely bright people, and highly motivated, talented people who have got some great training, great experience over a number of years. Emerge great leaders. And if a group don't quite cut it, the next wave come through, and so on and so forth. There's a constant wave of it. Which is not the same in many corporate companies. Many corporate companies, you take away the leadership, there's not much left. You know, they have to bring it in, because they, they run small teams of leaders and very big battalions who do as they're told, you know. Whereas professional services firms are, the only difference, I always used to say when I was running Accenture, between you as a new graduate and me is 20 years' experience. Right? You're as talented as I am, and you're probably more talented, and you're probably better educated. I have a bit more experience, but we're the same human being, just a bit apart. And in 20 years' time you'll probably be doing my job, you know. And that's the model of the Civil Service. The political class is different. So the political class is, becomes, I mean, as Sir Humphrey famously said, the Prime Minister of the day has only got 300 people to choose from, 100 of whom disagree with him and the other 100 of whom are certifiably mad, therefore he's going to need, he needs 100 ministers [inaud].

Sure.

And that was the Sir Humphrey joke. But it is kind of a bit like that, that, you know, you've got 300 people there, in your party, in Government. They've all got there because they've become elected, and, they may or may not have relevant skills to actually run a government department. And running a government department, as a politician, seems to me, you have three or four different components. You've undoubtedly got to be very good with the media. That probably is the thing that distinguishes the top politician from the top civil servant. The top civil servant doesn't really need to be good in the media. They're meant to be behind the camera, not in front of it. But, a top politician has got to be brilliant in the media.

[1:38:59]

Second thing is, they've got to have a policy idea of what they want. Now Number 10 sets a sort of broad policy direction, but you need somebody who's got real policy agenda, know-how. That doesn't mean... The department might do a thousand things, and a policy agenda might be concentrating on five, but they've got to really know what they want to do there.

[1:39:22]

The third is, they've got to be politically judge... They've got to have good political judgement. And again, civil servants over time gain that, but at the end of the day, some civil servants still lack that ability to look at something and go, that's going to blow up in their face.

[1:39:40]

And the fourth thing is, they've got to run an organisation. Now getting those four things in a single politician is quite tough, and quite unusual. And so, the view I used to take was, I'll run the organisation for you. I'm the permanent secretary, I'm the professional manager. You don't need to worry about that. What you need to tell me is what your top five policy things are, and I'll make sure we reflect that. If I think we've got a problem emerging, I'll tell you so you don't look[?] surprised. And you concentrate then on being out there on the stage, selling [inaud].

So you're not a proper Sir Humphrey?

Well I don't know. I think... I, I used to think, I used to say to John Denham, 'You're my client. I mean I'm... If you think of me as, I'm Accenture and you're the, you're my client,' right?

Mm.

'And if I think you're doing stupid things, I'll tell you, but ultimately you're still the client and you'll be, make the decision.' Now the reason John was particularly good was because he was actually, first class. He was good in the media, he had very good judgement, but he had an absolutely superb policy nous. Miles better than me. And he could... He wasn't really a manager of an organisation. So, he kind of outsourced that both to me and one of his ministers, Lord Triesman, who was his House of Lords minister. And so, David and I used to concentrate on the management of the

department, but John was just brilliant on the policy side, and I was in awe of him. So we got on really well.

[1:41:12]

And you dropped out for a little while and became CEO of the Football Association.

Yes. That was because of David Triesman, Lord Triesman.

That was nine months.

Yes. Well Lord Triesman... When Lord Triesman went off to be Chair of the Football Association, six months later I got a headhunter call saying they were recruiting a chief exec, and he wondered if I was interested. So, being a football fanatic, with a son who's a professional footballer now, but wasn't at the time, and is, he's played for England and so on, I, I thought, well I'm never going to get the... I'll interview. They won't give it to me, but... Anyway, I got offered the job, and I went to see Gus, and I said, 'Look...' Because Mandelson and I were talking about the Department for Business being created, which I was going to go and run for him. And, and then this FA thing came up, and I said to Gus, 'I need to do the FA thing. I'll never forgive myself if I don't.' And he, he's a big football fan. And so, he said, 'We don't want to lose you, but, I kind of understand.' So anyway, I went off to the FA. It, it didn't work. We can [inaud] long [inaud].

[1:42:16]

OK. OK. And then you came back.

But, when I...

CEO, Cabinet Office.

But I came back in, by then the coalition had happened, and I came back in, effectively doing a souped-up version of the role I had last time in the Cabinet Office. So, I had responsibility overall for the corporate functions of Government, which... So it wasn't just IT and some of the delivery things; it was all, HR, finance – well not

finance, that's the Treasury, but, coms, property, procurement, commercial, all those things. And, I was running the Cabinet Office as a department. And I did that for two years.

[1:42:55]

And then you left and said you wanted to spend more time with your family.

Well my wife became a vicar.

Yes.

Yes. So, I wanted to work with her.

Oh I see.

So...

But you're, you're now, now, today, you're in your early sixties.

I am sixty, [inaud].

Sixty-one or sixty.

Sixty.

Yes?

Yup.

This isn't all over now, is it? What are you going to do next?

Well, the... So...

I'm sure supporting your wife being a vicar is a very important role, but.

Well I do have another role, which we, which is in the Civil Service, which is, we should talk about. But, I left... She... Being a vicar is quite the most stressful personal job. Six days a week; if you're lucky you get a day off. You're only legislated to have one day off a week, and quite often that doesn't happen. She had been out of the workplace while the children were growing up. She was, she had got this job...

OK. But anyway, therefore you left.

And, and I went to support her. And it's up in Manchester. She became the number two to the person who became the first woman bishop, which was also very interesting. And, we still had children at school, and, so, we flipped. I also was on the board of the Rugby World Cup, which was crescendoing around 2015. So, I did that. When that finished, I realised, I had kind of got used to having a role of some, one to two days a week was doable; five days a week was not. And, the Civil Service Commissioner was retiring, and I got a phone call saying, would I put my name forward? And I said, mm, never really thought about that before. But, think about it. And, anyway, to cut a long story short, I put myself forward. Cameron offered me the job, but then he, he said it'll have to be after the referendum. He then imploded, or, exploded or whatever word you want to use, spontaneously combusted, after 23rd of June. I thought, well OK, that's not going to happen now. And then, next thing I get is a, Theresa May would like to meet you. So I went and re-interviewed for this job. So I've seen two prime ministers for the same two-day-a-week job. And, she offered me the job in August. I then had to be cleared through Parliament, the Queen, the Opposition, Nigel Farage, anybody that moved. And, and I started in October 2016. And I have a five-year term. And my job as the Commissioner is broadly to be, to oversee the systems of recruitment and the systems of Civil Service code, according to the statute. And, and what I do personally, apart from all that, I, I appoint, or I chair the panels that appoint the heads of each of the Whitehall departments.

[1:45:58]

Have we heard the end of Ian Watmore in the IT industry, or is there more to come?

Oh, I... I cannot conceive of a role I would play in the IT sector now at my age and experience. I'm miles apart. When I hired Mike Bracken, who was brilliant, I really enjoyed working with him, one of the answers he gave to the interview questions, I did the sort of, 'Why you Mike?' he said, 'I'm old enough to, you know, to know my way around big organisations and get stuff done, and I'm young enough still to be able to talk to the cool kids in language they understand.' And I said, 'How old are you?' He said, 'Forty-two.' Now, I don't think, in my sixties, I've got any relevance to the IT industry, apart from, recounting histories and maybe, maybe, giving some, a future Mike Bracken, [inaud] head[?], if I ever had a role like that, but I don't see that likely to happen. I'm going to do the Civil Service Commissioner role for my two and a bit years left, which will take me through to the autumn of '21. Who knows what's going to happen politically between now and then. And then I think it's, it's, you know, boots hung up.

I don't think it's over, because, people will be listening to this contribution, Ian, that you've made to the Archives, and be learning a lot as a result of it, because the objective is not only to capture the past in the Archives, but also to inspire the future, and I think you will inspire future people. Thank you very much for your contribution, Ian Watmore.

Thank you. It's been a pleasure. Been interesting to remember some of the things that I thought I had forgotten. So, very good.

[End of Interview]