



Capturing the Past, Inspiring the Future

David Clarke MBE

Interviewed by

Tom Abram

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Welcome David. It's Tom Abram here. We're in the WCIT Hall on the 23rd of May 2019.

Yeah, indeed we are.

It's about half-past eleven. So, thanks very much for coming along...

A pleasure.

...to talk about your background and experiences. As I said, I thought we might work chronologically through your life and career.

Yes.

So, what would you say about your start in life, your family background and so on?

Well very working class. And my father was a, a socialist, out and out socialist, which I never really agreed with. But you know, shop steward, and this kind of thing. And in fact my grandfather was as well. So there's a very sort of socialist group there. And I lived on a council estate, Yorkshire council estate, that's where I was brought up. So it was very working class. I think the thing that changed my perspective was that I... Well two things. One is, I had a natural ability for maths. I have to say, at that time I had no idea I did, but I obviously did, as I found out later. And, and I passed the Eleven Plus to go to grammar school. And what I found when I got to the grammar school was that I was rubbing shoulders with a whole raft of people from very different backgrounds, that I... And I felt, through the work and what have you, that I was equal to them. So, it kind of lifted, I suppose, my view of both myself and maybe what I might achieve, you know. I had friends whose father were lawyers, and they were going to be a lawyer. And that never occurred to me before then.

Mm. So, I'm a grammar school boy, and of course, I, like many others, think that grammar schools are a great thing in terms of social mobility.

Yes, me too.

So do you think that's what it did for you?

Absolutely. No question. I think without that, I wouldn't have... I wouldn't have, have looked to do the things that I eventually did. It just would never have occurred to me, that I could do them.

[02:10]

Yes. It looks like your mother was a professional though, a building society manager. So...

Yes. She was. For a lot of the time though, when we were growing up, she just looked after the home.

Right.

She didn't work in that while I was growing up.

A Very traditional kind of role in those days.

Classic, you know, and, and you know, you are Yorkshire.

Yes.

And, it's only really when the kids left that she had the time I suppose and the opportunity to go and do something for herself, and she did. So she clearly had the brains to do it, but it wasn't the role to start with, certainly in those days.

Your father was an engineer.

Yes.

Did that influence your direction towards technology at all?

No. [laughs] None whatsoever. It... I didn't really even know what an engineer was to be honest. And it... The thing is that through, through those grammar school years, whilst... something stood out. There were two of us who always topped the maths numbers every year in the exams, myself and a lad called Peter Denton. And he went on to get a, a scholarship at Cambridge, on the back of his maths ability. And we were always battling for who was number one in there. So that... And I quite liked that, you know, because I'm... The one thing I've, I've always been is competitive, in sort of, everything. But it was the sports side of things that, that I really wanted to win if you like. So you know, I would win at all the school's racing things, and then I won the Yorkshire schools cross-country thing, more out of bloody-mindedness than anything. I actually won that, the Yorkshire schools cross-country thing, whilst I was coming down with German measles. [laughs] And the next day I was out flat. And I didn't feel very well during the day. But I was so bloody determined to win it that... That's... So I was driven to succeed, whatever I was doing. But, from quite an early age I got spotted as, as having some talent in playing football.

Yeah.

And at school, I got, I signed, schoolboy papers, and I turned down Leeds to go to Hull, just because it was so much more convenient for me to get there. Because you had to go training two nights a week, and, and playing for the under-eighteen team, and youth team, in the FA youth cup, and I played for East riding FA under-eighteen team in the national championships. And I felt, that's, that's what I'm going to do. And I have to say, I kind of, put most other things aside.

[05:01]

Yes. Because I don't think you mentioned in your bio the, the expertise at maths.

Probably didn't.

It was more of the focus on sport.

I probably didn't.

Yeah.

It didn't occur to me then. But afterwards it, I realised that that was one of the things. It's interesting you say, were you an engineer? Well not really. But, but I certainly, the maths thing worked.

Yup.

It dawned on me one day actually about being a potential engineer when, when I was the finance director of a business when we had a computing system. That actually is, I'm jumping now, but, it's actually where I started, where I was approached to go and do something with Hewlett-Packard, and I watched this guy... We, we had these disks holding data, quite, minicomputers, and, every so often they'd go out of sync. And some engineer would have to come in and align the disks. And, and I watched this guy, and I thought, you know, I could do that, that's not hard.

Yeah.

And I started to think, well... And he's an engineer. And I was starting to think, well maybe, maybe that's an... And I'd like to do that; not only I could, but I'd like to do that. So that started me to think. Before then I'd never have given it a thought.

[06:18]

Yes. Just going back to the, the sport. I mean people often say that there's a, that there's a link between business and sport, that, people who are good at sport are good at business. And there is even an argument that you should do more sport in schools, because it helps people to get better at doing other things. What's your thought on that? Is it, is there a link, is it cause and effect, or what?

I've never thought about that. What I think is, though, you do, you do develop being a member of a team. There's no question. In the sports I played anyway, which were team games. It was a team, and you had to know what your part of it, and... And I

also ended mostly leading the teams. You know, I was captain of the teams, pretty much all the way through. Not my decision of course, you know. But even at the junior school I was, I was captain of the football team. And wherever it was. And I think that's just because I, I actually shouted at everybody, and talked too much, and they thought, we'd better... The only way of shutting him up is to make him captain. [laughs] Nobody else will get a word in. So, at that level I was, I was developing the skills of getting a team to actually play. Because there wasn't a lot of coaching from teachers or what have you.

Yes.

There wasn't in... Well, at grammar school there was, in the techniques of rugby. Because none of us knew how to play that. But in terms of, as a team and a strategy, there was none of that.

Yeah.

It was just basics. So we kind of worked it out as we went along as a group.

Yeah.

So, it helped me, there's no question it helped me. It gave me confidence too to perform. You know, people... I was... Somebody once said to me that, when I was on stage, which I loved to do...

Oh right, you liked performing as well. Yeah.

Loved, loved it. The bigger audience, the better.

Yeah.

And... And all the way through my life I've done that, I've enjoyed that.

Yeah.

And somebody said to me, well that's because, you know, you're used to playing football in front of a big crowd. You're used to it. And getting a reaction from the crowd, good or bad, depending whether it's your supporters or the other side.

[laughs] But you're used to it. And it... And I think that probably did help me with the confidence side of it.

Yeah. So you think some of the aptitudes are common between sport and business?

I think so. I think so. But I don't think you have to have sport to be successful in business. You know, if I look, for example, at Branson. He's got no idea about sport whatsoever.

Is that right? Yes.

You could... And there are some people who think he's got no idea about business, but he certainly, didn't have any idea about sport. And... And so, you know, never came close to that link. So, I don't think it's...

But you, you clearly, you clearly have an intense will to win, judging by your cross-country with German measles, and...

No question. No question.

To winning the first It's a Knockout!...

Oh that was, that... I loved that. I loved that. I mean I got... It had to be... I was actually not around much at the time, because I was, I was actually playing for Hull City youth team. And, this was a series run in, I think it was '66. It was run that summer. It was the first one they ever did, *It's a Knockout!*. And it was a competition between seaside towns.

Yeah. I remember it well.

Yeah. And I, really, you know, I looked at it. And a mate of mine had done the final challenge as it was called in the semi-final, which was a cricket, knocking down stump. And then the guy who organised it all for Bridlington came knocking on the door, and he said, 'You know, we've got this final on Sunday, and they tell us the challenge, final challenge, which may well decide the whole thing, so it's important, is going to be a football-based thing.' He said, 'I don't know anything else at the moment, but it's football...' You know, 'Are you up for it?' [laughs] Try and keep me away from it. And so, yeah. And that was, oh it was a fabulous a day actually, I loved it. I loved it. And, the other thing was, I mean, we were playing Lytham St Annes, and the way they worked it is, they had a number of events in Lytham and a number in, in Brid. And this was the final challenge. And basically, for all the games up to the final one you got two points. And then the final challenge, you chose the level of difficulty you went for. They had the mayor in, two mayors in a...

Oh right, yes.

In a...

Yup.

In a studio in Leeds. McDonald Hobbly was hosting it. That shows you how far back it goes. And, the mayor decided whether they went for three points or five points. And, the... We... And whoever was behind got to choose. Well, they chose to go for three. And what it turned out to be, it was a bit like a skittles thing with ten goalkeepers, and, and a football, and you just knocked them down. And you had so long to do it.

Yes. Yeah, I think I remember watching it. [laughs]

Absolutely. Anyway, so, so they... They went for three. Because what they said is, we've seen this in the past where Bridlington's been leading by a point, and the opposite side go for five, and they don't get it, and they lose anyway. So we're going to go for three, get us in front. And this guy from Lytham, this lad, young lad, just scraped through in his thirty seconds to get through, to get the three. No, no there

were ten. So it would be six. Knock six down for five points, and knock all ten down... Knock six down for three points; all ten down for five.

Yeah.

So, he knocked them down, got his three points, got in front. And actually, I had been fooling about on the rehearsal, because... I mean I had a few badges on my stuff, like East Riding County FA and stuff. I had the Hull City players, and... You know, I think I, the whole point was to try and intimidate this kid from Lytham. [laughs]

Yeah.

But what he did, which was ridiculous, is, he chipped at this ball. He got carried away by the event, and he chipped it each time, put some air under it. And they're bouncing all over the place, over the top.

Yeah.

So he managed just to scrape through.

Right.

Whereas actually, it was so simple, that all you did was roll the ball. You just rolled it at them. And they were wide enough that if you got anywhere near, you'd knock 'em over. So I knocked them down, six, out of six balls, I just knocked six, boom boom boom boom, six down. Because he had made it look so hard, it looked like I was some sort of superstar. And for a while it went, it was ridiculous. The next week in Brid, I was, had people chasing me all over the place. [laughing] You know, the local papers were full of it, and, oh, Jesus! But there were thirteen million people watching it.

Yes.

And, and I loved, you know, I thought... I actually felt that was really, really a good, I enjoyed that. I loved that.

[13:24]

Yes. Yeah. I should have asked, what position did you play as a footballer then?

It depends. Now I played everywhere. Depending on the standard. The higher the standard, the further back I played. [laughs] I actually played sweeper for the professional clubs.

Right.

And I went, I went... The first trial I went on was, was Leeds, and, and they, they wanted me to sign, but the travelling, while I was at school, was impossible really. But I had a trial there. And... And I went there thinking I was a creative midfield player. And they told me they were going to put me in as a sweeper. Never played there before, not at all. But this is a, maybe a classic example of what you were saying before, Tom, that, there was a guy that was also on trial, a South African called... Oh, it was the first black player ever... Albert Johanneson. And Albert was, was, he was there and on trial. These trial games, they mix some of the, the first team, one or two of those, and some of the reserves, and... So it's a test. And they played me actually on the left-hand side of the defence left back, which I had never played before. And they played Albert Johanneson on the right-hand side, attacking. And he was a flyer. He was the fastest thing you've ever seen.

Mm.

He's a sad case actually, Albert. But... But he couldn't cross a ball.

Oh right. Yup.

So he's flying, but he couldn't do anything with it. But, when I... So... So I'm playing left back. Oh all right, OK. And of course, they know, the midfield know. And so they chip this ball over the top of me, and Albert's off like, you know, a

bloody hare. And, lost it. Couldn't... And I... You know. And I thought, I've come all this way for a trial, and, I'm looking stupid. So the third time, I, I hung back, as they called reading, 'We like the way you read the game.' I said, 'Well I just stood back, further back.' And, I managed to time getting to him when the ball did.

[laughs] And I smacked him so bloody hard, because I was that, I was that irritated by it all, and him, that it was known, well I didn't realise, that it was known at Leeds as a row Z tackle. Now A is at the front of the stand, and Z's at the back. [laughing] And it's called that because the, the opponent's supposed to end up in row Z. And I thought, oh bloody hell. Because you know, he's rolling all over the place. And these were the days when you didn't feign that.

Yeah.

And about four guys come running, coaches and what have you, come running over, from the touchline. And I thought, well, you know, that was the end of that. One of them went to pick him up, and the other three were coming over and said, 'That's exactly what we want to see.' [both laugh]

That was the Leeds style in those days.

That was it. That was it. And I thought, oh, bloody hell. [laughs] Yeah.

[16:29]

So. Moving on to more work-related things.

Yup.

So, you, you left school after what were called O Levels in those days.

Yes. Absolutely.

And went for the football.

Yes.

But, but you then, kind of, shortly after switched into a professional career.

Yes.

So, what happened to the football?

I got injured.

Oh dear.

Yeah. Ankle injury that never healed.

Oh gosh.

It's one of those things. And it was devastating for a while actually. And so I kind of drifted into things after that. Because, I was absolutely intent on doing this. And I was just going.... I thought... I was a reasonably good, I had a reasonably good standard. I was keeping out of the Hull City team a guy called Stuart Pearson, who went on to play for Manchester United and England, and he was the same age as me, and he was the same position.

Wow. Yeah.

And he was kept out. So I had a standard. But, I got this, a tackle. And basically, the ligaments in the ankle, which are kind of like an elastic band, in that tackle, just stretched to where, to beyond mending. And, I'd have better actually if my ankle had broken, because the bones would have mended, but the ligaments don't.

Yeah.

These days, you can get replacement ones.

Yeah.

The first person to have that operation was Stuart Francis about ten years after me, went to America to have this. But, it never mended. And so, these ligaments never came back strong enough. And I had at least a year trying to get that, and, into recovery, and... But as soon as I had, you know, what's called a block tackle, where you put all your weight behind it, and the opposition does the same, and the ball...

Yeah.

As soon as I did that, it went again.

Yes.

So, in the end I had to give up the professional football.

Yeah.

So then I didn't know what the hell to do, to be honest. What do you do? [laughs]

[18:25]

So you seem to start a kind of, what we might say these days looks like a kind of apprenticeship process of, kind of going into banking, and doing some, studying or training or whatever whilst working.

Yes. Absolutely.

Is that the picture?

Yeah, absolutely. I got a job at a bank. And, which I was very grateful for. The maths thing I think helped. I had no intention of, you know, working for a bank. I saw the job advertised, went and talked to them, and, and they said, 'Well, could be...' I needed a job, you know, I mean, what the hell do I do now, that, that the football is, is not going to happen? So, I went there. It was the most boring thing I think I've ever done. But there was a, a little link in there that helped. And... But, to

get on in the bank, you had to have qualifications. So I went four nights a week to Scarborough, which is twenty miles away, to do night school.

Yeah, night school was what we used to call it.

To get the banking exams.

Yeah. Yeah.

And... And then I went into accounting from that. And the thing that triggered me there was, there is a thing about the bank, the bank I'll come back to in a second, but... I used to process people's salaries. And I had looked at all these bloody salaries going through of accountants, and I thought, I could do that. [laughs] And the bank had a brochure that told you what you would earn at this age level.

Right. Yeah.

And I remember that you had to be 31 before you got £1,000 a year. Now I mean, admittedly this is the Sixties, but I thought, this is ridiculous. That guy, who is thick as two short planks, that I'm serving, on a monthly basis when he comes in, actually is earning double what I'm earning.

Yeah.

This is ridiculous. And then I worked out, or somebody told me, that actually, a significant part of part one of the... I'd got part one of the banking exams. But a significant part of that was exactly the same as it was for the accounting exams.

Right.

Same subjects, same standard. And it was only part two that became more industry-focused. And so, I talked to the people at Scarborough, and I, they said, 'Yeah, you can transfer, you can take those with you into the accountant thing, and you can do

accounting.' So, well this is, this has got to give me more, more scope than, than banking. And I got a job as an accountant.

[20:49]

So, where was... The accountant job was in the bank, was it?

No no. Separate.

Oh right. OK. So, you, you seemed to go from being a bank clerk to being a salesman for Olivetti.

Oh that's... Yeah, that's true actually. Yeah.

But that wasn't part of the process of qualifying as an accountant?

No no. No, this is... The Gordon Armstrong one is the accounting.

But you had a brief flirtation with sales in the IT industry.

Oh yes. Absolutely I did. No, I did. Yes. That was interesting. A lot of fun. I thought I could earn more money. Company car, you know.

Yeah.

This is where I really had no idea what I was going to do. And, and these salesmen kept coming round, trying to flog you an accounting system. And I'd ask them questions, and they couldn't answer them, because they weren't accountants. So, I thought, well maybe I can have a go at that. So I had a go at that. And it was, that was, that was very educational. The one thing I'll say about Olivetti, and it was, it's, it was the same with Hewlett-Packard, they're one of the few companies who would take people who aren't trained and train them, in every aspect of the job, in the product but also in sales. So if you had never sold anything, they'd, they'd send you on a training, their own training, internal training course.

Yeah.

And I learnt an awful lot from Olivetti.

Yes. Well they were renowned as, as, you know, the training ground for...

Absolutely. And it was... We had some fun there. I remember... Just an aside. I was there at, in... It wasn't Guildford. Just south of Guildford. Haslemere, at the Training Centre. And, they had got a new, a country manager. Every year a new Italian would be posted into the UK to be the country manager. And this particular year, he had just sort of arrived, and all the country managers had been invited down to go through their plans with him, at Haslemere. And we were, although we were on a training course, we were able to sit in on this. And, and they were all, all of the branches were saying, it's going to be a lot harder year next year, you know, things, times are tough, and it's going to be harder. We're not going to do the numbers we did this year next year. And it got to about the fourth one of these. And this Italian guy said, 'Stop. Stop stop stop.' He said, 'This is, this is not good.' He said, 'You think I know bugger nothing. But know bugger everything.' [both laugh] And I thought, oh, well done. [laughing] No, 'You think I know bugger all, I know...' No. 'You think I know bugger nothing, but I know bugger all.' That was it. And of course the whole place erupted. He never really... I don't think he lasted the year.

[23:56]

No. And interesting thing about your, your career is, you seem to have worked for this, you know, all the iconic companies that kind of define the...

The IT industry.

...the industry of, the IT industry in the twentieth century.

Yes. Well of course I didn't see that plot.

No. No.

But I think what I did do, I think... I mean, it's interesting that, one of the, *the* great advisers that I have ever personally had coach of is, is John Harvey Jones. And I was really lucky, just struck lucky at DEC, where, he retired from ICI, and we asked him to be a non-exec director. And the project he was asked to look at is the one I was running. So I spent a lot of time with him. Just pure coincidence. But I thought he was, he was a superb... What he could do, and he said this is what I could do, is see the wood for the trees.

Yeah.

He said, you can, you know, all this stuff going on, but you can see what really is important. He certainly could do that.

Yeah.

And I was delighted he said he thought that about me. And I think that, this thread probably was seeing what the next thing's going to be.

Yes. Yeah. Well it seems... [laughs] It, it seems to run through your sequence of roles up to the BCS, you know...

Yes.

With those companies, and then the Internet, and the...

Yeah, exactly.

Yeah.

Although the drive to Netcom wasn't the Internet actually.

Yeah.

It was a different motivation there.

[25:25]

Coming back to those early jobs then.

Yes.

So you, post-Olivetti, you pursued the accountancy qualifications further.

Yes.

And, and you ended up in nineteen, sometime between 1972 to '78 as finance director and then as managing director of a company. So that was quite an achievement.

Yeah, that... Well, again, you know, a series of luck really. I went in there initially to try and sell them an accounting machine.

Right.

And... And some time there was a gap, sometime between that and... I had got on well with the directors of this, this company. There were two brothers who ran it. And they were selling out, six months later. They were selling out to, it was a takeover, a group. But, their accounting systems were absolutely appalling, and I thought, classic for an Olivetti accounting machine. And they, and they, they put me off. I mean I, I had convinced them; they put me off. And I thought, well that was a waste of time. But actually, they had put me off because they were looking to sell the thing, and they didn't want to spend money. So then I got a call saying, 'Do you want to come back and talk to the people who are taking over? Because they're interested in, in somebody, and maybe you, putting an accounting system in and becoming the, effectively the accounting, the, the accountant.' And I went to talk them, and I thought, well this, this seems like a, maybe, maybe something that's worth doing. So... And so I did that, over, you know, a period of time, before I decided. But I did that, and I put in an Olivetti accounting system. [laughs] I don't think I claimed the commission of it from Olivetti. But... And then, gradually, it wasn't that gradual... But they didn't really have any management in this organisation, because the brothers

had retired, and, it was a London-based company, and they were looking to grow, and, and gradually they asked me to be finance director.

Yes.

And then, they had a couple of attempts at finding a managing director, that didn't work out, and so they eventually asked me to do that side of it. And, and it was a surprise to me actually, I have to say, to be offered that job.

[27:47]

So that, that was... You were an MD by the time you were 30 then?

Yeah, I think it was 28 actually.

Yeah?

Yeah. Yeah.

And that, that was in agricultural...

Engineering. Well basically it was selling tractors and, combine harvesters, and, all the equipment for farming.

Yes.

And I had people, obviously, who knew that business, and who knew, who could sell tractors. I mean I wasn't doing that myself; I was just running the business. And we grew it quite successfully. And then, you know, interestingly, a combination of things all, all got in the way of that, and, and if that hadn't happened, I might have stayed there. But, we were the agents for International Harvester.

Right.

Nearly all of our kit was International Harvester. And, you basically, it's a bit like having, you know, a Ford motor franchise.

Yes.

And, and they were UK headquartered in Doncaster, which was just down the road from us. And one day the major, one of the major guys came in, and, talked to us, wanted, said, 'Can I come and talk to you?' And we, so we'd smarten everything up, you know, and polish International Harvester tractors. And he came in, and he said, 'I've got some bad news for you.' 'Oh, what's that?' 'International Harvester have gone into bankruptcy in the US.' So that... So what does that mean for here? pf! We won't get any kit. It all gets imported. We don't make it here.

Yeah.

So, kind of, what you've got is what you're going to get.

Yup.

So we fished around then for a while, see if we could get alternatives. But, you know, they were poor alternatives. There was an Italian... We, we took on an Italian tractor company called Same, s-a-am-e. Absolutely useless. So... And none of the farmers of course around were interested in that. And the other major brands, like Ford and, and what we called dear-oh-dear, but John Deere. And, and all the other brands were already well covered by other dealers. So we had no future at all.

Yes.

But I had done a lot of work on trying to improve the profitability of that business, because it wasn't as profitable as it should be. One of the big problems with that industry is that it's so seasonal. So unlike a car dealership, where you're always supplying parts to cars, in that business, your ploughing kit is, lasts about four weeks twice a year.

Yup.

So if you've got too many of them, too many spare parts, you're going to carry them all year without a sale. And they had no real management process on that. So they had far too much money tied up in stock. I mean this was the issue.

[30:28]

So I started looking at doing something there, and got talking to some people, who had something they had developed for the motor trade, and, I said to them, 'Can we, you know, is there any way we can build seasonality into this?' Because, apart from that, it was fine. But... So we did, we developed that. This was all running on HP.

Right.

And, in the end, HP were very keen on what we had done, because they thought we could sell this to lots of other people.

Right, I see. Yup. I can see where this is going.

So they came and talked to me about it. And, and the guy said, you know, 'Do you want to, do you want to sort of, get involved, consulting, whatever, about this product? Because we'll, we're going to support this application developer, develop it.' And, I said, 'Sorry, I'm not going to be here. Because, I've just heard International Harvester have gone bust, and I'm going to have to do something else.'

Yes.

[31:25]

And then I got a call, out of the blue, from, interesting, because, from a woman called Karen Blue, from Hewlett-Packard, one Sunday afternoon. And, she said... She was about an hour on the phone, going on about, you know, 'What we're interested in is... What we need is someone who understands the computing side, particularly on our minicomputers, and who knows how the finance structure works in the UK. Because we are building a series of products called HP Financial Accounting,' which had a battle eventually to get changed, because of course it's FA, which wasn't the best title

you could ever come up with. And, 'And we want someone who has got affinity for accounting and who knows how the accounting system should work in the UK. And, and so we're looking for someone to, to sort of, be the knowledge base of that.' That was the job. It wasn't anything else. And she had... You know, at the end of it, she said, 'Well look...' And she kept talking about what I thought was Birmingham. And she, she kept saying, 'Well, why don't you come over for a weekend?' And I thought, I've been to Birmingham. [both laugh] I don't need... I don't need to go to Birmingham. I know what Birmingham's like. And I said that to her. And she, there was a sort of stunned silence for about ten seconds, and she said, 'No no, I'm talking about Böblingen.' Oh, right. What? 'Yeah, near Stuttgart.' Ah. [laughs] That's different. Oh, we're going to have to start this conversation again. So anyway, I was really interested up to then, and I thought, well my wife, we had two young kids, they were about four and seven, and I thought, well Anne doesn't, isn't going to want to go to... We never talked about anything like that. And I was gobsmacked when I talked to her about it. Because of course I'm there on the phone for an hour and a half, and at the end of it she says, 'Who the hell was that?' You know, what was that? And I told her. And she said, 'Well if they're daft enough to pay for us a weekend, why don't we just go?'

Mm.

Get a free weekend in, wherever it is.

Yeah.

So we went. On the basis of a free holiday at the expense of Hewlett-Packard. [laughs] But we loved the place. It was a fantastic setting. You know, it's southern Germany. Well, it's on the outskirts, it's, it's twelve miles or so from Stuttgart. But, Böblingen is in, I mean Böblingen and Sindelfingen are two towns joined up. Sindelfingen is the centre of Mercedes-Benz. So... And the effect of that is that there's huge amounts of money piled into the town from Mercedes. So there's every facility you could imagine.

And is that where you had to go to work for HP?

Yes. Joined them in there.

[34:05]

Right. So this was 1978.

Big decision.

You moved to Germany.

Yes.

And, and all the time you are working for HP were you based there, or...?

No. We had to make a decision. We were there, I think a couple of years, something, feels like that. But we, we had to make a decision about the schooling. And, we, we developed this product, and it was a really good series of products, it wasn't just one, it was a really good series of products. I had more fun during that time in Germany than the rest of my career put together, business wise. It was, we just had some amazing...

Was that Germany, or HP, or...?

It was the whole thing really. It was just the thing... I mean, I have to say that throughout my early career in IT we had a lot of fun anyway. It was, it was just that kind of thing. But, we had a week's-long... We had, as, as we, who were non, or, we had never done presentations or anything in this group... They were really technical people, accounting or whatever, and, and I made some lifelong friends of, of some, people who went a long way. Nick Barley is just a really close friend. I don't know if you know Nick, but he's a really good friend of mine.

No.

But he was marketing director at Microsoft here, and, eventually. He came to work for me in Germany. I mean I didn't recruit him, but he worked for me there. No, they did a week's course in presentation skills.

Right.

I mean a week.

Yeah. Yeah.

And... Because we had never presented anything.

Yeah.

So, you know... You know. I mean I struggled to start with working in an open-plan environment. I had always had an office.

Yeah.

All this noise going on.

Yeah.

So, you know, presenting stuff, never done anything like that.

Yeah.

And, and... It was a fantastic course. They had a German guy do it, and he was, he was... He was retired, age, done, written several books. He was considered to be *the* best person in Germany for this kind of skill.

Yeah.

We had this, this week-long course. And the, the people in the team were a real mixture, of, some Germans, three, three I think were Germans, myself, and Barley, and a couple of support people from the UK. The UK was going to be where these were launched, so there was a bigger leaning towards UK people.

Yeah.

And then, there were a couple of Americans, who were over. Because we were trying to make sure that the accounting products were integrated into the manufacturing products that were done out in California. So, it was a real mix. And this guy came in, a German, and he started speaking to us in German. This is going to be a great course isn't it.

Yeah. [laughs]

Anyway, he did have English, but it wasn't great. And he gave us a copy of his book, which was in German, and, you know... But, but the course was fantastic. And, I remember at the end of the course, they asked us to do a profile thing on it, and, and I wrote that I have never had so much fun in my life, but I don't think I learnt much. That's actually what I did, on the day the thing finished.

Do you still believe that?

No. I didn't believe it, a month later.

Yes.

Because a month later, I'm doing presentations.

Yes.

And I, I realised that, every presentation was using things I learnt during that week. And, it was just how he did it. So I actually went back to them, and I said, 'Look, I completely screwed up that evaluation. I'm find I'm using it all the time.'

[37:40]

So HP, I mean, must have been an exciting place. Global company.

Yup.

I mean they, they were very well regarded, weren't they.

They were. They were. Yes.

And at the forefront of, I suppose the small computer, small end of computer range wasn't it?

Yes. Yes, so...

Workstations and stuff.

Yeah they were. And very technical to start with. They wanted to get into the commercial market. What... They were, HP, they brought out something called the HP 3000, and a not very existent MP to go with it. And what they had were, were products that were for manufacturing, and various other kinds of, of product development, but the data coming out of that wasn't going anywhere. And it certainly wasn't going into HP machines. So they came up with this thing, we must develop order processing and accounting applications, so that the whole thing is a complete offer to the customer.

Oh right, I see. Yeah.

And that's what this development was.

Right.

And then for political reasons they decided to make that in Europe.

Yeah.

Internal HP politics. And therefore they'd make it at this European headquarters site in Böblingen. But it's got to be English language to start with. So we'll have the, we'll have the UK market as the test market.

Right.

[38:58]

And, and that's why they were looking for people, as it turned out, like me. And then they saw something in me that I, I hadn't. They said, 'We think you can become a marketing person.' And I said, 'I have no idea what you're talking about.' Because I didn't. And they said, 'Well look. I mean, you're a consultant at the moment, saying, "No no, this, this thing doesn't work like that. You've got to, it's got to be like that." On an accounting basis. But we think you can actually present this to customers.' I still had no idea. So then they started this, this, the training thing came after that, and a few, we had a few technical guys as well. I mean Nick Barley went on that course as well. Fabulous course, that. It's the funniest week of my life, that, actually, from a business point of view. But we haven't got time to go into it, because there's a week there. So they sent me on a course to Henley Management College, a week's course, residential course, on marketing.

Yup.

The new, the new values of marketing, or something. And, and I really enjoyed that, I have to say. And, and it just had a fit for me. I thought, yeah, that's, this is what I want to do actually. I don't want to be sat in the background, saying, 'Yeah, well you know, let's do that little thing.' We can get somebody else to do that. I want to be out front presenting this stuff, and marketing it to customers. And, and so I, I then moved into a marketing role, initially in Germany. But then the UK organisation, when they launched, wanted someone to lead that launch in the UK. And, we had a big decision to make about the kids and the schools. Because, whilst the German schools were very good, they were different, different to the UK. And we felt it was... And my kids were coming up to the stage, my eldest one was coming up to where he would

start secondary school, in the UK. I mean, they got on fine in the international schools in Germany up to then. But what you couldn't do fairly to them was to swap halfway through secondary school. It would be really hard for them.

Yeah. Yup.

And we had to make a decision, we're either going to stay in Germany until not just my eldest son but my youngest one sees himself through there, or we have to go back.

Yeah.

And, although we loved it there, and the kids loved it there, we decided, long-term, we really ought to go back. The UK were offering me this job. So, we went back to the UK.

[41:34]

Yeah. So you came back to run the finance industry business, is that right?

Yes.

In 1981.

Well I, I thought I was coming back initially just to run the financial accounting business.

Right.

And when I got back, they said, 'No, you're running... Yeah, you'll run that, but also you'll run the finance industry.' 'Oh right.'

So that's banks and insurance and, and stuff like that.

Yeah. City mostly. Yeah. Not that we had any. [laughs] I mean we had, we had nothing for them. [laughs] But... So I had to start working on a plan for that. But, yeah, so...

[42:07]

So what, what was happening in the industry at that time? I mean, this must have been, nineteen, early Eighties.

Yes.

This was a time of transition, wasn't it...

Certainly was.

...in a way that industry was using computers.

Yeah. No, it was. And, and I don't think any of us really knew what we were doing, to be honest. And it includes the customer, I have to say that.

Yeah.

I remember John Harvey-Jones, although this was a bit later, at DEC, when he retired, he said that, he loved the minicomputer idea. And of course DEC invented, the VAX, but, but also Ethernet to connect. And, obviously marketing Ethernet, but for a long time the company propaganda was that they invented it, but I don't think anyone other than PARC laboratories actually developed anything. But they... There's a new way of doing things. And I remember Harvey-Jones explaining to me his project at, at ICI, they'd buy, they'd buy companies, in fact a lot of companies, and they make a division out of half a dozen of them. And, what he would like to do is to reorganise those companies into a different model to the one they've got. He'd like to put all companies that are really about volume and low added value into a group and operate that separately from those where, they're almost doing bespoke stuff for the customer.

Yeah

So... But, he's buying companies that do all of that. So he was looking to reorganise, to make his business more efficient, and every single one of those damn companies had a mainframe computer that stopped him changing it. And what he wanted to do was to have a series of minicomputers in each of those, so that he could pick this bit and that bit and that bit, and stick those together.

Right.

And that was his description of minicomputers versus mainframes

Oh right.

And, and I think, and I, you know, I, I got that a bit late in the day, but, but that was what we were trying to drive, was this minicomputer revolution. And it was cheaper. But it was the flexibility of it that really was, was the driving force behind it.

[44:27]

So that, that... That must have been a boom time for HP then.

Well HP got behind. HP got left behind.

But, you moved on to...

The people who were leaving them behind. [laughs]

Yes.

One of the things about marketing is, you know who is... [laughs]

How did you come to jump from HP to then...?

Well I had a... HP were having issues with HP. HP were having issues. There were two companies in HP. There was the original one, which was all the technical stuff, people who were developing things for the medical profession, and...

I remember it well.

Yeah. All that stuff. And then, they tried to then develop this bit I was in of, of the commercial side of things.

Yup.

And the technical stuff had about 75 per cent market share, of their market, and the commercial stuff had about three per cent. And, they, HP decided, in their wisdom... They had been run separately, two country managers.

Yup.

They decided to merge the two. And I think the problem was that, that they still weren't getting data out of this one into, into the other one, and they thought, the only way we'll do that is, we just have one company, and, we run it as one business. And I remember having this, listening to this discussion of the country manager, who had just been appointed, who was of course the guy with the 75 per cent market share. And they decided that they would give those guys the top job. And I remember it like yesterday. He said, 'You know, we aren't going to do any of this marketing rubbish. Because we, I mean, we don't need to really.' Well, if you've got 75 per cent, maybe you don't. So... 'And we're not really going to focus too much on the commercial stuff.' And I got the message, well if you're in marketing and the commercial stuff, this is not the place to be.

So they mis-, they misread the market quite seriously.

Totally. Totally. And, and of course... So I'm thinking, well there's no future here.

Yeah.

[46:36]

And so, I applied to, to DEC, to go to DEC.

Oh right, yup.

Because I thought, this lot don't know what the hell they're doing. There's a, there is a story with that. There's a guy called John Young, who was the, who was the CEO of, the corporate CEO of HP, and apparently the new board went over to Cupertino and, and he, he took the new country manager for a walk round the car park to discuss, away from the rest, 'We're just going to discuss what's happening in the UK.' And, some of the guys who were there said they couldn't believe it, but at the far side of the car park, John Young shouted, loud enough for them to hear, 'No, that's not what I meant.' [laughs] But it's too late, because too many people were bailing out.

Yeah.

They're going to DEC. And DEC had some advantages. HP only had a 16-bit machine; DEC had gone to 32. They looked like they were in the lead. They had Ethernet, they were really at the forefront of it.

Yeah.

So it looked to me like DEC were a better bet.

So you made a strategic decision to...

I made a decision to go and, and apply for a job there. And they, they didn't have a job, but they found one for me.

[47:50]

So this was 1983.

Mhm.

And you became European Channels Marketing Manager, is that...?

Yes.

Channels. That's... Was that a new style of working in those days?

I don't know. [pause] It... I had never come across it before. But, DEC were selling product through a number of different types of resellers.

Yeah. Yeah, that's what I was thinking. Mm.

And, and even selling direct was one channel in their thinking.

Yeah.

But they were selling through distributors, and they were selling through added value resellers, and, a lot of different ones. And they had got themselves into an almighty mess. And the first job I went there was, the CEO there, Geoff Shingles, said to me, 'Look, we've got a real problem here. Marketing and sales think they are the competition, to each other. So what I want you to do is to get in the middle of that. Not work... Report directly to me, not them. And try and sort the bloody thing out.' So that's the job I joined in. But, I had been there not a long, a lot of time. There was an internal legal counsel, really smart guy, he was a QC actually, called Peter Bembridge, who came to a board meeting and said, 'We have got serious problems here. Because we are selling products through different channels, illegally, if you look at the European competition act.' And he had gone into it in some depth. And he said, 'We have got real problems here, because we are selling the same product at different prices through different channels. You can't do that. You've got to sort this out.' And so, they asked me to look at that.

[49:37]

So I started looking at it for the UK. Peter was brilliant advice, but he didn't have the time to sort it all out. So I'm going through all this. And I had the project with, I

think there were three of us, sorting out what this model should look like. And we presented that to the European board, and they said, 'Oh, Jesus. Oh it's happening everywhere. Can you do this for Europe?'

Yeah.

So, we did. And... And then we presented it to the US team, who were coming through Heathrow one night, board of DEC, And...

[interruption]

[50:22]

So...

So, this was a, this was a new... This was a new way of thinking in terms of how you took your product to market.

Exactly.

Which introduced a whole set of problems.

Huge, huge amount. But nobody thought there were problems until the legal guy said, 'Look, you're breaking the competition law.'

Yeah.

And I became an expert in, in those competition laws, for a while, because, we were. And, and we sorted it out. And it was really interesting too. There were some funny things. We did this presentation to the Americans, who, who took it all back, and, and did the same thing in America basically. Sorted it out among, against that. We had got a model. And I was trying to describe it. And we were in this, Heathrow Airport, and, the idea was just ten minutes, but they had a bit longer, while they were, they'd been, I think to Norway, and they were on their way back to the US. And they had some time at Heathrow. So we went to this hotel. And... And so I didn't take a

presentation or anything. We just talked about it. And I couldn't quite get it across to them. And there was a... We were in a room, and there was a whiteboard. So, I started... There was just a green pencil. I started drawing the issues, direct, selling directly to the customers, these are the indirect channels. ff-ff-ff And this is what... You know. And, and they took, they took that away with them. We sent them all the stuff anyway, but they took that away with them. And the really funny thing for me was, six months later I went, I was in the US, at a meeting, a presentation meeting, quite a large group of people, and this... I had got up to talk about the channels strategy in the US. [laughs] And he starts talking about the green zone and the white zone. [laughs] And the only reason they were green and white is because that's the only coloured pen that I had at Heathrow. [both laugh] It's really amazing. And, you know, they had presentations saying, right, this is the green sector.

Yeah.

Jesus. [laughs]

So that was ground-breaking stuff.

Yeah it was. We enjoyed it.

[52:22]

So how... How did John Harvey-Jones come into the picture?

Well John, as I said, was... John had retired, as chairman, and we had, myself, Peter Bembridge and one or two others, felt that he could advise the company.

And was this at the time you were doing the channels stuff?

Yes.

Yes. So he was involved in all of that?

Yes. But... But we used him for other things too.

Right. Yes.

We were sounding him out on anything.

Yeah.

Tremendous influence, for me. He would speak at our conferences, sales conferences. And, Shingles wasn't impressed, but that's because of Shingles's ego.

Right.

Because he actually said to me, I remember saying... We didn't get John as a non-exec director formally. He was, he was operating like one, but we didn't offer him a job. If we had done that initially, he would have accepted it. But by the time the egos had gone down a bit, he was busy enough with everything else.

Yeah.

So they missed the opportunity there. And I remember Shingles saying to me, 'Well what would he bring that I didn't?'

Yeah.

And I nearly said to him, 'Just about every bloody thing there is.' But, anyway.

And was that, this, this understanding of how business uses computers, or, or was it...

Yes.

...a higher level thing about, how do you run a business?

It was more around... It was really about, how do we pitch what we're doing to a business case by case.

Right. Yeah.

So it was very much computing-oriented.

Yeah.

But strategy not, you know, down at the detail level.

Yeah.

How do you go into a company like ICI and, and just get in the door.

Yeah.

You know, what are the things you need to, to say, what are their issues that what we're doing might fit?

Mm.

So, yeah.

[54:19]

So you're at DEC from '83 to '90. And presumably, that, again, that was the time when everybody had a, a DEC computer.

Absolutely. Yes, a VAX. Yep. Well, by the end they did.

Yeah.

But... But as so often is the case with these companies, they don't see what's coming.

Yup.

And the thing that really threw me with DEC... We, we used to have this annual review of the business, annual budget meeting or whatever, and, and I would attend that. I wasn't actually on the board in that sense, but I was... Because my unit was kind of, doing something separate, and it was Europe-wide now. But I was always invited to these meetings. And, they did this presentation. And... And I had done some work myself about the future, just, just for my own benefit, about where this world was going. And, Shingles and the team presented, pretty much the same again. And it wasn't going to be like that.

Mm.

So, I had worked out, actually, I got this slightly wrong, but I had worked out that if a company like, and we did some investigation, interestingly, Compaq [laughs], we had done some in-depth look at Compaq, but if a company like Compaq, with their growing capability, hardware capability, teamed up with an operating system like Unix, we actually said Unix because, Microsoft wasn't evolving at that stage, then they could probably do what we do at a fraction of the cost. One of the issues for DEC was that they integrated in the pricing an awful lot of consultancy. That was the price you pay for it.

Mm. Oh right, yeah. Yeah, oh right.

And the operating system was closed.

Yeah.

So, you buy DEC, you buy that operating system. They're all the same. You buy that operating system, and you buy these apps that go on it. And we dictate the price. So once you have decided on DEC, we'll tell you how much you're going to pay.

Yeah.

That was really the thing. Now, Compaq and Unix, you are free.

Yeah.

And, and in theory, although there weren't too many apps at the time, you could buy any app to go on that. And I remember working this stuff out with a little team who actually I thought were a very smart group of people, and, and we went to this board meeting, listened to all this bullshit that Shingles was saying about, oh we're going to grow by 20 per cent just doing exactly the same. And I said to him, 'We've done some work, and if Compaq and Unix combine, and start taking us on in the marketplace, the end result of that will be that we could afford to employ about, 2,000 people in the UK. The problem is, we're employing four and a half thousand now. So it ain't going to work.'

Yeah.

And, Shingles basically said, 'You don't know what you're talking about.' So... And, and I thought we'd have a, a go at the Europeans actually, to see if they had got... They didn't. They didn't have a picture. A guy called Pier Carlo Falotti was the European chief executive, who to me stood out in memory because at a, at a European sales event, with thousands, a couple of thousand people there, he had got him and his board to wear white – it was a black tie job, to wear white tuxedos, the six of them, wearing white tuxedos. And I got this sales guy from Sheffield to go and try and order some beers from him. [both laugh] He didn't know what it was. [laughs] 'Go and ask that Italian waiter...' [laughs] But... Anyway, I don't think he ever found it was me that set the guy up to do that. But they just didn't get it. They... You know, it was... It's one of those things I think. I remember afterwards, with, after one of these marketing courses, probably Henley, where somebody said to me, 'Who should have been the most successful airline in the world?' And they said, 'P&O.' Because... But they didn't understand the business they were in.

Yeah.

They thought they were in the business of shipping. Where actually, they were in the business of getting people from America to Europe. And if they had realised there's a

different, better way of doing it, and if... And to me, the Shingles thing at the time was like that. You know, 'We do it like this, and it's successful. We've knocked the mainframes on the head. We now are the future.' Well somebody's going to knock you on the head.

Yeah.

But I couldn't get that through.

So you took a decision to move on, did you?

Go to Compaq, yes.

[59:20]

And... So, it sounds like you are pretty successful in, in growing that business.

Yeah. It was... It wasn't... It wasn't that hard. Because, of course what happened was, it wasn't Unix, it was Microsoft.

Yeah.

And, and I did a lot of work with Microsoft. There is a... John and I, there's a guy who was the marketing director of Microsoft, came up with Microsoft Office. And it was simply a marketing strategy. Because, what he said to me was, they wanted a... And these are the sort of things that mean all the difference, but, they wanted us to preload the, the applications on that system, Word, Excel.

Yeah. So this was the early Nineties, when, I mean, we, we all just accept that PCs have...

Have the apps on them.

...Microsoft stuff on, these days.

Yes. Yeah.

But, but this was a relatively new idea then.

Totally. And I remember having a real battle with John over, over, over the amount of RAM you need to run this stuff.

Yeah.

Because they were selling all this stuff on one Meg, it will all run on one Meg. You know, Windows will run on...

Yeah.

Well Windows would run on one Meg. But if you try putting an application on, it wouldn't. It would stop. So if you actually wanted to do anything... So I would, I was having these media conversations with people saying, 'You need at least two.' And, oh, it's, it's...

Yeah.

Getting perplexed. But, what we were competing with was Lotus SmartSuite.

Yup.

Which was a similar set of applications, not exactly the same. Similar set. But they had packaged it very neatly into SmartSuite. You buy SmartSuite, at a price, you get all of it.

Yeah.

And we said, we need to do the same. If you want us to preload... We were... We had a relationship with, with Lotus, and we were, we were preloading SmartSuite. And, they were saying, 'What do we do to get you kick that out and, and put ours on?'

And we said, 'Well, first it's the price of the damn thing, because we don't want to be paying a lot for it; and, and secondly, it's got to be more integrated.' And, so eventually we came up with this, this idea of Microsoft Office, which had Word, Excel. I don't think it had PowerPoint to start with. But Word, Word and Excel at least.

Yeah.

And, we called it Office. They didn't talk to each other. You know, you couldn't get a spreadsheet into Word, I mean, that was way off.

Yeah.

But you could buy it as a package.

Yes.

[1:02:05]

And, and so we started installing that. And that was a significant part of why we grew. But also we, we came up with a really... Maybe this is the background I had before, but, we came up with, I thought, a fantastic marketing strategy, channel strategy. It was all in direct channels, our business, at Compaq. We... We came to the conclusion that the reseller channel, PC reseller, was actually not being looked after properly. And they were pissed off with IBM who were selling direct against them.

Mm.

And, and Apple were as well. And, basically, we got these resellers together, and they had all come out of being IBM typewriter companies and this sort of thing, they had developed into PCs. And we got them, and said, 'Look, we will, we will guarantee we will not sell direct. We get an order, we'll give it to you. But we need a commitment from you.' And then I came up with something called Salespaq, which was, the discount, they got so much discount, and we'd, we'd got an extra couple of

per cent that we held back. So we're going to hold that back, and we'll do joint marketing with that fund. And so, if you want to... You know, we'll do something together. And there was some, some really entertaining stuff on that. Because I used to have to approve it. [laughs] And, Computacenter were the biggest by far. They had got very successful at this.

Yeah.

But it... The combination of a whole raft of things. We also had a good machine. I mean all it was, was a reverse-engineered IBM. They just took it apart and put it back together again.

[1:03:55]

Yeah. But this was the period of the rise and rise of the PC...

It was indeed.

...and the, and the, and the Microsoft.

Absolutely. And we were right, right in the middle of that.

Yeah.

And went from a poor... I remember a guy coming from Houston, Compaq, saying, you know, 'Our goal this year is going to be to go from number four in the market to number three.'

Yeah.

And I said, 'What a waste of time.'

Yeah.

Well, what's that? 'What's the, what's the point of that?' 'Well don't you think we should go from number...?' 'No.' I said, 'You go for number one.'

Yeah.

If you go for number one, you will do a whole series of different things, than if you were going to be third. You just do different things. If you don't want to go for number one, you don't try and do that, you don't have a plan for it, you just simply won't get there.

Mm.

So you have to go for number... And, we managed to do that fortunately.

You do it.

Yeah.

[1:04:48]

This was the time when client server was the fashion, wasn't it?

It was.

When people, when your, your consultants were writing papers about how you should switch to client server architecture.

Yeah, absolutely. Yes.

And presumably that's part of the success of this company.

Yeah it was. I think, part of our success too was that the resellers were gaining in capability the whole time. They were seeing themselves as, as the service provider you add to this core stuff.

Yeah.

And we were signing up all the big and best service providers.

Right. Yes.

So the client server thing was... We were fuelling it, and supporting it, but we weren't actually providing the services ourselves. And I think, that was a nice clean cut. So we weren't competing with the guys selling our kit. Whereas IBM were.

Yeah.

Yeah.

[1:05:41]

And in the middle of all of this, the Internet was...

Yeah.

Well not... The Internet was invented long before.

Indeed.

But the World Wide Web started to, to rise, didn't it.

It did. Yeah. Yeah.

[1:05:55]

So, so the next move was to, to an Internet company then.

Yeah.

In, in '96 or thereabouts.

'96, yeah. I think... Yeah, that was more a personal thing than, than... For the first time really, I moved there for personal reasons rather than, than, than strategy. I had been at Compaq as number two for quite a while, in the UK. I mean I had had a European level job, doing European work, but I wanted to be a CEO. And, Joe McNally was the CEO. And, and Joe and I got on really well. Because, as it turned out, what he liked and what he did were totally opposite to what I liked and what I did. And we, we very early on carved the thing up. And, and you know, business plans. He had no idea what one was. So, you know, I would do that kind of thing. I would do all the marketing, he wouldn't get involved in that. He'd have the relationships with the salespeople, he was very much a sales manager really. So the sales team, he would be actively involved in and going out. And, you know, wining and dining the directors of, of Computacenter and all this. He loved all that. And doing deals with them all. So it all kind of fitted.

Mm.

But I wanted to, to be CEO. And, the problem was that Joe really, right from day one, saw his main competition as being Compaq France, followed shortly by Compaq Germany. And as long as he was number one in Europe, he could do pretty much what he wanted. But he was quite aggressive about that. He made Margaret Thatcher look European really. You know, he was a bit of a, Farage type character. [laughs] European meetings I've been to, embarrassed. But it didn't really matter, because he, he was, so what, you know. And his view was, as long as I keep doing the numbers, they'll keep away from me, which was, true actually.

Yeah.

But, then the European... What happened then is that, Rod, whatever the guy was, he was a corporate president of, of Compaq, fell out with the board, over something, I'm not quite sure exactly what now. And, they looked around, and they appointed the European president as the corporate president. So the European job's up.

Mm.

So Joe of course thinks he's an absolute, rock solid shoe-in.

Yeah.

We all did. They gave it to the German guy. [laughs] Not only did that piss him off big time, but... There was a guy called Eckhard Pfeiffer was the, the president, the European president. And, he came over, we had breakfast. Because I had said to him, you know, 'I've got some concerns about that.' I had done a lot of work directly with Eckhard, and... He came over on one trip, and he said, 'Let's have breakfast at Heathrow and talk through all this.' And, basically his bottom line was, you know, 'If you were in my position, would you get Joe McNally to run Europe?' And I said, 'No.' [laughs] The truth is, no, he's, he's just, made too many enemies.

Mm.

I mean, they would compete. We had a great, we had some great sales schemes. We had one where if you, if you sold the most stuff in a year, you'd get a free trip to Houston, you know, with all expenses paid, and, some fun nights out and all that sort of...

Yeah.

So the French, the French bought a Ferrari. And, whichever French salesman sold the most that month would get the use of the Ferrari for a month. I mean it was all this sort of, competitive stuff. But Joe was quite aggressive to the individuals. And there's no way the French or German country manager would work for him. He had just ruined that. And didn't think about that at all. So, now, he was really pissed off that he hadn't got that job. But the problem for me was, that was the ceiling then. He's not going anywhere.

Yeah.

He... He doesn't want to go anywhere, he won't get paid the sort of, package he's got at Compaq, with significant share options and stuff. There's no way he'd get another

package anywhere else. He's going to do this job till he drops. So what am I going to do? Because this is, I can't go anywhere.

[1:10:27]

So I started to fish around. And, I got... I... I think I got headhunted for Netcom, but it was... It's one of those things where I started putting around I would be interested in doing something else. And, so the appeal for Netcom for me was, CEO, start-up, you know. Basically, the headquarters is in San Jose, but, you know, they leave you alone.

Well an interesting thing, looking back on this, as I said earlier on, your career seems to, to mirror the development of the industry.

Yes.

You're moving out of the, out of the hardware and software, and into the online world of services, and, media and, information.

That's true. All I would say is that at the time I moved, I didn't think, I didn't see it that clearly, to be honest. I had the others. I had seen where it was going. This just looked like a potentially interesting area, rather than, this is going to be the big future. And I think that's where we were in '96.

Yes. I mean again, one of the things that comes out of some of the interviews for AIT is, is the convergence of the telecoms industry and the IT industry.

Yes. Absolutely.

And, many people looking back, you know, say, that was completely obvious as a strategic move, but, not everybody realised it was happening at the time.

Well, not in '96. I think, I think it was, not far after that. But at Netcom, we put together the product for the customer, but we were the first consumer-based Internet provider. And we had a, we built a product called Netcomplete. I remember we had, we marketed this as being everything you need to get on the Internet, and Dixons rang

me up and said, [laughs] 'You have a real problem with this.' I said, 'What's that?' 'Well this woman's brought it back and she said, apparently you need a computer to run it on.' [both laugh] Oh, great. So, we were targeting really for the first time the consumer.

Mm.

And, and built that thing, which made it a lot easier to get on. And, and had to have support, 24-hour support really. We had some guys doing night-time calling, call handling, in the premises, we were in Bracknell, to support those customers. But it was the first consumer-based one. And, and we learnt a lot. But, if I look at the telcom side of it, we had to buy capability from the telephone company. We had to buy time. I mean, they weren't paying us.

Yeah.

Just where it ended up.

Yes.

We were paying them, to provide us with the capability.

Yes.

So we just saw them as another supplier really. At that time, in '96, we just saw them as another supplier. I mean it changed fairly quickly after that, but not, not straight away.

[1:13:47]

So you clearly made an impact, because, you were then approached to take on a bigger role. This was '97.

Yes. Netcom were having problems. I mean, I set off with this... I... I was going to board meetings on a monthly basis to San Francisco. I'd do a day trip every month to

San Francisco. And... But the company, the guy running it, a guy called David Garrison, and his team... I think... Netcom evolved, and, and they had, they suddenly got big ideas. They evolved... They were initially suppliers of Internet capability to students in the Bay Area, that's what they did. Then they decided they'd widen it out to more, to a wider group than just students. And, as the numbers grew, and they got more aggressive, they thought that they could wind this out internationally. And they started a subsidiary in Canada, and then one in, they were going to fund one in UK. But they were not geared to do anything like that. And, basically, the funds that they told me would be available for the UK subsidiary, when I got into the job after working out notice period with Compaq, I found or somebody told me [laughs], they'd all been spent. Well what have they spent it on? You know, what have they done? Nobody could see what they had done. But there's no money left. And, they started... I think they overextended. And they didn't have any money. And, there was nothing really we could do to develop it. What we did do was, do it on a smaller scale, and provide Internet capability to businesses. And that was quite successful, and that ran for a number of years, providing Internet capacity to businesses. But the consumer market wasn't, wasn't going to be funded without getting the message across. You had to spend some money to get the message out. So... So I'm starting to have doubts about this bunch. And...

[pause]

[1:16:08]

And then... I then got approached by, the bearded wonder, as a result of what we had done on Netcom. Because what we had done, it was interesting, we won something called ISP of the Year. I think we were the only ISP anyway that year. But, but nevertheless, we won, we won the award in some of the magazines for ISP of the Year. So I get approached by Virgin, typical.

[1:16:40]

So just, just to kind of remind us.

Yup.

This is 1996, '97.

Yes.

So... It's difficult to remember, you know, what was the state of the Internet and the technology in those days.

Well, not, not...

Clearly, clearly it didn't have a very high penetration into households.

No. That's because you... To be honest, at Netcom, I used to say to people, you can use this system if you've got a PhD in Boolean technology.

Yes.

But if you haven't, you'll never find anything.

Yes.

And it's growing. There are user groups were starting to form, where you could access them. And, you could get access to some sites. But you probably needed to know the ID of the site, the name of the site.

Yeah.

There was no real search capability. You needed to really know where you were. So, groups of people were forming, were starting to advise each other about this stuff.

Right.

But it wasn't really easy to find.

Yeah. So did Virgin have a, a more friendly approach, a more easy to use system?

Well we went... I remember talking to the bearded wonder about it all. And clearly he was a technophobe. He had no idea. He said... This was... We worked in his... He worked in the house. He bought a house on Holland Park that he worked in, and then, as Virgin grew bigger and bigger, he bought the one next door to live in, so... This was his bedroom at one stage, and all the files were in a wardrobe and stuff like that. But on a dressing table at the side was an old computer, was a, a Compaq computer, a new one. And I said, 'Ah, one of my old business, one of my old machines there.' And he said, 'Ah.' He said, 'Do you know how to switch it on?' I said, 'Yes.' He said, 'Oh, go on.' He said, 'That's the first time that's been on.' I said, 'I can tell, because you've got no mouse and no keyboard. You can do bugger all with it actually.' But, but he was a complete technophobe, was Branson. There's a lot of benefits of, of working with him, but there is some other interesting stuff too. But they had no idea. But he, he felt, he felt that... Well I think he had been advised by his brother-in-law that this was an area that was coming, and, and it was going to affect all of their businesses. Somebody in Virgin had said, you know, 'This sort of stuff, we're going to need. We're going to need it in the airline business, we're going to need it in the records business. This is coming. And we'd better try and develop something.'

[1:19:25]

So, I went into... And they had got a, a few techies, mad as bloody hatters they were, but very technically competent people. They... [laughs] Virgin had just launched a cola-cola, Virgin Cola, and they had got a, had a freebie of one of those dispensing machines. But when I got there, it was full of Red Bull. They never, [laughs] they never put any Cola in it at all. It was all Red Bull. And they were all absolutely off their heads by about two o'clock. And... But, most of the good work was done after that. So... And they were looking for, how can we find/search? How can we find something that fits this problem?

Yeah.

And the guy, a couple of guys went over to the US, and they came back and, and said, 'We've got it. We've found something that does this.' He said, 'What's that?' And they said, 'Google. We found...'

Google.

Google. Never heard of in the UK.

Wow.

But there's a research engine here, that actually does what the consumer wants, and it's called Google. And it's... 'Can we get hold of it?' 'Yeah, they'll supply us.'

So just, just to, just to reiterate. This is 1997 when Google makes its first...

Might be '98. But, you know, it was certainly in that early stage of Virgin, where we got a deal with Google to use their search engine. It wasn't an exclusive, they wouldn't do exclusive.

Mm.

But we were out first with that. And, they would work with Virgin. Everybody would work with... One advantage you have with Virgin is, everybody wants to work with them.

Yes.

It's never an issue. The price of the deal might be, but everybody wants to work with Virgin. So... And they know who you are.

[1:21:13]

So just looking at your statistics that you briefed me with. When you left Netcom in '97...

Mhm.

...they were number one...

ISP.

...with, with 17,000 customers.

Yes.

And two years later Virgin seemed to have 500,000 customers.

Yes.

So that's... That is a steep growth curve.

It is. Although, you know, Freeserve had two million.

Did they? Oh right. OK. So...

What did people do with it? I don't know.

Yes.

But it was, it was a very very steep curve.

Yeah. Was Freeserve the leader at that time?

Yes. Yes, absolutely. And they, they came up with this deal. And this is really where the, for the first time, the role of the telecom company in this business changed. Because, they had a guy in Leeds running this who, who worked out actually that, the telco were making a lot of money. We were paying them, and they were making a lot of money out of the customer. We should have a deal where, we get this for free. We get the telephony for free. They can make their money on the consumers using it, and we get the service capability for free. That allows us then to offer the service free.

Yup.

Which is what they did. And we're still paying Cable & Wireless to supply us. They got the service free. I don't know think it's right. It's probably... I think it might have been France Télécom. But anyway, they got, they got the access free.

[1:22:52]

So what was your role in all of this change in the way the industry was working at that time then? Were you, were you marketing, or...?

Yes, mostly.

Yeah.

I mean, I had to manage the company, and they were a real bunch of... These are people Virgin had recruited. And they were such a strange bunch. They were... They were recruited because of their technical capability. And they were technically brilliant, but they were mad as hatters, many of them.

Yeah.

And, you know, I mean, the first day I got there, I walked into the gents, there, because, Virgin... Strange company. They would move offices all the time, because they were buying up cheap end-of-lease somewhere in London, they'd move. Anything that was cheap. They, they were really looking for the cheapest of everything. A very parsimonious company. And I walked into this, this office on Soho Square. And... Sorry, into the gents on the way in. There's this guy there, with... He had put some paper towels in the sink to block it, run some water, and he's getting shaved in there. And, I said, 'Are you all right?' 'Yeah, yeah, good.' And he said, he said, 'Yeah, I thought I'd better smarten up, because, apparently we've got a new CEO starting today.' [both laugh] I said, 'Oh.' 'Yeah.' I said, 'Well you look like you've been working...' 'Yeah,' he says, 'I've, I've been here all night.' And, and a number of them would work through the night on something, because they were into it. And then they'd go home at ten o'clock in the morning or something. It was a... It was really a strange mix. The... The three managers of content, technology

and marketing, had fallen out to such a degree before I got there, that they had developed, they had built a... Brother, I mean, Branson's brother-in-law was trying to run it, but he hadn't got a clue. Built what was basically a, a sort of, King Arthur table, a round table, with three chunks, so that these three would sit and work together. But no sooner had it left than the three musketeers themselves put three boards up so that they couldn't see each other. [both laugh] Which defeats the whole bloody object of it. And they were, they were really, kind of at war with each other most of the time. So it's actually getting, getting something done that we, you could use really, was, was the first thing. And then, once we had it, then it's marketed.

Mm.

But it was just getting a group of people to work together really.

[1:25:43]

But, the, it sounds like the industry was moving, or Virgin was moving very quickly, and, you were also involved in the Virgin Mobile business.

Yes. Up to some degree, although, I was more involved with... I mean we provided the, the knowledge for the Virgin companies to get into the Internet.

Yes. Right.

My group did.

Yeah.

So we developed the first Atlantic system.

Yeah.

Virgin Atlantic system. We developed something for the retail side. We were developing an online ordering system, we developed an online ordering system.

So this was a capability for the whole of the Virgin group?

Yes. Yes. And often, some... It was for the group, although it was often a specific request for somebody, by one of the businesses.

Yeah.

So they would, they wouldn't take on their own people, there weren't people to take on. They'd ask us to, to do that. So my team were not just doing the ISP side of it. We were doing that, and we were trying to add reasonable content into the business for people to see, when you go in the system, not just how to go to a website to get it, but to get something reasonable on the site, on our site. And of course then tie in to Virgin. There would be a, you know, there was a home page, and all the other Virgin sites were, were on the front page, to try and promote the Virgin business as well. And then Google if you wanted to go somewhere else. So we were, that was really the drive for what the team were doing.

[1:27:29]

And, everything at Virgin is for sale.

Always. Always. No question.

They made a lot of money out of selling it?

Yes. The thing is that... [pause] I didn't know that when I joined, that everything was for sale, always. But a friend of mine, a guy I got to know really well, who was running the radio, Virgin Radio, David Cameron, different David Cameron, came to me one day and he said... Because we were sharing offices. He was actually using some of our office space in Soho Square. And he said, 'Well I'm off.' I said, 'Are you?' He said, 'Yeah. Yeah. I've got to decide what I'm going to do now, but, we sold Virgin Radio.' 'Oh.' He said, 'I've been offered the job of going with it, but I'm not sure I want to, because it's, they've sold it to,' the ginger mob, Chris, whatever his name is.

Evans.

He didn't want to work for him.

No.

He said, 'On the other hand, I have worked for the guy with the biggest ego in history already, so maybe another one isn't a big problem.' But David didn't go with that, he went somewhere else. But, when I joined Virgin, I wasn't there that long, when I joined Virgin, there were 235 Virgin companies, about half of them with the brand, Virgin, and half of them not. If Virgin owned 51 per cent or more, it would be Virgin brand. And if it was less than that, it would be some other brand.

Yeah.

You know, there were all sorts of companies that didn't carry the Virgin brand. But everything was, was for sale. And, so you never really where you were. And it also would be sold, a thing that really annoyed me, from under you.

Yes.

So, you know, there is me trying to build something long-term for the company, for Virgin's benefit, and, and... And, the next thing you know, it's sold.

Yeah.

I mean Branson, you know, they say, 'Oh, I'll find you another job somewhere all right.' But that wasn't the point really.

[1:29:41]

So that, that's, that's why you moved to Trinity Mirror?

Yes. Well, they had been talking to me for a while anyway. After what... When they saw what we were doing, it actually was... At that stage it was the Mirror

Group. Trinity hadn't, hadn't come in. It was, it was a so-called merger of Trinity and Mirror, but actually, Trinity, Trinity were the largest, the owners, still are I think, of, the largest number of regional newspapers, that's what they were.

Yeah.

They buy up all these family businesses and... They have regional newspapers really. And of course *Mirror* is the national newspaper. And they had the chairman of, they had a chairman who was chairman of both, Victor Blank, who decided he could make some money out of pulling it all together. But there was a director at Mirror who really understood the Internet, a guy called Cornel Riklin, an American guy. He was very good friends with, with Meg Witman, who was, at that stage, CEO of eBay. And, we even looked at bringing eBay, a version of eBay, here.

Oh right. Yup. Yeah.

Branding under the Mirror. I mean, Cornel was really well-connected.

Mm.

But in the merger of Trinity and Mirror, you know, someone said to me, 'What's the difference between a merger and a takeover?' And I said, 'About six weeks basically.' And, and the top jobs all went to the Trinity people.

Yeah.

Who did not get the Internet at all. They, they had a board who were all, you know, retirement age. And they just didn't get it. So, before long Cornel had left, and really, he, I went there because of him. I mean I went there to work for him. And, and I took a chunk of the Virgin team with me as well. And we had, we had a great set-up there. We... The biggest mistake I think that Trinity Mirror ever made was not pursuing what we did with the media stuff. Because we had something special.

Yes.

Way in front, way in front of anyone else. At this stage for example there was no Internet betting. But we had come up with a proposal for Internet betting, branded Racing Post. Because we owned Racing Post.

So this was circa 2000?

Yes. '99 to 2000.

So this was the start... Well, that's another milestone in the use of the Internet.

Absolutely.

Those leisure activities.

Absolutely. We had a shopping system which was, a huge number of different products you could buy. We had a sports channel, sports piece.

Yeah.

We had... All based... And of course for us, it was easy. All the content was already being produced by the newspapers.

[1:32:34]

So you were right at the front of the wave of...

We should have been. But the board wouldn't, wouldn't back the plan. And I, I wrote this book about that. And they, what they did was... We were, we needed some investment to get it to market. And these were newspaper people, who didn't believe, I have to say, didn't get the Internet at all. The board were just newspaper people. And they just didn't get it.

Yeah.

So, when we're talking to them about this, there's just no awareness of what's coming. And it was, it was, they were really difficult discussions. So then they put their, their advisers to look at it, and they spent about a month going through all the details, of what we were asking for and, what we should do, and...

Yeah.

And they then made a presentation to the board. Because we needed to get on and do this. This wasn't something you could wait six months for. And, they made this presentation, which I thought, started really quite well. And then... There was competition for investment. *Mirror*, Piers Morgan, was pushing for more money to be invested in the *Mirror*. And... But this, it was ridiculous, because we were... I had a deal lined up to sell the ISP, without the content, just the technical ISP, which had a lot of uses. And the telcos were looking to buy. And I had Deutsche Telekom lined up.

Mm.

And they were, they were... They made an indicative offer on the numbers we gave them of about a million quid. We were looking for half a million quid to develop our business. And I said, what we... 'Look, I can give you half a million for his bloody newspaper if it'll shut him up, and we can develop all this content to make it available on all the sites.' And they didn't quite get this, you could do that, make it available, if you didn't have the ISP.

Mm.

But in any case, this, this organisation came up with this presentation, and basically, what they said was, 'This is not the time. We need to wait.' And the last line, which was the title of my book, was, 'The market is moving in our direction.' Now this was, March 2000. In June 2000 it blew up. The market blew up completely, when AOL were finally found out. Because, basically, the way AOL were working, was that they were amortising the, the cost of acquiring customers over five years. They said,

‘Customers stay with us for five years. So we’ll amortise the cost of acquiring them over five years.’

Yeah.

And as long as you keep growing, you never have to fund that.

Yeah.

But they stopped growing, the numbers. So now, the money’s not coming in. And, so now the, the authorities, and the accounting authorities auditing, are saying, ‘We need to look at this again.’ And what they came to the conclusion is that after five years, AOL had shown a series of profits, because of that accounting method, over five years, and they came to the conclusion, they had actually made a loss over those five years. They had never actually made anything. And it was all down to that accounting method. And that blew the bubble completely. The other thing was that most, most income from Internet companies in the US, large Internet companies from the US, was coming from other Internet companies in the US. So they were... It was, it was just a myth. They were making, they were putting a number of shares available into the market; consumers would buy it; they’d give them a load of money, and they’d spend it with another Internet company for something. And they were all doing that with each other. Consumers weren’t actually buying anything. And, and all that combined to blow up in 2000, during 2000.

[1:36:47]

And then, you ended up having to dismantle all of that by the sound of it.

Yes.

And move on to something completely different.

Yes. [laughs] Totally different. Yeah. Well I took... I... I mean they owed me quite a bit of money, Trinity Mirror. I had a contract, and, which they honoured, they paid it up. I had a twelve-month contract, which they paid. And, some stock options.

They, they paid what they should pay. And that gave me some time to reflect. I didn't have to go out and find another job the next day. So, I just relaxed for a bit. Started trying to write the book. And I did write it, although I found it very hard to do, I have to say, really hard process, of sitting, tucked away in a bloody room doing it yourself. And I, doing it again, I'd do it a different way, but...

And this is published is it?

No.

No.

The reason it isn't is, because I asked a couple... Once I had finished it, I asked a couple of people to read it. And, and then I reread it myself. And they said basically, 'Well it's all right as long as, you know, you don't think Branson's lawyers will have a go at you about this, that or the other.' [laughing]. Well no...

That's the trouble with the interesting books, isn't it.

It would. But I said, you know, well yeah, I'll tell you what, he'd be, he'd be less impressed if I hadn't put him in.

Mm.

[laughs] Didn't mention him.

Mm.

But I, I felt myself that it was too negative. It felt somehow, just the whole thing, in the style, that it was just one long whinge.

Yeah.

And I thought the content is right, but the style was too negative. And so, I need to rewrite it. And I never got the time to redo it.

Yes.

So it's still sitting on my computer.

[1:38:48]

Because you ended up at the BCS.

And I ended up at BCS. Yeah. Although there was... There was some time. Because I was, I was approached about that job. I don't know where that came from. I certainly didn't apply, because I had never... Well I had been once to the BCS, I had been once to the BCS.

Oh right, so the BCS came to you?

I think an agent in the middle did. And, and I went to meet with... It certainly wasn't something I had, you know, I was looking to do.

Yeah.

And, and we had done a presentation when I was at Compaq, at the old, at the old London headquarters, to a bunch of old fogeys, sat round a table. And we were telling them what a PC was. And I remember at the end of it we took a note-, we took a laptop there, and, and demonstrated it, showed them. And I remember them saying, 'Ah, very interesting. But it'll never catch on of course.' [laughs] Oh right. Well, so that's that lot. And... And I met Geoff McMullen.

Yes.

And, David Morris.

Yup.

And Mike... Oh. In Sheffield. Treasurer. Three of them anyway. And, and they, they impressed me. And... And they had a little board. And they had a guy who was at GCHQ, but he was, he was at the time chairman of the young, the YPG, and he was clearly switched on. And they, they were basically... I did some research, and, in fact I did a lot of research with all... When I thought it was a potential, I did a lot of research, initially, before the interview, and then, later on when I got the job, a lot more, about BCS. And... Because I had no idea what I was going to do next. Just no idea. And, it seemed to me that there was, there was something needed, and BCS maybe could be the people to do it. But, there was no real sign of it happening. So, they offered me the job. I think it was, it was a split decision, they had somebody else in mind. Geoff said afterwards that after his, his, some time afterwards I have to say, that after his daughter's wedding, it was the proudest thing he had ever done. And I said, 'Oh I'll soon change that for you.' But, we... Geoff was President when I took over.

Yeah.

David... Oh no. Yeah, Geoff was President. And he... What do they call... Alastair. Alastair was President, for a couple of months. And then Geoff for the full year,. And then...

Alastair...

Macdonald.

Oh right. Yes.

He chaired that farewell meeting, which is why he tabled it. What a character he is. But he only really did his year and went. He didn't really hang around afterwards. David Morriss of course did.

Mm.

And we, we developed some... And, and, what Geoff said to me is, 'Look, we need you to commit to five years. Because we can't be changing...' The previous, predecessor really hadn't done much. And... Judith Scott. And... 'And we need a shake-up, we need something doing.'

Was he specific about what needed shaking up?

No. No.

But there was a five-year project there then?

He said, 'Look, we'll work it out.' And I spent a lot of time with Geoff, working through a lot of things. And we, I think we had a very similar feel for what needed to be done. [pause] So yeah, there we were. Took it on. There was a six-month wait. Because, they had found somebody quicker, because, I was going to do it, quicker than they expected to. And Judith was on six months' notice.

Yes. So you shared the job her for six months?

No, I... No, I didn't start for six months.

Oh you waited to start.

And because I was getting paid by Trinity Mirror, I could afford to do that.

Yes.

So I got appointed on Christmas Eve; I didn't start until May the 1st.

[1:43:07]

Right. So what was your assessment of what had to be done in this five-year project?

Well, the first thing I did was to... I didn't know much about BCS, apart from my one [laughs] experience. So I went to a lot of people, a lot of people in the IT industry

that I knew, friends and what have you, people who were working in IT for the companies that I had worked in, Virgin, Trinity Mirror, you know, they had some really top people running the IT departments of those companies. So, users of IT. And I said to all of them, 'What do you think of the BCS?' And there was a sort of, split response. It wasn't exactly 50-50 but it was near enough 50-50, where, half of them said they'd never heard of BCS, and the other half said, 'Oh yeah, we've heard of them, but it's not for us. Irrelevant.' The word irrelevant kept coming back.

Sorry. The people you talked to, you found from, where?

Contacts.

Right.

People I knew.

Not just members?

No. They weren't members.

But people in the industry.

They weren't members. I mean by definition they weren't members.

Yes.

And, you know... 'So would you join BCS?' 'Never heard of them. Who's that?' Or, 'Well, no, that's not for me. I mean I know who they are, but it's, academic rubbish,' or something. 'And there's nothing there for me.' You know, and these are people like, you know, the IT director of Trinity Mirror. A lot of the techie people I had in Virgin, that I was still in contact with. Even going back to, you know, some of the, the previous lists, on our list, you know.

Yeah.

‘What do you think?’ And, and it was, I have to say, having accepted the job, I, it was disappointing that there was no, just no awareness in the profession of BCS. It was the same level as mine really. If I hadn’t... If we hadn’t been invited at Compaq to go and do that presentation, I would never have heard of BCS.

And yet it had quite a few thousand members.

Thirty-seven.

Yes.

Yes. So, who were they?

Yes.

I don’t know. 5,000 academics. Which was not a market I was tapping into.

Yes.

[1:45:31]

But... So I thought, well, you know, this, this is not... When you think of the number of people working in this profession, different estimates, but it’s still around one and a half million at the time, and there’s 37,000 members, of which quite a few of those are students. And what I found later was, there was a nice little scheme about that, that, if you were an international student, and you wanted to take the BCS exams, and the BCS exams were in some countries, Mauritius and, in particular Mauritius, and Sri Lanka to some degree, they didn’t have their own IT exams, they didn’t have national exams, BCS was it.

Yes.

That, we had this scheme, managed by the British Consul [laughs], British Council I think, that, if you took our exam, and took out membership, it was cheaper than just taking the exam.

Yes.

Well funnily enough, we had a lot of international student members. They also all thought, if they did that, and got a job, and, and passed the exam, and were a student member of the BCS, that they would automatically get a job in the UK. It would give them entry into the UK. All very disappointing for them. But, so there was about, I don't know, there were several thousand student members in that 37. And, it had not gone up, it had not really changed for about five years.

Yeah.

Absolutely static. And yet the number of people working in the profession had doubled in that time. So if you looked at it... I remember saying this in the interview. 'If you look at market share...' Because they're all, 'Oh our membership's steady.' I said, 'Well actually, if you look at it in market share terms, it's halved.'

Yup.

You know, you're not making any progress at all. And, they didn't really know what to do about it. And, and I said, you know, this, it'll last for a while, but it's, if you don't keep filling that pipe up, it will disappear.

[1:47:37]

So you found yourself sitting in the, sitting there as chair of BCS.

I did.

And, did the people who appointed you have a vision of what they wanted you to do?

None whatsoever.

So it was your job to create the position.

Find one. Yeah.

Yes.

They didn't even have a vision for BCS. You couldn't find anything like that. You know, five years' time, where do you see BCS? Nobody had that that picture. Nobody had even done the work for it. I mean, it's sort of, it's not our responsibility almost. The board certainly didn't. Big problem with the board though, in my view on BCS, is that it changes so often. Because of the election process, an annual thing, a lot of people are only on the board a year, trustees for a year or so.

Yeah.

And, and that doesn't give any consistency at all to, to things like, where shall we take it?

Yeah.

You know, key people behind certain things disappear in no time.

Yeah.

And they're starting again, all of the time starting again. And that's one of the things I found is that, you couldn't actually leave those things to the Trustee Board.

Do you think you should be able to leave those things to the Trustee Board?

No.

You think it should be the chief executive that drives that?

Executive. I think the Trustee Board should approve it, should know of it, and support it. I don't think they, they can do the work on it.

Yes.

And they can have a view. But there's some other elements to that as well. Because BCS is not one set of people. There are a number of different groups who are very very different to each other. I mean it was formed, it took nearly five years to come together in the Fifties, because they couldn't get the academics and the commercial people to actually agree on anything.

Yes.

They were two separate organisations. And, and when they did merge, they didn't really. You know, it's still separate. And they have very very different requirements. And to try and keep everybody satisfied, well you'll never do that. In fact you'll never keep anybody satisfied. But, but that's all right, because, it is that, that much of a mix. And in some of the things, it makes real sense to try and pull those different things together to do certain things. And in fact BCS is unique in being able to do that, has the ability to do that, if it only focused on doing that sort of stuff properly. But, there are some real different cliques in BCS, specialist groups, cliques, you know, and...

Yes.

With their own agenda. Entirely their own agendas, nothing to do with BCS. You go and ask some of the specialist groups about the BCS agenda, they're... *Our* agenda, [tapping sound] is this. And, you know, stuff BCS basically.

[1:50:24]

So did you, do you feel you got to a position, having, having come into the job, that, working with the Trustee Board and with your staff, that you created a, a vision that you could drive through, and...

Yes.

...use to change the organisation?

Yes. Particularly early, earlier on. And I have to say, and this will, not necessarily go down particularly well, but I have to say, the quality of the people I was working with, the volunteers, early on, was of a high quality, really high quality, and high commitment to BCS. You know, and I can't say too much in praise of Geoff McMullen, David Morriss, people like this. They, they really believed that we could achieve something here, and it was a win

Yeah.

And they would give all the support you ever wanted.

Yeah.

And, it became much more watered-down later.

Yeah. Right. So, it sounds like, it got off to a good start then.

It was a good start. Yeah. And got better.

And...

And got better.

[1:51:32]

Did you, did you achieve the objectives that...?

I don't know where we are now. [laughs] We achieved a lot of the objectives.

Yes.

I mean the first thing is, that BCS's financial model was a complete mess. There wasn't any money to do anything.

Right.

And, we had to do something to fix that. There's only a certain amount you can do on, on membership. Although we doubled the membership numbers. But there's a cost in acquiring members as well. So the net profit on those numbers, you know, to... And to feed... So, if you've got, say, 75,000 members, you've got to recruit 1,000 members a month just to keep that at 75,000.

Yes.

So there's a lot of investment of various kinds to keep that level. And then of course it's a lot harder to, to manage that number.

Yes.

[1:52:27]

But what we decided was that, we've got to have a commercial, a real focus on the commercial side of BCS to drive some money to fund the rest.

Yeah.

And, and that was the examinations business.

Yeah. That, that was developed under your regime.

Yes. Indeed. They had already acquired ECDL. But, it wasn't turning in the sort of numbers that it could. And Pete... Can't think of his name. We... It was already... He had just started actually. Who ran ECDL for us. We recruited him in from the college market. He actually was at Swindon College, a lecturer in IT. And we recruited him in. Because that, we thought, this is the way. And Pete knew the thing

backwards, that, the only way we... I didn't know. But the only way to get on the curriculum for next year is to get approval of government funding into those, into those organisations. Because, they get about 50 per cent subsidy, and if, if it's approved; and if it isn't approved, they don't get that, and they won't put it in their curriculum and you can forget it.

Mm.

So we did a lot of work around getting, working out how you do that, who were the qualifications board to do that? And what do you need. [exhales/whistles] And every year we'd work really hard at getting that qualification. You had to have the right product. It had to be up to date, which took investment. You had to be prepared every year to invest in those products, so they stay up to date.

Mm.

But we did all that, year after year.

Yup.

And, you know, you could stop at any time and, have a plateau. But it wouldn't last long.

[1:54:26]

Yeah. So... So, you were pleased with the way the society developed?

Yeah. And then we went into the, the more professional exams. Because ECDL really is a user environment. So, the ISEB

Yeah.

And we developed a whole raft of new, of new capability there, and new, new areas where we would certify people.

[1:54:48]

So how would you characterise the change from when you joined the BCS to, I don't know, well when you left the BCS? That's the simplest thing isn't it.

Yes. Well I think... Well the first thing is, we had a lot more members. And that does a lot for you.

Yup.

Having a lot more members per se doesn't do a huge amount, but, governments start to think, you're big enough to take notice of. You say you've got 75,000 members. Quite a number of government ministers or what have you think you're actually a trade union, but you know, [laughs] there's a negativity about the Conservative Party in that. But, they think, they're going to have to listen to you, because you've got all these people.

Yeah.

You get asked to do things.

Yup.

And we had to... We changed totally our whole approach to how we respond to requests for information, to... I mean, the classic for me, about how you do things differently, how, we had to do things differently, is, the first week I was there, I think it was about the second day, I was in the office, and I got a call from the *Financial Times*. And they had some issue going on in the market around IT security.

Yup.

And they were trying to get an answer. Is this serious, what do you do about it?

Yeah.

So, they rang us. And, and I said... Colin Thompson was, I remember him well, talked to the guys at the *FT*. And I said, 'Right, well we'll, we've got... We'll come back you.' And I said to Colin, you know, what they had just said. And he said... I said, 'What do we do?' He said, 'Oh, we've got a specialist group for that. We've got a specialist group for everything.' Here's the list.' 'Right. Let's get 'em on to that.'

Yes.

So he rang 'em, chairman of said specialist group, and told them the whole story, and that the *FT* are on, and we can get ourselves here, prominent position, in tomorrow's *FT*. And the guy said, 'Pf! Going to need the questions in writing.' 'Oh, you're joking.' 'No. We've got to be right. And, anyway, we'll have to consult my committee.' And... 'And, so if you can get me them in writing, I'll send them out.' So, we went back to the *FT* and got the questions in writing. They were quite bemused by that.

Mm.

Because they weren't that desperately difficult.

They just wanted to talk to somebody.

Yes.

Yes.

They just wanted somebody to say something, anything.

Yes. Mm.

So... So we got the questions, and we sent them out to this chairman. And every day then for a week I'm ringing him up asking where the answer is. 'Oh, Joe hasn't come back.' 'We haven't been able to...' And anyway, eventually, after a week he said,

‘You’ll be pleased to know we have come to a conclusion on these questions.’ ‘Great. What is it?’ ‘We’re not prepared to answer them.’ [TA laughs] Anyway. As it turns out, it was far too late for the *FT* anyway.

Yes.

But it said to me, [sighs], we can’t do that.

Yeah.

We simply can’t do that any more.

Yeah.

What we have to do is to find people... And, and then the other piece of that. Somebody said to me, ‘If you get 50 people in a room, 50 BCS people in a room, and ask them a question, you’ll get about 65 answers.

Yes.

So, there’s no consensus anywhere on anything.

No.

So, I said to Collin, ‘Look, we need a list here of experts, that we trust. And all right, they’ll piss off some of our members,’ sorry about that, quote, ‘but, at least we’ll an answer out. At least people will start to see us as being relevant.’

Yup.

And relevant is the thing we had to become. So let’s get a list of experts in various fields, and at least, if we get a question on that, we can ring them. And we’ll just take their view.

Yup.

And, all right, other people won't be happy with it, but that's just how it is.

Yeah.

[1:58:40]

So we built up our own internal list. These weren't staff members. These were volunteers, but expert in their field. But everyone's an expert at BCS. But what we were able to do was to build through that a presence. People would ring us and know they'd get an answer.

Yeah.

Government departments would ask us, and we could send some people over and talk to them. So we were starting to get... We were starting to be responsive to, really important areas. So we became relevant.

Yup.

Which was actually, to me, the whole thing: is BCS relevant? It wasn't when I went in.

Yes.

I think when I left, I think it was.

Right. So that, that's...

So that main one. It was solvent. It was financially solvent.

And relevant.

And relevant. And, the biggest relevant thing of all was the Professionalism in IT programme.

Yes.

Because I think that was hugely important. So many good people got involved in that.

Yes.

Mostly down to Charles Hughes's recruiting them I have to say.

Yes.

But... But the idea sparked actually from an idea, from, from Colin and I about a month into me being in the job. Went up to Nottingham to talk to IBM's consultants. They have some, educational centre in Nottingham, and we went there. And, we got them talking through it. And we, we were all sort of agreeing on the issues of IT. You know, people think it's a cowboy industry, they don't trust anybody, all that sort of stuff, is what was being reported all the time.

Yeah.

And, you know, why would people join this profession?

Yes.

And thing is, it's got to be a profession. We have to make it into a real profession. So... And I remember making this pitch, and, and saying, that's what we have to do. And this guy... There were only about five members... There must have been about 400 people in the audience, and I said, 'How many of you are BCS members?' This is classic. About five put their hands up.

Yeah.

And, and I said, 'We've got to do something about this.' And this guy put his hand up, and he said, 'What are you doing about it?' [pause] Ah. Good question.

Mm.

So on the train back, I said to Colin, 'We've got to do something about this. It's down to us to do something.'

Yes.

And I think he, he, he was closer to Charles than me, he had a word with Charles. And we started to build this group. Which as I say, Charles drove, got some really good people. And I think a lot of good things came out of that.

Yes.

And, and we started, I think, through that, to look like a profession.

[2:01:20]

Yes. Along the way, you, you had a bit of resistance to, to some of these changes from the members, didn't you?

Yes.

What do you put that down to?

[pause] If there's one thing I'd have done differently, it's the transformation programme.

Yeah. This is what triggered the EGM experience.

All of it. Yes.

Yes.

And, I think it was... The reality though is, it was an excuse for some people to, that they used for long-term issues they had had.

Right.

They actually couldn't care less about it, but it was, it was... It was something that they could use. But when I look at it, I don't... We didn't manage it very well in terms of managing it with the members. I thought we had. But we hadn't. And, we had gone to a number of groups, focus groups, on it, a number of groups of people, about what we wanted to do, and on all of them we got a positive response. But when you look at it, it was a small fraction of the membership we got to.

Yeah.

And we sort... I think we assumed, well if that lot think it's good, then, everybody does.

Yeah.

And that clearly wasn't the case, and we should have done a lot more work on that. We also should have done it differently. Because there was this conflict of Ian Ryder using his previous company to do some work. That was so... I was reluctant to do that. But, they were cheap, they were, they were good quality, they were ready to go. And I said to Bob Harvey, who was President, 'Look, I think we need an independent look at that, an independent audit on it. Because, this could come back to haunt us.' And Bob verified all the expenditure of that, and we had a... We, we got them to produce spreadsheets that compared their pricing with other people's pricing for any work they did for us

Yeah.

But no matter how you cover yourself like that, and I think we were, there would always be this element of people saying, 'Ah, jobs for the boys.' So, on reflection, I

wouldn't have done that. I'd have used somebody else. And I would have gone wider in terms of taking people with us. But we needed to transform.

Yeah.

[2:03:50]

We needed to actually make the impact. We just... I would have handled it better. And what we did with that was give people the opportunity to have a go about things they didn't like. This was particularly the specialist groups. Because what we had done is, we had stopped them just spending money willy-nilly. We had got them to be responsible for what they spent, and responsible actually to Philip, but to the finance department for what they spend. They really didn't like that. So... And there's, there's an enormous amount of money being spent, and wasted, and they didn't think, a lot of these people didn't think that should be, that was anything to do with us.

Yes.

So, you know, for example, a small group of six people, specialist group of six people, who seemed to only be part of BCS for one week of the year, and that was the year... There was a Fortran group, and that was the week that there was a worldwide Fortran conference in Las Vegas. And we funded them going. And that was the only...

Yeah.

That's, that was it. You know. But we stopped it. Oh!

[2:04:53]

So it sounds like you feel that you brought a lot more structure and purpose and relevance to the BCS.

I think so.

Is that kind of, the crowning achievement of your career, is that the thing you're most proud of, or, or are there other things that you can point to as your important achievements?

[pause] Well we've gone through a lot. And, and there's a lot of things, you know, that I'm proud of doing. I think it's right up there, in terms of, of, what I think we set off to do with BCS, and a big task, over a long period of time, and I think we achieved a lot of the things we wanted to do. Not everything. And, and I would have done some things differently. But, I think we, we achieved a lot in that time. But then I think we achieved a lot with some of the other businesses, in a shorter time.

Yeah.

But I think we achieve a lot in some of those as well.

Yeah.

So, I think, in terms of in the public domain, probably, the BCS, the impact was bigger than any of the others. But... But I feel like, you know, if I hadn't done the BCS thing, I still think I, I still feel like I would have achieved a lot, different things.

[2:06:12]

Yes. What have you done since BCS?

Bugger... No. [TA laughs] I was going to say bugger all. Well I, I stayed on a year longer than I was planning to. And we bought a business of course.

Yes.

The best tea rooms in the West of England apparently, according to the *Sunday Telegraph*. Although I want to retire from that.

Yeah.

I'd like to have had more impact on the registered IT professional.

Mm.

[pause] Sorry, Registered IT... It's not professional is it? It's... [pause]

Chartered IT professional?

No, the, the thing with Sainsbury.

Oh right. Oh I see. Yeah. The... Yeah.

I think that's been a missed opportunity.

Yes.

And unfortunately... And I was disappointed with that.

So that's something that you couldn't see through, because you left the BCS.

Exactly.

Yup. Yeah.

And I'd like to have seen it through, because there was... There was a real opportunity for, for BCS to get young people in, and to start people on a proper profession in IT. But when I left, it wasn't, that vision wasn't there. And it was seen, it was passed down to the marketing department, who saw it as an opportunity to recruit a relatively small number of new BCS members.

Yeah.

I saw it as much bigger than that. I saw it something that the profession needed, as did Sainsbury. You know, he and I had long discussions about this whole thing

before the thing started. And, and it, it is about getting young people to come into the IT profession.

Yes.

Whether they're members of BCS is a secondary thing later.

But you... As I understand it, you put that on track, and, and did your part.

Well as best I could. As best I could, yeah.

[2:08:12]

Can I, can I ask you, then, if we draw a line under the, the history.

Yup.

Looking forward, is there some advice that you would give to anybody starting off in a career now in IT?

There are a number of times I think that... It may be different now, because, there's so much greater understanding of IT now than there was, at many of the stages I went through. But I, I feel like I let myself get talked out of things by people who had no idea what this profession was about or where it was going. And, and I think, maybe at the time I wouldn't have thought it like this, but, no, I think I got talked out too easily. I should have just stuck in there. Because...

You are thinking about your, your industrial career there, are you, where...

Well I'm thinking about, you know, for instance...

...you could have shaped the future of a business differently.

Well I'm thinking, like, Trinity Mirror for example.

Yes. Yeah. Yes.

They really should have been in, the star Internet. And I, I walked away from them too easily.

Yes.

And, I think you have to... You know, it's, I suppose it's the courage of your convictions. You know, I'm battling the whole board at Trinity Mirror.

Yes.

But on reflection, I wish I had done it more. Because I think Trinity Mirror now would be a very successful, very rich business.

So, there's a piece of advice there about sticking to your guns.

Yeah. It... Go for it.

Yes.

Just go for it. Don't... And don't be put off by people, no matter how many of them seem to be lining up against you. If you really believe it, then go for it. And you'll find it's worth it in the end.

[2:09:59]

Great. Any other pieces of wisdom?

[pause] I think you've got to build... I, I always think that management is about developing people, and developing a team. And I think it's really important to do that. It's really important to, to have a group of people you can trust and that work with you, no matter, wherever you are in it.

Yeah.

So, I think you need to be looking to develop people, and develop teams. Because that is, in the end, this is I suppose the football thing, but in the end, that's what wins. You can't do it yourself. You need to build a team, get some really good people alongside, and work in that, in that, that way, I think.

Very good.

That's it I think.

Thank you for that David, it's been very good talking to you.

My pleasure Tom.

Thanks for your time.

[End of Interview]