Capturing the Past
Inspiring the Future

Peter Hermon

Interviewed by

Tom Abram

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Virginia Water, Surrey

So, welcome to the Archives of Information Technology. I'm Tom Abram, I'm the editor at AIT, and I am here today to talk to you, Peter Hermon. It's the 16th of October 2019, and we're here in your home, Peter, at Virginia Water in Surrey.
[00:25]
So just to introduce you. You are notable for many achievements in the IT industry, the application of IT to various businesses, as a senior manager in a number of industries, and an authority on and author of books on hillwalking.

Mm.

In your early career, I would say you're a pioneer of business computing, which is why we're interested, first with LEO, and then, particularly notably, for the development of BOADICEA in the airline industry.

Mm.

[01:10]
So, thank you very much for agreeing to talk to us, Peter. We'll go into some detail in a minute about the, about your background, your career, your experiences, and I'm particularly interested, having looked at your CV, and the various publications about you, about how you saw that period when IT was developing as a business tool in the Fifties, Sixties and Seventies. It must have been an exciting time, and, and very significant.

Mm.

First though, let me ask you… It must have been a very bold decision when you went into the IT industry, because, it was a fledgling industry. What did the general public, or the man in the street, know about IT at that time, and, and what got you interested in it?

Nothing. Nothing… I wasn't interested in it. I was filling in a year doing teaching, which I didn't like, and I wanted to get out of it, and I saw this advertisement in the *Daily Telegraph* for mathematicians for J Lyons. And I wondered why J Lyons

wanted a mathematician. So I applied, and I was interviewed by TRT, who told me something about it. It sounded interesting, so I accepted it.

[02:39]
So before you went for the interview, did you know anything about computers?

No, nothing at all.

And, and did it strike you as exciting, or daunting, or…?

Well it struck me as a, as a way of getting out of teaching.

Right.

That was the main thing. [laughs]

Well that's, that's, that's a first in my experience as a motivation for getting into IT.

[laughs]

[03:05]
So, well let's talk about your start in life.

Sorry?

Let's talk about your start in life if we may.

Right.

You were born in November 1928.

Yes.

Which must make you 90 years old now.

Yes.

Where were you born?

Oxford.

And, what were your parents doing in Oxford then?

My father worked for Morris Motors.

Oh right.

Who were based in Oxford.

Yes.

So that's where the Oxford, Oxford thing came from.

Right. And, and what did he do for Morris Motors?

He was a sort of, technical assistant.

Right.

Later on became their technical manager in the Midlands area.

Right.

So any problems with their cars in that area, he had to go and sort out.

Right. And what did your mother do? Did she work?

Dressmaking.

Dressmaking.

Mm.

Wow. Would you say they were professional people, or working-class people?

Oh working class, definitely.

[04:09]
Right. I was struck by the detail in your CV about your educational record, and having, you're a phenomenal over-achiever in academic terms.

Mm.

Did your parents come from a, a well-educated background?

No, not at all. Nothing at all.

Right.

Just basic education.

Right. And, can you see that, you know, can you see in their characters where, where the genes came from for your achievements?

Not really. [both laugh]

[04:53]
Well that's interesting. So, what was, what was family life like, what, where did… You lived in Oxford to start with.

Till I was four, yes.

Yeah.

With my mother's family.

With your mother's… Right, with your mother's family?

Yes.

So, with your mother's parents, or…?

Mother's parents, and sister, yes.

Right. Gosh, yes. So how many of you were there in the house?

Well mother's parents, my father, mother, myself, and one or two sisters.

[laughs] Right.

So it was well occupied.

Right. And was it a happy household?

I think so, yes. Yes.

What do you remember doing in those days to keep you amused, you know, playing or, whatever?

Sitting in my grandad's chair, opposite a big window like this, and pretending I was a bus driver.

Really?

Yes.

Is that what you aspired to then?

At that stage.

Yes. What about sports and things like that?

No, there was no sports, no. My grandparents were very keen I, to keep me isolated more or less. They didn't want me mixing with other children.

Why, why would you say is that?

Well they were like that. I don't know. I can't explain it.

Right.

[06:18]
Mm, interesting. So, who were the important figures in your life? If you were living with that extended family so to speak, I, I guess there were a number of people around you who influenced your, your way of life.

Not really.

No?

I don't think.

Who… You look back fondly on grandparents and, and aunties and…

Yes.

[06:47]
Yeah. Yeah. OK. So moving on to education. I see you went to school somewhere other than Oxford. So, you must have moved.

Well my father was moved up to Nottingham, about 1933, to be in the centre of the Midlands area, to be a technical adviser.

Right.

Yes.

And, and presumably, when you moved up there, you had a bit more space in the family house?

Yes, we had a three-bedroomed house, yes.

Right. And, and you went to school. Where did you go to school?

In a local council school, Lenton, Nottingham, Lenton council school.

Right.

To start off with.

Yes.

Till I was about eleven, when I went to Nottingham High School.

Nottingham High School is a very good school isn't it.

Very good school, yes.

I, I note it has some, some famous alumni, apart from yourself.

Yes.

[07:48]

So, how did you get into Nottingham High School then?

My father paid to start off with.

Right.

I didn't take a scholarship exam because we thought we were moving back to Oxford, because of the war. But that was scotched, so, he paid for a couple of years. Then I got an internal scholarship, which paid for the rest of my time there.

Right. Yes, your mention there of the, the war, just makes me think, I hadn't, I hadn't done the numbers before, but, but when you went to school, when you went to the high school at eleven then, that would have been 1939.

It was, yes.

And that was wartime.

Just as the war started.

What, what difference did that make in Nottingham then, to a boy going to school?

What… Sorry?

What difference did the war, what difference did the war make to your life as a boy going to school in Nottingham?

Well, a lot of the teachers were called up, but a lot of changeover. And sport was difficult, because they had to dig a whole lot of the ground to grow vegetables.

[09:00]
Right. So, what did you like doing at school?

I liked studying really. At different times I liked history, Latin and Greek, chemistry, before I came to mathematics.

Right. And were you good at all of those things?

Yes, I was.

[laughs] I have that impression from, from your achievements in, in your CV.

Yes.

Well, maths was what you liked best was it?

Eventually, yes, I settled on.

[09:29]
Yes. So, it says on your CV, and you've just mentioned, you were a foundation scholar and a Thomas White Senior Scholar.

Yes.

So what did that do for you? Did that pay all of your fees?

The foundation scholar paid all my fees and books and things, and the Thomas White scholarship, in addition, paid you so much a term, I forget how much, about £15. Doesn't sound much, but in those days it was worth having.

Yes.

So it provided pocket money if you like.

Yes. OK. And, that's a day school is it then?

Yes.

Yeah. And, I mean it sounds like, if, if your father started paying for you to go there, that, that he was moderately affluent at least by, by that time?

Well no, I think there was a great sacrifice on his part.

Right.

I don't think he was ever affluent really.

Right. But he, he must have seen a value in education.

Oh yes, he did. I owe a lot to him for that.

Yes.

Oh yes.

[10:33]
Yeah. And, you mention that you liked studying at school. Did those other extramural things like football and cricket and, drama and so on, not, not hold much attraction for you?

Well I, I was active in the drama society.

Oh right, yes.

But rugby and cricket didn't have much hold on me.

[10:59]
No. What influence do you think your school days had on your subsequent career?

Well to the extent they got me to Oxford and so forth, they paved the way for, for that.

Right. There's a lot of debate these days, I'm sure you see it in the press, about lack of interest in what they call STEM now, science, technology, engineering and mathematics, a lack of interest in those disciplines, and the need for people to learn those disciplines in order to get into engineering and technology.

Mm.

Did you think there was a very close relationship between being good at, say, mathematics and being good in terms of the IT industry? What, what… What disciplines do you think equip you best for work in computers and IT?

Just having the, the mind.

Right.

Not mathematics as such.

Right.

Just having an ordinary, logical mind.

Right. A number of my friends who were early entrants into the IT industry studied things like classics.

Yes. Yes.

And, and they tell me that's a great discipline for…

Mm.

That's the orderly mind thing, do you think?

Well with any academic, any academic subject is, if properly tackled.

[12:37]
Right. What about your, your teachers, do you look back on any particular teachers as being important to you in shaping you?

Oh yes. Yes. Yes.

Your maths teacher maybe.

My maths teacher, I had several, yes. They were very good, and very helpful.

Do you remember their names?

Yes. Yes.

And, and, you think that, you looked up to them as role models, did you?

Yes.

[13:12]
So… So clearly you did very well at school.

Mm.

You don't detail exactly which exams you passed in your, in your CV, but presumably you got, you got excellent grades in your, was it O Levels and A Levels in those days?

Yes. Yes.

Yes. And then you went on to Oxford…

National…

Oh.

National Service.

National Service next.

Yes.

Yes? Tell me about National Service.

Well I didn't really cooperate with that; it was a complete waste of time. I did very little and learnt very little.

Right.

I spent lots of time in Libya where I was stationed just killing time really.

What were you supposed to be doing?

Well in the artillery, so, I suppose firing guns, but, we didn't do much.

So, [laughs] it was literally a lot of sitting around doing nothing, was it?

Yes it was. Yes.

So, you wouldn't advocate National Service as, as something young people should do?

Well I… No. If it was… If they had people properly to teach you and lead you, it would be all right, but, we had nothing, as I say, no incentive to do anything.

Was it harsh?

No.

No?

Boring.

Boring.

Mm.

One has this vision of National Service… I didn't do National Service, I'm too young, but one has this vision of, of fearsome non-commissioned officers bullying young chaps and…

No I didn't experience much of that.

No. So how long did National Service take?

Two years.

Right. So it was school, then National Service, and on to university?

That's right.

[15:10]
And, and you seem to have won a, a handful of scholarships for university as well .

Yes, for Oxford, yes.

A state scholarship on the basis of your A Levels. By the time I went to university it was all about local authority grants, but…

Yes.

…in those days, you were awarded a scholarship, were you, by the Government?

Yes. There were 360 for the country, covering all subjects.

Right. And how did you qualify for one?

Well by your performance on A Levels.

Right. So it was the top, top 360 performers got a scholarship.

Yes. Yes.

Wow. Which A Levels did you do?

Maths and physics.

Just two, two A Levels?

And scripture. We had to do scripture.

And scripture.

Yes.

Right. And, a major open scholarship, St John's College.

Yes.

That was awarded by the college presumably.

Yes.

On the basis of an entrance exam or something?

A scholarship exam, yes.

Yes. And a Henry Mellish scholarship.

That was a Nottinghamshire award. The headmaster wanted me to get that for the prestige of the school.

Right. Oh. And was that an exam, or an interview?

Yes.

[16:40]
Right. Very good. Did you enjoy university?

Yes, I did, very much.

You studied pure and applied maths.

Yes.

And, was… Was Oxford an easy environment for you to adapt to?

Yes, it wasn't difficult. Life was absolutely OK.

Yes.

I had no problems.

Of course it's noted for the, the college and tutor system.

Yes.

Is that something that worked well for you?

Yes, I, it was very good.

[17:25]

Yeah? And, so you did very… Well, you got a First Class Honours at the end of the university. And, and what then, post-university? Did you…

I was going to do research, but when I started doing it, I realised I didn't want to do it.

Right.

And getting married at the same time.

Right.

So I decided to get a job. And I was offered this good job by Leeds Grammar School, as head of the maths department.

Head of the maths department, as your first job?

Yes. Yes. Crazy isn't it. No teaching experience whatsoever.

But a great mathematician.

Well they couldn't get maths people to teach in those days.

Right.

Because the salaries weren't very good.

Right.

So they made it attractive to do that.

Right. And, it doesn't sound like you enjoyed it much.

No, I didn't.

What was the problem?

Well teaching boys who didn't want to be taught.

So it was… What kind of school was it? It was in Leeds you say?

A grammar school, rather like Nottingham High School in fact.

Right. But the boys weren't motivated.

No.

Badly behaved.

Yes, they tended to be.

Yes. That's disappointing isn't it.

Well, I don't know, it's… [laughs]

And, you say that that was partly influenced by you getting married at that point.

Yes.

So, did you, did you meet your future wife at university?

At Oxford.

Yes

At a social event at Oxford, yes.

Was she a student as well?

No, she was a nurse in the Radcliffe Infirmary.

Oh right. Yes.

Yes. But they used to invite nurses to the social events, because in those days, the men at Oxford outnumbered the women by seven to one.

Is that right?

So they balanced it out by including the nurses in social activities.

Wow, that's very enterprising wasn't it.

Yes.

[19:24]
What… That… You touch on another issue there that's a hot topic in the IT industry, which is the imbalance of the sexes. I'm not sure what the ratio of men to women is now at university, but… Why, why were there so few women at Oxford in the 1950s?

Well because for a long time the universities didn't want women.

What do you attribute that to?

Well it's discrimination.

That simple?

Why didn't women have the vote?

Yeah. Yeah.

Same thing.

How do you think we're doing on that now?

What?

How do you think we are doing on that now?

Oh it's absolutely gone now, there are equal numbers of men and women.

In universities?

Yes.

Yeah. What about in the industry?

Well I think the same thing really.

Yeah.

We had plenty of people working in LEO, women, who were just as good as the men.

Yeah. Did they get paid the same?

I think so, but I don't know. I should think so.

Well that's good. I mean, there is an imbalance in, they say, in the industry now, an imbalance of, lots more men than women, and especially in senior positions. It's a bit of a mystery to me why, but, do you have any thoughts on that?

Well no, it's just part of the tradition that women were regarded as housekeepers.

Yes.

I mean, in those days women were told, you either be a secretary or a nurse or something else, I've forgotten what the other thing was.

Yes. But that's not true now, is it?

Oh no, no; it was then though.

But, but we still have, you know, something like, at senior levels, fifteen per cent of the senior managers are women.

Yes, but then you see, since women have only been in the industry for a few years, it takes a long time for them to percolate through to the top, doesn't it?

[21:33]
Well that's a fair point. Yes. So… So you looked at doing research.

Yes.

But decided against it in the end.

Yes.

You tried teaching.

Yes.

But you weren't, you weren't too keen on that.

No.

So, that's when you saw the advert for mathematicians for Lyons.

Lyons, yes.

And… And you applied for that. How did you get the job then?

I was interviewed by T R Thompson.

Right.

Simple as that.

And, what kind of interview was it?

Well he told me about LEO. He didn't ask many questions about me.

Right.

I was told… He was selling LEO to me, rather than me selling me to him.

Right. He, he had decided you were a good chap then, before…

Must have done, yes.

Is that something to do with your excellent qualifications, or…?

Well I must… I must… I suppose, yes.

Yeah. So he spent his time selling the idea to you?

Yes.

And you were convinced, by the sound of it.

Yes.

[22:42]
Yeah? So… So what did you do when you went to LEO?

I did programming, I was training in programming for a time.

So you say you were trained in programming.

Yes.

How did they train you?

They had a six-week training course.

Who ran that?

Some of the other, some of the LEO people.

And what did programming mean at that time in, in LEO?

Just learning how to instruct the computer to do things.

Was there a language?

Yes. Well, yes, sort of, yes.

So, there was a, there was a LEO language. It wasn't done in assembler, or, machine code, or something like that?

It was very near machine language, but not quite. Mm.

So you got six weeks' training in how to program.

Yes.

And, and then, what, you were given a, a program to develop?

Yes.

To perform a function on the machine.

After that, yes.

[23:47]
So what was the first, what was the first business process that you had to implement?

On Ford's payroll. Lyons…

Ford's payroll.

Yes. Lyons had won a contract to do Ford's payroll on their computer. And I worked on some of those programs.

Right. And, what was the starting point? I mean, how was the problem presented to you, I suppose what you say, what I'm saying?

I was given details of statistics Ford wanted.

Right. Yeah.

So I had to produce programs to produce the statistics.

Right. So, it was… [phone ringing] Sorry, I'm just turning my phone off so it doesn't ring. So… Start my question again. So, the problem was presented to you in terms of the inputs and the outputs?

That's right.

And, and you worked out how to turn one…

To get between the two.

Right. And, how long did it take you to do that?

Four or five weeks I think.

Right.

Yes.

And, did it work first time?

No. None of these things do, no. It worked fairly quickly.

Right.

Quickly enough.

[25:06]
One of the… One of the things that has struck me, looking at various articles on you and LEO, is that, there seemed to be quite a high success rate in terms of implementing these business functions quite quickly and efficiently.

Mm.

If I think back to when I was working in, when I was working in the IT industry, and we were doing work with Government, if you followed these things after you retired, you remember, in the, in the Nineties and the early 2000s, there was a lot of kerfuffle about failure of Government IT programs.

Yes.

And… And some people said, well, why is this? Because, if we go back to 19, the 1950s, we could implement a payroll system, no trouble, and it worked. Why are we struggling to do this in, 1999 or whatever? What do you think was the difference between how you were doing it in 1955 and how we were doing it in 1995?

The great thing was to go direct to the user, and find what he or she wanted.

Right. And, and that's what you would do as the programmers?

That's absolutely fundamental, yes.

Right. Right.

Yes.

[26:49]
OK. I mean it seems, reading about Lyons, that, that the company was the source of a lot of good practice.

Yes.

You were the first, and, you got it right somehow. What do you attribute that to? Was it great management or something?

No, because Lyons had had a good reputation for years about being efficient in their systems.

Right.

I mean when you're making money on cakes costing 3p or something, you can't afford to be inefficient with the paperwork.

Right.

So they had a good organisation and methods department that worked out their systems in great detail, stripped them down to the essentials. And so that was a good starting off point for computerisation.

So Lyons, Lyons sounds like it was quite an advanced company in management terms.

Oh it was. It was.

And that's what got them into the computer business.

Yes.

[27:51]
I mean, looking at, looking at the story when I came to it fresh, it seems a bit crazy for a cake company to build a computer.

Yes.

If somebody suggested doing that now… [laughs]

Yes.

Well, if… People frown on companies carrying out non-core activities, don't they.

Mm.

This was non-core for Lyons, wasn't it.

Yes. Very much.

But on the other hand, it was kind of, a tribute to their advanced business thinking.

Yes.

So… So, yeah. So it's a credit to the Lyons management really that this worked out.

Oh very much.

[28:42]

Another thing that struck me reading your words in the book, and others, is, is, they, the sense of camaraderie and the importance of people.

Oh very much, yes.

It sounds like you have very high quality people.

Very high quality.

What… How was that achieved?

Well by severe selection techniques, and if you weren't very good, you were out, without any salary.

Right. So there was a, a hiring and firing culture.

Yes.

Right. And, are there people that you think of there as, as influencing you greatly in your subsequent career?

Well David Caminer.

Right.

Yes.

How did he influence you?

Well he was the manager of the programming team.

Right.

And his work ethic for efficiency, and, speed and efficiency, was something that kept your nose to the grindstone.

Right. Anyway other names that you think are…?

He was the outstanding one.

[30:04]
Right. OK. I worked in a, what you call a software house in the 1980s, and, it struck me, there was quite a lot of similarity in culture between what you described in Lyons and what I experienced 30 years later in, you know, a UK software house.

Yes.

It was almost like, Lyons kind of, defined the model…

Right.

…of, of how that kind of technical services business should work. Had you thought about that at all?

No I've not heard that said before.

No? OK. That's just my observation then.

[30:52]
So, you stayed at LEO for, how long?

Five years.

Right. So you joined in 19…

'55.

'55. And you were there until 19…

'59, end of '59.

Yeah? And, is that when you moved on to Dunlop?

Yes.

And why did you go to Dunlop then?

Because I couldn't see the LEO life going on. They obviously couldn't make it now with the intense competition from people like IBM.

Right. So when did the IBM competition ramp up so to speak?

In the Fifties.

Yeah. And, what was the breakthrough for IBM at that point? I mean why, why did they come onto the scene in the UK?

Well they had been in the punch card business, and they were very strong in America.

Right.

So, they just swamped things. They, where LEO were building four or five LEOs a year, they were building hundreds.

Right. OK. So LEO's success was limited by, the investment in the business, or…?

Oh yes. Yes.

Right. Because, you had some very prestigious clients, didn't you…

Yes.

…in the UK. I mean, some big names bought LEO.

Yes.

Was it just a fundamental kind of problem then that Lyons were really a cake company, and not a computer company?

Well ultimately it was a question of money. I mean, you had to find hundreds of millions didn't you ultimately, to support computer manufacture, and they hadn't got that.

Yes. Right. So… So they, they chose to back out of it, they sold the business to English Electric.

Yes, English Electric, that's right, yes.

And, was that their choice, or was it forced on them?

A bit of both I think.

Yes.

They could see writing on the wall.

[32:54]
Right. OK. So you went to Dunlop. And you went to Dunlop initially, didn't do, because of the LEO connection.

Yes.

But, I see that you did end up doing IBM installations in Dunlop as well.

Yes.

Sounds like you had a lot of international experience at Dunlop.

On what?

International.

Oh I did, yes, in Dunlop, yes. Yes, I visited their plants all over the world.

Right. Was that a good experience?

Yes. Yes.

Do you think that helped you in your subsequent career, getting that international exposure?

Yes, probably.

[33:36]
Yes. What… Where was the motivation for Dunlop investing in computers at that time?

Just to make savings in their back office functions.

So, that, that was money saving. I mean I'm, I'm interested in, in the growth of the computer business in the, in the Fifties and Sixties especially, and, and the reasons why companies were adopting this kind of new-fangled technology. Was it only the, the brave advanced thinkers that were doing it, or was every company in…?

Oh no, it was just a, a few farsighted companies.

Right.

Mm.

Yeah. And, because they had particular strategic needs, competitive needs?

Yes. Mm.

You say for Dunlop, it was cost-cutting.

Yes.

[34:42]
Yes. One of the things that we've talked about at the Archives in connection with, with other interviews, is that there was apparently at this time, when computers were being introduced into companies like Dunlop, there was a perception that it was to eliminate jobs.

Yes.

Cutting costs meant getting rid of jobs.

Yes.

Was that, was that the reality?

I don't think so, no. No.

Because there does seem to be this myth, doesn't there, that, that computers would get rid of jobs.

Oh yes.

But they still employed the same number of people.

Oh yes. No, it didn't happen. That didn't really happen, no.

[35:22]
No. No. And… And, we mentioned women in the computing industry. Did you find that when you were implementing the systems in places like, well, Dunlop and the Post Office and, Ford and so on, that, that was creating jobs for women as computer operators and programmers?

And computer programmers. The whole gamut. Yes.

Yes.

Oh yes.

Yes. So that was a kind of, a source of employment rather than a source of unemployment.

Oh definitely, yes.

[36:06]
So, in, in 1965 you went to BOAC.

Right.

You were headhunted.

Yes.

How did they find out about you?

Well they put an advertisement in the paper, anonymously, to which you applied.

Right. So you didn't know who it was you were applying to?

No, not at first, no.

And what, how was the job described?

Well, they were behind the airline industry generally, in so far as they had no proper reservation system, and they had to get one very quickly.

How did they do their reservations then?

By hand.

Right.

On paper.

And how many, do you remember how many passengers they were carrying at that time?

No. Well, six or seven hundred thousand I suppose.

A year?

Yes, that sort of number.

Right. And that was all dealt with with forms and…

Yes. Yes.

So, somebody had a big sheet of paper with the seats in the aeroplane marked out.

Yes, that's right.

And, and when, when a seat was sold by a travel agent, they'd phone up and say, 'Can you put this person on the plane somewhere?'

Yes. Yes.

So… Presumably that didn't work very well. [laughs]

Well it was inefficient obviously.

Yes. So, what, what was the, what was the big driver then for BOAC to do this reservation system?

Why?

Yeah.

Well because, reservation is very volatile. What happens is, people book in advance, but very close to flight departure you get lots of cancellations.

Right.

And with the paper system, if a seat's cancelled, you can't get the paperwork through quickly enough to re-offer it for sale, at a time when there are a lot more applications.

Right.

So, you lose a lot of business.

Right, OK. Yup. So there was no, no concept of real-time operation there?

No.

No. OK. And who made the decision that BOAC should invest in computers?

Well the board of BOAC, led by Giles, Sir Giles Guthrie, the Chairman.

Right. And did they have, at that time, somebody who understood computers on the board?

No, not really.

Did they have any consultancy or advice or…?

They had consultants, yes. But they didn't take much notice of them.

Right.

So when I got to BOAC I was on my own, and I had almost complete power and autonomy.

Right. To, to make this business-critical system for them.

Yes.

[39:08]
How did you go about it?

[pause] Well, I, I sought tenders from IBM and various other companies, and chose IBM, because they had a rudimentary reservation system, which we could develop and show them what we wanted.

Right. What was their reservation system called, do you remember?

PARS, p-a-r-s.

p-a-r…

Passenger Airline Reservation System.

Right. And they had developed that for another airline, had they?

Yes, they were starting to.

Right.

We, we developed it for an international airline, which opened up new areas of business for them. So they were very keen to cooperate with us.

Oh I see. So they had developed it for a domestic US…

American domestic airline.

Right. OK. So, it was a, a collaboration with IBM then?

Yes it was, yes.

Right. And, what, what choice was there other than IBM at that time?

Well UNIVAC.

Right.

They had some systems, but they were largely disasters.

Really?

Mm.

In what sense?

Mm?

In what sense were the UNIVAC systems a disaster?

Well they didn't work. They had to be… They were thrown out ultimately.

Gosh.

They kept breaking down and so forth.

[40:33]
Right. So, how big was the project?

Well, we had about 300 programmers on it at one time.

Right.

And, the initial capital investment was about £8 million, which was a lot in those days on IT.

Yes. £8 million in, this was in 1965, 1965 money. Yup. So 300 programmers. You were in charge of the project.

Yes.

You weren't managing 300 programmers though. You had, you must have had a hierarchy of management.

Oh yes, there were programmers, then you had to get new buildings to put the computers in. You had to organise for terminals to be installed in BA offices all over the world.

Yup.

So… And there was training of all the staff. I was in charge of all of that.

Right. So that was a huge job.

Yes.

And, [laughs] and probably much bigger than anything you had done at LEO or Dunlop.

Oh much bigger.

[41:50]
Right. So, how did you convince BOAC that you were the man for that job?

The what?

How did you convince BOAC that you were the man for that job?

Well I was asked to give a presentation to the board one day.

Right.

And that, that did it.

Right.

They obviously got confidence in me.

Yeah. Was that the first job that you did in BOAC then?

Yes. Yes.

So you got appointed.

Yes.

And then you were asked to present to the board.

Yes.

And then they gave you the go-ahead to develop…

Yes.

That is a fantastic opportunity, isn't it.

Yeah, absolutely.

Is that what you would call the pinnacle of your career? [laughs]

Possibly. [laughs]

[42:38]
So, that all, that all worked.

Yes, it did.

According to time and budget and functionality?

Yup.

So, that, that's another example perhaps of where, you know, a, a major project was delivered more effectively than we see major projects being delivered now.

Yes.

So, I wonder if we've lost, if we've lost sight of some…

Well to repeat myself, I spent a lot of time getting my people to go around and talk to reservation staff and sales staff all over the airline, to see what they wanted.

Right.

Now when you think about this big system they were planning for the Health Service a few years ago, that collapsed, you find out that the doctors haven't been consulted.

Yup.

There you are.

Good point, yeah. Yup. And, yeah, so I think you mentioned in the course of the talk about the project the, the need for training the, the people.

Yes.

That's another aspect that we forgot perhaps on some of the major projects, what we now call change management.

Yes.

Managing the people change.

Yes.

[43:58]
Yeah. OK, so, so you were getting some stuff right there that perhaps we forgot about later. While we're at BOAC, and indeed British Airways in general, you seem to make a move from that, that technical role into a general management role.

Yes.

Which… Did you see that as a natural progression, or…?

No, they could see I was a good manager, and so they wanted to utilise my capabilities.

Right. And why do you think you were such a good manager? I mean was it, was it because you were a good manager, you were great at managing IT, or was it that the experience you got from managing IT made you into a great general manager?

I think my education, which has taught me to think logically and consistently, is the biggest part.

Right. And you think we're good at educating people in that way now?

No. No.

What do you think we've lost?

[pause] I don't know we've lost anything. But I just picked it up more quickly, and, and took it to heart more quickly.

Right. I just wonder whether there's something we could learn about, education, and business education especially, these days.

No I can't really comment on that.

[45:49]
Right. OK. Not to worry. So… So, I was just asking you about, yeah, the move into general management.

Yes.

And, around that time you, and we're talking here about, around 1970 now, aren't we… And about that time you, you were actually instrumental in the merger of BOAC and BEA.

That's it, BEA, Yes,

And subsequent integration of the companies.

Yes.

What was the challenge in integrating the companies?

People's resistance. The people in BEA didn't want to be taken over. I mean, in a merger like that, jobs are going to get lost, aren't they. You're not going to have two computer systems, you're going to have one.

Yes.

So jobs go.

Right. And how did you manage that?

I just managed it.

Yeah. Just came naturally?

Well I was a bastard, I got rid of people.

Right.

Yeah.

You say that with a smile. I, I suspect you weren't quite so, [laughs] quite so hard-hearted about it, or…?

Oh pretty hard-hearted.

Were you? Yeah.

Yes. You had to be.

There's no choice.

No.

[47:10]
Yeah. And you did, you gave some advice also to the Government at that time, didn't you?

Yes.

With Lord, now Lord Baker, then Kenneth Baker.

Yes.

So what, how did you help Kenneth Baker?

I don't think I did, because, I was asked to give advice to them, but they didn't want the advice.

Oh.

I was asked to relatively small-scale, trivial little things.

Oh right.

They didn't use me properly.

Oh.

They didn't want the applecart upset.

When you say they…

The Civil Service.

Right. So, Kenneth Baker of course was a politician, wasn't he?

Yes.

But you think the Civil Service was resistant to change.

Yes.

Was that at the time when Mrs Thatcher put Kenneth Baker in charge of the…

Oh no, this was much earlier than that.

Oh it was earlier than that?

Yes.

Right. So, it was before he was the Minister for…

Oh yes, much before that.

Oh right, I see. So, these were different issues then in those days.

Yes.

[48:16]
Right. So, in… You left BA in 1983.

Yup.

And, it sounds like you did quite a lot of consultancy…

Yes.

…for a range of companies, both on IT matters and general management matters.

Mostly IT.

Right. So you're, you had had this big general management job in BA running, running the European branch of the airline actually wasn't it?

Yes.

Was it a welcome change to go back to looking at IT in business again, or…?

[hesitates] I suppose so, yes. It was familiar ground after all.

Yes.

You could make more money there.

Right.

Mm.

So you made more money as, as…

IT, yes.

Yes. Right. And you, you ended up as a, an independent consultant.

Yes. Yes.

And how long did you do, do that for then?

Four or five years I suppose.

Did there come a point where you considered yourself as retired, or, did you…

Yes I did, yes.

You gave up work at some point.

About 1960, yes.

Right. So that was… Not, not 1960. 1980, would have been?

[hesitates] Sorry. Yes, 1980. Yes.

Right. So you were then, early fifties.

Late, late fifties.

Late fifties, right.

Yes.

[49:54]
And, and what did you do when you, when you stopped going to work then?

Well, wrote my book on hillwalking.

Right. OK. So, so that's when you had time to devote yourself to, to authoring on hillwalking.

Yes.

We haven't talked about hillwalking yet, but, you had been hillwalking all of the time that you were doing your IT had you?

Yes.

How did you fit it all in?

At weekends.

Right. So every weekend you'd go off to the Welsh hills?

Well not every. About once a month.

Oh right, yes.

I'd drive up to Wales, or the Lake District, yes.

Yup.

Yes.

And, it takes a bit of discipline to do that, doesn't it.

Yes.

So you, you have to make time to do those things.

Yes.

And, you've, you had a family, you've had children, haven't you.

Yes, four, yes.

Yeah. So, so you had family life. And, did the children like hillwalking?

Yes, some of them did, yes.

Or did all the children like it ?

Yes. Up to a point, yes.

So would you all go off at the weekend for it?

Oh no, no, mostly me with some walking companions from work.

Oh right. OK.

Yeah.

But you wouldn't talk about work while you were…?

No.

No. So, you had this lifelong interest in hillwalking, and, but you didn't write the book until you had given up the day job so to speak.

Yes.

And, was writing something that, that you had thought about, that you were good at?

I had thought of writing, yes.

Yeah.

Yes, I enjoy writing.

And, how long did it take you to write the book? There are two volumes aren't there, on hillwalking?

Four or five years I suppose.

Really? I mean there's, presumably, a huge amount of technical detail to managing all of that, in the sense, you know, the routes, the maps, the…

Oh yes, yes.

The views, the…

All that, yes.

So, you had, you had a big archive, did you, of maps and photographs and…?

Photos and things, and maps, yes. There's lots of maps over there in the bookcase.

Yeah.

All those yellow things.

Yes. Yeah. So you… Did that occupy you fully then for a few years after retirement?

A lot, yes.

[52:19]
Yeah. And did you have any, any other post-working interests, or activities?

Well I used to travel a lot.

Right. You mean, leisure travel.

Yes.

Just going to see the world. Yeah.

Yes, seeing the world, yes.

Have you got involved in any, how shall I put it? Kind of, professional bodies or…?

No.

No. No. [laughs] No, I think that's something you either love or you, you hate.

[laughs]

[53:02]
And… Yeah. So… Well I, I think, we've kind of covered the, the career in some detail there. And as I say, I'm particularly interested in your mix of general and technical management. What… What… What would you say is your proudest achievement in all of that? Was it the BOADICEA and…?

Yes, the BOADICEA project.

Yes. And, were there any low points? Apart from the teaching and the… [laughs]

Oh I… Yes, that. [laughs]

Is there anything you'd do differently if you had your time again, I suppose is what I'm saying?

No, I don't think there is. I've thought of that, but I can't think of anything particularly.

Yes. You've enjoyed it all?

I've enjoyed my life immensely.

Right.

Yes.

[54:10]

Well you can't complain if you can say that. I asked you about your mentors and role models. Looking the other way, are there people that you brought on in your career that you are particularly proud of, you know, having developed and what they've done?

I've brought on quite a lot.

Yeah.

Who occupied top positions in computing in other companies, yes.

Yes.

Oh yes, there are quite a number.

Well is, is that down to you, or is it down to the LEO system, or is it you…

Down, down to the LEO system through me.

Yes. Yeah. So you think, there's a legacy in the IT industry as a result of you and LEO developing those ways of doing things, that lives on?

Yes.

[55:10]
Have you thought about the future of the industry much? I mean we've talked about the past, and, and almost where it started from.

Mm.

But do you, do you think these days about… Do you keep up with, with technical stuff these days

No I don't.

No. But, but you read in the papers about the developments in AI and machine learning and…

Yes, I'm not, I'm not switched on by AI.

Yeah. What do you think about it?

Well you show me it first.

Right.

I mean you see the subtitles on the television for the…

Yes.

They can't even get those right.

Yeah.

They write nonsense sometimes.

So you're not convinced it works very well.

No. I don't think beating people at chess means AI works either.

Right.

That's just a question of following rules in great detail.

Yes. Well what, what you are saying to me, I think, is what a friend of mine said to me when I asked him about AI, which was, 'Tom, there is no AI yet. AI is still 30 years off.'

Yes.

His, his argument is, what we see at the moment is machine learning.

Mm.

It's identifying the rules to apply. So, I think, I think you're, I think you're in line with other thinking there. But, does, does the prospect of that stuff, getting to the point of being genuine AI, excite you, or frighten you, or…?

It certainly doesn't frighten me, no. Nor does it really excite me either.

No?

No.

Because we, we, before he died, Stephen Hawking was talking about the threat from AI wasn't he?

About the what?

The threat from, the dangers of AI.

Yes.

That seems to be how some people think about it.

I don't see any dangers.

[57:28]
Right. OK. What do you think are the big opportunities for IT to make our lives better then in future years?

I'm not sure that I do think it will make our lives better.

Do you think it will make our lives worse?

No; I don't think it makes a lot of difference really.

So it's something that, is just part of our lives now, and…

Mm.

…we are all used to it, we take a lot of it for granted.

Yes.

[58:06]
Yeah. Would you advise… I don't know what your children ended up doing for a living. Would you advise young people these days to enter the world of IT as a career?

No, not unless they had some inclination that way, no.

Right.

I don't think so.

[music in background]

But you wouldn't, you wouldn't suggest that they steer clear of it?

No I wouldn't… I wouldn't know, I wouldn't comment either way.

Your philosophy seems to be, if, if I try and sum it up, that, you're an advocate of clear thinking and, and logic or action.

Yes.

Which works whether you're applying it to AI or any…

Anything else.

Yeah. Is that fair…

Yes, that's, that's a good summing-up, yes.

Yes. Right. Well I understand what you're saying there.

Yes, I am, that's…

[59:08]
Yes. One of the things that you might have a view on, given your experience of IT and general management, is, is how you think companies ought to make sure that IT is managed effectively in their business. We, we had a fashion at one time for, for having IT reporting into the finance director, or the HR director, and then at other times we've talked about having main board directors responsible for IT, or… You've done all this. How do you think companies, what's the right way for a company to manage…

I think in the past companies needed a guy at the very top to coordinate and develop IT. Because it needed a lot of thrust to get anything done. And it did cover the whole organisation.

Yeah.

But today, IT is so part, so much part of ordinary ongoing activity, that I mean, that's necessary.

And I think that, that must reflect something about our progress in the last 70 years then, so…

Well yes. [laughs]

So, Peter, thank you ever so much for taking the time to talk to me today. That's been fascinating.

OK. Good, thank you.

Thanks a lot.

[End of Interview]