



Capturing the Past, Inspiring the Future

Sir Peter Ogden

Interviewed by

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Welcome to the Archives of Information Technology, where we capture the past and inspire the future. It is Tuesday the 24th of September 2019, and we are in High Street, Kensington, just off it, in London. My name's Richard Sharpe, and I've been covering the IT industry since the 1970s.

[00:20]

Making his contribution to the Archives today is Sir Peter Ogden. And he really comes into focus in this industry in 1981, a big year for the industry. IBM launched its personal computer, completely new in its approach by having someone else's software, someone else's processor, being open to people plugging things in, and also letting other people sell it, with their name on it. And so, we also had in the year before VisiCalc, and James Martin had told us, and Tom Forrester had told us as well, in their different books, about what the future was going to be like with microelectronics and the wired society. So, the industry was becoming self-conscious so to speak. And also there was planning for IT82. And to this contribution, in 1981 Sir Peter and his colleague, Philip Hulme, launched in 1981 a company called Computaceter, c-o-m-p-u-t-a, center, c-e-n-t-e-r, all one word. And before that, we have to be born. So in 1947 you were born, and your father was a co-op worker, is that right?

Correct. My father worked for the Rochdale Pioneer Society, and, and my mother was a housewife.

[01:45]

How did they influence you, what type of values did they transmit to you do you think?

They were a very normal, working-class northern family. My mother devoted herself to raising children, and my father went to work. They were very strong Methodists, a very strong Methodist culture. They participated, I participated of course, in the church when we were younger. And, it was a very normal life. We didn't have a lot of money. We had nice holidays in Colwyn Bay [laughs], not very exotic. But a very, well, a good upbringing where my mother was a very, was very committed to education and education being the thing which would be the thing that would move us from being where we were in the north of England to things that would be better in

life. And my sister, my sister was the first in our family for any generation who went to university, and I became the second in fact.

[02:39]

And, before that, you got into grammar school.

Right.

So by your age, you must have passed the Eleven Plus.

Passed the Eleven Plus at eleven, and went to Rochdale Grammar School, and, where I was... It was a... [laughs] There was nothing very special about Rochdale Grammar School. It was a very nice school, I had a good education, and I left there after the sixth form to go to university.

Right. What was your schooling like? Did you enjoy it?

I very much enjoyed it. I had wonderful teachers. I've been back there many times afterwards, although it became, it ceased to be a grammar school in about, 19... oh, I guess it must have been like, '98, it ceased to be a grammar school. And, I have the boards, they gave me the three, the big boards on the walls of scholarships, and I was the last person to appear on the board. And before then we had, we had Sir Geoffrey Pilling, who went, Northern Ireland Permanent Secretary; we had Thwaites who was the, Wadham College. A whole list of scholars who had done well. And after me, no more. Which was quite sad. So the end of the grammar school really was the end of what I would call academic excellence.

[03:50]

And you read physics, did you, at Durham?

I read physics at Durham.

Did that mean moving away from home?

Yes, I lived in Durham. It was... I moved away from home. I, you know, we had to pack a trunk, put it on a train and send it to Durham. You arrived, unpacked your trunk. It was a very, yes, a different life. I always say I lived, lived in the castle, in University College. And I did my three years there, which were very happy. Good friends made there, and, a very nice time.

These are the late Sixties?

Yes. Well the dates, it's sixty...

'68.

'68. Correct. Yes. [laughs] And then I stayed on to do a PhD in physics, and I was there till, '71, I got my PhD, I went, did theoretical physics in, particle physics, which is very... At that time it was very much working on CERN and different people's data and producing models basically.

[04:45]

What drew you to that?

I think, the most important thing that drew me to doing that was, I couldn't think of anything else to do. So it was definitely a nicer option than doing anything else, was to do research. And, I was pretty interested in the, in, in physics, and particularly what we were doing, which was obviously very much computer-driven physics, because it was obviously building models. So yeah. And I graduated in, got my PhD, and immediately, immediately... I had applied in my last year of doing my PhD to Harvard, and off. My dear then wife, I was married in 1970, and, both of us, who had never been to America before, got on an aeroplane and flew to Boston.

To Harvard to do an MBA.

MBA, correct.

And then, what drove you, then... You've come from physics into MBA. Why, why the transfer?

Oh I think because, by the time I had done my PhD, it was becoming apparent to me that, maybe the people, some of the people around me may get a Nobel Prize, but I probably wouldn't. It was, I think there were so many brilliant people there, I realised that, I liked the subject, but maybe I, maybe, maybe there were better people to do it than I was. So I felt I ought to do something else. Shared an apartment with an American who came from El Segundo, California. He said, 'You've got to go to Harvard Business School.' So I thought, I'll go to Harvard Business School. I applied, and, quite surprisingly in retrospect, was accepted, since I had no business experience whatsoever.

And, then you, you then, must have moved there then.

Yes, we moved to Boston, my wife and I moved to Boston. We lived in a little apartment in Cambridge, Massachusetts. My wife very fortuitously went to, went to work in, I think she worked in a beauty parlour, and then she worked in a, then she managed to get her qualification, she was a teacher, degree, and then she worked in schools. But she actually made the money for me to go to Harvard Business School.

[04:40]

Had you met your first computer by then?

No.

Where did you meet your first computer?

Oh I didn't... Oh God, much later. I mean, so I... Probably it was in... Goodness me, that's a great question. It was much later when I got into computers. And that was really when I went to... Because I went to... I came out of Harvard. Remember there weren't many computers in 19..., when I graduated from Harvard. But I then went into the City, into finance.

Right.

And I worked for a bank in the City, and then, I went to, Merrill Lynch. And I brought back an Apple IIe later in that, in that time from America, and, I remember what I did was writing a program. In those days, people who had worked on trading desks used to look up numbers by looking in books. Used to have to turn the page and say, find eight per cent coupon, 100 per cent, price 90. And then it would tell you the yield. And of course, it turned out that it was quite trivial to write a four-line code that kind of did that for everybody. So all of a sudden you could see how that, you can introduce a small computer onto trading desks and people got very excited. They could do things they'd never done before. And, and then I was at Morgan Stanley, where I became a partner. Because again, I could do lots of things that nobody else could do.

Which were what?

Well mainly, mainly it was in the area of calculations, understanding that you could, you know, in the early days, today it's called derivatives, but in those days it was called swaps, financial swaps, structured products that you could use a computer to calculate the values at all points, and then you could go out there and get issuers to issue them, and people would buy them. And that was a very, very very lucrative business for the banks in those days. Today they do them 1,000 a day, and they don't make much money on them at all, but, in the early days they were very lucrative. So obviously that was a skill that was based around being able to computerise them in machine code or FORTRAN. So that was how I started. Then...

[08:43]

And you became a partner.

Yeah, I was partner when it was a private firm, it was a private bank. In fact I was the 101st partner since 1933, so it was a, [laughs] it was...

That's a very good position to have.

It was a very very nice position to have. And then, I worked in new York, I worked in London, Cath and I had some Chicago. So I kind of moved around a bit. And then, in nineteen eighty... Oh no, nineteen seven... Oh I can't remember when it was, nineteen... Anyway, Morgan Stanley decided to go public.

Right.

And so we had a public offering, and the partners did very well out of it.

[09:20]

So we've got up to the important year, 1981. You've been through banking, you've made quite a bit of money so far.

Yes. And...

A lot of money.

By the public offering. And so... I met... When I was at Harvard Business School, we all had sections, like, 60, 70 people in a section, and there was a guy called Philip Hulme in my section, who was from England. We... The English tended to form the English group at Harvard. There weren't that many of us, but we had a nice, we used to all get together. And, Philip Hulme and his wife became good friends of Cath and myself at Harvard. He then went on to run in London Boston Consulting Group. I was a managing director at Morgan Stanley. And we decided to do something together. So we decided, after going round in circles for a while, that we would do computing. Because, it was just the start of these computers coming in, and of course we, we, I think we did actually look at buying a company, which, some accountant then told us we should wait a day and buy it in bankruptcy. So obviously we learnt early on that we weren't the greatest... We had learnt a lot at Harvard, but it wasn't how to look at small companies and see what the state of play was. So we then formed the company Computacenter. We, we... IBM...

[10:33]

Whose idea really was it?

I think... I... I don't think either of us can say that, but I say, I think, I think it was the name... At the end of the day, I think... I don't know. I remember sitting down with him, and there were all these stupid ideas, like, Bombay, Bombay Computer... I mean all these stupid names that came about. I don't know how we came up with this idea of Computacenter, but I do remember... Again I can't remember... When we sat... Because we used to just sit and talk. The idea to make this silly American spelling, *Computacenter*, which has ruined my... Every time I write 'centre' in a letter now, I always put er, and have to cross it out and put re. It's a... I think... But instrumental then in getting the business started, I think Philip was... Well, it's interesting. Philip was definitely more instrumental in getting it up and running, because we had two reasons. I had the money, so I had to go and make... I stayed at Morgan Stanley for a year or so making very good money, after the public offering. So I funded the early side.

Right.

But we used to meet at weekends and go off and do all our things together. And so we...

[11:31]

What was the business model then that you were aiming for ?

Well the idea, interestingly, was that, that the personal computers would become an... We never... Not... We didn't see this far forward, but personal computers would be an important, new technology for businesses, particularly the finance industry. And at that time, I had written some programs for, floating rate notes, and bond yields, and that, which actually sold off... I mean I wrote a North Sea oil program, which I remember I sold to loads of banks when I was, you know, as a sideline. So, there was this idea that, you know, you could do things on this that nobody else could do. And financial institutions were very very interested in this kind of technology. So we set up Computacenter. Of course, then we had, we had to find somewhere to go. We asked everybody where we could go. IBM turned and said, 'No way, you don't have the credibility to do this.' And I think we finished up getting an Apple dealership.

And they said we could do it... No we couldn't get an Apple dealership, because there were too many Apple dealerships.

Right.

And we, having looked at this company who was an Apple dealership, we were able to say, 'Well we know the one in Swindon's going to go bust, so can we can have one?' And they kind of said, 'Well, yeah.' So then we started off with all those things like BBC Micro, Osbornes.

Yes.

Go on, name me all the other ones. All these other, rubbishy stuff that kids used to, sticky fingered kids. And we had a shop in Swindon, in the main centre of Swindon, where we started Computacenter, and we sold computers. And, that was, that... And then initially again, we had somebody, Philip was at BCG, I was at Morgan Stanley, and then we hired a, well I'm not going to use his name to give him the credibility, but we hired somebody and said, 'Right, you are now in charge.' And after about nine months we realised, I think we went, actually we went to the first Christmas party, that was it, we had it in Swindon, and we had ten people. And his wife, [laughs] she used to sell to Janet my secretary, 'I'm so glad that Philip has joined the company. You know, Philip always wanted...' this, her husband, 'always wanted to own his own business, and now, to have you two to come in, you know, as small shareholders.' [laughs] So... I remember Janet said, 'I thought you two owned this company.' [both laugh] So it was an embarrassing Christmas party, because his wife thought he owned the company. So it was... And after that, he just, made lots of big mistakes, and so he, he had, he had to go. And Philip said, 'That's it, I'm going to do it.' So Philip got a van. [laughs] So Boston Consulting Group, being one of the prime consulting groups in the world, and Philip was the managing director of the London office, suddenly got a van [laughs], with a few computers. And we... And then we wrote more little programs, and, the Apple IIe, we sold that. Then the Apple III came, and we sold that to, I remember Bank of America. And we sold some of the programs with it. And, that's...

So the combination was, application and, here's a micro to put it on.

The application was in, wasn't... In the early days, to get people to listen to us was important, OK. But obviously it didn't really help later on when we got into volume business. But it was interesting, and we could show people that you could do things with these computers that you couldn't really do with other things.

[14:38]

Then, we sort of, then we... Then we decided to open an office in the City, we went into Fenchurch Street, into the, square, was it... And that's when we started to make great progress, because we then were obviously going to see the banks every day, and they were obviously quite interested in what we had to offer. And not just because of the programs and that, but because, the fact, you know, they started to buy in quantity. So it was good.

You started buying quantities...

Ten machines, not enormous but..

Right.

Those kind of orders. Twenty machines. And that's... And all our clients, like Morgan Stanley, Goldman Sachs, you know, Bank of America. And yeah, that's, we built a very good financial business, working in the City.

When did you get your IBM dealership?

Well that was... That was about, probably about, '82 I think we, we did get an IBM dealership, and, and that was because of the City business. And it's quite funny, the guy who ran the City business was Greg, Greg Lock, for IBM, who, who became, five years, who became Vice Chairman for five years. So... But early on he was very dismissive of us. [laughs] Oh those guys. But we had two things. One is, we... I remember, we... I mean I still see some of the old IBMers, but you know, I remember once I had a meeting, when we explained that we, this was much later, we explained that, you know, how many we were going to sell next year, and they said,

‘Well you can’t do that.’ and we said, ‘why can’t we , that be too much of a margin. You can’t do...’ So you know, I remember, Tony Hill, that was the guy, Tony Hill, was the head of IBM at that time, you know, he said, ‘You can’t do that.’ And we thought, we’re going to do it. And of course, that’s what we did, becoming the biggest share of their business, which they didn’t like, deep down. Do you know what I mean? There was a lot of resistance. And you’ve got to remember, all those companies who were set up at the same time, you can tell me their names, because I can’t remember them now, but there was the one that Gerald Ronson backed, he used to live opposite me over there, that’s right. So all these companies had these big plans to become the dominant players in the world, and we were just, Computacenter. But we, we always had this thing, the key stress to success later in life where we used to write these things was, you know, and it was true. It was...

[16:42]

When you put the term Computacenter into the index of Times back copies...

Oh, what does it say? [laughs]

The first time, the first time you see it is in an advert for, ‘Who’s going to help me make my small business big?’

Yeah.

And the cartoon of a woman, with ‘your friendly IBM personal computer’. This is a personal computing, personal IBM personal computer...

Do you want something?.

...ad.

[interruption]

No I’m fine. I’m fine.

Yeah.

This is a personal computer ad for IBM.

Yeah. Yeah, yeah. How much were they? [laughs]

So, here is IBM advertising directly to the, to its potential customers.

Yup.

And here are the phone numbers of the people who will do it for you. And you're there. There you are.

I wish I could remember the ad.

In Swindon you're there.

Yeah, but the...

In '82.

Is that correct? All these, all these companies grew up, and they all had big plans to become the dominant world player.

For instance, there's Byte Shop here, which went, bang,

Yeah yeah. They all went bang.

Apart from Computacenter, and one other, one or two others...

Well SCC is the only, SCC and Computacenter-, the only two left standing I think really. [laughs]

[17:54]

Yes. Yes. So that's my question. Why, why are you left standing?

Well, this is what we were... A lot had been... The first thing is that we, we had a clear strategy, we had a clear strategy, that the personal computer will become a significant business machine, and obviously quite soon we realised that these would be, could be linked together, could be, could be a, an important thing. Secondly, we had enough capital to not, you know, to grow very quickly, and you do need capital to grow quickly. And thirdly, which, we're always like, that we stuck to our knitting. We didn't... You know, we... There was all these sirens, retail, small businesses, consulting, you know, there was all... And everyone else tried them you know, Rigby went into retail, and lost his shirt. People went to SME business, you know, lost their shirt. We stayed very focused on what we were doing, which was to be, which was to be in the large space, of large corporations, who were... And we kept to that strategy. So that's why all our customers became, big name customers, you know, that's what we, still today we focus on. What we call custodian companies, people who sit at the highest, there's a tier, a top ten customers kind of thing. And so we've always had a focus on, on not, on doing, looking after those customers, and, sticking to what, what we thought we did well. And, we never got caught up in all the sidetracks which usually cause the demise of most of the people basically.

Mhm.

So we said, stick to your knitting.

[19:32]

Did you grow organically, or by acquisition as well?

Totally organically, until... Yeah, the first ten years we were all organic growth. And very very rapid growth, I mean, tripling the volumes every... Yeah, it was amazing. Then, we obviously found out we... Because we had capital, we could, we could do very good, what I call invoice financing. So at one stage we had this, you know, we had all this, treadmill, and, which was phenomenal. We were a phenomenal place. And then obviously, when... Not at this stage. At this stage we're growing

well, we're big IBM... IBM was resisting us getting bigger. When we told them we were going to open up in somewhere else, they said, 'Well, no, we don't like that.' And then came the famous Compaq. And that's when we went [fast swipe sound].
[laughs]

Now, IBM didn't want you to get too big.

They didn't want... They want to be... They want us to be beholden to a large company with a large market share, you know.

Yes. How did they try and restrict that?

Well, they restrict you by talking to us. But obviously when we kept ordering more, they kept being happy didn't they. [laughs] A little bit restricting us by credit. You know, if they had control of credit. But again, that didn't really, wasn't really a... We could prove that, you know, that we had substantive resources, and... So... But they did lack credit. And we used to have these quite, early on quite tough meetings with them, because they were not pleased about some of the things we were doing. Like.... [laughs]

But this stuff was coming out in volume from Greenock in Scotland.

Yeah yeah.

The IBM PC was being made for Europe there

Yeah. I went up to Greenock and built my first PC there.

Right.

[laughs] They gave me the four bits and I stuck 'em together, put them in a box, and brought it back. But yeah, that's it. And so... But we forged a good relationship. And obviously we didn't screw around with IBM. We'd treat, we were honest, we didn't try being ...

[21:14]

You were now a dealer.

Yup.

They wanted a second layer, they wanted distributors as well, didn't they?

Yeah. And... Yeah, yeah, we, we became a distributor for, for IBM. But then again, they had problems with their model, conflicts between the distributor and dealer.

Yes.

You know, and so... So, again...

Why would a little dealer trust you to supply them, and not take the business.

Exactly. So... And therefore, there was... So there was a lot of conflict in those times, but it was always good conflict. But at the end of the day, one thing they did like, we sold a lot of them. You know, they were, much as they would like to keep everybody like, at ten per cent, they couldn't, they were quite happy if somebody had 30 per cent of it all. [laughs] As long as the whole thing was growing. So yeah, we got on very well with IBM, they were very important in growing our business. But, then the X came along, and, the XT and that. Yeah, they were very, very important.

[22:04]

But then, as I say, a big moment came, was Compaq.

Right.

When was that? I can't remember.

So Compaq came along with, basically something you can lug around but was...

Luggable.

Luggable,.

Like a sewing machine or something

And that was completely compatible with the IBM PC AT.

What day was that?

The AT was launched in '84.

Yeah, yeah. OK.

So, really it was the PC AT architecture, wasn't it, that was the architecture which really took over.

Yes. And the... And obviously, we were, Compaq liked us, because we sold a lot of IBMs.

Yup.

And so... And obviously...

You also had Hewlett-Packard, did you not?

Hewlett-Packard, Toshiba. God, there must be some other ones I can't remember. Oh, there's another one, what's it called? What's that one called? Quite a big company. Xerox had something. Yeah.

You did your own advertising in the Times.

Yup.

Advertising the fact that you had this Hewlett-Packard, Hewlett-Packard machine.

Yup. We did HP, HP computers. We obviously the HP printers, but we did HP computers. We worked with all the manufacturers at that time. But we had Toshiba. I say, they were big... What was the other one called? Oh God. Xerox had a machine. Yeah. So we, yeah, we were pretty reasonable with everything. Remember this was still a PC desktop business though.

Yes.

And then, really, then Compaq, as I said, and then, obviously Compaq thought well we're great, because we had got 30 per cent of IBM's business, so maybe... So... And we built the business very very quickly on the back of Compaq. And, they got to the stage where they used to just tell lies to us. Joe McNally would come round and he'd say, 'You're doing well, now you're the third largest dealers.' What are the first two then? Who could they be, you know. 'Can't tell you that.' Of course years later when we got to know him, we realised then. [laughs]

You were the first.

[laughs] Exactly. He shouldn't tell lies. Because again, they didn't want concentration, you know.

Right.

And then obviously, then we explode, because all of a sudden, you started to link, networking, you start with these servers

[23:59]

Then we get to the year 1987.

All right, go on, what happened that year?

A crucial year. IBM in 1985/86 decides, hold on a minute. We have let this whole PC thing run away from us.

Run away from us. Yup.

And we are going to get back control.

Yup.

We're going to launch a new machine called the Personal System/2.

The PS/2, yes.

PS/2. And it's going to have a completely new operating system, OS/2.

OS/2, yeah.

Which we're going to write with Microsoft.

Yeah.

And it's going to have new connections called MCA, and it's going to have also a new video connection.

Yes.

And it's anybody who wants to do MCA, we will charge them for doing the PC AT connection.

Yeah. Yeah. [laughs]

IBM launched that, thinking, we're going to grab it all back from them

They obviously tried to get it back so many times, that's right, yeah.

And Compaq, I remember going to the Compaq press conference, and we asked them, 'What are you going to do?' And they said, 'Give us a week, we'll look at it.' And they'd come back, they came back and said, 'We'll do the video connector, because it's good, and anyway, it's open source.'

That's right.

'The rest we will not do.'

No.

And that was the day IBM lost it.

Lost it. Well they obviously, they... It's a shame really, because they had everything, you know, every... Well they probably, they did everything right, but they just, they just, a) had no idea what they had let loose on day one, and, and obviously early on... but then Compaq really really were clever. They're just so clever.

Was it a good company to work with, Compaq?

Oh fantastic, yeah. Yeah, because, yeah, because... Yeah, they were... They weren't structured like IBM you know. I mean, you've got to remember, in those days, I think marketing allowances were running at like, six per cent, you know. So in addition to anything, you know, initially you buy them for 1,000, sell them for two. The market was mad. You used to get six per cent on top of that back again in marketing allowance. Which actually we were very clever with for that, we ploughed that... Resisted giving away free pens, and ploughed most of it back into the business, to grow the business. But it was a, they were very very good. They were just dead keen to grow high volume quickly. And, and we were quite happy to...

[26:00]

Who were your main competitors in this period?

In this period, would have been, obviously SCC was always a competitor.

Right.

[pause] Oh. I should be able to...

The Byte Shop was still around I think.

Yeah. Who was the guy, David, Pete... Oh. You've interviewed him. The... Oh. Oh, so, I was going to... when I started this, I said, I must get a list of all the people who we've kind of done away with over the past years, but it was... Oh. Oh, Pete and Pam.

Right, Pet and Pam. PP.

Pet and Pam, Rossendale. [pause] Oh, what was the other one called in London? The... There were about four. So... And you always knew who they were, because when you used to go on these jollies. IBM always had jollies, you know. They'd obviously go to Florida, and we used to go to that. All the dealers together, all over the world, kind of thing, you know. And, you know, and it should be, you always knew who was in, because they always had a, when we arrived there'd be a coach and two limousines, and if you were in, you were in a limousine. [laughing] So you'd always know... Oh. There was probably about four or five who were very

[27:07]

Had you got out of, broken out of the financial market yet and got into different areas?

[hesitates] No, because I think... [pause] Is it probably about this time that we realised that the, that the software business was a good business. And, we had done our first round of venture capital finances, and we, we had, Adrian Beecroft, from, oh God, I'm forgetting all the... I see him but I can't remember the name. Oh. I'll think of it. Anyway, we had a VC round, and we had Foreign & Colonial, I think we had...

When was this?

[pause] Eighty...

Mid-Eighties?

Yeah. After Compaq. Late Eighties. Actually, I've got all these dates. I do apologise. I thought I should do dates. Apax Partners, that was, Apax Partners, Foreign & Colonial, and, one other. ba-ba-ba-ba And, they came in, and they, they, we raised something like, two or three million I think it was at the time. Quite a lot of money, it was quite, you know, to build the business, to grow the business. And, we had this software business in the negotiations, because we don't, you know, we've got these programs out, so it was in the negotiations, the... software. You know, they didn't really want that. So I sort of thought, we'll take it, we'll keep that, that's fine. And then we had this idea. Met a guy called Simon Hessell, a wonderful guy, who wrote game programs for computers, and particularly interesting things, like how to win the election, all that. And obviously what he could do, he could write the... Well, I could write the hard code, he could write GUI interfaces. And this was before the Internet; anybody can do it now, but in those days, to write the interface, you know, you had GUI pop-ups on the screen. And we recruited him, and we set up a company called Computasoft. And that was probably in about '84, I think it was. And, we kept it. And, we built it up. We sold it three years ago to Carlyle, and that was bigger than anything. That was the best thing we ever did was keeping that company, Dealogic. It was absolutely... And that, every bank all over the world, every bank uses Dealogic to do, do its financial analysis and that. And so yeah, we built that up with Simon Hessell, myself and Philip.

d-e-a-l-o-g-i-c.

d-e-a-l-o-g-i-c. if you look, it's...

Banking and soft... Banking software...

Yes.

Yes.

Yeah. And that's, you know, you look at the *FT* most days, there'll be a graph, say, 'Source: Dealogic'. So it kind of sells its data into, to all the banks. And it was very much built on the idea of building league tables, i.e., Goldman Sachs would say, 'You can use our system to look at every deal done in Asia in dollars by a certain kind of clientele,' and then... So, banks would produce the league tables. 'We are the number one in the world. Source: Dealogic.' And that's how the business developed. And, so, sadly, because, you know, moment comes when you have to sell the business, I've sold quite a few businesses. And there comes a moment where you have to realise that not everybody... We, we've had a few past goals, but a lot of people, you know, after 20 years, after having ploughed away at, at Dealogic for all those years, for a lot of people with big wealth, you know, millions, twelve, fifteen million, loads of employees, you have to say, well, I guess we ought to give you an exit. And so, we sold the business to Carlyle, and, which was the saddest day of my life, because I loved that business, but, you can't, you can't own private companies forever, if you have lots of children.

Does it feel like babies to you?

That did. That was a real baby. That was, in computer senses, we still have it, so I still spend a lot of time with it. So it's, it's not really gone. But, Dealogic, it was very sad when that went, very sad. But obviously, [laughs] its, got you know a big fat bonus, because... But it was, it was sad, because I loved the business, it was really good. But it was nice to see all these people who became very very rich, [laughs] and very happy. So, you can't complain really.

[31:10]

Are you quite ruthless in that way?

In what way?

In the way that you can cut things off.

No. No, I think... I don't know... Philip was much more ruthless than I am. No, he could quite happily... No, I think I was, I think I delayed the process in Dealogic longer than, well, not too long, because, it got bigger and bigger, but, I think people were getting a bit fed up of me saying, 'Let's not do that just yet.' [laughs]

Are you ruthless as a manager of people?

No. I mean... Well, no. I'm pretty straightforward, you know, I don't... You know, if something has to go, something has to go.

You're the man from Rochdale are you, straightforward?

[hesitates] Yeah. But not...

What you see is what you get.

But not ruthless at all in that sense. In fact, yeah, my biggest weakness in many ways is the fact that, I don't sell anything. I still own every car I've ever bought kind of thing. I don't sell things; I buy things. I'm not a seller.

Right.

And yet it's kind of interesting you know, because, I mean, you look in financial markets, and I mean, my kids always, they've always got a good idea. It's do that, go short that, long that, you know. There's a position I have in the S&P which I had like, for 20 years, and now look at that. Can you beat that? You know. And they say, 'Well...' I say, you wait long enough.... In fact this is a, well a great friend of mine once said, I went, I had a dinner with somebody, he said, 'I never made an investment that didn't go up in value.' I said, Jesus, you know, what's the secret. He said, 'I just forgot to sell.' [laughter] Which is kind of the truth of the matter. If you don't... If you wait long enough, and keep something long enough...

Some day it will turn around eventually.

[laughs] Yeah. Or it goes down, up, down, up, and eventually it goes up again, you know, so yeah.

[32:46]

When you look at the official register at Companies House...

Yes.

And obviously you put in Computacenter, and, you find about the relationship with you and Philip and so on, but also when you track back and say, Peter Ogden, you find this man is a director of a huge number of companies, some dead and some alive.

I have a cartoon on my wall, Peanuts talking to Charlie Brown, and Peanuts says, 'You win a few, you lose a few.' And Peanuts said, 'Gee, that would be neat.'

[laughs] So, so there is a long list, but, don't read them all out as great successes.

[laughs]

Bio Mini. that's one...

Biomini.

Biomini.

Yeah, that was a, that's still going, that's a good, a nice little company.

What does it do?

Biomini took the technology that we developed in Computasoft, which is Dealogic technology, we took that technology into part of it, which was, and used it to build, it was a, B to B marketplace. And, in nineteen... 2003 or something, Goldman Sachs was going to take it, wanted to take it public with a valuation of something like 1.5 billion. [laughs] We didn't take it public. But probably they had a very nice tight, small... It does... This has got lots of big, client relationships with Sematic and all

that, and it does, it does B to B software basically, and, and people use it in, they put it in their Sematic stack, and, it's, it's part of other people's stacks.

Right.

And it does part, particularly, what are they called, when you, you know, when...
When you want to order something, order process.....

Right, yup.

People say, 'I want to buy these things.' It goes through the whole system, you want to buy something, somebody approves it, disapproves it; gets to there, that ships it, it comes back, you come in again. So that, when a new employee starts at some place, the Biomini software says, well what does he need? It says he needs this.

[34:40]

You seem to be into property as well. Falcon Propco 4, which is...

Oh, yeah, no that's...

These types of things .

Yeah yeah. No, that's my, that's my son.

Oh right. OK.

That's, that's my...

Diamond Topco.

That was, that was the... When we sold the business to Carlyle, we only sold 70 per cent of it, and we kept... And Diamond Topco was the company that then became the owner of Dealogic, which is really 70 per cent. And then three years later they bought us out, so Diamond Topco's gone.

Right.

Any more?

[35:12]

Well, I won't go through them, don't worry. You also got into France and Germany.

Yes.

France first I believe.

Yeah, that...

How did you do that?

That was... So, I formed... My... Philip was very much... Philip was very much, was the man who created the big value of the sales force. He really drove that part of it. I then looked after the international stuff. And, we had a group of companies, there was, there was one in France, there's one Germany, one in... And we formed a, a group called European Computer something. And basically, it was so that we could fulfil for each other, in each other's countries, so like, we had a client who wanted something in Germany so they fulfilled the German end. And so we formed this loose relationship, which became quite... And then we started to get lots of other people wanting to join. So we had quite a big grouping of people. It was very much a, loose. Renoir was it called, in France, they then went bust, and I then went, finished up buying it for one franc in the French courts. And that was a very expensive one franc. We lost a lot of money over the next few years. We tried to get it to look more like the UK business. And... And then obviously, over time, we've stuck at it. Again, we don't give up on things. So that, we stuck at that acquisition, and now, it's a nice company, it's doing well. It's got a very good management team. We integrated it into all our systems, so that we can all, we all have common systems between us. So that's totally absorbed into Computacenter France now. And then, obviously the next one came in when, I think it was GE wanted to sell, they got themselves into the

computer business in Germany, they wanted to sell it. And we bought the, the German business, which was the partner we used to have when we started that loose connection. So...

OK. Yeah. So you were seen almost as, the bank of last resort for these people when they went.

Yeah, probably. They had already gone, so we, bought them. But obviously we knew a lot about the business. The Germans we knew really well, We knew them well. And funnily enough, the other guy, we met him very early on in his start-up, because, he had also gone to Harvard Business School, three years after we had been there. So we went to Germany, met guy who went to HBS. He was starting a computer business. We had got one. So we kind of, worked together. And then we finished up, he finished up selling it, I think to GE. GE ruined it. And then we bought it out of bankruptcy.

[37:49]

The technology's the same.

Yup.

Some of the applications are the same. Is the business culture different in France?

Yeah. Well, obviously we... it's a bit hard to look back. If you look today, obviously the culture I think, obviously, in England we are very much more, our business now is, is a service business, not a hardware business. We really only sell hardware to our customer base which is a service customer base. So it's like, you know, it's like going to a garage, you know, you want your car mended. One exhaust. Why not? So it works, you know, for us. France for example has never been, never, France it's doing well, it took a long time to develop that, the service business. The French were not for outsourcing at all.

Right.

You know? They do it all in-house sort of thing. Fine, don't outsource. But they didn't buy a lot of equipment, you know. So, so they became much more a, hardware buying mix than us.

Right.

Germany turned out to be actually a bit of a, one thing, we felt we were the smartest thing since sliced bread. They turned out to be, probably much smarter, they were way ahead of us in networking.

Really?

Yeah. Even though we were kind of, at the top. You know, we are pretty strong. We are big, but they had much more consultancy services around network in Germany. Which we latched onto. So now, I mean we always say , Germany looks much... Germany is bigger. Germany, in contribution to bottom line, is bigger than the UK now. So it's, it's, a very successful acquisition. We struggled with that for a little while, become, has become very very very successful, and, and totally integrated into... and totally integrated thing like, if we go and bid for, just did a big bid in France and there is somebody from France was there, from Germany. So I mean, it's, it's all cross-border stuff, you know. There's no silos any more. And that took a while to get to you know.

Right.

You get to that by making sure they all use the same systems. And, so yeah, we're very proud of the German business.

[39:48]

And you decided to float.

Oh yeah, that was... Yeah, that was ninety... Yeah, that was... Again, I think... Quite frankly, again, that, when we had the big meeting , we got to float, and I said, 'Oh no we're not.' He said, 'I want to float.' So I was not that keen on the idea.

Why not?

Well, it's more fun sitting around the table than having, you know... Having been much more involved I think in public companies, I've been on the board of, Sion . I mean, yeah, there's a lot of pain in being public, you know, you have to, you have to have a board of directors, corporate governance, and, you know. So, I thought it was nice to be private. Anyway, we went public. And...

Did that change the company?

Yes, very much so.

How?

Well it changed it in the sense that, you know, we created 25 millionaires, so they all sort of... Gary careering off and bought a vineyard in France. So, a lot of the big shots went off and did their own thing you know, quite rightly, you know. But that was fine. And then... But, so we, you know, we had a... Then... And obviously, the... By this time... It also a watershed time. The culture of the company was changing quite quickly, from being a sales-oriented business to being a consultative sales type business. A lot of, you know, some of our salesmen would rather, you know, would rather sell, you know, if you wanted one, they'd rather sell you two.

Mhm.

Whereas I think, you know, like today, it's, it's just, nobody's out there trying to persuade you to buy something. You know, it's, it's... And they were getting what I call much more serious account management people type, people who could run large groups of people in sales, rather than people who were just brilliant at selling. So I think it became a much more business culture than a sales culture, from, from, just before we went public. And then, nowadays it's a very kind of, team, corporate sell , you know, every time we do a bid, there's like, 25 lawyers in the room, you know. It's a very different culture to the sales, saying, 'What do you want?' You know, and

again you're like, 'Do you want to buy a bit of software?' 'We'll buy a bit of software.' You know, do you want to buy a bit of software... [laughs] We don't do that any more, you know, everything has to get scrutinised and that. And, the culture's changed for the better, but it, it has been a change of culture. We're no longer quite so entrepreneurial as we'd like, we'd like to be, but sometimes we, we've lost a bit of that. In which case, we spend, we have a whole group now looking at, how do we become more entrepreneurial, how do we get some of that back in the business? Even though we have to say, we understand that we, when we do these 25 million, 30 million contracts, we have to be a bit more, careful. [laughs]

True. I mean you have to be quite careful if you are doing a 42 million contract with the Inland Revenue and so on.

Exactly, yeah yeah yeah.

Yes? Which you did. And you kept on...

We have a lot of these, do a... We've got a lot... But obviously, we have big teams with them, but they don't always succeed you know, so you have to be ready, you have to put a big team to spend... These things take two years by the way.

Yeah.

You know, it's not like, it's not like the sales. So you have a two-year programme of winning your customer care. You get down to the last two, then you get selected. And then you've got to work out the details of the deal. Every one of those phases, you can be...

Knocked out.

You know, you can spend a lot... So have, we spend some, big money on some campaigns where we got to the end of it, and still not won, you know. And it's a very competitive business out there in the, in the big, the big contract business.

[43:12]

Have you had mentors, people that you look up to or follow?

[pause] Yeah. I mean... Yeah, I mean... I'm trying to think.... Yeah. Like, good friends who I talk to and listen to. I've never kind of had mentors in the sense of a, older person being a mentor, but I've had, certainly people that I've talked to, and, even today, I kind of listen to a lot of people, because, in fact we've just, the other business which we haven't mentioned in, in recruitment business, and, I know nothing about the recruitment business. So obviously I would go off and, when we got into it, and we're doing it, I go off and talk to people, you know, people like, at Graphite, who, who, companies who have done a lot of buying of these companies, and I listen to what they have to say. So I mean, yeah, I always go and ask people about businesses when I don't know what they're about basically.

Business terms you on, doesn't it?

[hesitates] Well, I obviously enjoy, some parts of business, I said my enjoyment in business is, is unfortunately, the best part is, five people round a table, working out what we're going to do. Now obviously, that means you can't be a big business, because if you're a big business, there's going to be, five people and five lawyers and... And I did big boss at Morgan Stanley, I used to have to, I advised the, do the Australian government, the Yankee Bond financing. So I sat in with all those people, and I understand that can be fun too, doing big deals. But, it's quite good fun when you sit down with people about creating a business, and talk about it, and, people have ideas and that. So I... And I always used to say, when we get human, an HR department, it's time I moved aside. [laughs] It's not a very nice quote, but it's true. I feel, you know, when people start to say... I remember, people, people in New York would send us evaluations of our people.

Oh yes.

Yeah, I remember him one day, the head of Morgan Stanley in London, I've got all these things stacked up. And he said, 'These are the evaluations of our people from New York.' And he went like that: put it in the bin. You know, what's the point in

having an organisation with people being evaluated by somebody else? You'd like to at least, do it yourself. [laughs]

[45:26]

Right. What are your biggest mistakes you've made?

[pause] That's a, that's a hard one really. [pause] Probably doing... Probably- Yeah, I've calmed down. Probably having done too many of these, round the kitchen table kind of stuff. Then, you realise that in fact, there is, you know, for them... For you, it's, that's the moment, the enjoyment; for those five people, they need to get on with it you know. And, and therefore, the fact I enjoy sitting round the table shooting the breeze; they, they need to move on to the next stage. So really, that's, it's not a mistake, it's just, the fact is, you know, I'm better in the, in that environment than I am in... I'm not very good on boards to be honest with you really, I get quite a...

You get bored quite easily?

Yeah, that's the trouble really I think, I think, yeah, I get... Yeah, particularly, particularly about pro- I mean, process is so important in building a business, but it does bore me. I mean, it's...

You like risk as well, don't you?

I take risks, but, that's why having... The other great, key success in all this business, I've done most of business with a partner. And I always think the partner was smarter than I was.

Right.

So that's been a great contribution. Philip Hulme is very, very smart, process-oriented, you know what I mean. He really...

Yeah, but I'm pointing to your yacht racing...

[laughs]

I'm point to your motor racing.

Oh yeah, well that's... That...

Here you are, 72 years old.

That might be a bit risk-oriented, but you know, I'm not crazy. Yeah, I'm risk... I mean, I'm certainly risk-oriented in businesses. I mean, you know, yeah. But, I don't think I'm risk-oriented... I don't go and climb mountains and fall off. But... But as I say, the great... Yeah. So I put my best thing in , is Dealogic, Simon Hessel. All these businesses, I've always had somebody there who probably knew the business, and what I could bring was the experience, and, in many cases, the financing. So I mean, that, that's it, to be honest with you. So, having great partners. It makes life a lot easier if you have a partner. You can talk to them, you can argue with them, and, you know, it's, and they can temper your worst, [laughs] excesses. [laughs]

Do you have excesses?

Yes, I talk too much. Philip would do that tapping his fingers on the table

Yes. Right.

When's he going to shut up? [laughs]

OK. Can you close a deal?

... I spent the first ten years of my life doing, closing deals. So I think I'm pretty at closing deals, yes.

Because talkers often find it difficult to close.

Oh, no no, I'm pretty, I'm pretty good. I know the moment to shut up, you know.

[laughs]

Right. Right.

I think I shoot the breeze more than... I think on closing I'm quite good really, in the sense that, I know when, when the guy says, 'Yeah, I'll do it,' to shut up. [laughs]

[48:16]

What is going to happen to the market space in which Computacenter is now so successful?

It's interesting... Yeah, we, obviously we look at competitor analysis quite a lot. I mean, it's a very, it's competitive. I think, the market has always moved in our favoured direction, in the sense that, anybody who thinks it's getting simpler is kidding themselves, OK. This is a complexifying industry. You need a lot more skills in the security, networking, all these technologies that you need to have very much specialist knowledge in. And you can't just set up in a shop and say, 'Here you are, come and see me.' So it's, so it's a complexifying industry. It's an industry where I think a lot of people struggle with how to manage it, and that's why you have this growth in outsourcing. And, the other thing which makes it very interesting, it's cyclical, you know. You know, we outsource a big contract, I think for, a big bank, very complex contract in fact. And this new guy comes and he says, 'I'm going to take it back in-house.' We said, 'Fine.' And we will then help him. So, we just made money by outsourcing. And you don't make any money in outsourcing the first couple of years; you have to kind of, build it. So with a five-year contract, you make all the money towards the end, so that's good. He then wants to go back in-house again, so you then make even more money, because now he's dependent on you for two years. He then gets it back, and then, they fire him, and again, new guy says, 'I'm going to outsource.' And then we will say... Well obviously we know that company inside-out. We don't throw away the knowledge we have of that company when we don't get... We, we follow that company, we go and see them.

And that new man probably doesn't know that company as well as you do.

Yeah. And we go along and talk to them. So we always then, even though he's going to take it in-house, we maintain an excellent... You know, we're not going to go, 'Oh, that's it, we're out of here.' He says, 'Oh, you've got to give me extra...' We'll do everything to make him successful. But I tell you, [laughs] in five years' time, somebody else is going to come in and say, 'We'd better outsource.' [laughs]
[50:15]

And the other thing which has been the biggest change over the last few years to help us is, there was a period in the, like, five or six, seven years ago which was the idea that you would outsource everything. So IBM would outsource everything. And then they come through and says, 'Can you do the desktop services?' 'Yeah, we'll do that.' Nowadays, the companies tend to be much more, say, 'We want, we want...' They come in and say, 'Well IBM, you can do the, this...' They, they are the ones who then allocate them out. So there has been an idea of one great big bang outsourcer. That's no longer applicable. They look for specialists in the areas they want to be in, and obviously, the whole area, desktop, integration, networking, call centres. We have, like, we have 15,000 employees now. And, and we obviously run the help desk for all these big contracts we have. So it's a... So we think, it's a complexifying business, in which competition gets... Well it just changes all the time. Like, at this moment for example, TCS, which is the, Tata group, all of a sudden, you know, they just kind of, stood into this, they've got massive resources, you know, they've just signed a big contract with GM and that, you know. So you see other players coming in, and you see other players leaving. It's very much a, you know, it's, you never... I always say, it's like a hill, as you get to the top of the hill, you go, oh shit. [laughter] There's another hill. [laughs] It, you never gets to a position where you can sit back and say, 'Oh we're in charge now.' It's very competitive at all levels. And, as fast as people leave, other people arrive, you know. Like BT. BT, there biggest contract, they decided to, go in-house, you know. So, you get massive changes all the time.

[52:01]

Have you got any insight into what seems to be the fact that the public sector is so bad at IT in many ways?

[pause]

A horrendous screw-up of the NHS central records.

Yeah. Yeah. Well what is... I mean, I... It might... We would say... We do quite a lot of, of, like, we do the Home Office, we do, we do financial security. We do a lot of the what I'll call, you know, bodies which are, you would call public, public bodies services. I think they're not bad actually doing infrastructure technology. Where they always come unstuck is on the applications software. Them, and law firms. There's always some bright spark at a law firm, a lawyer, who says, 'You know, I'm going to write, get these people to write the software to do that.' you say, 'Well, you know, you'd be better off going with standard software.' 'Oh no no, it will have to be a very unique solution for this.' And it always ends in tears. And then... Yeah. Always ends in tears. The law firms are the worst. Because they don't really have management, you know, they have lawyers, and lawyers always have ideas how they should write software.

Right.

And the same I think comes with public service companies . I think they get carried away by it. Because, obviously, everybody wants software that rings you up in the morning, brings you a cup of tea. Gets you the car to the front door. Gets your... You can write them a long list... You know, you write this spec, and actually, it's kind of... You think, oh it's kind... You know. You'd be better using standard, standard application software that's available, that's tried, tested, and, and then think around the edges, rather than trying to specify what some people have already done. So I think, I think a lot of the failures has always been on the software side rather than the hardware side.

[53:32]

If you started again, where would you start?

I'm sure you'd never start from here, would you? [laughs] I mean obviously, I, I think... I think you would have to start where we started, because, the great reason

why we got ahead of everybody, or, the people who did get ahead, was that, you know, you joined... The best thing in the business is to be, have a business that's developed enough, to take advantage of a rapidly growing sales curve. You know, if you arrive a year later, you're too early; if you arrive a year earlier, you went bust, because you didn't get there. But if you just happen to be... We were just lucky. [laughs] We arrived, recognised that this was going to be a growth curve. IBM – Compaq came and off it went. And we were on the growth curve. And a couple of other companies were too. So, when I look at the first thing I look at is the sales growth. Because if you see a, a sales growth curve, and how much per year you'll make, and many people put business cases in front of you, you say, 'Well, so you're going to grow to that, and you're going to make a penny a unit, and you're going to raise that money. But that means you'll never pay the money back, will you?' Break even calculations are always quite an interesting way of working it out. If it's a good business. And so I always think, you know, you need a growth... You've got to be sure that the sales curve is going to grow.. And, and that's. It may not grow, but you have to have the conviction that you, that you, it's going to grow. But, but it may not, it might be you lose. But, but for us, it's fortunately we entered the sales curve at the right moment in time. And...

[55:04]

You ploughed a lot of your fortune into various charitable ventures.

Yeah, but that, that's... That's just, goes back to the fact...

And that's why you got your knighthood.

And it's just the fact it was, you know, it's quite clear that when... The money I got from Computacenter when it went public was, was quite a lot of money. That I put into a charity. I didn't really need any money in the sense, well, I needed money, I wanted to buy a super yacht, and, you know, and a Challenger jet, but I don't think I was in that frame of reference at that time. And, so I put it into the charitable... And I had a tremendous enjoyment of building that organisation up over the years. And, and it was focused on education, disadvantaged pupils. . And then like, four years ago, three or four years ago, my trust director, who I had hired from day one, from

Cambridge, he said, 'I'm 65, I'm going to retire.' And I thought, oh God. The idea of starting with a new person. We had a nice meeting with the family, and my son Cameron said, 'I'll take it on.' So he became Chairman.

Who became Chairman?

My son, Cameron my, my eldest son. He said he'd take it on.

Right.

It was a very emotional moment. I thought, oh that's fantastic. Because it's going to carry on, you know. He's going to get a new trust director. He moved the office from Cambridge to London, nice little offices, like, five or six people. He is also the, became the... He has also become the chairman of Shine, it's an inner London charity for, literacy and numeracy. And, so he's taking it very seriously. Because obviously, you know, sometimes you can't start again you know. You know, you get all...

Does he ever say to you, 'Don't look over my shoulder Dad'?

No. He, he... I don't look over his shoulder, but he'll come and ask me questions. But he's getting on with it, you know. I've done my... I'm not all... But sometimes... I met with a bank yesterday, they came to see me, 'We've got lots to show you, show you this.' And I said, I said, 'It sounds awful.' I said, 'Really.' I said, 'I'm sure they're good ideas. If you haven't got money, I could invest in them.' But, then you're going to say, I have to do due diligence, you know. And that's going... I said, do I really want to spend four weeks sitting with people looking at making some, a deal? It's only, in the end, only makes more money you know, when I could be doing other things. So, I said, 'Why don't you call my children? Call Cameron, call Edward.' Cameron went to Harvard, Edward runs his own business. Sure, Let them do the work. Because, you know, I don't really want to do that any more. Time's precious you know. 73. I mean, you've got to look on the bright side of life you know. All these little grandchildren.

As I recall it, that was the end of a film.

Is that right? [laughs]

Look on the bright side of life.

[laughs] Yeah, that's right.

So that's a very good place to end our interview. Thank you very much for your contribution to the Archives, Sir Peter Ogden.

Well thank you.

[End Of Interview]