



Capturing the Past, Inspiring the Future

Jo Connell OBE

Interviewed by

Tom Abram

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Welcome to the Archives of Information Technology. It's November the 21st 2019, and we are in the WCIT Hall in Bartholomew Close, London. I'm Tom Abram, editor of the Archives of IT, and today I'm talking to Jo Connell.

[00:22]

Jo started her career as a programmer in the 1960s, and later joined Freelance Programmers, the iconic company founded by Dame Stephanie Shirley, progressing to be Group Managing Director of the successor, FTSE 250 company, Xansa. After a time from corporate life, Jo has pursued a portfolio of activities, mainly charitable and voluntary, relating to those in need, public service and the IT industry. So welcome Jo.

Thank you.

Thanks for agreeing to be interviewed. We'll talk about the detail of your background, career and experience in a moment, but first, I'm intrigued by this, this division between your corporate professional life and your subsequent, very considerable, portfolio of voluntary roles and public service, after a, a notably successful career in IT. So, was that something you had always planned to do, or was it something that just came up after you had retired from corporate life?

I hadn't always planned to do it. It probably came about at some point in the Nineties for me. Actually, FI... If I call it FI, is that OK?

Yes.

It was Freelance Programmers Limited in the beginning, and then became FI. FI encouraged the senior staff in particular to take on one or two external roles. It was thought to be developmental for people. And so, the very first external role I took on was being a trustee at Help the Aged, and that was sort of discovered for me, and I was introduced to that possibility by Steve Shirley. She had had some sort of relationship with Help the Aged, and she knew they were looking for board members, particularly those with a marketing expertise, and so she suggested that I might get in contact. So having done that, and then, I became a non-exec director of Thus, that's

the Internet company that was part of Scottish Telecom. I don't know if you remember it.

Oh yes. Yeah.

Up in Scotland. And that was in the late Nineties. So I think about the middle of the Nineties I decided that, actually, I'd like to retire at the age of 55, and I mean that's a really fortunate position to be in, because not everyone has that choice, but, very fortunately at FI we had been very successful, there was a very generous pension scheme. Thought to myself, yes, what I'd like to do is retire at 55. And at that point I thought I'd like to share my time between doing further work for corporates, in terms of non-exec roles, but actually, then the other half I could spend on the not-for-profits. So I had that at the back of my mind for some time. And then I did retire at 55, in 2003. And after that, you know, I took on... Well just before I retired, took on the University of Hertfordshire, I took on a governorship there, and, and then it took off from there.

Wonderful. We'll come back to that later on, because, I'd like to know quite a bit about what kind of activities that's involved you in, and, and what you feel is the difference that, that those things have made. But perhaps first we can talk about your early life, and, then move on to your working life.

Mhm.

[03:57]

So, your start in life. Where and when were you born?

I was born in Windsor. So, January '48. So I'm a post-war baby.

Right. And, what was your household like, what did your parents do?

Well it was fairly working class to be quite honest, Tom. The household, and I don't know if this applies to everybody, but in those days, the money that my father earned as a railway clerk was handed over to my mother in cash. She took it, she put it in

pots on the shelf, in the kitchen, and then she gave him a bit so he could go to the pub on a Friday night. And there wasn't anything else left over at the end of the week.

Yeah.

And, when I think back, so my father grew vegetables in the allotment, and when I think back, at Christmas we had one major present each. When you look at what people have these days, I don't know that they quite appreciate the, the sort of extravagance in a way that our lives now reflect, for a lot of people at least. So it was, my parents worked hard. My mother had worked in a restaurant. She didn't... She was a hairdresser by trade, but she didn't work full-time while we were children. She worked part-time. And I had a brother and sister, I had a sister next, and then a brother. I was eldest in the family. So, but life at home was good, you know. In those days there was freedom. We went off during the day and rambled the parks and the woods, and nobody worried about us. So it was a great time.

So, a happy childhood then?

Very happy.

And were your parents homeowners, or...?

Yes.

Yes.

Yeah. They were lucky enough to be able to buy their house when my grandfather died.

And, what kind of values they instil? I mean, was education seen as an important thing from their point of view?

I'm not sure that they focused on anything in particular, to be quite honest. I mean there was a certain amount of discipline. They were very loving. So... But as a family, you know, we were very loving. I think it was quite a hard life for them.

Yes.

Because as I said, you know, my father worked hard, went off to the pub on a Friday. [coughs] Excuse me. And, my mother worked very hard at home, as a housewife.

[06:24]

So, you clearly had a, a very successful career as a, a professional, but you were coming from a family where there was no history of a professional background.

No professional background, no university education, no.

[06:45]

So, was there any leisure activities that you liked to pursue?

What then?

Yes, games, or...

Well I think it was going off, you know, we went off exploring.

Going off. Off to the park?

Spent our time, yes, doing things. I mean I had a bike. We... You know, I... Do you know, I remember at the age of five my friend and I went off to explore seeing her granny. But of course, at the age of five, wandering quite a long way in another area of Windsor, it was almost like running away, but we didn't think of it as running away. We thought, oh no, 'Let's just go off and see your granny, shall we?' And so the going off and exploring, and, and having freedom, I think was always very important to me. I've always liked to read, I've always read a lot. And, at Christmas we always did have a game each. So playing whatever it was, and Monopoly, or

Totopoly, or, you know, whatever. My father loved playing cards, so we played a lot of cards.

[07:50]

And who were the important influences? Obviously your parents, but, were you close to grandparents and aunts and uncles, or...?

No, it was my parents. Not close to grandparents. I didn't see my gran... My, one grandmother died when I was a baby; the other grandfather died when I was fairly young. And then, my grandmother and grandfather were both hairdressers. I moved about, and ended up living in Devon for one place, and all over the place. And so we saw them occasionally, not very often.

[08:20]

So, school then. What kind of schools did you go to?

I went to a local school, infant school, which I was able to walk to at the age of five. A completely different world again isn't it. And then I went to something called the Royal Free, which was a state primary school in Windsor, and to get there I had to catch a bus. So from the age of seven I was walking to the bus stop and then catching a bus and coming home again. It's hard to believe really when you consider the lack of freedom children have these days.

It's astonishing isn't it.

But I was very fortunate. I was usually, [clearing throat], excuse me, in the top few in the class. I used to have a competition with another boy there, who could come first or second. I passed my Eleven Plus, and then I went on to Windsor High School for Girls.

I'm not sure you are allowed to come first or second in a class any more, are you? I mean, that was certainly how it was in my school.

[laughs] I don't think you are. But did you have that? [laughs]

Absolutely.

Yes. No, no you were always ranked. I don't think you can these days.

You knew exactly where you were in the class.

Yes. It was just the same.

It was on the annual report.

Yeah, you got your report.

Twelfth out of 34 or whatever.

Absolutely.

Or first out of 28 in your case. [both laugh]

I know.

[09:39]

So, what did you like doing at school?

Maths.

Maths. [both laugh] Was that true from, from an early age...

Mm.

...the, the sums and mental arithmetic and all of that stuff?

Yes. My father was actually very good at maths.

Yeah.

He was very good... He was very good at mental arithmetic.

Yes.

So, I probably got it from him.

You, you prompt an interesting question in my mind. Because your childhood sounds not dissimilar to mine in ways. [JC laughs] And, I, both my parents were, were working class, but I, I think actually had a intelligence and capability much beyond what they actually did...

Yes.

...in terms of working life. So do you think that was true of your parents?

I do. Yes. I think my mother was more intelligent than her working life would indicate, given that she first went out to work in the ABC café at the age of fourteen.

Right.

And, my father was, was definitely bright, particularly on the mathematics. And, and just general knowledge.

Yes.

You know, he knew a lot about everything.

So in different circumstances...

I think they would have done different things.

So was it just maths that...

Maths and science.

Maths and science.

But I can't say that I really enjoyed school that much.

Oh right.

It was all right. I went to school, but I didn't swot. I just did what I had to do. But do you know, when you look back, there wasn't anything wrong with it, but it didn't inspire me. I don't know why I wanted to be a teacher after that [laughs], but, it was the maths thing.

Was that your ambition?

Yes, always wanted to be a maths teacher. So I was very fixed.

[11:30]

So when you passed the Eleven Plus and went to the grammar school, you didn't have any clear aspiration in your mind, other than being a teacher perhaps?

Mm. That was all.

You didn't have this vision... Well I guess you did expect to go to university, and, and...

Or college. Teacher training college. I just wanted to be a maths teacher.

But that, that wasn't... I get the impression you weren't kind of, driven by that.

No. No. No, no not at all.

So you tried your best, and, and did very well as a result, but, but not overwhelmingly...

I quite enjoyed the Sixties social life.

Oh right. OK.

But I don't think we'll go there. [both laugh]

Anything else at school? I mean did you, were you sporty, or musical, or a dramatist, or...?

I wasn't sporty, but, I was quite arty.

Right.

So I very much enjoy drawing and painting. And it's something that I am determined to pick up again once I have more time in my retirement.

[12:36]

And, and what about your... You've mentioned you were top of the class or thereabouts at primary school. That continued into secondary school did it, the grammar school, and...?

No, because I don't actually think I worked hard enough.

Right.

Isn't that interesting. Because, I was brought up... One of the things my parents did bring us up to do was to be very conscientious. Not necessarily work hard academically, but if you did anything, you committed to it, and you should deliver it. And, I have always thought... I didn't apply this when I was at high school, but I've certainly always thought during my working life, and it's now my motto if you call it that on my coat of arms, hard work reaps reward.

What's that in Latin?

Don't ask me Tom. [laughs] I don't know.

Right. So that, that was a value that your parents instilled, do you think?

They worked hard for their, for their life. Because they didn't have a lot of money, so, they actually worked very hard.

Yes. And, what about exams then? You...

I did the O Levels as they were there, and, got seven I think. And then...

Yes. Good grades?

A mixture.

Yes.

I'm not a linguist. And then I did A Levels. So... But I, I did struggle with my zoology A Level. I found it full of Latin words, and you really needed to have a very good memory. So, my maths was fine, and my botany was OK, but my zoology, [intake of breath], I didn't really revise enough I guess.

So that, that was the A Level mix was it, maths, botany and zoology?

Mm. Yeah, in those days, they split biology down.

Yes. No physics or chemistry?

No, not... I... No.

Was that a not-for-girls thing?

I don't know Tom. I just liked biology in particular, maths and biology. So...
Science, I was fine at science, but, yeah.

[14:54]

So, university, or not university.

Well I decided that I would apply for teachers' training college, because then I would go through college and come out as a trained teacher and then go straight into work. I mean the family weren't very well off. Couldn't afford to give me a great deal of support. So I was always keen to try and give something back. So I got my place at teacher training college, to train as a teacher, particularly with maths. And left school in the summer of '68.

Yes. Were you, were you inspired at school by any particular teachers, or...?

No.

No?

[laughs] No.

Do you remember any fondly?

I remember the headmistress very fondly, yes.

Yes.

Yes.

Any, any people at school you are still friendly with?

Still do the Christmas cards, yes.

Yes?

Yes. Just a couple.

Yes.

It's funny isn't it. Mm.

[15:58]

So... So you're all set to go to, to train to become a maths teacher.

Yes.

But, it all changed then didn't it?

It did all change. My mother said, 'You can't hang around the house all summer.' This is the bit where the work ethic comes from. You know, you can't hang around doing nothing all summer. We need to find you a job. And she even went to the extent of phoning up Mars and said, 'Would you be interested in a student for the summer?' And then when she explained I had a maths A Level, they said, 'Oh, yes. Yes, we could do with one in our computing department.' In those days, Tom, they hard-coded in things like the Purchase Tax rates, and the Purchase Tax rates had just been changed by the Government. And so they decided they'd put me in the computer department, get me to change the rates in the programs. And stuff like that.

Right. And you mentioned Mars in passing there.

It was Mars.

I... I remember Mars very clearly, because it was a, a high prestige employer in those days. We're not that dissimilar in age, so... [laughs] So I remember the job adverts from Mars, who, they seemed to pay very well, and offer good career prospects.

Yes. They were serious about people's career and development.

Yes.

Fascinating company, when I look back, and I appreciate its, its quiriness if you like, compared to others. Everyone clocked in, even the top directors and managers, and you got a good timekeeping bonus on top of your normal salary.

Oh wow.

Everybody other than in the factory, everybody else sat in a huge open-plan office, because they didn't believe in having these hierarchies. Even the few offices round the edge that the senior managers used didn't have doors on. It was really, really interesting. I mean they, they had an ethos that they brought with them from the States. You could tell how senior people were though, in the factory, because they had different coloured bow ties. [laughs]

Wow. [laughs]

So... They wore these white overalls, and they had a different colour bow tie that indicated what level they were.

And did that come across from the USA as well, that...?

It must have done, mustn't it?

[18:18]

Mm. So, so you became a programmer in your summer vacation then?

Yes. I was doing an element of programming, easy bits. And then at the end of the summer they offered me a job to stay and train to be a programmer. And, in my father's eyes that was a complete no-brainer, because that meant I was going to be paid exactly the same amount of money as an annual salary, as I would have done after three years of training to become a teacher.

Right.

You can see the attraction.

I can. Yes.

So... And, you know, my father and mother hadn't been to university or to college, so it was just a natural thing to do.

So, so there was no regret at not going off to pursue your...

I didn't... I had pangs throughout my career of not going to university. But actually, given what was happening in the computing industry, getting in at the very start and gaining experience was probably more important to my career than going to university and then coming in at a later stage.

Yes.

As it worked out. It's just that, never having gone to university, you feel a bit sort of, second-class when people are talking about it. Did you go Tom?

Did I go to university?

Yes.

Did go to university.

You did. You went off.

Yes.

Mm.

Yes. I think that, that was influenced by the fact that I was the, the younger child, and my elder brother had been to university, and by the fact that I think my mother in particular did value education very highly, as a result of having missed opportunities herself.

Yes. Yes, my, my younger brother went to university. My sister went to college to train to be an occupational therapist, but he went to university, ended up being an accountant. So...

I think we're more broadminded about this now though aren't we, in the sense that, the, the attendance at university doesn't carry quite the same, I don't know, prestige or...

Oh I don't know. You still find jobs advertised as graduate level.

Yeah, but... There's this idea of apprenticeships now.

Oh, agreed, but you can be a graduate apprentice as well.

Yes. Yes.

But no, I agree, you can be an apprentice these days. Which for some people would be a natural thing to do.

Yes. I just wonder whether we are, we are more concerned now with the, with the content of the job, and the outcome of the employment, rather than the qualifications that got you there. I don't know.

No.

[21:05]

So, did your schooling help with this job at Mars, your programming?

Not the schooling. We didn't do anything with a computer at school.

Yes.

Not... [laughs] No, certainly not in those days.

So, the...

I had never come across a computer before.

The, the mathematical ability...

But the maths was the, the thing to apply.

Yes.

And... Yeah, no indeed. No, it was good.

[21:28]

So, this was, this was 1966 I think when...

Oh it's sixty... I said '68 earlier, but it was '66, you're right.

So you went to Mars in '66.

Yup.

And, that was fairly early, as you just said, in the computer industry age.

Mm.

The computer age. What, what did people know about computers in those days? You know, what did the woman on the street know?

[laughs] I don't think they knew a great deal, Tom. And it was interesting from the point of view that computers were used in back office systems.

Yeah.

So they weren't used by individuals, individuals didn't really see them. It was all to do with things like payroll, stock control, accounting systems. And it was very much like that. And, you know, invoicing. Very much like that at Mars, and it was very much like that when I changed job. But the... I think, you'll ask me later about the, the industry, the technology. I just remember from Mars also, not just the big office, the clocking in, I just remember this rather gigantic box, which was a Honeywell CPU, sitting in the middle of the office, because they wanted this computer to sit in the open-plan office, with all the staff, because that was their ethos. They had to have the tapes in an air-conditioned room, but the CPU, which was blue, grey if I remember correctly, was sitting just outside the room. And it had this line of cigarette burns all along the edge. Because you were allowed to smoke in the office in those days. [laughs] And before the computer operator could go in to the tape room to change a tape, they'd leave their cigarette on the side of the CPU. And quite often they'd burn down and burnt the edge of it. It's just fascinating. So you know, this [laughs] computer sitting out in the open office. And there were things like punch cards, and paper tape. And it was an entirely, entirely different computing setup to anything you would find these days.

Yeah. So, this was kind of the second wave of computing I, I would suggest, in the sense that, you know, if you consult the Archives of IT you'll see a lot about LEO...

Yes.

...and the stuff that was done in the 1950s...

The Elliotts. Yes.

...which was quite pioneering and ground-breaking. So, in the mid-Sixties, we were looking at more of a kind of mainstream role for computers in...

Yes.

Every good business would be putting a computer in at that time.

Yes.

[24:07]

And what was it actually like in terms of, well you've talked a bit about the dress code and so on, but, you know, did you work in a team, were you left on your own to teach yourself how to program and so on? I mean was...

No. No, I was sent on training courses. So I was sent off to Honeywell, to be trained in, in how to do programming properly. We all sat together, and, we would... Yeah, it was, it was a team spirit for the computer department, which was not that big. But it was a team spirit. And then we got our individual tasks to do.

Yeah. So you got some professional development...

Absolutely.

Yeah. And, and was it a nice team to work in, the computer department?

Yes, it was.

You went out on a Friday night together, did you, and...?

I don't know about that, but it was a nice team. Yes. They were all friendly.

It was a friendly environment. Yes.

What was really interesting, and I'll come on to it later, is, actually, there were far more women in the team than you might find these days.

Right, yes. Interesting.

Mm.

[25:20]

Did you, did you feel that you were at the cutting edge of something, doing this computing in 1966?

No, I think, it was too early. Too early.

And, did anybody from Mars have a kind of, lasting effect on your career beyond that? I mean do you look back on the head of the computing department or a mentor or whatever who influenced you?

There was... Not the head, but, a sort of second-in-command was a lady that then popped up later in FI, or Freelance Programmers Limited, funnily enough.

Oh right,. Yeah.

And, not when I was there, she was there before me. But she was a good role model at Mars.

[26:10]

Yes. So, you moved on from Mars after...

A couple of years.

...a couple of years.

You know, people used to move every couple of years in those days. It was interesting. Yup, moved on to be an analyst programmer.

Right. That was promotion then?

It was promotion.

And where was that?

And that was Aspro-Nicholas, which was, over the road.

Still, still in Slough.

In the industrial area in Slough.

And was that a similar environment?

It was a Burroughs.

Right.

Which is slightly different. [both laugh]

Different machine.

But, it was still mainly corporate systems.

Yes.

Payroll, accountancy, things like that.

Yeah.

And what fascinated... Well it's fascinating to think in those days people wrote their own payroll systems.

Right.

It's not something you'd consider doing, many, for many many years, because everybody just uses a payroll bureau, or councils.

Yeah. Yah. And, what was the business case for these computers in these companies at that time? Was it the saving cost, or was it efficiency, or...?

I really... I... I've never... I don't recall seeing a business case. That didn't come down to the likes of me at my level.

No.

But I would have imagined it was both, efficiency and some cost.

[27:31]

Yes. You mentioned writing a payroll system.

Mm.

So if you were doing systems development in-house, did these things, did these projects work out well? Did they deliver on time, and...

Mm.

...on budget and performance and so on?

I think they largely did. They weren't as complicated in those days. I mean you are talking about, something that, you could describe a payroll system as a set of rules, isn't it.

Yes.

Much easier.

Right.

Much easier to develop than the things that now embrace everything.

I asked the question because I, I interviewed somebody from, somebody who had been doing systems development in the Fifties, and they made the point that, these things just worked. You know, they, they did them, and they worked, and they didn't have these problems with system failures and project failures and... And, and I have a, an enduring memory of being on a conference platform with Peter Gershon when he was at the OGC. And, he, it was the day he launched his attack on the IT industry [both laugh], with, with an assertion that 50 years ago we could write a payroll system that worked every time. Why can't we do it now?

It wasn't hard. And, there was... Because of the nature of how you did it, so you wrote coding on coding sheets, you sent those in to the punch room, and it was punched up, and then, you had a turn-round of your program. Now sometimes you had to wait quite a long time to have a turn-round of your program. So the key thing was accuracy in those days.

Yeah.

You had to make sure you were as accurate as possible in the very beginning, because there wasn't any way you could keep changing and putting something back in. You'd have at least an overnight. And then when I went on to work from home, you were coding on coding sheets, you were putting the stuff in the post, it was going off, and you were lucky to have a turn-round once a week. So you had to be as accurate as possible. So things had to work.

So you think we got lazy when we got to the days of sitting at a terminal, drafting a program, compiling it, running it, debugging it, and...

I think so.

Yes. You may well be right.

[laughs]

[30:05]

So, you, you mention, Aspro-Nicholas was it, as the first move. Were there other moves after that, before you went and joined Steve Shirley?

Well after Aspro-Nicholas, I then went and joined, I became a systems and programming consultant at CMG.

Oh right. Yes.

Another really interesting company.

Yes.

Hadn't been going that long, and, very open. A great model in those days, because, they were very open about what everyone was paid, you could even go and ask to look at somebody's personnel records. They were great at communication, there was a regular monthly staff meeting where they told you everything that was going on. They encouraged share ownership. So all this happened in CMG. And it did systems and programming, as well as, it had a Honeywell bureau, and it had a Burroughs, so, I had the right sort of tech experience when I joined.

[31:6]

So, CMG was what we might now call a systems house, or a software house.

Yes, a consultancy, they would refer to themselves as.

Yes. So, previously you had been in-house...

Yes.

...working on computers owned by...

Yes.

...the company that made something. Whereas now, you were outside in a company that was selling computer-related services into those customers.

Yup. Interesting things learnt there that held me in good stead later on. If you weren't doing any chargeable work, you had to make 30 sales calls in a day. And, you were measured in terms of your chargeable utilisation. And I can look at that, and I can see a project in terms of that, and when I moved in to Freelance Programmers Limited, and became a project manager, it certainly helped me in terms of the professionalism of management project.

Yes. So CMG as kind of, in the same category as Logica...

Yes.

...and Scicon...

Yes.

..and CAP, and those companies. But, but was an early entrant into that market I guess. When are we talking about here?

No, I, I think, the others were there. I think, when I look back on the industry, they were there.

This was 1970 wasn't it?

Because this was '70.

Yeah.

So you had, Hoskyns, you had Scicon, you had systems designers, you had Logica, you had CAP. Yeah.

Yeah. So that was 1970.

Yes. I think it was probably '71. I think I had done over two years in one of the others.

So what did they call you in terms of your job role at CMG?

Systems and programming consultant.

Systems and programming consultant.

That's what we all were.

Yes, right.

Except if you were an associate director.

Right.

Yes.

And, that was presumably a different kind of environment from the, the manufacturing companies like Mars and Aspro-Nicholas.

Mm. Yes.

I mean you mentioned some of the cultural things about communication.

Yes. Well you were being sold.

Yeah.

You had to go where you were told to go. So you might be told on a Friday that you were being sent to Manchester.

Yeah.

I can... [laughs] I can remember being told on Friday that I was going to go off and start work for a bank, with PL/1. And I said, 'Well I've never done any PL/1.' And they said, 'Well here's the manual. Read it over the weekend.' [laughs] So, off I went. And then, I remember, it wasn't long, and, one of my programs didn't work. Of course PL/1 was on an IBM. And I needed to debug it, and, it gave me this printout to debug, which I had never seen before in my life. I said to somebody, 'Oh can you help me? I haven't done one of these before.' I said, 'My programs have always worked in the past,' [laughs] she said, to get round the problem of the fact that I had been sold as an experienced programmer and analyst, and actually, I hadn't done a lot of that skill.

But you took it in your stride.

Yes. [laughs] Yes, do you remember those sorts of days?

[34:13]

So, on a personal level then, you were, you had to be very flexible at that time. You were going off travelling.

Exceptionally.

Presumably sometime along this timeline you, you acquired a husband, and...

I did. And, he was quite happy. I carried on being flexible, flexible in terms of, you know, I was sent off to Belgium to do some work, flexible in terms of, you get a call in the middle of the night from the bank saying, 'The system's gone over. We're sending a cab.' Taxi turns up at the front door, takes you off, and you work all night. Because of course you can't do anything at home, in those days. And so you were there at the beck and call of the company. Very different. And so, when I had my

first child, I knew I didn't want to work full-time. And we'll talk a bit about that for, for women, later.

Mm.

So, I knew about FI, FPL.

Yeah. And that was what prompted you going to work at FI.

Indeed.

Which was in 1977, I think.

Yup. My son was born in November '76, and by about January '77 I was bored.

[laughs]

Right.

I thought, I'll do some part-time work.

Yeah.

Yah.

[35:34]

And... And so this, this company had this model of, of female freelance programmers working in their own home, and...

Indeed. Every... I can't say everyone, but if you were female, you had heard of Freelance Programmers Limited, FI. You knew what they offered, everybody spoke about it. And in the industry, even if you went back to work, it was very rare to hear of a part-time job in the industry.

Yeah.

And it was so different in those days, Tom, to what it is now. And even if you went back to work full-time, or you were part-time, if you were female with a family, you were overlooked for promotion. People just didn't think you could do a competent day's work in the same way that full-time salaried men and perhaps women could.

Yeah.

So, you weren't treated in the same way. And so, I knew of FI. So I applied, and I was interviewed, and, I started life, really as an analyst programmer, working for FI.

[36:48]

So, well let's talk about the women in IT a bit then.

Yes.

Because, it sounds like there was a plentiful supply in those days of IT-skilled women.

Do you know, I think, I think there was. I can't remember precisely what the statistic was, the percentage. I've got a feeling it might have been greater than 20 per cent. But when I was in the department at Mars, probably a third were women. And when I look back at the Aspro-Nicholas department, 50 per cent were women, 50 per cent were men. You know, in those days, there wasn't this feeling that tech was for testosterone men.

Yeah.

Nobody had been playing all these, shooting and, you know, games where you are killing people. It, it was seen very much as a, I think a gender-balanced opportunity.

[37:43]

Presumably though, there was an implication there that, what you've just said about the problem of women finding employment with children, that, there must have been a bias towards younger people in those teams that you were talking about at Mars and

Aspro-Nicholas. Or were there women who had, who had got children that they could leave at home and they had gone back to work?

No. I don't remember any of them having children. They were younger women.

Yeah.

And the only one that wasn't, I think was, I don't think she had children. A big problem was, you could, you could work, you could be treated equally at that level, but once you had a child, you sort of, were deemed as, different.

Yes.

I mean very peculiar. Very peculiar situation. But you weren't the same. They couldn't rely on you. You didn't deserve promotion.

[38:33]

Yeah. Well I was going to ask about, you know, solutions, like childminding. You know, my wife's a teacher, when she went back to work, you know, there was a lady who looked after the children. But, of course, the school days, it's quite rigidly controlled, in terms of hours.

Mm.

Whereas the, the computing day presumably often went on into, into the evening and late at night to solve problems and...

Absolutely. You had to be there to fix things, if you were needed.

[39:03]

Yeah. So this idea of, of Freelance Programmers was an inspiration.

Wonderful. I owe my career to Steve Shirley. There's an icon, there's somebody that I look up to, in terms of what she did, and what she started.

Yeah. So, you, you clearly know her very well, and, over a long period. And she, she is genuinely a figurehead, but...

She is.

Yes.

Absolutely amazing. And of course, you know the story about Dame Stephanie Shirley in the early days, she couldn't get any sales appointments until she signed her letters 'Steve'.

Yes.

And again, another reflection on the fact that the industry didn't really take women seriously at that sort of level.

So again, going back to your, your experiences in the companies before Freelance Programmers, did women achieve seniority in those environments as managers or directors or whatever?

There was a sort of... I can't remember whether they called the chap an IT director or what they called him then, in the computer department, but that was male in both departments. There was a more senior woman, but much more a systems analyst deputy.

Right.

I didn't see anywhere else. So, there weren't that many women.

In CMG, presumably there wasn't a, a glass ceiling, was there? If you were good at, at being a consultant, you would have, you would have progressed to, earn more and...

Well you would. There weren't many women to start with. Not at all. But one of the founders of CMG was a woman.

Right.

Not so much with a computing background, but she was, she was a founder member of the company.

Yeah.

And... But no, there weren't that many women. Not many women consultants. Maybe it was to do with how you went where you went, and...

Yeah. So...

I'll tell you a little story. Because, they were... CMG themselves were quite into equality. I mean there wasn't this, this 'them and us' with women and men. And, if somebody applied for a job, they had to be interviewed by a consultant as well as being interviewed by a manager, and they has to pass both tests.

Yeah.

And it was my turn to interview someone. Someone turned up, I showed them into the interview room. And I, I asked whether they wanted a cup of coffee. And went off and got a coffee, and brought it back, and then I sat down. And they were absolutely, you could see, they were, if I say gobsmacked, it was true. They thought I was the secretary. They did not think I was a consultant in any way.

Mm.

So there was this perception that women did the secretary roles, and not necessarily the higher, computing roles.

Mm.

Just like that Tom.

[41:54]

Yes. So what was your job title when you joined Freelance Programmers?

I think I was an analyst programmer, then I went on to do systems analysis. But quite quickly I became a project manager, which I enjoyed. And then an account manager, which was dealing with the customer.

How did that work then? If you were... You were working from home originally, doing your programming and systems analysis.

Yup. Then I took on a, well not a childminder; I, I found a, I suppose a childminder, not in the house, but I found somebody who would look after my son for two days a week. So, I could go out twice. I could go into London or wherever on two visiting occasions.

Right. Yes.

But, yes. So, that enabled me to have some sort of client interface. But quite often at home I would be doing my work in the evenings.

Yeah. Oh right, yes. Yup.

Not during the day.

Yeah. Yeah. And, it's, it's inconceivable now that, you couldn't do that work at home without a multi-megabit broadband in your PC.

I know. Well this is, this is the reason you had to be so accurate, because you had to write coding sheets, you had to send them off in the post, you had to wait for them to come back. You couldn't afford to make mistakes.

So this, this was, at this stage, all done by, by post.

[laughs] yes.

No, no dial-up, no modems or anything like that.

Not at that stage, that very early stage, no.

So how many days would it take to turn around a, you know, a cycle of code and test?

It could take up to a week. If you think about it, you put something in the post, it's got to get there, then it's got to be turned round, then it's got to come back again.

Yeah.

So you know... Yeah.

[43:51]

So, I mean we seem to have this, this crisis in the IT industry with, with gender equality or whatever we call it, a lack of opportunity. What's changed there? Because, you know, I mean, it seems to be, there seems to be a lack of interest amongst young females in joining this industry, doesn't there?

I think...

What's changed?

I think, people think it's all techie stuff, and nerdy stuff.

Mm.

Sadly. What they don't realise is that, as well as the programmers, and you do need programmers, you do need clever technicians, but there's so many other roles, in

terms of project manager, in terms of account manager, client-facing, where actually what you need is, good interpersonal skills.

Yeah.

And, I left my techie days behind me, you know, COBOL programmer, and then, on to designing systems, and doing the interface with clients.

So you think we've failed to convey to young people the real excitement, the real interest of this as a business?

I think you still get some. I think it's under 20 per cent these days. But I think you still do get some. But I think it is seen as rather a techie thing. But...

Do you have any thoughts on what we should do?

[laughs] Well there are... Encourage more women in. There are initiatives. There are charities that, that encourage women in. I personally fund a scholarship at the university to try and attract a computer, computer science and engineering woman to take a degree in computing.

Yeah.

So... But, I guess, schools, it's where you, you know, where you fix your career really, where you decide what you're going to do at university. It all comes out from schooling. More schools like Hammersmith Academy that focus on information technology and computing.

[46:00]

I'm interested in, in that period from, from the Seventies through to, well as... You, you ended up running what was then Xansa, didn't you.

Well, yeah, operational...

Up to 2003.

Yes.

So, you, you experienced the IT industry from the middle of the Sixties for, gosh, nearly 40 years.

Yes.

Up to, up to the early Noughties as they call them.

Yes.

Which was a huge... There must have been huge changes in the industry over that period.

Well of course, I saw the changes really from the point of view of working in F International. I find, you know, I think I'm very very very fortunate to have worked for that company, which was again very forward-thinking, everyone was equal, and, Steve wanted to create a share ownership model amongst the employees. So in particular, the Eighties and the Nineties were such an exciting time. I mean you know, computing was taking off. Eventually people got their minds round the Internet and things, computing was becoming more and more important in businesses. The market was growing like Topsy. There was plenty of opportunity for companies providing external services. And it was absolutely amazing. It was a wonderful time to work.

[47:39]

So what, what changed in that period? Let's focus on the Eighties and Nineties. You know, how did your company change in terms of, what it was offering to the customers?

Well we were very fortunate, because, Steve wanted to retire, I think she retired from the board in about 1992 when she took on Master at the Worshipful Company of

Information Technologists. So she brought in, in the late Eighties, she brought in the successor, Dame Hilary Cropper, so Hilary Cropper then, who had worked for ICL. And, she had enough experience to see that, the company was doing bits and pieces. It hadn't got a strong enough strategy and focus. So, we were building systems for people, we were maintaining systems for people. And she was very smart, and she saw the fact that, doing support and maintenance, which was considered the lower end of the computing work, not so exciting as building new systems, she saw an opportunity for an outside company to be able to sell into that and pick up the support and maintenance opportunities in the large companies. That worked very well, because it was true, that is what they wanted to, not do if you like, in their internal computing department. And then, that was packaged up into something called applications management. That led into being able to sell outsourcing into these large companies, where FI took over the responsibility for those systems. Again, they were tending to be ones written in COBOL, ones that were sort of, more back office, retail systems, banking systems. And that developed eventually into business process outsourcing, where you could take over the business process. And on the back of that, FI grew fantastically.

[49:43]

So when you talk about outsourcing, you, do you mean that in the same sense that EDS for example did outsourcing, in, in that, when they took over responsibility for a computer department, they would transfer all of the staff from the management of the company, the, the original host company, into their company, so it became...

Yes.

...a largescale matter of staff management and transition management as they used to call it?

Oh yes. Outsourcing involved the toopeeing, the transfer of the staff. FI didn't ever take over control for the computer; that's not where we, we focused, that wasn't what we sold. We sold a best of breed strategy into the IT department whereby they would, if they wanted to, outsource the computer to someone, but they outsourced the applications to us.

But you take on staff who were doing the applications.

Took on staff who transferred across.

Yes. So that was a whole new skillset wasn't it, to...

A whole new skillset, and a whole new gender set. Because although we had had men joining up until then, of course, if you look at a bank, if you look at their IT department, it's going to be far more men than it is women. So suddenly we have hosts of people joining us in a, in a different way.

So who were you competing with?

Oh we were competing with the outsourcers, yes.

Right.

The people that you would think of, Logica, CMG sometimes.

Yup.

Mm.

[51:22]

And, did you then, did that then move you into the design and implementation of new systems for these, for your customers?

To some extent, but the focus was very much on the existing ones.

Right, on the market

And then the business process linked to the existing one. And in order to try and retain a cost-effectiveness edge, we acquired a company in India.

Right.

So that we could move some of the work offshore.

Did that involve you going to India and, and dealing with the Indians?

It did. It did indeed. Yes.

Yes.

So the mergers were very much driven really by Hilary before me.

Yeah.

But yes, going out, and, managing the company and managing our relationship with India. Because, they were doing, doing the work for the outsourcing projects.

Yeah.

And, which I had a responsibility for. It was so exciting, the first big project, taking it over, taking over the department.

[52:32]

Yeah. So, how did you relate to other companies that I think of as being at the forefront in those days, like Accenture, and, you've mentioned Logica, IBM of course? I mean, you were working in competition with those?

To some extent. But I was also trying to sell to IBM.

Right. Yes.

I was trying to sell what we offered. But we would be more in competition with a Logica and, and CMG.

Yeah.

To some extent Accenture, later on when we were doing public sector and outsourcing.

[53:13]

Yah. So what, how did all this affect you and your career?

Well it was a wonderful, wonderful time. And as the company grew, so opportunities grew. I mean it's fantastic isn't it. And, I was a project manager for some projects. I then became an account manager. I then sold, and I was quite successful at selling some new big projects. I became the regional manager of our southern region. So the company got to a stage where it had to split itself up into regions. And I eventually became Regional Manager of South. It sort of, took off from there really. It grew. I became Sales and Marketing Director, I became Chief Operating Officer for a while, and, yes.

And did all this come naturally to you?

Yes. [laughs] That sounds as though I'm bragging, doesn't it. But there's just, it just was a very natural thing. I hadn't sat back and thought, well I'm going to do that one day. The company grew, opportunities became available. Quite often I'd not perhaps even apply. Sometimes the opportunities were just offered to you. But eventually one had to apply for the more senior roles. And yes, it was great. Absolutely fantastic.

[54:36]

So, what, what do you think is, is the secret of your success in that professional capacity in terms of, you know, the, the personal traits and skillset? I'm not, I'm not suggesting you should brag.

[laughs]

I, I asked, I asked somebody else I interviewed, you know, to what they attributed their success in the computer business, and you know, was it... He was a mathematician as well actually. Did the maths help? He said, 'No. No. Clear thinking. That's what I've got, clear thinking.'

That's a good one. I can't say my technical skills contributed greatly; after a certain point, I wasn't really using them. I think that, what got me on were, my interpersonal skills, my people skills. I love managing teams.

Yes.

I just love motivating teams, and managing them. So, getting that group of people together, so you gel and you work as one, absolutely fantastic. And I also like project managing things. I'm a bit of a completer finisher. If you do the, if you do these... I can't remember the, you know, when you analyse your traits, and they come up with, chairman, monitor, completer finisher. I'm either the chairman or I'm a completer finisher.

Yes. Yeah.

So I'm not an amazing ideas person.

Right.

What I'm good at is delivering things, and then eventually, I'm good at chairing meetings. And having a clear focus. So I think, clear thinking is an important aspect actually.

Mm.

Because you've got to be quite focused on what you're trying to do, and not get distracted.

Yes. I remember in, you know, my own career, I worked mainly with consultants, and there was always a big issue about selling, and whether consultants sell, whether they should sell. And they used, they used to say, 'But I don't like selling.' And that, that always seemed to be a big issue, because it sounds like you...

I like selling.

You like selling?

I did like selling. No, we used to say about consultants, because weren't really, we weren't a consultancy, not until we acquired a company, in the late Nineties, when, you know, what was... In the industry, it was said, you know, give a, give your watch to a consultant, and they'll tell you the time.

Yes.

But I'm not sure consultants are the greatest completer finishers. They're, to me, they're the ideas people, they're the creative element in a lot of cases. Project management requires a, I think attention to detail in delivering things.

[57:27]

So, so you ended up as, as Group Managing Director.

Managing Director.

And, you have explained that you had an ambition to retire at 55. And, and you did that.

Yes. I did.

In 2003.

I did indeed.

And was that a wrench?

No. [both laugh] No, no, I was ready for it. I wanted to do different things. I wanted to spend more of my time doing things that I thought made a difference.

Right. And that then led to this build-up of your voluntary and charitable portfolio.

I think for the first few years I was probably about 50-50. I already had Help the Aged. And then I added... Well the university wasn't until 2001 actually. So, I had added the university before I retired. So I had Help the Aged, and I had the university. And then in 2003 I became a trustee of my local hospice. I was always quite driven, not only to give something back but to try and give it back in my community. So if you look over the years, you'll find I've withdrawn from London to do more and more in Hertfordshire. It's what spurs me on. Make a difference in the community. And so I became a, a trustee of The Hospice of St Francis, then I found myself being elected Chair the following year. And, in the university I was a governor for six years, and I found myself elected as the chairman for another six years. And Help the Aged, I was actually there for about eighteen years I think. And, I was a trustee for a long time, and then I became Chair for their final five years.

[59:29]

Did you, did you find that there was a big difference in terms of how you worked in the corporate environment and how you work in the voluntary environment?

I don't think there was a big difference for me, but I think there's quite a big difference in how those organisations work. And I think one of the things that I was able to bring to those organisations was actually, more business management. I wouldn't wish any of them to be a business, because, they needed focus on the caring aspect of what they're doing. So in the hospice the key thing for them is, they look after patients at the end of life. But there's no reason why they can't be run in a business-like way. And when I joined them, there was quite a lot one could do to make them more businesses-minded in how they approached board meetings, committees, finance.

And were they receptive?

Yes they were. Yeah, no, they were receptive.

And, can you, can you kind of quantify in, in any way the difference that, that you've made in these organisations?

In Help the Aged, I became Chair, eventually, this is after about, being a trustee for six teen years, a lot of that time I was working full-time. And, it had always seemed to me that it was quite ridiculous to have two charities, Age Concern and Help the Aged, both doing exactly the same thing. Both having chief executives, both having finance directors, both having marketing directors. All that money in, in that director-management team, could be spent on older people, if they would only get together. I seem to remember they had tried getting together for about four times, and it hadn't worked. But when I became Chair, I was very fortunate, my opposite number, Catherine, in Age Concern England, I got on with really well. And we were able to take our boards through a process, quite a long process, it must have been three years perhaps, two or three years, whereby at the end of it Help the Aged merged with Age Concern England. No, Age Concern England was separate to all the other Age Concerns, because, Age Concern is a federation. So they had all these different little charities. But Age Concern England was the central one that did a lot of the big business stuff. And they merged. And then, they had one chief executive, and they had one finance director. And that was going to release moneys up to spend on older people.

And was that a difficult process?

Yes. Have you ever done anything with charities? Charities are so precious about their charity.

Mm.

If you look across the sector, so many of them could really benefit from doing more together. But a lot of them get started with a passion for something, and, their founder

is there, and, doesn't want to do anything with another charity. I think the Charity Commission have often said they would like to see more mergers in the sector.

Yeah. Yeah.

It would make the sector more efficient. But they have this, this passion that makes them want to put their arms round their charity, and they can't see how they could possibly work with another organisation.

Yes.

So it was difficult. It was step by step, Tom. You lead people step by step.

[1:03:11]

And you enjoy doing this stuff, do you?

Yes. Absolutely. It's a challenge, and then you get a wonderful end result from it.

Yeah. Yeah.

With the hospice, it was a different kettle of fish. It was, certainly bringing my business management skills to the board, and bringing more focus. But, they had just agreed as a board that they wanted to move premises, and they had found a plot of land, and I was chair of the board in the period where, we raised money, we sold an old building where I think we only had four beds, and we built a brand new building, and, which took, twelve days I think it was, provided twelve days for patients. And that was quite a big project. So although we employed a professional building project manager, it helped greatly to have had my experience at managing projects, large projects, IT projects.

It sounds pretty obvious when you explain it like that, why, why you are so valuable to them. Because you're, you're bringing your experience...

Those particular...

Yes.

You know, I, I had a passion for the hospice, local hospice, it was wonderful. And that was brilliant. I think, the university's a much bigger organisation, and it was established. The biggest thing I think I did there was contribute towards the recruitment of a vice-chancellor, who has proved to be hugely successful. Absolutely wonderful.

[1:04:47]

Because your position at the university was Pro-Chancellor.

Yeah, and Chairman of the Board.

Is that what, they mean the same thing, do they?

Yes. Yes. Yes.

So what do you... What do you, what can you influence at the university, in, from that position?

The way the board works.

So...

And, obviously, the vice-chancellor, given that you work closely with them. I have... This is bragging, Tom, and I don't want to particularly brag, but I have been told on so many occasions that I am particularly good at chairing meetings. Chairing meetings to cover the topics that need to be covered, chairing them to time, allowing people all to have their say, and making sure that they're run in a very professional way. And I think that's something that I've brought to the university. I hope I helped make the board more professional. So, we reduced the number of governors, because, there's nothing worse than having a board of about fifteen people. You don't really ever achieve a lot.

Yeah.

Reduced down to, a number of different governors, and made it much more an effective board. I'd like to think I've done that everywhere I've chaired. So...

[1:06:15]

Yes. Yes. Yes, I suppose, I suppose that... I, I don't really understand how universities work, and what they, you know, what the management structure is. So, yeah, what makes them successful, or, or not successful. And, I guess what you're really saying is that, that you make sure in that position that the top layer of management is, is the right set of people.

Yes, and the board drives the strategy.

Yeah.

You know, there needs to be a very clear strategy. You need to know what you are going to be known as.

Yes.

And what was really interesting was, that the University of Hertfordshire made its differentiation being a business-facing university.

Right. OK.

Very interesting.

What does that mean exactly?

Well that was, in terms of developing people, but it was... It was businesses in the way it ran it, but it was also business in, in what it did. So it had links to business. It found work placements for students.

Right. Yeah.

People were sent out with a set of attributes and skills that would suit employment. So it was very much geared up to that. So, rather than being maybe a, Oxford, Cambridge, Durham where the focus is on academia, and academic stuff, it was trying to equip people for the world of work through their university degrees.

And, is that your influence in setting that direction?

No, I, I wouldn't like to take the credit for all of that. But I think it worked well with my background.

[1:07:55]

Yah. And, Ofcom. You've done stuff with Ofcom haven't you? Which sounds a bit different from...

Yes, I had one of those phone calls. You know you get somebody phoning you up, headhunters. 'We have this opportunity we thought you would be, you know, interested in.' And, at the point they phoned me up, Ofcom had something called an advisory committee on behalf of older and disabled people. Making sure that what was happening in the telecoms market was appropriate for older and disabled people. And they were interested because, I had chaired Help the Aged, so I had a background of understanding some of the older people's issues. And I got recruited as chair of that committee. They then decided to merge that committee with something called the Communications Consumer Panel, because of course the Consumer Panel, large part of its time was spending, looking at issues on behalf of older and disabled people, along with the rest of the population. So they put those two together, and I became chair of that panel. Fascinating.

Presumably, a very different environment from either the university or, or the charity.

Very different, but you still need to chair the meetings effectively. You still need to have a focus. You think about, the telecoms marketplace.

Mm.

There are so many issues for consumers that if you don't have a clear focus and understanding of what you're trying to tackle, you'd just be completely lost. So you need that focus, you need your clear direction strategy, and, yes, no, you need a good chaired meeting with panel members.

[1:09:33]

I must ask also about this Deputy Lieutenant, which...

Oh.

I don't really understand what that involves either. What do you have to do as a deputy lieutenant?

Well, the Lord Lieutenant is the Queen's representative in the county, and every county has one.

Yes.

And, the Lord Lieutenant is supported by a team of deputy lieutenants. So the sort of things that happen are, of course one of the key things for the Lord Lieutenant is, if there are any royal personages visiting in the county, they would work with the people in the Palace to make sure that the visit was well organised. They would be present on that visit, and make sure that it was all very suitable for the Royal Family. In addition to that, they support the sort of things that the Royal Family are doing. So, recognition of achievements. So, they have, they give out the BEM, the British Empire Medals. They assess charities for the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service. They go and attend, present sometimes the Duke of Edinburgh Bronze Medals. They attend charities' AGM. They go on visits to charities. They're there to support the charity sector, they're there to support schools, they're there to support what's happening in the county in the same way that the Royal Family grants them support, so that if you look supporting the services, the cadets.

Right. Yes.

So it's a sort of offshoot. So I laid a wreath for Remembrance Day, in one of the local towns, in recognition of the November the 11th. I'm going along next week to award some Duke of Edinburgh Bronze Medals. I go and give presentations at schools on the Monarchy, Commonwealth and Lieutenancy.

And how do you get to be a deputy lieutenant then? Is this another of those phone calls?

[laughs] Yes. I think what happened actually was, when we opened the new hospice the Duke of Kent came along, and because the Duke of Kent came along to open it, the Lord Lieutenant was there, and the Lord Lieutenant met me, and after that I seemed to get the phone call.

[1:11:50]

So you, you've clearly, you've clearly leveraged those skills that you learnt over the first 35 years or whatever. Are lots of people like you doing this stuff? I mean...

There are people who go and do pro bono work in charities, particularly trustees and, and another things. You know, I have met them on the charity boards. [laughs]

Yes.

So, there are...

Are there enough of them?

[hesitates] There are enough. But, I think there should be more women, and I think there should be more people representing the, the ethnicity side of our community.

Yeah.

So when you look at the boards, something else that I've tried to do is make sure the board is representative of the community. But it's very hard to find the right sort of people. You're relying on people applying, but not everybody thinks of applying. So, I would like to see more ethnic representation. Fortunately, on some of the boards I've sat, there has been quite a good female representation. I think it's very important that you get a balance across a board.

[1:13:07]

I suppose what prompts the question is that, we, you know, people we interview in this process, there's a lot of people who have been successful in a professional or corporate career, and, and most of those, a large number of those, these days seem to go into a, a kind of second career of investment and, the angel role.

Mm. Yes.

The investment and mentoring and growing more businesses. You seem to have enthusiastically embraced a voluntary and charitable direction.

Yes. Yes, I did, I did do some non-execs when I first retired. But a lot of the companies were small companies, and they got sold quite quickly, because the right thing to do in the industry at the time was actually sell them to somebody else. And I did a couple, I did an AIM-listed one, and I thought, after that, no. And sometimes as a non-exec director, it's quite difficult to effect change on a board.

Yes.

And, I think, on a trustee board of a charity, you have a lot more sway. And so, I just found, I was getting a huge amount more satisfaction out of the, the charitable work that I was doing, the pro bono work that I was doing, and gave up the non-execs.

Yeah.

But, having said that, I was in a very fortunate position, Tom, where I had a pension, and I didn't need to earn a lot of money, at that point.

Yes.

So... And that's back to Steve Shirley. Her company grew, it flourished, I had shares, and so, you know, I had a pension and I was also able to have a shareholding for the end as well.

Yes, of course share, the employee shareholding was a big feature of that company, wasn't it?

Yes.

Did... Clearly, it was good for you, in terms of the, the outcome. Did it, do you think it made a big difference to the way people thought about the company, and worked in it?

I certainly did, and particularly the Nineties. Everyone was abuzz, with the shares. And then when we floated on the Stock Exchange, and share price was important, and, I think people were very driven. If you've ever read... Have you read Steve's book?

I have, yes.

Some of the people on reception, some of the receptionists, invested in the shares and became millionaires. That was fantastic for them.

Yeah. Yes.

But... So I've been very lucky, because I've been able to choose the paths I wanted to take, because I was financially secure. That doesn't happen for everyone.

[1:15:58]

Yup. And you've been honoured in various ways for these contributions to society.

Yes, I have.

What does that mean to you?

Well it's, an independent external recognition that you've done something.

Mm.

Which I think is really important. And so I got my OBE for services for older people, which was really the merger of Help of Aged and Age Concern. I became a Deputy Lieutenant, I think for the work I was doing in the county. I was chairing the university board, and I was chairing the hospice board. Here, I think because of education... I mean, one of the things I haven't said is that, I joined the Worshipful Company of Information Technologists, partly because it had a charity and did charitable things. And so I joined because it gave me a framework to give something back.

Yes.

And as you know, I went on to be Master in 2008/9, and then I went on to chair the charity, which I did for eight years or something, and I retired in June. And that's just been another, you know, fantastic aspect of being able to give something back. And, I just think that's really important. I've been able to establish a scholarship at the university for somebody, a girl, although you're not allowed to say that in print these days, female, but some female doing computer science and engineering. I've been able to establish an endowment fund at the Hertfordshire Community Foundation, to be able to donate and make grants to help older people. I've been able to establish, become one of the guardians at The Hospice of St Francis supporting their bereavement centre, and I'm also a patron there. So it's all sort of linked together.

Yes. Yes.

And it's just absolutely fascinating.

But there was no master plan in all of that, it's just...

Well the master plan at the moment, Tom, is to cut back. [laughs] Because I think, I've reached a point where, I've been very busy.

Yes.

Probably busier than a full-time job, to some extent. Ofcom ended in March, and a number of the positions that I have finished, so the chairmanship of the charity at the livery company has finished, and I am no longer a trustee at Hertfordshire Community Foundation. Everything came to the end of its term. So now I'm focusing my time being a patron of the hospice still, and being a deputy lieutenant, which takes some time, and being a church warden, which seems to take quite some time, and being able to go out to Portugal more often, because we have a little place out there.

But you're not looking for other big voluntary charitable jobs?

I'm not. But if somebody tapped me on the shoulder and it was something really interesting...

So if one of those telephone calls came...

You never know.

[1:19:07]

*Do you have any thoughts on the future of the industry that
, you've been part of?*

[pause] I...

Is it going to be a force for good in the next ten years?

It's changed so much. It is life, isn't it. Life cannot exist for anyone really without computers these days. The industry in the UK in particular has changed so much. It's

really quite sad. When I was doing my early-day programming, you know, there was CMG, there was Logica, there was Hoskyns, there was systems designers. There were all these... BIS. You know, all these companies. There was this absolutely vibrant UK computing industry. But over time, they've all been acquired, and, they've all gone really. There's Accenture still, but that's an American company. EDS, and, I think most of them probably... Oh, I was going to say, acquired by the Americans, but Xansa was acquired by the French. [laughs] So Steria.

Mm.

And, there isn't the home-baked industry in the UK any more, not in that way. But what we do have is a very entrepreneurial, technical industry, so, we have a lot of start-ups and a lot of good things happening in the UK. But I think in the future, some aspects are for good, and some aspects not so good. And I just think it's so difficult to say.

[1:20:41]

The idea of AI seems to divide opinions strongly doesn't it, about whether it's going to be a good thing or a bad thing.

I think all technology is down to how it's applied and used. And that means it's down to human intervention. Technology has the power to be good all the time, but it's not always used that way.

So, what do we need to do about that? Whose, whose responsibility is that? Is that the Government, or, is it, is it something the WCIT should be influencing, or...?

Well partly it's the Government. I know, when I think of it's not good, I think of scams, I think of people hacking in and getting your data.

Mm.

You know, it's big things like that. AI I think is a force for good, in that it can be used to make charities far more efficient and expand their operations. So, it can be,

you know, they can be helping far more people. But, there's an ethics side to AI isn't there.

Yeah.

And, whoever's implementing it needs to be very careful that they are observing the ethical requirements.

[1:21:52]

So if you were to meet, well, as, as I'm sure you do, if you were to meet a seventeen-year-old, sixth-form student studying maths these days, what advice would you give them about a career?

Oh I'd go for it. Absolutely. Yup.

In IT, or...?

Yup. IT or engineering, because they're very intertwined in some ways.

Yeah.

I certainly would. If they have that sort of nature. You know, they, you do need to be a bit of a, a maths, a bit of a technology person. I mean it's no good if you are doing language A Levels. Perhaps to try and go into the technical end, the computer science bit. But that... When I was recruiting graduates at FI, we recruited half our graduates from computer science degrees, which you need to get the technical bit, and we recruited half our graduates from language and, you know, arts degrees. Because those are the people that seem to be better at dealing with people.

Yeah.

Having those interpersonal skills. Running big projects with big teams.

Yeah.

It was interesting.

[1:23:05]

So, you're, you're sufficiently optimistic about the future of IT then that you would encourage young people to, to...

Not going to go away, is it, Tom? Not going away at all. It's going to be like science fiction films. Well it already is in a way. Do you remember them? [laughs]

Well thank you for that. Is there anything else that, that you would like to offer by way of a thought before we close the interview?

Just to say that if anyone ever thinks of what they might do with their time, particularly if they're getting older, giving back, either financially, or giving back with your time, to help those less fortunate is a very rewarding thing to do.

Well I think you've demonstrated that very well, and, it's been fascinating hearing about it. Thank you very much for that.

[End of Interview]