



Sir Desmond Pitcher

Interviewed by

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Welcome to the Archives of Information Technology, where we capture the past and inspire the future. It's Wednesday December the 18th 2019, and we are in the City of London, in the headquarters of the British Computer Society, which was founded in 1957.

[00:18]

Nobody that I know, and certainly nobody whom I have interviewed for these archives, has such a varied background in IT as the man who is making his contribution today, Sir Desmond Pitcher. He has been on the computer side, he has worked for American companies, he has worked for British companies, he has been on the telecommunications side, and also he has been in charge of the implementation of large computer systems in British industry, and particularly in Littlewoods. And so, welcome to the Archives Sir Desmond. Now you were born in Liverpool.

Yes.

And, your father left home pretty soon.

Yes. He... Well, he virtually left home, about the time I was born, yes, uh-huh.

And you are a, you are a dedicated Liverpool man I understand.

Well, I don't know. I mean I, one of the great privileges I have had is the opportunity to do business in many countries, like China for instance, we go over there once a year, to see the Chinese friends again. So I have always seen myself a little bit, personally I admire the Far East, and I, I really liked doing my seventeen years in the States. And, of course, my whole life has been driven by technology and improvement technology.

[01:41]

So your mother basically raised you. What values did you get from your mother?

Well, I was six when the war broke out. So, at that point in time I had to go and live with my grandmother. My mother was co-opted, as all women were in those days, so I lived with my grandmother on the docks at Liverpool, with one of the chaps there

who was one of the senior dockers. So, my first impression of, of life, was one of chaos and concern. For instance, there was very few men around. You didn't see men. You would see women crying on the street in a distressed situation. One night, a night I shall never forget was in May 1941, when 59,600 bombs dropped on Liverpool, all round the area where I was. 1,000 people dead on the street. And so on and so forth. So, my life was a bit of a shock really, but, somehow or other, I sort of thought of it as a sort of, exciting game at that age. But nevertheless it, it left an impression upon me, because it was I think an unusual situation of course. But later on things got back to, to normal.

When I was in Liverpool recently there was an exhibition in the town hall of that Blitz attack, and the devastation was just huge.

It was, yes.

We think that London was battered, when it was, but Liverpool was really badly battered.

Well, it was, Churchill was absolutely adamant that there must be no mention of it in the press and the country. But Liverpool of course was, was at that stage, fourteen miles of docks, by far the biggest port in England, and the only one accessible. They could not go above the Channel, that wasn't possible because, the threat following fall of France, the Germans had control over that. But... And also, it was too years before, after war was declared, before the Americans came in. So the whole burden of sort of, stopping the Germans, fell on the British at that time. And our Commonwealth friends had co-operated enormously. I mean a million troops had come through the city. And on top of all that, enormous sums of goods and things came from our Commonwealth friends, particularly, again, in that, that front, in that particular time. So, that, to Hitler, that was a number one target. He had to close the city down, and more particularly, the docks down. He was capable of doing that from France. The country was protected by very, very brave and strong fighter divisions in the south, but it wasn't protected at all from the west. And that's the way the Germans got there. They flew up the Irish Sea, to Dublin, and then turned right at 68

degrees and they could get over Liverpool very easily, without any real possibility of attack.

[04:36]

Was your school disrupted, your schooling disrupted?

Well it was. I didn't really have any proper schooling till I was about, about eleven, because of the... the war it was stopped, but everything else went on. A pretty chaotic situation, yes. But, it didn't stop me... Funnily enough, if I have to sum up, summarise one aspect of my own character, I've never been frightened of anything. And I think, in my industrial roles and attacks and all the rest of it, I've never been frightened of anything. And I really put that down to those early years.

[05:08]

When you did get to school, did you enjoy it?

Well, [laughs] not really, because the first school I went to was in Llangollen, where, the Government decided in 1942 to get all the people out of, and evacuate all the young people. But of course [laughs], the real impact of it was then over, because the Americans came in to the war and that changed the dimension in terms of the German approach. And therefore I was in a Welsh educational school, of which there were about six of us, and we had to sit at the back because most of the discussion was in Welsh. [laughs] So, so it's only when I came back to Liverpool when I'd be about ten that I actually went to any sort of school of any consequence. The consequence, the implication of that of course was, I never got a chance to go to a grammar school or any other kind of education like that. But I did win a scholarship to go to Liverpool Technical College, and that really was a big breakthrough for me frankly, and which, I then studied at Liverpool College of Art. Liverpool... Sorry, not College of... at Liverpool College of Law, Liverpool Commercial College, and at the Law Institute. So I have a whole batch of examinations, but nothing really thorough. But that was put right by Manchester, because I also studied at Manchester, where they made me an Honorary Professor for 20 years or so, so, yeah.

[06:33]

Were you always interested in technology?

I was always interested in trains, therefore engineering.

Trains?

Trains.

OK.

Engines. And I was endlessly at Wigan and places like that, to see all of that. I could walk from, back to where my mother lived, which was a council house in, near Ken Dodd actually. [laughs] And so, that was our only claim to fame, Ken Dodd was one of our neighbours.

I thought that Knotty Ash was made up, but apparently not.

Oh no, no no.

It is an actual area.

Oh absolutely, yes. [laughs]

I thought he made it up.

And became famous because Ken Dodd talked about the Knotty Ash treacle mines.

Yes.

[laughs] Yeah, but, no no, it's there. And actually, it, in its time, and now, it's still quite a reasonable sort of place. It's, it's semi-urban, but was then in the country, was still in the country.

Right.

Yes. So, there it is. I mean...

So it was trains.

It was trains.

Trains that really turned you on.

Steam trains of course.

[07:32]

Yes. One of your first jobs was as an apprentice in AV Roe. Now, Avro was a great plane maker, based in Manchester was it?

Yes.

And they had made the Lancaster.

Yes.

And they were building one of the three V bombers to take the atomic bomb.

Yes. By the way, I wasn't an apprentice. I was appointed as a development engineer.

Sorry.

OK.

And you were a, electrical systems engineer.

Yes.

And you worked on the electrical systems for the Vulcan bomber.

Yes. Yes.

Which was the delta wing bomber, a very elegant plane.

Yes.

Only once used in anger.

Well there are similarities between the Lancaster and the Vulcan. There were three bombers, the Victor, the Valiant and the Vulcan. The Valiant was a stopgap bomber, because we had nothing after the war comparable to, to replace the Lancaster. 11,200 Lancasters built by the way, of which 6,000 were destroyed in the war. And... But it seemed, because all the political events after the war, which kept a sort of, a wartime feeling alive, they needed a bomber. So the Valiant was a rushed job, but very standardisation. The Victor was the Government's favourite. The Victor, it was a crescent wing, unusual shape, so on and so forth, and that's the one that the Ministry of Defence put the backing to. And the Vulcan was an intermediate, never thought it would be the main, mainstream. The same story as the Lancaster actually. The Lancaster was disregarded in the war, until AV Roe itself built it, put it together. Borrowed engines from Rolls Royce and what have you. And in the end of course it became the backbone of our defence system, and...

[09:26]

Do you regret the death of companies like AV Roe?

[laughs] Absolutely. Absolute... I regret, I mean, not just AV Roe but our British steel industry, our, all our major industries which died as a consequence of political decisions in the Sixties and Seventies, you know.

Not that you are responsible, but you have worked with companies that have, have died and gone. You've worked with AV Roe.

Yes.

You worked with Sperry Univac.

Yes.

Gone. You've worked with Leyland.

Well not quite. [laughs] Sperry, Sperry...

Sperry is still there, true. But Univac is not.

Well it was...

It merged into Burroughs and...

It's the same company.

Yes.

Yes, OK.

You worked with Leyland.

Yes.

And you worked with Plessey.

Yes. Do you want me to go through them one by one?

Yes. Well they were not your fault, I'm sure.

OK. No.

But what I'm saying is that you...

[10:19]

I mean... I mean Sperry, Sperry of course was the company that made me what I am, right.

Right.

I mean, they are...

You moved into Sperry in '61.

Yes.

How old were you then?

I would say probably 31. No, hang on. Born in '35. You work it out. Be 26 wouldn't I.

36.

26.

26.

Yeah, 26.

Yes. Why did you go to Sperry?

I went to Sperry because they, following the situation where the, there was no continuation of AV Roe, they advertised, I think it was in the *Times*, for two scholarships to study computer development in Switzerland, with American, American achievers who made real progress studying. And, there was hundreds and hundreds applied for that, hundreds. And I do think, I was fortunate because of my background in AV Roe on the development and design of closed electrical control

system, right? And one day was on that exact relevant experience, the first day was on general knowledge type thing. Surprisingly the other Englishman was an Indian, [laughs] who spoke 22 languages, you know. So, then, they were from six countries, there were twelve of us, and we were there for a period of time, meeting, meeting all sorts, Eckert-Mauchly, and all kind of people came to lecture and work with us. And, just seen the photograph out there of...

So this was Sperry Univac.

Yes.

Univac, which was, which had absorbed the Eckert-Mauchly computer company.

Yes.

And Eckert and Mauchly had done ENIAC in the United States.

But it was also a major technology company in Minneapolis, which was a real gem that they brought into it, which had been heavily committed to military communications, and had the real power to communicate externally to it. And that's where... Univac started taking all the major contracts in the world, which involved heavy communication, or interactive communication. For instance, SITA. Nobody's ever heard of SITA, but SITA is Scientific Information Aviation, science... It's, it's a company based in, in Paris, which has the whole responsibility for all aviation messages. Because aviation messages are taken from the Government, and the Government subordinate to all that. It didn't have to develop the means of transport, but SITA handles all that. And it's a massive contract of major switching centres all over the world, to handle that. And that kind of thing, a kind of, speciality that major computers, and communicating computers, that was, that was their, always their forte.

[13:15]

When you joined Sperry Univac in 1961, the UK had 312 computers, a fifth of which were US made.

Mm.

And then, two years afterwards IBM launched the System/360.

Yes.

Which, it had a lot of trouble getting the software and hardware working.

Mhm.

And Univac was able to really capitalise out of that, .

Well I, I think... No, I think we're in different markets []. By the way, of course, quite right, I mean, one of the early tenders I was associated with, there were 25 bidders, [laughs] right? You name it, the 25 bidders. But in the end they came down to ourselves, IBM, Burroughs and Honeywell. But very serious bidders. But IBM dominated the commercial market. They took their business out of a massive commercial base, and brought it into computers. The concept of Sperry Rand was to achieve the same thing, except that Sperry Rand had a different sector of the commercial market. And, and they had a consultant, what name, who suggested how you improve your, this is worldwide of course, how you improve your profitability, is, you actually, don't do your own marketing; you sell your marketing outlets to people, and then you don't have all the burden cost of marketing. But, that's true, but then you've got no bloody business, you know. [laughs] Which is exactly what happened. Because the Japanese moved in and bought the whole load, and put their products in to them exactly the same thing they did in cars. I mean they were terrible cars, the Japanese brought in, rubbish, the paintwork was going, they were unreliable. But they came in and Leyland had to ditch all its different dealers, because they had seven different ranges of cars. They couldn't cope with that. But the Government had no idea how to rationalise industry. It does not understand marketing, competitive selling, no idea. And it thrust all that open space out for foreign countries to come in and take up. IBM happened to have less than an attractive situation in, in Britain, because both Remington and Sperry had an agreement not to, not to interfere with the

Hollerith 90 card system. And that put them behind, but they came. Now I think the best example of this is... Is this all right, the way I'm talking to you?

Yes, fine.

[15:49]

The best example of this was the space programme, because, Kennedy... Some of this is hearsay and you can take out what you want of it. But, Kennedy was having a pretty hard time, his personal life had been exposed all over the press, Bay of Pigs hadn't worked very well, and so on and so forth. And he, seemingly he said, well, one day in his office, and he... 'Who's in charge of space, space activity?' So the chief of staff went back, and he said, it's some department called NASA, the national association of space, association. And he said, 'Well bring the boss man here,' right. So, they ring up for the boss man to come and immediately, and he wasn't there, he hadn't come to work yet, you know. And he eventually turned up at half-past eleven, and everybody in the office was going hysterical because [laughs] he had to be at the White House at half-past ten, [laughs] you know, right. And when he got to Kennedy's office, Kennedy said to him, 'Do you think we could put a man on the Moon?' And he said, 'Oh, well, not, not really. There's only 36 people working for me.' He said, 'No, no, forget all that rubbish. The resources will be there. Do you think it's viable to put a man on the Moon?' 'Well, with a lot of resources sir, everything's possible.' He said, 'It would take a bit of time.' 'How long would...?' He said, 'Probably fifteen years.' 'No, no no. [laughs] I want him on in four years,' you know. The next four years, he wants to be President, right.

Yes.

He said, 'Go away...'. The chap said, 'Well, I really, I must go and talk to my colleagues,' you know. So, 'Go and come back this afternoon,' right. Which, he went and he talked to his colleagues. After a long argument, this seems ridiculous, and there are problems and all the rest of it. The difference between Britain and America is, we argue the problems all the time, talk about the problems all the time. Working in American industry, it's lovely. Everybody talks, 'What can we do? What can we do?'

Right. This is a fundamental difference in attitude is it?

Total. Yeah, totally, yes.

And you were taught that in Sperry, were you?

Absolutely. Yeah. Never get gloomy about the past you know. Look at, look at some examples where it's gone wrong, and put them right. But don't let it dominate your conversation, right. So, he had this, this conference with the people, and finally thought, 'Well I think you all seem to agree that, with the right resources, this can be done, but obviously we can't do it by ourselves, right?' One chap said, 'Yeah.' He said, 'You look a bit gloomy.' He said, 'Oh yeah,' he said, 'but we can't bring him back you know.' [both laugh]

But they did bring them back.

Yeah. So what happened then, when Kennedy got the word, it could be done, that's all he needed to know, right. He then decided, if the Government handled it, it would never be done. There's a message here, isn't there. [laughs] A strong message here, right. So he said, 'Well, bring me the two best companies in the States that I can consider for this.' And it was IBM and Sperry. And Sperry by the way were the biggest single defence supplier of any other company. So that's why I think it was Sperry. And Sperry got the contract. What he did, he, he insisted, one person, a face-to-face interview, one person. 'I don't want the chairman,' he said. 'I want somebody who has done something like this in the organisation. The best man in their organisation who could possibly do this.' And Sperry got the contract. Now within two years there were 25,000 people on that programme. To my mind that's the, the best example of a management achievement the world has ever done. And the man was on the Moon in four years. Don't you think so? How they put that management team together in two years, the right sort of people, all different skills, all different backgrounds, and all... And don't forget, the other major problem in all this was, you had to have the world on side. Because, all right for them to go round the world, you can have six stations, but when it's going up there somewhere, you have to

have 20 stations, and one had to be in China. And they put one in China. The Chinese put it in, in spite of the different, hostile...

[20:07]

So, so when we see the historic pictures of Houston command and control centre, with all of those banks of screens, with all those specialists, and their notebooks, [laughs] and their pipes and their cigarettes...

Yes. And of course all the Univac equipment.

And... Well behind that is all Univac is it?

Yes. Yeah. Because of its...

Although, it was an IBM computer on the spacecraft itself, wasn't it?

I don't remember that.

I think it was. But all of that was Univac?

Yeah. Yeah. Yes.

And presumably all of that was on a type of cost-plus contract.

I don't know. I wasn't involved in the contract business, but, the Americans, the, the Government, are very sharp on cost.

Yes.

[20:54]

Let me give you an example when I went back to, when I went to Plessey. Plessey shares were 36p. The order book was virtually zero, going to zero. That was because of course, the Government had gone through a blitz on capital spending a few years and cut out all these things which are vitally necessary. And, I'm sitting down with

the other, the directors and what have you, the first meeting, and with the finance director who had just joined as well, a cracking bloke, cracking bloke. I always believe in having a good finance director, and a good relationship with him. And I said to him, how do we get the cost out of this, and the cost out of that, and the cost out of this, and the cost... So we have a break, and he says, 'Desmond,' he said, 'it's not going to work, what you're doing.' [laughs] And I said, 'Why?' He said, 'Because to get the cost out, it's all on the Treasury formula, which is, four per cent of turnover plus fifteen per cent return on assets.' So while get the cost out, both profit goes as well. [laughs] And, the Americans have a better system, nowadays, right.

Yes.

And, I, I actually got round that, because, Bill Barlow was the Chairman of the Post Office, and Bill, the man that split the Post Office from BT apart from...

Yes.

And Jefferson was the Chairman of BT. I got on very well with these two people, right. And, we had... Bill would have, once a month he would have the three major, or the four major suppliers, depending on how he felt, have dinner with them, to see how things could get better and better. Because, we got blamed, we were no good. So somebody else gets blamed, and, government type things, right. And Bill, of course he was, commercial background. And, I said to him, 'You know, TXE4,' which was the current range, which was replacing the Strowger equipment, but nothing like System X, which we were developing, I brought the research group over from the States in to finish, develop System X. A bit like, a bit like, you know, leaving the EU, you've got to get the right people in there to, to work. I said, 'Why can't we get all your, your examiners and cost estimators and all the thing at my factory, and I will agree to you that, we'll keep the... And I, I will agree to you, and you agree with me, that the price that you pay today for the next five years,' it was a five-year contract, 'will be the same, except for Retail Price Index.' And he said, 'Are you certain?' I said, 'I am, yeah.' Because I knew we could cut the cost by half, right. [laughs] And it was obvious. I mean apart from anything, the cost of all these inspectors was enormous, right. And the other two were furious. Doug Ellis from

GEC was, was furious about, about this, and the chap from STC almost punched me in the face. So, so Bill kept at us you see. And he said, 'When will we do that?' I said, 'Tomorrow morning.' I said, 'If we don't do it tomorrow morning, it'll be whittled away.' We all sort of unions will be attacking us, and everything else, you know. 'I'll call you in the morning,' he said. So he called me, he said, 'The prices that are listed today, you will do for five years plus, plus the increase of,' of it, the normal increase situation. We made 50 million a year out of that contract.

Right.

And they got it on time. And that was my American background, wasn't it, that wasn't...

[24:36]

Who were your first customers at Sperry that you worked with implementing the 1100 series?

1100 series. RAF.

RAF.

Yes. We had a lot of government business, the Treasury, RAF, Royal Navy, the two big...

What types of applications were they interested in?

They were... The military ones were control and command, control and command.

Right.

That was the main issues. The Navy had two, one for the Polaris missiles and one for the other ships, right. I don't want that mentioned by the way. I don't want them to hear somebody talking about the Government, if you know what I mean. You can mention the Navy had two or so or whatever, but...

Right. Do you want me to cut that out?

No, I just, I don't want to mention what...

OK.

...what they were doing, and that sort of thing.

OK. Right. That's fine.

They wouldn't like that. Right. And, what else? Oh, massive impact in the financial market.

Right.

With, with Abbey National, and, well building, big building societies came, big time, on board. Whereas the, the big banks were already committed to, generally to ICL, some to IBM. And they actually didn't want to communicate, the big banks, but... The first, the first company we took was Coutts Bank, oddly enough, because they wanted printed statements, online printed statements. Nobody else could give it to them, right. Which, we gave it to them of course, right. Shell, BP, I mentioned the Navy, mentioned the Royal Air Force. And the, Scottish engineering centre, the National Engineering Centre in Scotland.

[26:21]

These would naturally have been potentially customers for ICT, ICL, the British computer company?

They couldn't possibly, didn't meet the bill, meet the spec.

Because, you had more powerful computers.

Communicating computers.

Ah.

That's... We also had the first operating system which is actually inside this today, when that was a real breakthrough, because not only did we have them communicating, we had, we could handle inside and outside activities, online activities.

Right.

I mean, a lot of this resulted in domestic online systems.

So we mustn't think of this as a, an entirely batch-oriented system, the 1100, from Univac; we must think of it as a real-time interactive communicating system.

Absolutely. It's the first, it was the first, ten years, or fifteen years ahead of the rest that had an externally specified index.

Yes.

If something went out, if it came back, you knew exactly where it had come from.

Right.

And that's the whole secret of communications basically. You've got to have a DS, C, right.

[27:24]

You were, started as a systems engineer.

Mhm.

But then you moved into management, did you?

Well that came when, in the States. I mean, the... It really... There's about four men in my life that really made a big difference to me you know, big difference to me, because they, they took an interest in me you know, and one was the chairman of Sperry, Sperry Corp. And he, he succeeded in the chairmanship, he was quite young, he'd be about 35 or something, quite by accident. Vickers, who put Sperry Rand together, was a dominating, old, banging the table type manager. And, he didn't really know much about technology. He was an old baron, the old Thirties baron, that's what he was like you know. [laughs] You had to admire him, but you didn't love him you know, he wasn't that sort of person, right. Paul Lyet came, was appointed overnight. Because Vickers had been playing golf, and he lived in New York, and, when he got out of the car, he walked across the road and a cyclist came round, a motorcyclist came round, and killed him outright. So they suddenly, instantly, found themselves with no, with no chairman. And then, struggling with this problem, and when they merged with Remington, with, with Univac, a chap... Oh no. Remington had farm machinery, electronic, car hydraulics. Of course Sperry, Sperry wanted the worldwide application of navigation. And that of course is another major factor in the space programme that made it, still is of course a major player in worldwide navigation. And Remington, which had offices all over the world, and so on, but, obsolete, obsolete product, too much stock. So, Paul immediately decided to get rid of some... Oh New Holland, New Holland farm machinery as well. To get rid of some of these things, and concentrate, as he put it, on the future path. So he took a particular interest in Univac, far above, the scale of his [] that scale.

[29:41]

A wonderful man to communicate. He taught me how to communicate. When you run big businesses, you've got to know how to communicate. You must get around you and meet every week without fail your executive directors. Have a week off, or, something, or two weeks off if there's something planned, but it has to be planned months and months and months; you just can't decide, I can't come this week, I'm going somewhere else, right. And then you've got to meet once a month with the 100 top management. And then, you get them to send in their questions before you meet, and you address their questions, and then you make your announcements, and they in their turn have to have similar groups of people that they must immediately go and talk to. Get round to every single factory and shop you've got as soon as you can.

Because, he said, you know, the bosses are always unpopular, they're always criticised, but almost entirely by people who don't know who they are. If they just see you walking down, you've got them on board, right? And then, Sir John Moores, who was one of the finest men I ever met in my life, brilliant, brilliant man, had no education or anything, he said, [] doing all the things at Littlewoods, he said, 'Where do you get all these ideas from?' I said, 'They've been around for thirty-three years.' [laughs] Nothing new in this Sir John.

[30:56]

Plus the importance, I understand from your book, Water Under the Bridge...

Yes.

Plus the importance of the five-year plan.

Oh, absolutely, yeah. Oh absolutely, yeah. Yes. And... But, but the old man got, there was no five-year plan at Littlewoods. I mean that's what I took from Sperry. And Paul Lyet's interest, because he brought it in there, I, I, the bible. And five years down the line, he said, 'Look, a lot of you didn't want to do this five-year plan. And how have you performed against the first plan? Anybody got the answer?' Twice as well. [both laugh] And he, he would hold... This was the other thing he told me. 'Get your, get your grips on the young people. Don't flatter them and promote them artificially. Get your grip so they can see you and you can see them.' Right? And... So he would have twice a year a conference for the younger managers, not, not beginners but younger managers, who never ever would normally see a chairman, 100,000 people in the company would never ever see a chairman like that. Two days. And, first day, you talk about the company, and he tells you about the company, and all the directors are there, and they all fraternise with each other, so and so. Second day, you peel off into groups of fifteen or sixteen, and then you have a chairman, and then there's a list of things you can discuss. And then, in the afternoon the chairman makes a presentation to the group. So there's about 300 people in this thing. So, I was pared off in this group, and the group decided to have me, well I was always, very, somehow I was popular in America, because I was different. They thought I was Canadian, but of course it was my Liverpool accent and background. They also

knew that I thought differently from they did, because I thought like a Brit, you know, which is quite different from Americans thinking as we've just described. And they asked me to be chairman. Now Paul would go round, and he came round, sat listening to us for about ten minutes, and, well, he's been here a long time, you know, right? [laughs] Because he's going to do the whole lot, you know. And then you make your presentation in the afternoon. On the way out, Paul said, 'You were very good Desmond. Very good indeed.' 'Thank you sir.' He said, 'The way you conducted that meeting, everybody thought they had their say. And you listened to them. And you encouraged them. And you've come to a very good decision, conclusion, which you presented on there, with them. Very good, very good.' He kept on going. That was on the way out. There was no way back. Because he wanted a... VP International which is a third of the business, to be, not an American. And he decided that was me, you know.

That was you.

That was []. Going on I knew I was a bit of a favourite, but, it didn't seem to create a reaction from the people I worked with. Because when I was in New York, the secretary would say, 'He'd like you to go and have a drink with him in his...'

[34:10]

Was Univac, like IBM, a very paternalistic company?

Not like IBM. No, IBM was... IBM was living a, you know, very effectively on its history. I mean the two, Tom Watson and the father and everything else, you know. And, it never had any of that kind of thing you know. If it had a difference, it had a difference of young, young technology. Again, it didn't have... Because all the old people were in Remington, and all disappeared, you see, right. [laughs]

[34:43]

To be a good senior executive, I've often been told, you have to be a good butcher.

No. I don't agree with that.

You don't agree with that?

No I don't agree at all. The moment you do that, you're finished. You're out, you know.

No.

No. No no. That's the whole purpose of having these collective meetings. Because they, meetings sorts them out. Well, it's sort of, semi-socially, and in terms of intellectually. They know they're not welcome, but you don't tell them that. Obviously, there was, the occasional person reporting to you. But if you get that reputation, you're a bully, and that's, there's no hope for you. I mean what is the secret, what is... Another thing I picked up years ago. You've got to get people to do what you want them to do, because that's, they think that's what, that's what they want to do. You can't tell 'em, that's what you've got to do.

Right.

You've got to build up a consensus, but in their own minds and people they work with. And so that they would want to follow that line. Of course [] some idea you had which is bloody stupid, [laughs] that's a bit unfortunate. You have to be able to get out of that one. But, you've got to have them with you.

[35:53]

You rose to be Vice-President.

Yes.

But, you would never get to the top, because this was a, an American company with a huge amount of defence, American defence.

Yes. Yup, yup.

And you were a Brit. So you weren't going to get that job.

I don't think... I think that's not the reason though, I think. Because Paul was determined... And anyway, the defence projects were run separately.

Right.

I mean, I actually got involved in some, because, for instance we were dealing with Russia, we were the first to supply [] computer to Russia and things like that. But I think... Oh, of course, the condition was, I'd have to become an American.

Yes.

I mean that's what Paul said to me. You're a Vice-President, the next one is, the next one is Chief Executive, and the next one is my job. So he said, 'But Desmond, you're going to have to become an American.' Now, that's when I decided to come back,

[REDACTED]

As you say in your book, yes.

Yes.

[37:00]

And so you moved, you came back, and you were... This is 1976.

Yes.

By 1976 things are beginning to shift in the computer industry, because we've got the Zilog Z80 microprocessor for example.

Yes.

And we've got, a lot of minicomputers coming in.

Mhm.

And things are really beginning to shift. You spent two years in Leyland.

Yes.

In truck and bus division.

Yes.

Building that up, making it profitable.

And, and investing heavily, yeah.

And, you seem to have fallen out with the then head of British Leyland.

Michael. No, we didn't fall out.

Michael Edwardes.

We didn't fall out, no.

You didn't fall out?

No.

His was not your approach of consensus though, was he?

No it wasn't. No, we had... No, there were two specific reasons. But we didn't fall out. I've seen him... He died of course last year. But I've seen him a number of times since, and we'd chat, you know. He, he didn't understand the company. He didn't. And he had no background of any substance in terms of major organisations. He was the chief executive of a small battery firm effectively, had never been involved in anything like this. Sir Ian MacGregor was on his board, and it was Ian

MacGregor, well he forced through the key decisions on... And it was Ian MacGregor who came to me and said, '[] States.' He said, 'They want , we need an American-run truck and bus.' I said, 'Why?' He said, 'Well because we want it be run differently from the rest of the company, and we're going to put it to one side. It's salvable,' and so on and so forth. So that's how, that's where the opportunity came, that's why I came there, []. But, he... The first decision I knew naturally would not like was that he, the most efficient goddam factory in the group was the Liverpool factory. Not a surprise, because the Ford factory was ten miles away, and that was absolutely one of Ford's best, and is now of course the best factory that Jaguar and Range Rover had. But it went on strike the day he joined, very first strike. It was a new factory, about ten years old anyway. And he decided to close it down. And I said to him, 'Well, I don't live that far from there. I know some of the people that work there,' you know, right. So I'll have to move, obviously I can't stay around the hostility, it'll be awful. But I said, 'I don't agree with the decision.' And he said, 'Why?' I said... Because, we had five marques, sports car marques. Of two markets that we led, Leyland led, [] were, the Mini market, and these five sports cars. And that's where all the components parts were made, at Liverpool. I said, 'If you close that down, or as you propose they go back to the originating company, the efficiency goes straight down there. Costs will go up at least fifteen, 20 per cent. And you will disturb those companies from getting on with their job of selling and making...'

Anyway, politely said, 'I'm going to do it, and it's my decision,' and he closed it down, right. And of course what happened, of course we lost the bloody sports car market, the next year it went, in fact as quickly as that, right. The second decision was even worse, and that was that... I'm on the main board of course, with all this going on, right. I don't really want to discuss this, and I hardly speak about cars, right, but that was 99 per cent of the conversation, you know, how much money you made Desmond? 30 million or something this month, you know, but... Well let's get back to the strike []. [laughs] And he, he wanted to have a car, that was his, he wanted to be known for bringing this car in in this sector of the market that he could claim credit for, right. And he wanted, therefore, to replace the small family car. A small family car, all the European majors had been in production for three years. Two million were sold a year out there, [] come up with the Rapport.

So it went upmarket, and they lost.

And he produced the Dodge, you know. But I...

Yes, that's an issue of ego, isn't it?

Well that's what... It was driven by ego.

You don't seem to be a man driven by ego.

Oh I, [laughs] can't comment much on that. Ask my wife sometime! [laughs]

[41:25]

OK. OK. Let us wind back a little bit, because I've jumped too far ahead.

Yes.

Because there was a seminal moment in 1974 and 1975 when you were, towards the end of your period at Univac, where you did the Faraday lectures for the Institute of Electrical Engineers.

Mhm.

Around the countryside.

Yes..

Making the same lecture. And we have the CD of it. And if the technology works, we can put that lecture up on the website of the Archives.

Yes. Yah.

Now, you made some very interesting projections there, predictions.

Mm.

How did you make those predictions? For instance, that you would, the computer and the telephone, and the TV, would connect together, and you would have convergence and develop information technology into what I think you called teledata.

Mm.

This was well before Viewdata, well before Prestel, well before the French system Minitel. Where did you get those predictions from?

Well, I think, I would... One of the roles I had at Sperry was on the product planning group.

Ah, OK.

And, that was six of us who decided which products were going to... They were all big products in Univac you see.

Yes.

Of course, the 1004 was a small product that IBM, almost wiped IBM out. I mean we never sold it ourselves, it was sold through ICL and round the world. But that was a small, small scale, highly, a lot of different, added benefits on. But the... We always worked towards convergence. I mentioned a number of times that our communications capability was far in excess of anybody else, particularly in high volume, which meant switching large quantities of stuff. We of course were aware of microprocessing taking place; indeed we had our own microprocessing, you know, company. But of course Intel and people like that were ahead of the game. Grace Hopper. I used to see Grace quite often, and that's why []. What a lovely woman she was. Lovely. When she came to England I would have dinner with her quite often.

And indeed in your Faraday lecture, you use COBOL as the example of the programming language don't you.

Yes. It was the first wasn't it.

Yes..

It was the first one.

Yes, for commercial application.

So you could see, you could see the potential of this. It was enormous early on, particularly, as I say again, in the command and control military areas, it was already happening, but of course it was a narrower scope, and of course the equipment there was built to survive shelling and things like that. But we did actually develop something you could drop from an aircraft, which was about as big as this room. Now of course, as we all know, it would be much smaller. And of course, command and control generally consisted of, say, three trucks or something like that as a centre, office, centre of command. So, I mean, it wasn't... To me, it was obvious that if you could collect all this stuff together, you would have a fully integrated communications system. Now the problem in Britain, although we, we solved it much quicker than any other country, was, everything was analogue. I mean you go back to Plessey or AT&T previously, or, it was mechanical switching, the Strowger switch. But of course there's no speed in that, it's impossible. So the question was, to get it into digital form. Now with the relationship I created with BT, and even Margaret Thatcher got involved in this, she was very keen on this whole thing, right, we couldn't do that with three companies all competing with each other and wasting our resource. We had to concentrate on System X.

Yes.

That meant the four parties were in System X, including... And every meeting was a fiasco. Fiasco. And the Government woke up to the fact that, only, it's going to be done one way, and I do think Thatcher told them that, you've got to pick the company and do it one way. Now we pressed on, because [] always to invest and invest all the time, we pressed on actually at Liverpool with modernising automatic manufacturing, not because we wanted to reduce the costs, because it didn't reduce the cost at all, the

cost of the equipment was sky high, so that wasn't a good factor, but because of the reliability. And that was pretty key, right. So when Patrick Jenkin personally went and visited the three operations, and he came to Liverpool, he said, 'This is amazing, you know, I haven't seen any of the other three like this at all.' And then I brought the technology people in from Sperry to come and work, to run the research side, and they got System X up and running, which again was amazing. And so, we went...

[46:13]

How did you get, how did you manage to persuade the Plessey board to place manufacturing of System X in Liverpool?

Well I've always arrived at the companies in actually desperate straits. So that's easy then. [laughs] The next year or so, they, they're watching, you'll get your head chopped off. [laughs]

Right.

Right. And of course, well the Liverpool one was interesting. I mean, I was away from Liverpool years and years and years and years, till I went back to Littlewoods really. But... And of course, obviously I took an interest in Edge Lane. They were really fed up with the strikes. A bit like we've got now. They were really fed up with that way of living, you know. And, the day I went to see them, I, I couldn't get in, because they had locked the management out you see. They don't go on strike a lot, the management, they all pretend they're working, [] you know. And what I had also insisted, that any cheque over 50,000, I would personally sign, and any cheque over 20,000, or, between 20 and 50, the works manager can sign, but over 50,000, I would have to sign, right. And of course a lot of commotion [] cheques, but, what are we spending all this money on? [laughs] And then, they came with one for 152,000 or something. What's that? He said, 'Well it's just to pay the,' the... While the factory was, wouldn't have the management, and they were all working, so this is to pay them. I said, 'No way. [laughs] No way.' Oh, we don't know who was there. We're not going to pay this money out. No way, no, no. So that went back. And they called another meeting. And by one of the world's biggest coincides, my brother worked in that factory all his life. So, always denied how he was related to

me. [both laugh] 'Is that your brother?' And the chaps... No, no. No no. [both laugh] And he said, because he was at the meeting, he said, 'They propose going on strike again.' And he said, the crowd booed, boo the, booooo. One of them shouted, 'It's that fellow, he knows what he's bloody well doing.' [laughs] So then, once we got labour on board, and I got an intensive communication programme on that, with Redwood... Do you remember Redwood, the commentator?

Oh yes, yes.

Yes. Well he came and put, put it across. And of course cleared it with the board first. But they weren't taking any at that stage, no. They just didn't know what to do with themselves. And John Clark, the sales were down [] 38, now started to climb. When I left the rate [] 26. And, and so, [] I was very polite with them, I wasn't rude and demanding, of course not. And the, the... I said to them, 'Look, there's 14,000 people working here. Our product is obsolete. Everybody's talking about closing the factory. The way, we're going in that direction. That would be a horrible decision I don't want to have any part of whatsoever. We put the new development in; there's probably room for 5,000 people over the next few years. So I want you all to think whether you want to retire, right, or, or whether you want a, [], amount of... It's going to be a good amount of money, [], if they got... It wasn't going to be the usual bloody argument over this, that and the other. Or alternatively, do you want to retrain?' We never had any trouble at all after that. Not a murmur after that. And the whole thing... This is, this is the, communication is vital.

[49:55]

You were working relatively closely with GEC at that time.

Yes.

An organisation which had been put together through a number of amalgamations and takeovers by Sir Arnold Weinstock.

Arnold, yes.

Later Lord Weinstock.

Yes.

And that was run very differently from Plessey, was it not?

Well it was. I mean, I was of course frequently in touch with Weinstock. I, I struck up a relationship with Weinstock, and with John Clark at Plessey, when we... We put the... Sperry went to Japan, and then, the chairman actually asked me [] back, 'How did you find the situation?' I said, '[], fantastic,' you know. fantastic. It's not even thought of being an American company. It's dealing with one of the banks, [], you know. He said, 'Well, we've made a decision, to give a controlling interest to the Japanese, under certain conditions, right. Because think, it won't benefit [] their business, and they'd run it properly, than us as, putting ideas and equipment and things to them as a subsidiary.' He said, 'Do you think we can do that with the UK?' I said, 'Well I don't know, that's, [], but I never thought of it frankly, you know.'

[51:17]

Anyway, I got into Government, and we got quite high, at Secretary level. And they were, they were very interested indeed. But they said, 'Of course, this is really done by Weinstock and Clark,' because they had a controlling interest in ICL. The idea was, we'd put a company in Britain where ICL, or whatever the conglomerate was, would have 51 per cent. We would guarantee six per cent research and development, and we would guarantee the manufacturing level at a certain level. But over and above all that, we would supply the technology, and of course, the investment and so on and so forth. Now, []... It was []. [pause] Anyway. That was well received by ICL itself, and it was beginning to have some impact. And then the Government came back and said, 'Well, could you include the Europeans in this?' So, I don't quite see how, because, I mean, the relative assets they were pulling in now and everything, [] compared to [] European companies. But we've spent time with Siemens, time with Philips, and time with the French government, and couldn't see a French company. And it went reasonably well again. I mean the, they... They felt that, they couldn't find any suspicious approach here, []. They understood the rationale of 49 per cent of something which is ten times bigger than [] whole interest, and, it's good for everybody, understood the rationale of international standards and

what have you. The EU killed it. Christopher Chataway was the Minister of Industry at that time. The EU killed it. Wouldn't let them do it you know. And I think that was a great loss. That could have been a great European company today, branched out all over the place [].

[53:14]

You spent five years at Plessey.

Yes.

And you were supplying British Telecom as it then became.

Yes.

And System X was a great breakthrough, and at the same time British Telecom was digitising its transmission, as well as its [].

Well we had had another transmission contract as well.

Yes.

Yes. But you see, that's, that's very interesting, because, a chap named John Wright, who was the chief engineer of BT, really another cracking bloke you know, really cracking bloke, he put a proposal forward to his board, to put fibre into every house. Now if that had been done then...

We're only just doing it now.

Well, and doing it poorly now, half-heartedly. If that had been done then, this country would have been so far ahead of the game [] in infrastructure and communications, yes.

[54:08]

You then decided to leave, and you were headhunted by Littlewoods of all people.

Mm.

And Littlewoods, based in Liverpool, a Liverpool company...

Yup.

...controlled by the Moores family, a private company.

Mhm.

It had Littlewoods Pools, and it had Littlewoods retailing, which was both shops and mail order.

It had six businesses.

OK.

Yes. It had, Pools, stores, of which there were 230 or something. It had also a catalogue shop, but, but we don't mention that. It had property, finance, quite big in finance. It was, it... Many of these credit cards which, a name like John Lewis, they, they handled all that business, in fact handled all M&S's business at the beginning, right.

Right.

What have I forgotten? Property, finance. Oh transport. 2,000 vehicles on the road every day, and six centres.

Right.

So it had altogether six companies. And then, when I... How did I get involved in that? I met John Moores twice. That's the old man.

This is Sir John Moores...

Sir John Moores.

...who basically founded the company and pulled it together in the Forties and 1950s.

Oh he started in '24.

He started it in '24.

I mean, as he always used to say, there are two people that started in '24, and now you've got 62,000 people,' you know. [laughs]

Right.

He said, 'But the problems are just the same.' Anyway. He, he chatted to me. He doesn't chat much, but he chatted in his way, right. And then, he rang me up one day, and he said, 'When are you in Liverpool again?' I said, 'Well I hardly ever go there,' I said, 'but, doing different things,' right. And he said, 'Would you like to come and have dinner with me?' So, I'll come and have dinner, right. So, I wasn't very keen, but I didn't want to be rude, because, I liked him, you know. Well I respected him, respect. So, I got there late. I'm never late. I hate being late, I think you've lost the meeting if you turn up late. And he had the key members of his family there. He didn't mention that to me, right. He had John junior, who had been a chairman, and bought this business in Germany, almost wrecked the company completely, this mail order, second biggest mail order business in Germany they bought, and it went straight through the floor day two you know, right. His brother Peter, who is a bit younger than him, who had no idea how to manage anything. He was a, a secret homosexual. He kept on whispering to me, 'How do we let Dad, how do I announce my homosexuality?' [laughs] [] with that, you know. And he of course never, never in the office, [] know where he was. So, and that was another fiasco, which got to the point where, it got to the point where the company now owned £800 million, and things were getting serious, you know. So... And so, they had John, Peter, Betty, who just died, who was the senior, oldest member of the family. Her husband was the

chairman of the VAT committee, he's a very nice bloke, I used to talk to him quite a lot, a very nice bloke. And, he said... I, I hate being late, I really, that's my pet hate. My wife goes mad, because I'm always there far too early, you know. Even a social function. And, he said, 'I've asked Desmond,' he said, 'would he like to come and run the company.' He hadn't asked me anything. [laughs] And I looked startled, right, you know. He had made some pass-by comments, you know, but he hadn't asked me anything you know. And then he, he said, 'But, he won't come.' He... He... Oh, first of all he said, 'You know these headhunters we've got now, we've always, people, men we've met,' he said. 'Don't you think they're all not suitable?' 'Oh absolutely.' Sometimes headhunters over-sell these people. And you can't over-sell Sir John, he's so down-to-earth, you know what I mean, right?

Mm.

And, he said, 'Well I think,' he said, 'Desmond's ideal. He's got a good reputation for running big companies, and he's a local lad,' and, so on and so forth, you know. 'I think he's the sort of man that,' I'm sitting listening to him talking about me, 'that would fit in well,' you see. Well they didn't think so. Because, [] what he was saying, fit in well with him, right, [], right.

Yes.

And, he said, 'But, I know Desmond naturally, wouldn't want any of you or any of the family in the business,' and there were 32 members of the family now, 'because,' he said, 'he would not be able to get the control over the business. I can,' he said, 'because I'm the founder, but nobody else [] never do that when you've got all the gossiping and all the rest of it. So you all have to leave.' So... So I said, [laughs] well [] leave now. [laughs] I think I'll leave now. I only have to []. [laughing] So I left. And, well he had two secretaries, one had been with him 45 years, and one 35 years. You couldn't get past, like Russian guards [], you know, nobody could get past them, right. So I, one of them rang me up and she said, 'Sir John says that they've all agreed to get out of the business, and I should tell you that. And when you can come and join,' [laughs] right? I'll try and cut this short. I said, 'Well, apart from anything else, I'm far from making that sort of decision, and, we haven't discussed

any conditions and what have you.' []. 'She said, 'You can have anything you want.' [laughs] I said, 'I don't want [].' So we finished up, we both had the same solicitor, so... And again, I knew I would never become chairman of Plessey, that would never happen, right. Sir John was, I liked him, again, in fact we, we live within eight miles of his wife, right. But he was a bit of a clown to be frank with you. He just, he just would make ridiculous statements you know, you know what I mean? I'll give you an example. When the chairman of BT came round, we had to have lunch with him. We were making, I think they were making, on course for 200 million profit that year. And I said to him, 'Don't mention the profit. [laughs] Whatever you do, don't mention the profit.' On the way to the lift, he said, 'What a great pleasure meeting you.' He said, 'You know we're making 200 million profit.' [both laugh] They were on top of me to get the price down, you know. [laughs] So...

[1:01:00]

So you weren't going to get to the top of Plessey. You weren't going to get to the top of Littlewoods, but you did have significant executive control. And you found...

I had total executive control.

You found a company that was in dire need of systems, and computer applications.

And management training.

And you brought in a lot of computer applications. Now you seem to have, is it a lucky streak, or, did everything work well, when you applied these systems? Because quite often...

No they didn't. No they...

...these computer applications don't really work.

No. No, they didn't. But I also brought a man from Univac in.

Right.

I mean, it's quite funny really. Am I taking up too much time?

Not at all.

OK. When, first role at Univac was, they sent me to the UK to be chief, to be managing director, right? They ran me back to the States after that. The moment I arrived, the technical director left without even seeing me, but, I think he said some nasty things about me. He was previously the technical director of Rolls Royce. When I was again in that job, my personal director decided to have an affair with my secretary, and caused holy bloody havoc. So he left as well [laughs], right. So when I come to Littlewoods, personal director and the technical director [laughs] were these two ex-employees. You can imagine the situation with that. So, I [] technical director. And that's when I brought the Sperry man in. And it took him a while because of the management, we had a problem with. Honeywell equipment did not have the capability that Sperry had.

Right.

On the other hand, you couldn't switch, because all the, all the standards were run that way round.

Yes.

So we had to adopt front-end processors, which actually, Sperry were expert at front-end processors, right, to convert all this. And then we started to get it to work. But in the meantime, every Monday morning, the lifts were all full of people carrying great big printouts like this. Massive, massive... The executive lifts [], a building of three and a half thousand at headquarters, and then there's the workers' lifts, the usual stuff, you know. And I said, 'We've got to stop this you know. We... We're just a paper shop. Who's going to lead all that stuff?' you know. It's just impossible. The printouts []. So it stopped. I thought it had stopped, but it hadn't stopped at all. [] just taking [], right. [both laugh] Because they went round, walking round one [], and I saw him with the paper. I said, 'Where did you get that from' 'Oh,' he said,

‘every Monday morning we get it.’ I said, ‘Really?’ I said, ‘What’s wrong with the screen?’ He said, ‘Well, I can never find anything,’ he said. ‘So we need these papers.’ And then, then we got onto that , then it all started working.

Why is it that...

[] the business needed it.

Yes.

Because the mail order business, it’s the same as now, the... I mean why isn’t Littlewoods now a dominant factor in the online sales? Because, Littlewoods, and GUS, had 90 per cent of the mail order business between the two of us, right. And the answer is, because, we had made our money out of the embedded credit. Whereas of course, currently, there is no embedded credit. So you can bottom the price out.

Yes.

So that’s, that’s why I think, that’s why businesses moved dramatically into the big American companies.

[1:04:15]

Why do you think the many applications attempts really fail, why do they fail?

Which...?

IT applications, inside companies, and also in the public sector.

Well, the... You had that situation, didn’t you, and still, it’s in part... When industry settled down to the serious players, there was eight of us.

Yes.

Eight of us, right. When the, again, the microprocessing came in, which allowed obviously, in a small way, processing possibilities, the, quite a few, or, or, quite a few, some of them made a lot of money, a lot of money. Well, GEC, I'll come back to GEC [] interested, right. And because, obviously they capitalised the investment, and the investment was very high indeed, and because they were promising [] you know, something like that, certainly [], they were over-subscribed, and the price was sky-high. The problem with all that is of course, that you don't, unless you don't get in the revenue to offset the investment costs, then you're down there. So there was 800 of those within a short period of time, principally in America, some in Britain, and that's why they all collapsed, because they didn't have any money. I mean they put the money into, money of course writing the software, developing the system, and buying hardware, it became less of an issue then, because it was so cheaper. But they didn't have the money. So...

[1:05:46]

Now, GEC, the chief executive of GEC, George Turnbull, who Weinstock took on, because, the City hammered him because he had too much money in the bank, right, was that the... I appointed the managing director of the Scottish branch of Leyland Truck and Bus, had two big factories up there, but making, principally making the vans, and some of the engines. So George, who lived round the corner from where my office was at United [], would come round and chat with me. And... Because he saw me as a bit of an older mentor, because I was quite a bit older at that stage. And, I said, 'George, do you think you know what you're doing? I mean, you're selling off, you're selling off, for instance, Marconi. I mean that's the biggest thing in GEC.' I mean old power engineering, that's just standard stuff, but it's good stuff, brings good money, and, you know, it's reliable stuff, and, your customer base doesn't change, it's not fickle like the domestic market. And he said, 'Well, this is what I'm advised by my two advisers.' I said, 'Well,' [], I said, 'this is what happens if you're not careful.' Because you're buying up all these American medium and small size companies, which are highly profitable, in the first year, but [] capitalised all the goddam costs for five years, ten years, even 20 years in some cases, right.

Yes.

Of course they all went bust, didn't it. And it brought, it brought... I still see George sometimes. He never really recovered from that, he never really, wiping out that company you know. Weinstock was still alive of course.

Indeed. He must have been absolutely gutted, Weinstock, by that.

He was. He wanted me to go and work for him. I mentioned the...

You wouldn't have done that, would you?

No. [laughs] No. No. He said one day at lunch, twice a year [], twice a year I'd have a lunch with him, [], I said, 'Yeah, don't worry, I'm not going to leave or anything.' Just finding out what he's trying to think, you know, right. And, he always insisted on smoking cigars at the end of the lunch. I've never smoked in my entire life, ever, you know. [] it's not, it's not a virtuous thing, it's just, didn't have any money at the beginning, didn't want to when I had some money, right. And, he, he said, 'Come on, let's get down to it Desmond, let's get down to... You know why I keep inviting you here for lunch.' I said, 'Of course I do, yeah.' 'Well come on, take me seriously. Why won't you come?' I said, 'I don't really like the cash control programme. [laughs] I like to be able to put the money where it's deserving, so we get more money next year,' you know, that's, that's my approach really about...

Yes. Another person who's already made their contribution to the Archives said, he was being, cultivated by Sir Arnold Weinstock, and Weinstock broke off the meeting and picked up the phone and shouted at one of his managing directors, because [], something like £4,000, or £40,000...

[] you know, I mean...

And then put the phone down.

I wouldn't go to a meeting in his office, because he's always like that. Or he, or he's betting on the horses. He's got bloody horses running all the time.

Yes, just, just [], he said, 'No thank you.'

Well he was a... Again, []...

Wasn't that one of the biggest failures of the UK technology sector, GEC?

Er...

If it had been more dynamic...

I'm just trying to think about that one. He didn't have a lot of [Marconi. Marconi was, was always technology.

Yes.

Yeah. I mean his, his, his telecoms was awful, I mean, the factories were like, nineteenth-century workhouses you know.

[1:09:27]

Yes. OK. Now, in post-war development, well, Liverpool, your beloved city...

Mhm.

They built towns outside the centre, like Kirby and so on. And, pulled, basically, the heart out of Liverpool.

Yes.

And, we also had the Toxteth riots.

Mm.

And Michael Heseltine saying, 'We will intervene, [laughs] morning, noon and night,' and putting together a real programme of development.

Mm.

And you began to lead, therefore, the Merseyside Development Corporation.

Mhm.

Yes?

Mhm.

What role did IT play in that? Can it play a role in redevelopment?

Well I... It played a, a different sort of... By the way, Heseltine's not what he claims to be on that situation. He... The Merseyside Development Corporation was brought in to being with the London Docklands Corporation, and, it was very restricted in its, in its terms of reference. And we had Hatton of course, and not only him, but, there were three councillors involved: well there wasn't... At that stage there was only central Liverpool, right. So I mean, he, a lot of what he said was bullshit frankly, you know. And he never came to make press statements and, so on and so forth. And then Thatcher got involved. I mean, I had had, I have to say, my fortunate relationship with Thatcher had been a major factor in those days. And, she, for instance she would, if she was making a speech on, involving technical issues, she would ask me to come down and help her with the speech, just the two of us, right. Or come down []. Seven o'clock in the morning. [laughs] It was never a reasonable time. And more particularly, well, she wouldn't come to Liverpool until I organised it for her. Because she hated what they did to Jenkins, destroyed Jenkins's life, let alone his, his career, right. And...

This is Patrick Jenkins.

Patrick Jenkins.

Yes. How did they destroy his life?

Well, because, he did a deal with Hatton in terms of working with Liverpool.

Right.

He had no intentions of working with Liverpool, of course, there was money and things coming in, involved in all that support. So he didn't, Hatton did nothing that he had agreed in the deal whatsoever, and laughed at him, you know. He was out of the Cabinet of course. Thatcher couldn't keep him in the Cabinet, even though she liked him very much. So, she asked me to come and see her. She said... This was before I was appointed, right. And she said, 'People tell me, Desmond...' And I know... She used to do that. If a minister was anywhere near the area, she'd say, 'Go and see Desmond Pitcher.' So I had, all of them turned up, you know, except one. And, she said, 'Tell me about Merseyside.' I said, 'What do you want to know?' She said, 'They always talk about Liverpool. Tell me about Merseyside.' I said, 'Well there are three councils,' blah blah blah. She said, 'Well what about the other two, are they, are they, are they OK?' I said, 'No. No they're not.' They were satellites of Liverpool, Birkenhead and places like that. Derelict cities, derelict towns you know, like. She said, 'I want you to do that.' I said, 'But I'm running this big company, also other directorships,' so and so forth, you know. She said, 'I know you are, but you'll find time. People like you always find time for important things, right, and thank you.' And I said, 'But, another thing, I never will work for a civil servant.' And I'm talking to London people, other people, they say that civil servants are running it. I said, 'I don't want that. I mean I don't... Apart from anything else, they have endless meetings for no particular purpose, and I don't want to waste my time doing them, I haven't got the time for that.' She said, 'You can report to me.'

[laughs] []. Because, I said, 'Well, [] Prime Minister, you know, I think you are a bit busy for me to ring you up and, [] a question on this, that and the other.' So she said, 'Well what about the Secretary of State, and no civil servants?' I said, 'Well that makes a difference, yes.' And that's what she insisted upon. But, it was quite early on, she met, oh, this went on for about seven years, she met two or three people, or four people, that she would call to dinner one night. And she said, 'I talk to you four people. I know what's going on. Because you're big retailers.' And you do, in the retail business, on Sunday morning, three retail businesses call me, figures and

numbers, trends and what have you. And you know instantly what's happened, even the attitude, different things, you know, right. That's your business. If you don't that, you know, you have to react immediately, you know. And she said, 'I want you come before the next, public payment, public payments meeting in November.' And she said, 'That was fantastic,' she said. 'My, the people I work with don't know what's happening. They've no idea what's happening. Don't get any messages from anybody.' So twice a year we went and had, we met for dinner. And, and so that's why she got to know me quite well really, she took it from there. And we did things for her too. She wanted to start this payroll deduction for charities, and she said, 'There's only one company in Britain got the mail lists you've got, and that's Littlewoods Pools.' 22,000 customers, 22 million customers, every week, you know. I mean we had between 70 and 90 million customers every week. An enormous number isn't it, as a company, with a combination of Pools and the retail.

Yes.

And we set up a system for her, collected the money, so on and so forth, right. And, she, she is the one that got involved earlier on. I didn't meet her then, but I know, [] reported back by Patrick Jenkins, who then became the Ministry for Tech; before that it was the Ministry for Technology, on this System X issue.

Yes.

And she is the one that said, 'Well, if you think Plessey is the company, give it to them.' And then Weinstock gave them holy hell. He actually rang. He actually rang me up and said, 'What the bloody hell's going on? [] we had this business.' He said, 'We're still friends, but we're not...' And she insisted they get one third of the manufacturing, but none of the development, none of the marketing. Of course it wasn't long before that all evaporated, right.

[1:16:04]

You were able, therefore, to lead regeneration of Liverpool.

Mm.

And...

Have you been there? I, I think... I'm so proud of it. I am so proud of it. I mean, when I went there in '83, was when I went back, and Toxteth was on, right, I mean it was, it was a nightmare. And when you go back now and see the regeneration, not just of the centre, because, [] my memory [] you talk about the satellite towns. Because, Heseltine was putting money in, but... I said, 'No. We want people back in the city. That's what we want.' And that's what's been killing it.' I mean, money here, money there. People may pick it up, may mis-use it, so and so. We've got to make it known that we want people back in the city. And I said, 'I want to put the three leaders of the Council on board, because they've got far more influence than we will ever have,' right. And they're the most bitter, most critics of what we've got you know. And I met the three of them, and I think they're three decent blokes. And they came on the board, and they were fantastic. They supported us, we worked together. They loved every meeting you know. They were right on board. I mean for instance, there was an issue where the Government didn't want public to go to the planning meetings. We had the planning authority was all there, which no other development company had, and that's very powerful, and, education, roads, and all this stuff that Thatcher insisted go in this. It's got to be all done properly, right. So they, they said, 'Well, you're not very popular, because you won't let the public come to your planning meetings.' I mean, we've been doing this for a century, planning meetings, right? They can't speak, but they can't... Hm? So I thought about it, and I said, 'Well, [] people, they'll just get excited and upset.' I said, 'Why don't I try, public can come, and then my staff will tell them, ask them what items they're interested in outside. And then I open the meeting, I then adjourn it, and then I say to them, "Look, you can't speak, it's not allowed, policy. And you certainly can't come past that, that line.'" Because occasionally if somebody wanted to come running up, stand over me, talking to you, that type of thing. And they said... But, [] want to get your items, item four, six, five and, you know, [], because I know there's interested parties. I [] get those, I'll adjourn the meeting. We'll have a discussion, an open discussion. That really worked. That really... [] the three leaders said, 'Wow, we did this; that really worked.' Because, explained to them what our limitations were, and what our opportunities were.

[1:18:41]

So you got, therefore, Liverpool One.

Yes.

L1.

Yes.

Huge development.

But that... But that... Another one... You see, the idea was, to knock down the city.

Yes.

And, I've seen places like Reading where they built a lot of expensive retail alongside the high street, which was still a slum.

Yes.

You know, it destroyed, it distorts the whole thing. And I said, 'What we've got to do is ensure that Liverpool One fits in with the old city.' And it does. Have you been there? [].

Oh absolutely.

You wouldn't know the difference.

You walk through it, a lovely pedestrianised area.

Yeah. You wouldn't know the difference.

With the old road pattern.

That's right.

And also the dock, Albert Dock and then further north.

Yes.

With the...

Oh my... I missed out the important point here. We... You know, the Europeans wanted to come in, and they offered 100 billion or something you know, like that. But it was all about what they wanted to do. [laughs] It was nothing what we wanted to do, right?

Right.

And I said, 'We don't want you really,' you know. 'Why?' 'Well, we're trying to rebuild the city, get people in here. We're not going to... You want to educate them and all that sort of thing, that's somebody's else's job, you know, not what we, what we do.' So they got quite upset about that. Because, we didn't want... They would have taken it over, you know, [] Heseltine.

Yes.

So we took the Liverpool Philharmonic to the, for a tour of the United States. Raised a billion pounds in investment over the next four years, from that tour. A billion pound investment you know, an orchestra of that standing, that quality, you know. And... And then of course, Westminster put another billion pound in. And he was very good, the Duke of Westminster. And then we borrowed another billion pound from Allied Irish Bank, which they got paid back by the way, so...

[1:20:26]

So that gave it... And I always said, you know, we've got to get people back in, and we've got to take it out of the city. We can't have this [] fancy, slums all round the... If you go there now, you'll find, it's spreading out like that. And 90,000

people have come to live in Liverpool the last three years. It's the only growth city in Britain of Brits, of Brits, you know.

It's really...

So I'm very fond of it as you can see.

I can see you are. That's really not too bad, from a boy from a council flat, council house, is it?

Yes. I don't want people to see that; that's like, you're bragging, isn't it, you know.

I think you've got a lot to brag about. Thank you very much for your contribution to the Archives, Sir Desmond Pitcher.

OK.

[End of Interview]