Colin Knight

Interviewed by

Jane Bird

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By Zoom

Welcome to the Archives of Information Technology where we capture the past and inspire the future. It's Tuesday the 23rd of March 2021, and we're talking on Zoom as has become customary during the Coronavirus lockdown, which started exactly a year ago today. I'm Jane Bird and I've been reporting on the IT industry for newspapers such as the Sunday Times and the Financial Times since the early 1980s. Our contributor today has had a wide-ranging and inspiring career, he is Colin Knight.

Colin, you have come a long way from working for the RAF's bomber command as a school leaver through IT support, data…er, data recognition, and outsourcing to senior roles in the super-demanding technical worlds of financial trading in the city, post-big-bang, smartphones, online gaming, and phone voting for Big Brother. You've also had your own IT consulting business since 2008 advising clients on predictive modelling of networks, trading floor systems, and risk management and you've been very actively involved in charities that help disadvantaged people benefit from new technology.

But to go back to the beginning, so, you're a war baby, born in Perivale, I think, in Middlesex, in 1941, that must have been quite a hard time for your parents to start a family?

[00:01:27]
Well, it was, erm, my-- my father was an officer in the army, erm, so, pretty much, erm, I didn't see him at all, erm, until about '45, er, when they were repatriated from Singapore. And so, I was—it was really just my mother and I, erm, up until the age of 4, erm, living in Chiswick, London, erm, and er, [cough] it was a bit of shock when my father come home and wanted to stay in the same bedroom as my mother.

[00:01:58]
Yes.

[00:01:59]
So, a three-year-old didn't quite understand that, but whether that, um, affected our relationship for a long time, I don't know. But my brother is 4 years younger than me

um, so, he was born on my father's return from um, from eh, Singapore. Er, yeah, it was-- I don't remember or recall very much, I can remember as a—as a 3 or 4-year-old, um, running up the eh, high street to the tobacconist and newsagents for my mum. So, I don't think you could do those kinds of things these days, I used to have the money wrapped in a piece of paper, we had to run up and ask for ten Turf or whatever was the—Craven A, I think, is something I recall as the tobacco of the day, but erm, my mother was a prolific s-s-smoker, so, I think in those days, most people-most people were. But it was—I don't recall a great deal from-from that-that early stage there until my father came home. And then um, when he came home, he-he-he had to find a-a job in civilian life and that's when the moves er, really started.

[00:03:07]
Yeah, so, er, did you—w-would you say that um, er, your parents, r-r-really at that stage, w-were they—did they influence you quite a lot, I mean, how-what do you think that you got from them?

[00:03:20 Aside conversation]
Sorry, er, workaholics, they were workaholics, and I think that's the biggest thing I can-I can recall from that, um, my--one of my uncles was a director of a milk delivery service or milk firm. I don't know if—do you know west London at all?

[00:03:42]
Yes, I do, yes, I live in Hammersmith.

[00:03:43]
Oh, okay, well, as you come further out towards Sunbury, the old Sunbury Road, um, there- there was a-a-a dairy firm called Job's—Job's Better Milk, and my uncle was the marketing director of-of Job's. My father was one of six brothers, and as they all came back from the army, they all got a job in Job's. And Job's, at that time, built themselves up to about 35 branches across um the er, the west-west-eh, west London and er, the Home Counties, um, and most of my uncles' were-were-were managers of that. My-my father was quite er, industrious, an-and ambitious, and it was his goal to get the biggest branch.

[00:04:32]
Yes.

[00:04:32]
Which ultimately, he did, after about, um, it must be—what, I don't know, ten years, twenty years probably—no, ten years probably, er, he-he succeeded in getting the er, er, the-the largest, the largest branch. But that meant that every time dad got promotion, we moved house.

[00:04:52]
Right, but that would be quite a disruptive sort of time then.

[00:04:58]
Yeah, yeah, it was eh, I-I went to-to about, I think erm, four or five primary schools, in-infant, and primary schools—one I went twice [laughs] we moved house, then we moved to another br—with Shepperton, we moved to Shepperton on the Thames, um, then we moved to Southall, then we moved back to Shepperton [laughs] then—

[00:05:21]
So, was your education quite disrupted then would you say?

[00:05:25]
Yeah, it was, um, and particularly my birthday is in August, so, er, there was one note I made on my erm, resume in that eh, when eh, we-we sat—er, in those days, you-you sat to go to technical college, um—and, from-from that-from that point, it was eh, we all sat our-our erm, examinations and then we were designated the school that we-we-went to. And I can remember very distinctively that we would—I would have been twelve I think, thirteen at that time. And um, we were all in the hall there as we were being told which school we were actually going to in our class. And I felt well, I hope I get into an A class or a B, erm. Anyway, they read the names out and we got down to E, which was the lowest grade, and er, [cough] quite-quite lowly, and I-I was distraught almost, but I kept it—I kept it in. But quite distraught by this time thinking I'm-I'm—what on earth did I do? And then when it was all over, it was just me left and I said ah-uh, I've-they've missed me off the list, they've made a mistake. And

they hadn't, they actually, because of my birthday in August, moved me straight into the second year.

[00:06:44]
Oh.

[00:06:45]
I went to senior school and missed the first year of senior school by going straight into the second year, which is why ultimately, I joined the air force when I was technically fifteen rather than sixteen because I—

[00:06:58]
[unclear 00:06:59]

[00:07:00]
Um, yeah, so, that was—that was er, that was quite a-quite a strain.

[00:07:03]
So, you didn't take the 11 plus?

[00:07:07]
Yes, we did, yes and that was the result of that, you could, erm, you could either take it and go to er, a grammar school, or you could wait till you were 13 and take the examination to go to technical college.

[00:07:18]
I see, so, you've always had a technical, a technical bent from an early stage.

[00:07:23]
That's right, that's right. We-we-was, we-so, we, it-it, got better that I was straight into the second year and then we were put in the very first technical stream of this college. Erm, and-and that-that was very good. Erm, also, my-my erm, my other little erm, point that I put into my resume was I could distinctly remember not doing calculus—I-I-I've never—

[00:07:49]
You avoid—you didn't want to do it?

[00:07:52]
Well, no, I-I—what I meant by that was, er, it was so bewildering and never ever of any use to me that I couldn't re-I couldn't remember a thing from today.

[00:08:01]
But you do have a technical brain, don't you?

[00:08:03]
Oh, yeah—

[00:08:05]
You-you did maths and physics, yeah.

[00:08:07]
Yes.

[00:08:07]
Yeah.

[00:08:08]
Yeah, there was—it was always about engines particularly and things that move in the night and all that kind of business er, yeah, so, that-that was—

[00:08:18]
So, you enjoy-you enjoyed school overall, would you say?

[00:08:21]
Oh, yes, yes, I-I think though that-that comes later in my career though, that-that was um, I-I appreciate afterwards, I was probably quite lazy at school, um, not—I-I-I'm probably doing myself down in that sense, but I felt it—had I-I could have done better

at school because I found that out in the air force. Erm, when you join the air force and you join as an apprentice particularly, the-then, you join with a-- typically an intake maybe of 100 that-that are there at the time, um, and you start off on your course. And if you fail a course you are put back.

[00:09:04]
Mmm.

[00:09:05]
And if you're put back you would become in lower entry, so, the-the-your colleagues would be actually, be ahead of you, um, and nobody ever wanted to be relegated fr- from one entry to a lower entry.

[00:09:19]
No.

[00:09:20]
And that peer-that peer pressure.

[00:09:22]
Yeah.

[00:09:23]
Uh, was-was just changed-change my life.

[00:09:25]
Right, so, that sort of fear of disgrace really—of public disgrace.

[00:09:30]
Yes.

[00:09:31]
And you didn't have that at school, I mean, what about your parents, had-had they both—were they quite educated, did they push you educationally?

[00:09:38]
Erm, no, I-I-I wouldn't say, my-my father was, erm, but my mother was, um, she started work, er, in the war as erm, packing biscuits at Huntley & Palmers on the Great West Road, with her sister, um, so, my mum was, er, she was 20 when she was married so, she was a young thing; married an army officer with his leather-leather belt and braces, you know, so, er. So, er, my father had-was-was-was reasonably well-educated, but they … once-- going back into the dairy, um, a function is when-when we took over a branch, my mother took over the shop and became manageress of the shop, and erm, my father then managed all of the milk rounds and whatever. So, um, they were always busy, er, and that-that's the part I always remember. And we always had an apartment which was on-site, so, you were never … they were never, ever, off of-off of the job.

[00:10:38]
Yeah. So, what-what made you sign up to the RAF then?

[00:10:44]
Erm, well, my-my goal coming out of school was, um, or college, was, er, a toolmaker draughtsman. The-these-this was the, uh, one of the highest-paid trade er, careers that you could actually have, where you, erm, you could draw tools, you had the skillsets to draw tools and then make the tools, um, for repairing things. And the big companies near us, in west London, were clearly airports, Heathrow, as it was then, or British Overseas Airways Corporation, um, Hoover, the vacuum cleaner people on the Western Avenue, and Aladdin Petrol Heat, petrol paraffin heat makers, again, on the Western Avenue. And they were the three ones that I was actually seeking to get an apprentice er, ship, with them. And um, then I thought, well of the three, what gives me the most thrill, and it was aeroplanes because I was an aero craft spotter at that particular time. So, I settled around er, on doing the air-the er, airlines, um, it was B-BOAC, as it was called at the time. And my father had an acquaintance there and he kind of made a-an easy pathway for me to get an interview. So, I ended up being-being offered two apprenticeships and then I thought well, I-I'm going to go with the one with the aeroplanes, but why do I want to go and do an airline, why don't I go into the air force because then I can travel, and I'll get the travel experience of doing that.

[00:12:12]
Wow.

[00:12:13]
So, that is really how I joined the air force—really to-to follow a-a career, uh, as an apprentice, that was the proper training that you did in those particular days.

[00:12:24]
Right, and you stayed eleven years in the air force so, you obviously liked it?

[00:12:29]
Um, well, that-that's another little story, um, I-at my interview there, they said, um, okay, a-and-and there are lots of stories are part of that interview, you know, it's a whole week, that they--they know you inside out. Um, but erm, I'm los-lost the thread of where I'm going I think, um, yeah, so, I, er, I had my interview with them and they said, eh, "Well how long do you want to sign on for?" And I said, "Well, I-I'm pretty serious about this", you know, I put my best foot forward, and uh, I-I- so, I-I think, er, "I'd like um, five years, how-how is that?" He says, "Five years my boy, he said, nine years is the least you can do."

[00:13:13]
Oh, really?

[00:13:14]
I thought I'll-I'll take that. What I had-but what I hadn't realised at the time and didn't realise until a few years later is that the nine years that I was going to serve only started from my eighteenth birthday, when I was classified as an airman at 18. So, er, the time I joined at sixteen, fifteen, sixteen until eighteen didn't count.

[00:13:39]
Oh, no, so, you actually, er, you, these … to stay at the shortest possible time and it was still eleven years?

[00:13:46]
Yeah, nine plus two, yeah.

[00:13:48]
Yeah.

[00:13:49]
Yeah, so.

[00:13:49]
Did you feel that you had missed out not going to university?

[00:13:54]
No, that wasn't really—university at those times, was-was more of a profession and I was looking for things, it-it was more mechanical, or electromechanical things that would kind of interested me and making-making things, kind of interested me in that-in that particular space. Erm, and er, it-it was kind of work most-most of us did when we-when we left tech, you went to-you went to-into these particular skill sets, and the better people went to um, toolmaker draughtsman; that's where the money was.

[00:14:27]
Mmm.

[00:14:28]
Um, but then, subsequently, within the air force and the thing that I will always remember and be-be pleased about and glad about was that depending on how you matured and the direction you went, you had the crafts and the trades within the air force that you could actually move. So, pretty much, when-when they asked me, you know, what do you want to be? That was another little, er, discussion, I said, "Well, I think that when I come out I'd like to, um, have my own garage", er, um, I like cars, I'm a bit of a car buff and um, so, therefore, yeah, I was thinking of, um, military transport, or mechanical transport sort of, things like that. And he said, um, "No, no, we've not got you down at that", so, I said, "Oh, what-what have you?" And I thought you're not going to say cook or something like that are they. And they said, "Yeah,

yeah, yeah, we want you, we've got you earmarked here as radar." And I said "Radar?" I couldn't spell radar as easy as it sounds. And we'd been through the hangars and I'd seen an aircraft with the nose frame sawn off and the nose exposed and the radar in there. And I thought, yeah, yeah, so—they-they want to get me on board to fix that. But erm, that was—it was-it was not to be, I-I couldn't do that. We-we did actually settle on an electromechanical career which was in er, airborne mun-munitions and—as I said in my resume.

[00:15:59]
Yeah, so, you—yeah sorry. So, you then car … you then, er, when you left the RAF, you, in fact, went into computing, I think?

[00:16:08]
Yes, that's right. Well, part of that, I mean, again, that-that, the—it-it's how life bumps into you and it was something that's very simple of, when you are at arm, er, the-these were the days of the V-Bomber, by the way, I was on the-the Victor Bombers, V-Bomber, or white bombers. Um, and er, when you load those with conventional munitions, 1000-pound bombs and things, um, if you've got bombs hanging in the bomb bay, um, when you-when the pilot, um, releases those bombs, he-he doesn't just press a button and they all fall out because y-you- they're packed and stacked in drives. So, you actually have to … if you, the saying would be, um, top bomb, bottom bomb gone. So, you can't release a bomb higher than a bomb that hasn't gone off. So, you interlock the release mechanisms of the bombs. They'd have probably, I think it was about 35-thousand-pound bombs in the bomb bay and they would all be stacked in certain areas-in certain positions and you wrote a programme that actually said, er, depending on the flight details, to keep the aircraft, when it's-when it's dropping bombs it needs to be steady, so, you can't let all the tail ones go before the nose ones, you can't let the port before the starboard. So, you actually interlock, and interlocking was saying is this a yes or a no, can it go, can it not? And that is the start of binary arithmetic.

[00:17:35]
Yeah. So, right, so, you started, you actually were doing computer programming essentially, in that role then, were you?

[00:17:42]
Er, yeah, it was er, it was eh, called relay—relay logic at the time, um, but you-you were programming the bomb drop just by electromechanical devices, rather than by the digital devices. But it did give you a founder of, yes, no, go, plus-minus—it-it-it's digital and that-that-that kind of, not knowingly at that time, was actually prepping me for, er, that-that push into-into the career.

[00:18:12]
Yeah, flow-you were flowcharting?

[00:18:15]
Yes, yeah, yeah, pretty much.

[00:18:17]
So, when did you m-meet your first computer?

[00:18:21]
Um, well, that was, er, pretty much the moment I left. Er, I-I decided, what did I want to do? Well, I'd been used to working out in-in an airfield, you know, I worked outside, you know. Do I want to work a job outside again? Not particularly, um, well, where would I go? Go in a factory—no, I don't want to go in a factory, I want to kind of be myself, I want to work for myself, but I can't work for myself, I want some independence. And erm, after thinking right round the subject, I decided that a service engineer, um, would be a good place to be because I'm my-my own boss, I'm out on the road in the day, erm, I am fixing things and that's good. Um, the-the early computers had input devices, which were actually typewriters with, er, relays underneath the bottom of them and you—by pressing a key, you sent a signal into the computer box. So, the whole input device was actually an electromechanical typewriter, um, I don't know if you remember the IBM golf ball typewriter.

[00:19:23]
Yes.

[00:19:25]
Yeah, well, that-that's-that's-that's the-that was one of the later more-more modern devices, the golf ball typewriter, when they-they moved from teleprinters to-to computers. Um, they needed a fast, er, keyboard device, IO device and that was the 735-golf ball typewriter and that was a nightmare of a mechanical fix, of the timings, to get it, eh, right and this kind of business. But, no, so, that-that was really then a-an electrical function—electromechanical function, which I felt quite at ease with. Um, however, moving onto the—moving onto that, I had an option with IBM, DEC, and one other, er, and was accepted. They quite like service people, um, if they're qualified and so, it was, it wasn't difficult at all to get myself on board with those.

[00:20:20]
That's-that's good because often moving out of the armed forces into civvy street can be difficult, can't it?

[00:20:26]
Yeah, well, this time, this was the market, the market was opening up and they needed people that were trustworthy, go and work on their own of the day, didn't need—a minimum of supervision, um, and that kind of—we-we got, we got quite well. But again, fortune just knocks on the door and I was going on to, er, with IBM, to, er, have a … having been offered an apprenticeship, I haven't even been offered a job with them, I said no and went with another company because they gave me the company car straight away. So, that was being a bit greedy.

[00:20:59]
Of course, yes.

[00:21:01]
But it was a big thing for somebody, you know, one of your biggest outgoings was having your car repaired if you couldn't do it yourself; most of the time, you did it yourself.

[00:21:10]
Mmm.

[00:21:12]
Um, but, um, yeah, so, er.

[00:21:14]
So, that was British Computer—British Computers?

[00:21:17]
Yes, yeah, yeah, BCL, Business Computers Limited, yeah.

[00:21:22]
And you stayed there—and you stayed there eleven years as well?

[00:21:24]
Yeah, I sort of have eleven and seven, they kind of ring, I-I-I don't flitter, um, um, every time, either something happened to the company, as on a couple of occasions, um, or er, I-I-I was induced away for other reasons.

[00:21:42]
Well, up to that point in your life, what would you say the main influences had been; were there any people? I mean, even going back to, er, your school days that-that-that were really, er, role models or, or mentors for you up to that point?

[00:21:57]
Um, well, there were a couple of people that changed—that really did change my mind, changed-changed my, er, direction and that was that going back to BCS, when I went on my typewriter course, the IBM course, um, and that was—that was a-a month, a month on that course, it shows the complexity of, er, the input device. But er, without an input device, what do—what is a computer?

[00:22:22]
Mmm.

[00:22:23]
Er, so, er, with-with, er, with—where am I going? Um, so, h-having got this typewriter course, um, I had to wait because there weren't—there weren't vacancies for it, so, I had to wait three weeks. And, what happened was my boss came around and says, "Look, we can't have you hanging around in the office for three weeks, um, just reading manuals. Erm, we've actually got a software course, we're running a software course for the next month, and so, you know, just for the sake of a week, um, why don't you go on this computer course and-and learn what-what we actually do?" And so, I joined this programming course, at-the-the-the, um, the very first week, um, I was completely bamboozled, I just didn't get the jargon, I didn't get the words, as they were writing programmes. If you go back to start, you did a carriage return, to change formats, you did a-a-an upward lift or, a-a-a shift or whatever. What I hadn't realised at the time, that all of the programming language was actually based on a typewriter, erm, and er, an-anyway, at the end of the first week, I went to see the lecturer and said, "Look, I-I don't want to—I-I'm-I'm-I'm an engineer, er, not software, erm, I-I just can't get a grip of-of this and I would be wasting your time." He said, "Oh, you're not wasting my time, stay behind tonight" and he stayed behind tonight, and he just took me through, and it was that—just that simple thing of part of the language is what the-the typewriter is going to do.

[00:24:03]
Mmm.

[00:24:04]
And he-he-he dropped this coin in my head, or this thought or dream in my head and I said, "Oh, so, this and this and this and this?" and he said, "Yes, that's right, y-you can do it." I said, "Yeah, I think I can," I said, "Give me my homework back." And I remember I sat on the tube going out on the central line and up to Greenford because we were staying with my mother-in-law after coming out of the forces, a-a-and I did my whole week—a whole week's homework, um, writing a small application. And I sat there, only a matter of a few lines, of course, but, um, on the central line, that was the first bit of programming. Erm, and from there on in, understanding how the computer worked, and how you drove it, gave me a real insight. Um, because we were all new, and if you had a problem on a machine, then usually, these problems

just come up, erm, and then disappear again, and you-you can't find out what is actually going wrong because it's, er, just going wrong in-in an instant and you don't catch it.

[00:25:06]
Mmm.

[00:25:06]
So, what I was able to do then because I could programme, I actually started programming diagnostic programmes to test the machine in a particular function or a particular way for a period of time, so, I could actually track the faults, I was being able to exercise the computer or the input device in a way in which it would manifestly show its—show the fault—show itself.

[00:25:30]
Yeah.

[00:25:31]
Everybody thought I was a whizz-kid; I'm fixing all these things.

[00:25:35]
Right.

[00:25:36]
But—which I'm-I'm just reprogramming them, and the programme had made a mistake or whatever.

[00:25:40]
And that would have been what? The end of the '60s, '68, '69, or--?

[00:25:45]
Yeah, yeah, yeah—yeah, yeah, you've got that about right, about '69, '70, yeah.

[00:25:50]

Right, yeah. So, that's, so, then, y-y-you carried on in that, er, er, with-with, erm, er, er, Business Computers, for a good long while then you went away PT, didn't you? What was the spur for doing that?

[00:26:03]

Gap in Recording

[00:26:25]

Yeah, erm, and it was—by-by the ti—yeah, over the course of that time, I'm, so, I'm sorry for being clumsy about this, but so much happened in such a short span of time, and it's trying to just, er, reassemble that. Um, because of the—let's say, the shortage of engineers or the demand for engineers as the computer industry was growing up, my-my promotion was accelerated within Business Computers, right. So, I was working on my own for about eighteen months, but I was living—we had bought a house, our first house, in High Wickham. And I'm travelling into London before the M4 and all this kind of business, every morning from five o'clock, getting into town, um, whatever, but I, so, I-I was—I had my own patch and the patch went as far as something like West London, to um, out into er, the-the West Country, er, I can't think of—erm, Banbury Cross, was my furthest.

[00:27:28]

Wow, that's a big--

[00:27:29]

From-from-from West London to Banbury Cross, you know.

[00:27:33]

A big area.

[00:27:33]

A big drive, er, you needed a company car for that one, um, so-so, um, er, with-within eighteen months, what happened then was they started to have problems, erm, as-as where they sold machines. It was-it was very successful, the company, um, and the-the … as the user base started to build up, er, they became more and more in my area.

Um, and then, we brought out a more sophisticated machine, er, and one particular morning, they had a problem, they couldn't get an engineer to, erm, to-to this particular fault in Uxbridge and they said, "Colin, um, could you go-- er, to this company—this company on your way into town?" So, I said, "Oh, yeah, okay" so, I came into town. That started me—then, as a notch up, so, they gave me a branch.

[00:28:24]
Right.

[00:28:24]
Which is the whole time … I recruited a branch then, and we recruited something like six engineers to start doing all of the, erm, the-the work. I did that for about, I think I was a manager for two years, erm, and … sorry, one of the things, when I was in the air force, I spent five years in Germany. So, I-I was—I wouldn't say I was fluent, I could speak enough German to get me past.

[00:28:48]
Yeah.

[00:28:48]
And the company was growing and wanted to grow, er, out into, er, Europe and in particular, Eastern Europe. So, I was offered a job there to be hardware and software support engineer, for BCS, for the Eastern Bloc, based in Vienna, because everything sells in the East Bloc, through Vienna. So, erm, I-I then was promoted into hardware and software support. I did that for, er, two years, ending in my little excursion for six months, in Moscow, where I-I built a system in Moscow.

[00:29:24]
That must have been fascinating to be, er, working in the Eastern Bloc at that time, when-when—

[00:29:30]
Well—

[00:29:30]
In the height of the Cold War.

[00:29:32]
It was, it-it was exactly that and you … and there was a difference. I mean, the difference between the Hungarians and the um, Bulgarians, what's in a few letters? erm, a completely different culture, completely different behaviours. Ones were kind of like, [00:30:00] almost like royal families, the Austral--the Austrians and the history behind them, sort of thing. The Bulgarians were like the-the bullies of Europe, erm. And-and the culture and the whole thing there—Warsaw, Poland, very dangerous, you know. The poverty in some of these areas, was-was-was quite a lot to see. But it was-it was very enlightening, the, well, my-my tour in, er, in Moscow, was supposed to be, the Hotel Sputnik, by the way, er, was the first one. Erm, and they were a-a-a subsidiary hotel from Hotel Rossiya. If you know Moscow, it's Moscow's Red Square, the big hotel in, er, the, er, in the corner is, er, the Hotel Rossiya and that was the hotel I worked for. But in Hotel Sputnik, was a trade union hotel in the outer parts of, er, of Moscow. Um, so, at that particular time as well, it's quite difficult moving around, but my company gave me a Nosco, a-a-a company car so that I would actually could do—I could only drive within a certain twenty miles of the centre, from the centre of, er, Moscow, but that gave me some-some freedom of a weekend to, um, to-to-to go around. Erm, I'm rambling a bit here, but [laughs]

[00:31:11]
That's okay. Well, so, I mean, basically, you moved into telecoms one way or another, didn't you? I mean, how did that-how did that change come about?

[00:31:21]
Er, so, now, now, we've- now, we've actually got, erm, a company that's, er, really making grounds we-we were selling. I-I went out to, in Eastern Europe, I-I'd come back to the-the factory in s-in Brighton—

[00:31:35]
So, when—sorry to interrupt, Colin, but what sort of date are we at now, then?

[00:31:40]
Ahh, s-in the ‘72’s.

[00:31:44]
Right.

[00:31:44]
1972, around that area, yeah.

[00:31:47]
Yeah.

[00:31:48]
So, er, we-we was, we started, er, being able to sell, I-I-I would build the system, I’d take it to the next country, they had big these—they had big trade fairs in-in Eastern Europe at the time, selling everything from peanuts to lo-locomotives, erm, everything, and we had a stand on their computer stand. So, I’d-I’d build the system, that a customer had ordered, take it to the exhibition, we’d show it off and show them and do a promotion, and then, after the exhibition, I would take it to the client, install it in the client’s premises, train the engineers, and then come back and repeat it all again for the next country we would go into. So, we actually had got the market going, bubbling in, er, in Eastern Europe. Erm, and then Margaret Thatcher came through with her three-day-working week, um, and we had, um, in hindsight, there was nothing … I wasn’t in the management side of business in this, but we had a real problem in that, um, 25% was with, er, of revenue was with, erm, when you ordered. The second 25% was when you, erm, when we placed the order, the third p-part erm, 25%, that’s 75%, erm, got paid er, when we had actually delivered. And the final was when it was installed and commissioned and signed off. Well, when you’re snagging, that last 25, and you’re not paying the last 25, is-is-is a killer because that is where your profit actually is.

[00:33:21]
Mmm.

[00:33:21]
And by the time you actually got—and we were selling so much, and everyone we were selling much, we were still owed 25%, because they would come up with ideas; "Well, oh, we meant it was this" and they weren't, um, these-these were bespoke programmes. When you're writing an application, you wrote it for that client, there wasn't such a thing as an app.

[00:33:42]
Yes.

[00:33:44]
A finite app, you built them to-to tailored. Erm, and so, we had the-the snagging on this was-was huge, a-and then suddenly, erm, when Margaret Thatcher and the 90 days came through, and the erm three-day-week came through, then we had a big problem. Erm, that because all of our orders were 90-90 days payment terms and then suddenly, all the people we were buying from said, "No, no, you-you, we-we can't wait for 90 days, we want 30 days.

[00:34:11]
Mmm.

[00:34:12]
So, even, at that particular time, we, er, we had orders—an order book of seven million, um, and a backing, erm that was being progressed for—from Dubai to make us solvent again. Erm, but our bank, er, wouldn't take the Arab money. So, we had to foreclose. Erm, we were taken over by competitors, erm, they left mainly Singer Business Systems, was, er, one of our competitors, and a couple of their directors left Singer and took over the sales of, erm, of-of-of BCS—BCL.

[00:34:52]
Yeah.

[00:34:53]

Erm, and er, by that time, with the movement that was going on, when you first-when we first started in computing, the warranty just got signed off on-on as you bought it, you got free warranty. But over the course of time, and IBM again, was changes in that, erm, they put you in a blue suit, they gave you a briefcase to put your tools in and started charging them for service maintenance contracts. And so, every company then followed that and by that time, we'd built out … you know, I said, I'd been a service man, a branch manager, Eastern Europe, I was now, erm, Deputy Head of Technical Support for the company. Erm, and er, they said "Well, what's going to happen?" they said, "No, we're only going to buy the sales arm and the manufacturing arm. What we're going to do is we're going to sell off the service side, and with the money, we get from the service side, we pay for us buying the company." "Oh, that's pretty good, but what's going to happen to me?" "Oh, it's all right, you'll be a part of the group that we-we actually sell, you're a key player in our service." And I said, "Oh, okay, well, I don't think I'm going to do that."

[00:36:03]
No.

[00:36:04]
And the whole thing behind that was, I don't mind doing service, but I want-I want to know the product, I want it to be my product and-and, not a brand—not just go and fix things, like er, fixing a kettle or fixing a toaster, or fixing a whatever. This is our product and it's the best product in the world and when they get the product … So, I said, "No, no, I'm not going to go and do that." So, I then looked out to find out where I could find such a job and that's where Data Recognition came on board. They made mark-sense readers, I don't know if you've seen these things, you just—they're mainly for mat- erm, filling out questionnaires and whatever, you just mark a box, feed it through the machine and the machine in the computer reads it.

[00:36:47]
Mm-hmm.

[00:36:49]

And so, we started off, we had a contract with Sainsbury's for their little er, part star, I'm getting out of breath here, a little, erm, the Spar grocers.

[00:37:01]
Right.

[00:37:01]
Spar groc-Spar grocers don't like lots of stock, they-because that's their inventory and they've got to fund that inventory. So, what they want, if they want Cornflakes, they want one box of Cornflakes, and so, if somebody comes in and buys it, then they can order another box of those from-from the delivery, and it will be there the next morning. So, the shop is operating on a just-in-time basis.

[00:37:23]
Yeah.

[00:37:24]
Erm, and the way they could do that was we had a motorcyclist, would go around all the Spar shops in an area, picking up their order forms, which is done on the-on the mark-sense. Take them back to Blackfriars, to the headquarters, and feed them through overnight, they'd feed all of the forms and the trucks would go and deliver to the Spar shops the following day. So—

[00:37:45]
Yeah. Now, I don't want to talk too much, er, about er, the-the technology, although that is fascinating, erm, I think for the purposes of this we want to talk a little bit more about, erm, er, the sort of influences, you know, what-what the influences on your life were, and also, what difference those technologies made in the real world. I mean, of course, you've talked about that a bit, but maybe sort of taking a little bit of a step back, Colin.

[00:38:11]
Yeah.

[00:38:12]
Erm, and erm, perhaps moving on to, yeah, you then-you then joined BT, didn't you? And what-what were the sort of changes going on technologically, at that time? Er, and you know, your sort of motivators and inspirations and where you saw, er, you know, the-the excitement happening?

[00:38:30]
Okay. Well, erm, BT was a good thing in that it-it started me off in a … with a completely different mind, erm, erm, and-and-and their own reason for that was that er when I got into—it's how I worked my way through the businesses really—

[00:38:50]
This is—sorry to interrupt, Colin, but you say—you joined BT in 1993, is that right?

[00:38:55]
'87.

[00:38:57]
Oh, okay, sorry, '87, yeah, yeah, sorry, getting muddled up, yeah.

[00:39:02]
That's right, yeah, in '87. Erm, and er, the reason I joined them was that I-I in working for APT, I had a factory, er, and I had a labour force, uh, and there's lots of other changes that were going on in that particular period of time. But erm, I-I because I had a digital background, rather than an analogue background, the main product was power supplies, and power supplies are just a black box that—with-- if you touch them with a wet finger, you get a shock. It has as-as little interest to me as that, whereas a digital world is a completely different thing, and I couldn't get the digital out of my-out of my-out of my senses. Erm, so, what I did, I actually recruited a couple of people I worked with to come and work for me and we started to write programmes for testing power supplies automatically. So, we made a machine that actually, could just put the power supply in and it would connect up to it, test itself

and if any-any fault, it would highlight it, if it had not, it gave the pass rate, and the date and the time. And it-it guaranteed the serviceability of that particular product and saved an enormous amount of money on using test engineers who were very expensive, to do be able to do that.

Now, that kind of made a-a big move, er, in-in-in the factory. The, er … and once I'd got that and it was working, I'd now got these very expensive programmers with nothing to do. So, we-we looked at what else we could do in erm, in that-in that space, erm, and I-I-I then said well, I'll-I'll, I can make stuff, erm, for third parties that don't have any more skills, that don't-don't have the capabilities. So, you've got developers—erm, development and—sorry, you-you have people develop stuff or invent stuff and they just want to make their prototypes and whatever. So, we then did a make to print, provided I could buy the components and provided I could test what we built at the end, then I would do the full service and be a sub-contract manufacturer to them. And we did things like speak yourself weighing machines, we did electronic guitars, er, we did a whole r-raft of-of-of different kinds of products in that space.

One of the products that came back was, erm, a-a-a board from Telecoms, a vintage circuit board from Telecoms, and the-the key thing about this card, it was a very fundamental card, and when you're making a telephone call, there-there's only two points, you've just-you've just got to cross point between a handset and the line. So, you've got a line coming in, you got a handset here, you connect the two, you connect them with a switch and that is basically how a telephone works, it's just the telephone build-building switch. And this particular card could actually take 128 of these microswitches erm, in order to be able to switch telephones and lines. Erm, and so, clearly, the-the-the weakness of a-of a function, of a particular product like that, a multi-matrix relay card, is the service—the quality of the relay and the manufacturing of it. Un-unless you make those really, really good, then they're going to fail and what-what's the consequences going to be? You're going to lose your line; you're going to lose your customer and you're going to lose millions of pounds because you've just lost a deal. So, the-the-just this simple thing, again, had a big impact on what we're trying to sell. And so, what we did then, is I brought in investment—I put investment into, erm, temperature chamber-chambers. So, I could—once I'd built the

assembly, we could put it under changes, stress heat it, shock it, vibrate it, because it's so, by the time we'd actually … we almost break it, in the testing of it to get it sent out. We-we get out a product and the products were really, really high-quality because they'd got-we'd put them through a real functional testing, much stronger than they would ever do in life.

And then, what happened then was, BT were launching, because they go out with tranches, to different vendors and get you in a price competition. Well, I reached a point where, because I'm spending this amount and investing this amount to make a product that doesn't break, erm, I'm more expensive than the guys that are just doing it in the old conventional way. So, they previously went to, erm, at-at-at my competitors. Erm, they try and screw me, sorry, erm, to get the best price, erm, but erm, there comes a point where I can't-I can't go below my margins and keep my profit margins. So, I've said no, I said no, I-I-I'm not going to go that. They went out to this other supplier, they then came back a month later saying, erm, sorry, you were right, they-they-they had lots of failures with these other-other companies' boards and so, could you come in and talk to us? So, I went in to talk to them, and the order was for something like erm, er, half a million, coming up for half a million pounds worth of sub-contract-contract work, making these card for-for erm, BT. Erm, and so, when I went to see them, I'd got all my numbers, all the figures, So, we talked through, well, what would do if so and so? How did you do that, why are you better than somebody else? And the whole answer comes down to quality.

[00:44:42]
Mmm.

[00:44:44]
And I became a real advocate for, er, er, Deming and erm, the fourteen demonst—er, fourteen points of quality, that, er, you should be consistent, you should be—there's all different points—

[00:44:59]
So, this, er, this non-stop computing and five-nines or six-nines reliability and that sort of sub thing that you really kind of got into at an early stage you would say?

[00:45:09]
Yes, yes, we did yeah, yeah, sorry for [unclear 00:45:12] it out.

[00:45:13]
No, that's right, well, because I'm interested in er, in-in the influences and er, you know, what's going on in the industry generally, um, and you know, what you kind of … the opportunities and obstacles, that you-that you met along the way.

[00:45:28]
The-the-the thing that really resonated on that, was that it wasn't a bid for the, er, for the card, they were interviewing me.

[00:45:37]
Ahh, right.

[00:45:40]
And what happened then was, they offered me the job of director. BT was op-opening up, they were going back into manufacturing, so, they built five big factories. One in South Wales, one up in Scotland were labour—they started making telephones again, and all this kind of stuff. And they called me in, um, and then they offered me the job of being a director, or production director, for the new international product division that they were—that BT were opening for. And they put me to, um, CBP, City Business Products, who were the real computer manufacturer, the telephony computer factory. Erm, and er, most of the reason for breaking me in there was they had quality problems in manufacturing.

[00:46:26]
Mmm.

[00:46:27]
So, that started then another tranche of or another wave. And the wave at that time then, was really, in terms of making stuff, i-i-is is making sure that you-you can keep the quality and keep your variables down, er, as you-as you bu-build it. And there

were things like, erm, they started to have just-in—just-in-time manufacturing so that you didn't hold all of the inventory yourself, you negotiated with your partners. So, how many partners have you got? When I went into BT they had something like 45 suppliers, and they had what I call JIC, just-in-case.

[00:47:05]
Laughs.

[00:47:06]
Just in case this company failed to deliver, you had another one you could get something from.

[00:47:11]
Right.

[00:47:12]
Just in case you didn't do that. So, suddenly now, you've got the same-the same product, made by three different companies, just in case, one-something happens to one of the others, so, you have now got three variables. So, if you have a problem and the problem could be in the design, you don't know, where-where-where it is.

[00:47:30]
Yeah.

[00:47:31]
Is it with [unclear 00:47:31]? You-you-you've got three things that it could be now, rather than just-just-just the one so, that kind of thing was-was-was important so, I reduced the number of v-vendors from something like 40 and it's not an exaggeration, 40 down to about 4 or 5. Because they could buy and take the risk from the smaller ones themselves.

[00:47:53]
Yeah.

[00:47:54]
I stopped have—carrying inventory, and saying, now, part of my deal is that you will carry a month's worth of supply of-of my-of my products. You then look at the um, the lead times of your products, it's no use having 90% of it if you're missing a vital part.

[00:48:11]
Mm-hmm.

[00:48:11]
So, what, the vital parts that you are actually making, who are you buying them from, erm, and-and buy those. You can always pick up the little fringe stuff later on, but what are the key parts? There's a whole wave of-of new type of logistics and a different way of thinking, but it all boils down at the end of the day, to the product you're selling and the quality that you're making-they're making.

[00:48:35]
Yeah. And then, you went-and then you went on to BT Syntegra, I think, that was when you got into trading floor systems?

[00:48:41]
Yeah, yeah, yeah, that-that's right, yeah, they, erm, well, it was part of—it was a stand-alone subsidiary, erm, CBP, um, and Syntegra was an organisation, a solution manufacturer, not manufacturer, a solutions division, erm, and er, what BT … when BT look round, BT had, at the time, something like, er, I think it was around 60 or so, erm, computer companies, in the whole of BT. Erm, and er, what they decided to do was mash that all together and they mashed it all together and called it Syntegra Solutions.

[00:49:20]
Goodness, 60-60 companies into one?

[00:49:23]
Yeah.

[00:49:24]
That's extraordinary.

[00:49:25]
Into Syntegra, into Syntegra.

[00:49:27]
Mm-hmm.

[00:49:27]
And I was one of them, um, and the one of them being the largest, er retail, er, revenue makers, erm, but they just pulled us back in again. It was never a good fit, the solution and, er, a-a manufacturing entity, we were the only man—we were left down, as we went downstream, we-we were the only company that, erm, the-the subsidiary, that was manufacturing in the whole of BT. We were the only part of BT that exported stuff if you can believe it; 150-million-pound people, in a 12 billion pound, er, organisation, erm, incredible.

[00:50:06]
Mmm.

[00:50:06]
But, but that-that-that was-that was down to, erm, the quality of the products. We had two hangars of defective materials when I joined the company because they just broke and they broke so frequently that you couldn't do it.

[00:50:23]
Yeah. So, was-was that a success, in the end, they Syntegra venture, did that work out?

[00:50:29]
Oh, yeah, yeah, it-it's still—it's still working today.

[00:50:32]
Mmm.

[00:50:32]
Erm, the company itself has changed names, but it's still BT within—it-it's no longer Syntegra, the Syntegra, as you rightfully-rightfully thought, that's not going to work, it didn't. There were too many factions within it, erm, the culture, of-of so many organisations, just, it-it lasted about, I think about five years.

[00:50:53]
Right.

[00:50:54]
But all the time, the new-the new owners—the BT new owners in there, really wanted to, erm, split from BT, erm, and be an organisation on its own, rather than be part of BT, and that was the downfall of that, er—

[00:51:09]
Right, yeah. And then you-then you moved onto um, O2?

[00:51:15]
Yeah, wonderful—wonderful that was. So, um, after all of the things that I'd done for, erm, for BT, I reached er, 60, and it's, er, it's retirement time at-at BT at 60. Erm, and so, we went into a negotiation they said, "Look, you know, it's the--rules are the rules, we've got to retire you. However, we can, we'll keep you, we like—" they were happy with what I was doing, erm, just, sign on, and we signed on by a year and a year refresh, erm, carry on doing the job, but as a-a consultant.

[00:51:49]
Yeah.

[00:51:50]
Er, and I said, “Well, no, that-that-that doesn’t-doesn’t work for me because, you could-you could let me go at any-at-at-in any particular time, so, there’s no security there. If I’m going at 60, erm, so, I’ll find something else that I would do. And at that time, when, erm, er, a friend, you know, obviously, in the network comes out, Colin’s erm, free, have you got anything going type of thing. And I got a call from one of my guys, who-who had been previously a marketing guy and he was marketing guy for Genie Internet. Genie Internet was the very first IT internet company to sell phones and sim time, sim cards, er, in-in the UK. Erm, and what they wanted, they-they’d got a-a very, erm, young team, er, that I think I-I swayed the age see-saw, enormously, when I sat on the other end.
[00:52:52]

How was that to be-to be the one grey-haired person in the room?

[00:52:57]
It was-it was, erm, I’m kind of trying to think of-of the nicest way of saying it. It was-it was strange, I mean, I’d spent 40 years maybe, or whatever it was, erm, as an executive, most of it as a business executive, in all-all parts of the world. And now, I suddenly come here and, er, I go to this desk and, er, “What are you doing, you sitting there?” “Yeah, well, I’m sitting there, that’s your desk”—no, we hot desk here. Do we? oh, okay.” Right, I’d picked a nice little spot for myself that wasn’t there the next day or the day after.

[00:53:30]
Yeah.

[00:53:31]
And so, anyway, I-my-my daughter came and gave me a wonderful, erm, example of what to do. And she said, “You know, this is, erm, penguins and peacocks.” And I said, “What-what’s penguins and peacocks?” And she said, “Well, you know the difference between a penguin and a peacock,” she said, “One is all colours and everything and a peacock is just plain.” And she said, “No matter how well you work, how well you may integrate in, you’re visually different from the rest, and therefore,

you've got to stop being a penguin, dad—stop being a peacock, be a penguin." And part of being a penguin, was on Friday night, with this gang, was er, Bar One, five o'clock at Bar One for a few beers and bevvies, and er, one of my new colleagues, u- under managers, erm, said, erm, "You better take your tie off, Colin." I said, "Why is that?" He said, "You've been here a week and you've still got it on, you should-you shouldn't take it- don't go out with them with your tie on." And I said, "Well--" they knew me. And I went over there and then that's when I lost me tie, so—[laughs]

Erm, and again, that was-that was a change. It's a bit like remote working now, you know, you never think it's going to work, but it does and this-this openness, erm, where there is an office there, but managers share it. If you want something done in private, you take somebody there, but you're exposed to the whole of the er, the open floor, and the open plan and this kind of … so, I was quite pleased with myself at the end, I felt, well, I've broken my own mould.

[00:55:07]
Yes.

[00:55:08]
And er, and I-I-I can-I can work like this.

[00:55:11]
Yeah.

[00:55:12]
And so, eighteen months later, er, they made me erm, Vice-President, er, for-of the operations, running the data centres.

[00:55:20]
Yeah.

[00:55:21]
So

[00:55:22]
And then you went on to, erm, IPC Europe?

[00:55:26]
Yeah, well, that's because, erm, IPC are the same as BT, with the trading systems, only IPC are the largest in the world. And when I was, I went to O2, it got to the-the attention of er, what-who was my previous, er, opponents, or competitors, IPC, that I-I'd left trading systems and was now working into wireless. And they came over and said, "What are you doing over there, come back in—come back onto financials trading." I said, "No, no, this is cool, this is where it's going to be at." They said, "Well, why don't you come out to the States and see what we do?" So, they flew me out to the States, and they had me out there for a week, looking all over the whole of their business. And then they offered me the role of President of Europe, um, so, I left O2 and wireless, unfortunately, but I had six extraordinary good and extraordinarily financially rewarding, um, roles, er, in running chunks of America for IPC and-and Europe, so.

[00:56:30]
Yeah. So, looking back over that, er, th-the-those various roles, I mean, what-wh-is there anything you would differently if you had your time again?

[00:56:39]
Erm, yeah, I'd work for an American company earlier, erm—

[00:56:45]
Because fin-because it's more rewarding financially or-or the technology is more--?

[00:56:49]
Yes, both—well, all, sorry, you mentioned three there, all three, you know, er, it-it is different, um, and by-by just by way of offside, both my daughter and my son, er, work for American companies and are senior directors of those companies, and they're in their '40s, and they're paid mainly on equities. You know, it-it-it's-it is a different way of rewarding people, um, if-if-if that's an importance, erm, do it.

[00:57:18]
Yes. Do you think that they are more entre-entrepreneurial, um?

[00:57:24]
Yeah, yeah, and-and don't worry about failure, if you-if you don't fail, if you don't do anything, you won't-- sorry, I've forgot what—

[00:57:31]
Yeah. So, do, you feel sad about, er, about companies like BT that were so technologically advanced, um, and-and haven't really managed to get that global success?

[00:57:43]
Erm, yeah. I-I think it was, it was too autocratic in that sense. The quality of people in BT is extraordinary, the application of them, erm, of those people in putting them in the right places, I think was where BT lost-lost their way.

[00:58:00]
Mmm.

[00:58:01]
Erm, they were too big to kind of do that, and-and it-it was a situation where you would see somebody good in a role, they may do it for 2 years, and then they move him onto another job because he did that one well. And then they've all—the one behind him comes in, wants to change everything, 'cause you've got to do it your way, and it's just-just-just a tumble. So, it's-it's a-it's a real shame, it's a real shame.

[00:58:24]
Yeah, yeah, yeah. Now, you've had a couple of other roles haven't you since IPC? Erm, most recently, erm, Tribune Bus-

[00:58:35]

Tribune, yes.

[00:58:36]
Yeah, yeah, erm, er, and is there anything that you would like to pick out from those other activities? Because I-I certainly want to talk about your charitable work too, so, you must leave a bit of time for that.

[00:58:46]
No, I-I-I think, erm, er, once I started working for myself most of it was, erm, I-I was going to say, you don't need money—I-I d-d-don't need lots of money to-to do it. so, I-I wasn't going back to work to earn money, although I was, it-it-it needed to be getting the satisfaction and staying abreast of the technology when I actually did that and therefore, whatever, I did, I was paid for, theoretically, erm, by equity. So, I took a share in the business for, and then worked for-for pro-bono, but it wasn't really, I was working for-for the shares. Erm, if-if we were successful, we made it and we made it good and therefore it was worthwhile being in business. If we didn't, then, er, we didn't—

[00:59:34]
And have you made, have you made a lot of money through that- those equities?

[00:59:37]
No.

[00:59:38]
Why, why not?

[00:59:39]
Erm, probably the wrong things at the wrong time, erm, but there was always some problems, er, most of it is financial cash flow, erm, it's so difficult to, erm, the environment now—If we had been in business this year, we wouldn't have been in business last year, you know, it-it-it-it's what fate, what fate chooses. And Tribune was a brilliant, we had firsts in a number of areas, um, and our best year ever, it's almost like a history replaying itself from the, erm, the work with BCS. Erm, being—

your product not—it's not a problem with your product, everybody loves your product, you just haven't got the money to keep your company rolling while you-you-you're waiting for the changes to take place.

[01:00:26]
Gap in Recording
[01:01:44]
It's most-it's mostly, erm, basic—it's mostly cash flow. Its Department for Education pays the last million or two million, er, to clear it off. The school haven't got the money, the school just signs it off and then the Department for Education do that. We had 14 million of orders and we was just—government were just not paying us through.

[01:02:05]
Mmm.

[01:02:05]
They have a t-t-terrible record for payment of smaller companies, they pay the big companies, it's a bit like BT, BT had a terrible record of paying-paying of small suppliers.

[01:02:15]
Yeah.

[01:02:16]
Er, and that with Tribune, we-we-we h-h-hit a cashflow problem.

[01:02:22]
Yeah.

[01:02:23]
Suppliers wouldn't supply any—

[01:02:27]
Yeah. So, erm, so, what about making other people rich though, do you think, er, your-you've obviously, um, er, you know, made a-made a respectable a-a-amount-amount of money yourself over the years. But, but do you think, do you feel that perhaps other p-people benefitted even more or not so much?

[01:02:46]
No, I've never-I've never really thought about that, erm, particularly. Erm, but—

[01:02:53]
What, okay, yeah, so, shall we talk about your charity work now because that is obviously something that is very … How did you, er, w-w-when did you start to get involved in-in-in the charity work and what has really been your sort of big motivation?

[01:03:08]
Erm, my motivation really is children and being able to see children. Let me tell you a story then. Erm, and this-this is to do with the livery, erm, and the livery, um, we don't—we're not a-a rich … we-we're better than we were, we're not a rich livery. Erm, and therefore, the way in which could … one of the pillars of livery, is charity, and charity giving. But if we don't have money, what do we have? We have talent and experience, and we can erm, give that and that really, is the basis for doing it. And one of our past master's, I think he was the fifth, was Rick Foote, and he-he thought … because we would just go out and try and do something, erm, and there was no structure to it. So, he-he listed all of the places in London or functions in London that were charities and see if we could go and do IT with a charity in a particular area. And er, he-he gave me one called Recreation and Leisure, which I—it's a bit like changing the title of a-of a story you're writing that fits into what you want it to say, not necessarily what the subject matter should be … if you get that. [coughs]

And so, I took Recreation and Leisure to be the use of IT for somebody, erm, to do things they couldn't do without it, and that list led me to the blind, the deaf, erm, and the major illnesses. They didn't want any help, they had their own technical people,

erm, they just wanted money, so, that was a bit—a little bit naff. Erm, then I got, erm, a telephone call from a social worker, from the Royal Chelsea and Westminster Hospital. Erm, and she said she's got this little boy, young boy, who is—when he's in hospital for a long period of time … that's the-it's the Tertiary Centre for Cystic Fib-Fibrosis, erm, The Royal Chelsea. And when they're in there for er, treatment, um, he's missing his schoolwork. So, he'd become doubly disadvantaged then, one, for his illnesses, and two, that he's not keeping up with his work—could I get him a, er, a PC? "Yeah, yeah, yeah, I can do that." This was when I was I was in BT, so, [coughs] we got, erm, a trolley, we got a computer, we got a PC, we got the necessary things. We contacted the school and found out what lessons he wants and what things he could do.

So, we replicated his school desk on the trolley, um, great, I was very pleased with myself and then we rang him up and said, er, "Look, sorry to have taken a fair while, but erm, we've got this trolley now, I'd like to come and see if we can meet Michael or David?" And erm, she said, "Oh, Colin, I'm so sorry," I thought, "Sorry, for why?" She said, "He died on the table at Harefield Hospital, with a heart and lung transplant." Oh, my God, you know, I just didn't-didn't understand that I didn't understand that. Anyway, cut a long story short, we-we couldn't do that, and, um, [coughs] thought on it for a-a couple of weeks and I rang her back and said, "Look, we were doing it for-for Michael, but is there another child may be that we can do it and move it onto?" And she said, "Well, I don't know, Michael was this particular case because he comes [unclear 01:06:27]. You would need to speak to the-the headteacher of-of the-the head carer of the-of the school." So, I said, "Okay."

So, I went and [unclear 01:06:40] [coughs] and it was a young woman called Janette Steel, who is still there today, I believe, at the Royal Chelsea and I said, "Look, I've-this is where we've got, could I give this to another child, would you support that?" And she said, "No." "Why-why, no?" She said, "Well, because I-I-I wouldn't want you to give a gift to one person. If you wanted to give it for—to me, to share, then I would be delighted to do it." I said, "Oh, okay, we're talking the same language now." So, I said, "Well, w-w-what would you do with it?" she said, "Well, I want to build a school, so, when they come here, they can be Ofsted tested and we'll-we'll build a role, so, play teachers." So, that-that's how it all st-that's how it would work.

So, "Okay, well, I'll tell you what, we'll do it with five PCs." So, we got five PCs, we set up a classroom, and off it-and off it went. I cut a long story short but, that is still running today and that-that was, that was in the, well, crumbs that's '98, 1998, yeah, so, that's knocking on now.

[01:07:44]
Mmm, yeah.

[01:07:45]
Erm, and they-they've got five schools in one of the five hospitals that are all part of that particular, Kensington and Westminster, erm school. Now, that was, I was really quite pleased about that. Erm, and the-and the thread that was running through that, again, these systems must not fail, this telephone must not break and lose money. This-this child has actually got an illness, so, wants to play or wants to do it, it-it must work, it mustn't break.

[01:08:12]
Yeah.

[01:08:14]
Erm, we-we took the training room for er, erm, theory of must not break, quality in what you do, look for how you're going to make this s-s-self-healing, I used to call them, self-healing computers.

[01:08:26]
Yes.

[01:08:26]
You pick up and you change [unclear 01:08:28]. So, it-that was good and then what happened then was Rick Foote, the-the master who had suggested it, was very pleased about this. He said, "I've just been made a trustee, er, of a children's hospice" Oh, a

children's hospice, that sounds interesting. "Do you think you could do something like you did at Westminster with this? It-it's a place called Demelza, erm, and it's in Sittingbourne, Kent." Er, so, I said, "Oh, okay, well, I'll go down and see them" so, I went down and seen them, the head of trustees, was a guy called Derek Phillips, and he was the father of Demelza, who was a young woman, who died of a brain tumour at an early age, having ensured she got married. There's a bit of a big story behind it and whatever. But Derek and I got on extremely er, extremely well, and er, I said, "Oh, look, I'll tell you what we want to do then. What we want to do is we want to take the moral of a system that doesn't break, and er, and-and put it into your hospice." We were given, erm, £32,000 by the Royal Masonic Trust for Girls and Boys, Derek was fundraising for the [unclear 01:09:43]. Sorry, Derek was an architect, as well. So, he actually, he actually designed the hospice in Sittingbourne, Kent, up on the hills, the Kent Hills, looking down. Every bedroom looks down into a valley, it's beautiful.

[01:09:55]
Yes.

[01:09:55]
The Oast House is, er, is the-is like a chimney that comes out of the-of the—anyway, lovely place. So, we built … I-I then w-wearing my BT hat, then went back [unclear 01:10:09] er, to my contractors, and I've got—I wire trading floors. So, I've got this com-this company to come in and wire the whole of the hospital to put our instant, er, put our information systems in-into. So, we put five Sky boxes, so, you can have five channels of Sky, TV in every room, erm, we put games all around, we made three erm, er, rooms with three themes, o-one for education, two, for fun and laughter, erm, and I can't remember what the third one was. But three themes and that's started the whole-that started the whole thing up. It was opened by the Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, at the time, Lady Mountbatten of Burma was, um, the patron and they came and opened it with all of the er, the glory, the er, yeah, yeah. So, i-it, what happened then was, erm, the Royal Masonic Trust for Girls and Boys, er, had a millennium fund and they raised seven million for the millennium fund and they put that many—that money into our project.

[01:11:23]
Right.

[01:11:23]
And that's how-that's how they have-have funded the concept that we actually put on the table, erm, and it's-and it's still running today with 60, er, 60 hospices, every hospice in the whole of the UK, erm, baby wards as well.

[01:11:39]
So, it's had a huge erm, knock-on effect really, er, er, rippled out to a much broader erm, er, c-clients and-and-and areas where it's been applied?

[01:11:49]
Yes, absolutely so. I mean, we-we've just been through quite a hectic year where we've had to, erm, Zoom all of our communications to the hospices. We've had to do our training now, online, all of our manuals and erm, guides for the equipment that we put in have to be, er, available, er over-line as well, so, we've had quite a busy time to do. So, it-it still carries on but when you go into the-the ward, if you haven't looked at the website, please-please have a look there, and just to see the smile on these children's faces is-is so much of a reward.

[01:12:24]
So, looking into your crystal ball, you know, for the next sort of ten years or so, erm, could you, eh, give a few thoughts as to how you thought, erm, er, the IT, the world of IT is going to change and-and perhaps, you know, what some of the knock-on effects might be? Obviously, that, erm, er, total reliability is-is going to become more and more important, isn't it, with the in-introduction, you know the sort of spread of cybercrime, er, you know, there are so many risks and dangers out there now as we become more and more reliant on this technology. What do you see as the big sort of challenges and-and opportunities ahead?

[01:13:01]
I think-I think the challenge is, you know, whatever good you can do out of computing, somebody could do something bad and it-and it's how you-how you

safeguard what we can actually do erm, to prevent that-the bad guys getting a hold of it and doing it. Time and time again, I mean, there-there-there's-they're more cleverer than me, erm, an-and therefore, you've-you've-you've just got to spend so much more time on security, erm, in those particular spaces.

[01:13:31]
Mm-hmm.

[01:13:32]
Erm, in terms of what I would like to see, is, I spend, erm, er, a reasonable amount of my time now looking at the research that's going on at the moment, which is, er, neuronodes, which is—I know, we-we-we have-we have devices for eye gaze that you can read, you-you, for paraplegics, you can—eh, the only thing they can is moved their eyes. But you put a tracker behind the computer and whatever you're looking at can operate a keyboard, the keyboard can, in turn, convert that into text, text can go into voice, erm, so, you've-you-you're talking and reading with your eyes, it's—and the neuronodes means that i-if you've only just got to be able to move a finger, that means that you can move your finger as yes, keep it still, no. You've got a yes/no, and once you've got yes/no, you can put any kind of other application and game and playthings into that. It-y-your mind is-it's limited--unlimited, the things that you can actually do to help those people that … I can't w-wish to imagine, erm, locked-in syndrome and what that must be able to do. We, you know, we've been able to see young children saying things for the first time.

There was one little boy came in and, er, he-he'd actually typed with his eyes a message and turned that message then into a statement. And as his mum and dad came in and she said, erm, "Hello, Jonny, or whatever, erm, how are you?" And he said, erm, "I'm fine, but isn't daddy fat?" you know. It's-it's nothing, but if you were there, you'd gush, you know, just—the parent hearing their child talk… it was a synthesised voice, of course, and now, now… I don't know if you know the-the-the-the scientist, at the moment, who has donated his body while he's alive. And he's actually changing parts of his body, so, he's becoming a bio-man, you know, just like … h-how on earth he's doing it. But the-they're actually now, synthesising, er, voice to be a direct parallel to your own voice, can you imagine that in terms of anger--?

It's-just-just, all-all those kinds of things are going to make a life for the unfortunate, erm, better.

[01:15:48]
So, so, on the downside would you say what perhaps the biggest mistakes of your career might have been, or perhaps you don't think you made any?

[01:15:57]
Oh, no, I've made-I've made a few. I don't … I try not to talk too much about them, erm. No, I-I-I think that I've been fortunate, I think I've been, you know, somebody that … I mean, you make your own luck, I-I-I-I do-I do believe that.

[01:16:14]
Yes.

[01:16:15]
Er, and er, I-I-I like the fact that I've experienced … I've had good experiences in different cultures, erm, and I think that has made me a much more rounded and thinking individual.

[01:16:29]
Yeah, so, going abroad, er, your-your work abroad has been very important then, and working for overseas companies, i-it-albeit in the UK?

[01:16:37]
Yes, yeah, I-I think-I think that-that's the cultural side of it, erm, the man-management, team management, so, that's one thing I think that I'm pleased about. I grow teams, and we get ses-success through the team, it's no use being clever on your own because your own party with just yourself is not a good thing. Erm, you know, you just-just, it-it-it-it-it gives you that-that, it has given me a greater insight into people and how to work with--work with people. I think teams and quality are-are what makes any business, or without them, er, every business is-is not … you've got

to be-there's got to be some … I think I've said that there's got to be some fun in your day.

[01:17:21]
Yes, you-you're quite big on-on people having fun, aren't you?

[01:17:25]
[laughs] Yeah, er, er, which is quite unusual because I'm quite a—

[01:17:29]
For example, how would you, I mean, a-any-any particular way or, you know, that-that you might say, oh, yes, that was a fun day or that was somebody having fun?

[01:17:39]
Well, I, er, my-my best one of that was that erm, when I was made master of the livery, in 2007, er, you-it's general that you take out the court for dinner, er, or evening meal. And er, I took them to the Tower of London for the evening and we had the Whitehall and er, the Crown Jewels on display, and the Beefeaters were all in there, er, and had the Ceremony of the Keys and all this … that would, I mean, that's in the social side of my life, I think that would, er, that's a very, er, nice thing to have been able to, erm, to be able to have done.

[01:18:16]
Yeah, what would you say would be the proudest achievement of your career?

[01:18:25]
Er, I think, in hindsight, though I didn't know it at the time, was when we opened Demelza.

[01:18:34]
Mmm.

[01:18:35]

It-all of the technology of the day was there, and it was working, erm, and it was our idea.

[01:18:43]
Mmm.

[01:18:44]
You know, and-and it-it was taking the trading floor, and putting it into another environment, you know. Knock a switch off, it-it will just pull it back on again itself, you know, it's just—backups are there, you know, it's just, I-I-I … and it's still there twenty years. We-it's just, we had our twenty-first year as a charity, it's just … I can't.

[01:19:08]
So, what advice would you give to someone going into the IT industry today or thinking about going into it?

[01:19:16]
Erm, I-I think it's a good idea, it-it is the way that's going to go forward, erm, and just make sure that work you're doing is what you really need and understand yourself better, erm, for-for those kinds of tools. I was fortunate in that the RAF gave me an opportunity to change my skills, um, fairly rapidly over nine or eleven years. Erm, I was also lucky when we went with start-ups, erm, and promotion was-was the reward, erm, so, do a good job, and do it as best as you can, don't worry about failing, you-you'll do it better next time. Just, erm, just knowing where … and where you want to be in, er, in HR. Erm, my daughter is in human resourcing, and my son is in, erm, electronic sales, erm, network sales. You know, just different pitches play different people, erm, but, eh, they're doing very well on it, thank you.

[01:20:17]
So, you've encouraged, erm, both your son and daughter to-to get into the world of IT one way or another?

[01:20:23]

Well, it-it's probably one way or another is, yeah, there's no pressure there at all, I think it's they've seen what I've been doing, they like what I've been doing. Erm, what-it's lovely talking to my daughter, or has been in the past, er, with, er, her HR hat on of what she does and what she doesn't do and whatever. And er, to have my son come out and fix things that I can't now because the t-the time has moved on. [laughs].

[01:20:49]
So, is there anything, erm, else you think that we haven't mentioned that would be important, erm, bearing in mind the objective of the Archives of Information Technology to, erm, er, to capture you know, the last, in your case, what … 60 years of your career in IT?

[01:21:06]
No, I-I think, it would be nice to see your record of this really, but it-it-it's been a wonderful opportunity to go through the growth. So, there's nothing you could actually say, "I invented this" or "I did this" I have invented things, erm, but not … they're more having ideas that have actually come to fruition, erm, about the-the … Another thing I'm proud of was when we were arguing in BT about h-having a repair centre. And I said, "No, we're not spending on a repair centre because our things don't go wrong."

[01:21:42]
Yes.

[01:21:43]
What-what-what better, what more can you say to that? And it-it was true, you know, you've just got to … it's painstakingly difficult at times, but if you persevere in that space and build the quality in … it will pay back, it will pay back.

[01:21:58]
Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, Colin Knight, erm, I'm sure you'll be an inspiration to many people, er, including those who benefitted from your … a-all those charitable

activities and from having you as a-as a boss being somebody who, er, who believed in having fun, as well as achieving very high standards. So, erm, on behalf of the Archives of Information Technology thank you very much.

[01:22:23]
Very nice talking to you, Jane, a bit s-staggered I think, but erm, I hope you gained something from it.

[01:22:29]
It's been—

[01:22:29]
Very nice to talk with you and meet with you again.

[01:22:31]
It's been fascinating. Okay, well, thank you very much.

[01:22:35
Okay, bye-bye now, you take care.

[01:22:37]
Bye-bye, bye.

[Audio ends: 01:22:40]