Ian Severn Access Summary

00:00:00 Early life, education and training in chemistry, pre-IT industry

Ian David Severn was born 1945 4 Feb in Edinburgh. His Father worked for the RAF so the family moved to Nottingham where he was brought up and went to the High Pavement grammar school. He went on to do a Chemistry degree in London Battersea and then returned to Nottingham for M.S.C and PHD at Nottingham Technology College (today called Nottingham Trent University.) ⍰

He says the Chemistry industry was well funded at the time, and he got a sponsorship from Dunlop Brewer Company in Loughborough to research for them. He also received funding from British Celanese in Derby to do research in surface chemistry. The first research project centred on making heat resistance shields. These were eventually used in the space industry (e.g. re-entry shields stuffed with silica). The second consisted of nylon spinning, where he had to work out how to improve the wetting properties of nylon fibres to make the nylon wider.

This led him to his first paid job with the Vickers organization in Leeds, where he researched the wetting properties of lithographic printing plates[1]. He says surface chemistry was his life until he made the move to computing.

00:02:56 Start of career in IT industry: R&D[2] Leeds, ICL, first encounter with DEC kit

This job in Leeds is what got him into the Computing industry as there was no computing in the Leeds R&D department. Ian was therefore invited by the IT manager to go back there and tell them what the department needed for R&D. What they needed was to document the entire manufacturing process of that industry and go through patent info to ensure there was no patent infringement. At that time, there were no search engines or documentation at the department, so he was invited to work with Harwell on a search engine called STATUS.[3] Before word processing, there were only digital terminals in the in R&D department so Ian was part of implementing document processing (and what was effectively word processing before its time).

As Vickers was a big customer of ICL[4] they therefore got to influence projects. Ian details that he worked with Harwell on how to find information using STAUS and document it with 75 O2 ICL terminals. ⍰ He did not use DEC equipment for this task, just the just ICL 1900s George processing IBM[5] equipment and lots of ICL equipment too. Ian stresses the connection between Vickers and ICL, saying they were in hand and glove, wall to wall as far as Vickers was concerned. Ian says the first time using DEC kit was not till later, in 1978.

---

[1] In lithographic printing, wet plates repel oil-based ink to print an image
[2] Short for Research and Development
[3] Cannot source a definition
[4] International Computers Limited
[5] International Business Machines

00:05:06 Database Publishing with Bemrose Part 1: computerising car parts with microfiche technology

He worked for Vickers up to 1978 and then got involved with Bemrose Information Services in Derby. His work consisted of database publishing, where he computerised all the parts lists for Ford, Vauxhall Motor company. This consisted of documenting every car manufactured in UK and Europe. For example, all the exploded parts and diagrams of the cars were stored on the DEC computer. As part of this role, Ian and his team produced a jumbo microfiche typeset.[6]

It wasn't a common A6 microfiche as it could store thousands of pages. Ian explains that a microfiche is images stored on a film. Every month, his team manufactured a master file for every car, this film was then copied to pass on to every Ford Vauxhall dealer in the UK and Europe. This consisted of thousands of documents, with thousands of pages per microfiche and per car; some models required multiple fiches (short for microfiche).

The first time Ian used DEC was when working on the Cortina mark 2 Capri, where all the images were stored on a PDP-11 running the RSTS[7] operating system. This was his first use of DEC computers.

00:07:05 Database Publishing with Bemrose Part 2: Stanley Gibbons stamp catalogue and the impact of computerization on the print industry

Ian says that at the time, the printing industry was in turmoil because the computer was beginning to make old hot metal compositors redundant. He explains that hot metal refers to the method of printing where all the letters of alphabet in different fonts are stored on a rack for compositors put together and physically print with hot metal on paper.

Ian details the Bemrose project with the Stanley Gibbons Stamp Catalogue where he was tasked with computerising the Stanley Gibbons Stamp catalogue. Because they had access to a sophisticated type setting device, they started computerising almost everything because at that time, the NGA, the national graphical association, was doing all work with hot metal stamps while other people were beginning to do their own type setting on a floppy disk. This went on to compositors and didn't require anyone to retype anything to prepare it for printing.

Ian is asked how big the role was. He responds that all the images and text were all stored on the PDP. He says that the PDP-11 was not the biggest or fastest machine that they had, but that it was specific to doing the typesetting and all the database storage. He goes on to describe his role as communicating with the customer such as the British library, or the British film institute, who had their information stored on essentially index cards. He worked with the team to get this information off the paper-based system and put on PDP, work with

---

[6] Collins dictionary: typeset means 'prepared for printing'; jumbo means 'large'
[7] Resource Sharing Time Sharing Extended

the data and type set it. To get it on the computer they had to type it up via effectively a DEC word processor[8], as there was no alternative.

He reiterates that there is a huge amount of data, and a huge amount of storage in the PDP. He uses the example of thousands of pages and pictures in stamp catalogue, or all the parts of a car like the Axle, the interior, the doors. So are storing massive amounts of data and images.

00:11:00 Impression of DEC Part 1: PDP11 and DEC systems

When asked about his early impressions of the PDP-11 for the task, Ian states that his job was to design the systems. He didn't do any coding; he was a systems analyst. This meant that he was tasked with figuring out what the customer wanted to see (which was no change) and how to get the information into the system or database to achieve this. Ian says that he did work with computer programmers to ensure customer satisfaction.

During this project, Ian was dealing with type setting environment needs, so he needed to find software that would work on a D.E.C. system. Ian would specify what they needed, for example, database publishing software, and he seems to imply positive impressions with DEC systems, as after describing alternate systems that were not supplied by DEC (but one of its partners) he recounts that he 'didn't win the battle' to install the DECset[9] software on the PDP at Bemrose. After this, he was approached by a DEC salesman for a role in DEC in Reading.

00:13:22 How he was hired by DEC and the move to Reading

Ian moved to Reading to work for DEC as the publishing applications centre manager with a staff of about 12. This team was tasked with selling the DECset product. This was about 1985, where competitors such as WYSIWYG[10] were making advances on the presentation of data on screens (as opposed to on paper or through characters on the terminal).

When asked to elaborate about when he was hired by DEC, he says that the man who offered him the job was an American salesman, employed by DEC UK to sell DECset in the UK. He says that the man clearly needed a techie to support him in sales or he was not going to secure many. Ian adds that the lady who sold the software that Bemrose went on to install (previously mentioned in Impression of DEC pt.1) also joined him at DEC around the same time. He says that the American was evidently collecting good salesmen from a range of backgrounds.

Ian then returns to the subject of the move to Reading, where he had to consider his family, and how this move from Nottingham and Derby would cause upheaval. In the end, it was a

---

[8] Britannica definition: A computer program used to write and revise documents, compose the layout of text and review on a computer monitor how the printed copy will appear. The last capability is known as "what you see is what you get" (WYSIWYG)

[9] Presumably refers to the DECset 8000

[10] Wikipedia: Software first developed by Hewlett-Packard (HP) in 1978 which allowed content to be edited in a form that resembles its appearance when printed or displayed as a finished product

good deal. He says that the thought of working for a big American computer company was beyond his wildest dreams, as they paid for him to move to Reading, and he just couldn't say no. He elaborates on his 'wildest dreams' comment, saying that although he had worked for Bemrose, a big organization, he was part of the smaller Bemrose Information Subsidiary: a 20-man company working for big printing company. In contrast DEC was the second largest computer company in the world, at the time and the pay was good.

00:16:31 Impression of DEC Part 2: DEC technology, DEC as a company and workplace

Ian is asked about his impression of DEC systems, his use of PDP in role, and his sense of DEC as a company. He answers that at DEC, technology was sometimes at the bleeding edge, that he got to work with high-tech software and hardware, and that was a big challenge, one that he was up for. He really enjoyed the move and the got promoted time and time again.

Ian goes on to describe the DEC 'refer a friend' program, that allowed him to employ his colleagues to come work for him. He ended up bringing four people to the south, and the lady who he'd worked with at Derby brought people as well. This meant that they were a close team, to the extent that his wife would say they could feel the energy as their teamwork got the job done and put things into motion. Ian mentions that his team are having a reunion in 2025 as still in touch.

He details a trusting, task-oriented environment where management trusted employees to get the job done. He mentions an 'seek forgiveness later' attitude with the main goal being getting the job done. He also adds that the matrix management system[11] meant that you worked with anyone from, Field service to Training or Software services. He praises the collaborative environment.

When Ian is asked about 'the DEC way' and the autonomy granted to employees, he talks about the flexibility of his team's remit, which changed from the publishing group to the office and publishing application centre as they began to deal with things related to office automation.

00:19:18 Hiring and training (women) at DEC pt1: secretaries to salesmen and the change in department remit

When asked about women at DEC and his role in hiring them, Ian says that he made sure customers understood secretary was an important role in office management, and that he employed lots of secretaries to become the salespeople to the organization who was selling ALL-IN-1, the office automation system. He says that those ladies became quite technical and became excellent trainers. Then, his department became the Office and Publication Centre, and the centre of expertise for training other people in the company, as office automation and ALL-In-1 was synonymous with how DEC operated.

---

[11] Wikipedia: Matrix management is an organizational structure in which some individuals report to more than one supervisor or leader

The interviewer asks about the process of receiving or taking on new roles or jobs at DEC. Ian says that his job was to solve problems and sell ALL-In-1 to lots of people. He says that ALL-IN-1 went on to be used by the police forces and the pharmaceutical industry. Ian says he managed this because he knew and was able to show the customers that it was easy to use, that DEC secretaries could do this even if it was technology they've never seen before.

00:20:48 Explanation of office automation and its impact

Ian explains that office automation in ALL-IN-1 included word processing, Email, Networking and operating the calendar management. He says that there are a lot of similarities between ALL-IN-1 and what we now know as Microsoft office.

He used how revolutionary was as a selling point, asking customers how they communicated with each other. As email did not exist, he describes it as alien, being able to send a message across the company, and have everyone see it when they needed to was revolutionary, and his team were just telling them how they could achieve it.

00:22:09 Hiring and training (women) in DEC pt2: hiring internally and externally, receiving promotions

Ian is asked to elaborate on his decision to employ lots of female assistants and PAs. He says they were 'gold' to office organization, as if you got someone who was good at it, they could be used as an example of what customers could achieve. Ian repeats that 'those ladies were really technical at the end' and were also good at training. He talks about how his department used to train the whole of Sussex police, from police man to traffic wardens. He elaborates that this included very part of the organization from the chief constable at the top to the people at the bottom, too. They all used ALL-IN-1, and it brought them together by facilitating communication they needed.

On hiring people from inside the DEC organization, Ian says that he often sourced employees in from field service or training, and that the only external hires were those that were brought in personally through the refer a friend scheme (explained in 00:16:31 Impression of DEC pt2: DEC technology, DEC as a company and workplace) He says that, regarding their impressions of DEC, the friends and family that he approached to hire trusted him that the move to Basingstoke would be worthwhile.

Ian gets asked about promotions, and says that in DEC, you get promoted for doing good things. He mentions his promotion to the European Organization rolling out ALL-IN-1 across Europe, for both DEC customers and DEC offices. The interviewer recalls Ian's statement that he got 'promoted time and time again' (00:16:31 Impression of DEC pt2: DEC technology, DEC as a company and workplace) and he says that his managers always pushed him to do better, to expand DEC, he says that there was a lot of trust for the individuals to get the job done.

00:24:59 DEC's competition and place at the forefront of tech

The interviewer recalls Ian mentioning competition with WYSIWYG, going on to ask more about sales approaches and an unusually hiring lots of women who had been secretaries, to which Ian talks about ALL-IN-1 being the leading product of office automation at the time. He says that DEC was good at being efficient and at the forefront. He goes on to say that, eventually, in relation to WISYWIG, what was new was that with the transition from using terminal to non-terminal bases, you had to start working on a user interface, on the display. He says that ALL-IN-1 had another application called TeamLinks which was DEC's equivalent to WYSIWYG, and its job was to make the office look more sophisticated. Other products released in the later mid 90s that he mentions are Jabberwocky and LinkWorks. He explains that Link Works was content management basis for office automation and says that he is unqualified to explain what Jabberwocky is, only that it was very sophisticated and made sure products and interfaces worked across various platforms.[12]

00:27:20 DEC's commitment to employees and customers Part 1: moral attitudes, DECUS, sales relationships, list of customers

The interviewer asks about the culture within DEC of 'doing the right' thing. Ian replies, saying everyone realised that trusting each other was how they assured the customer's requirements were met, and that Digitals' goals, like acquiring long term customers, were achieved.

Another relationship Ian developed was with DECUS, where they offered technical knowledge to customers. He says that it was important as it prioritised techies'[13] voices and not salesmen. Ian describes how there were many representatives for aspects, for example he was the rep responsible for automation content, and there were other DEC reps for DECUS who did things related to networking and operating systems.

DECUS was important as it brought techies together during monthly meetings (maybe more frequently). It was not sales focused but tech focused. For example, it was a techie explaining how good and easy certain products were to use. Ian says DECUS was an important part of the DEC organization, as it facilitated links between techies and engineers as opposed to business managers talking to each other, and if you didn't trust the salesman you could listen to the techies behind the project. For example, Ian could talk about the way the operating systems worked and explain if they ran on the PDPs or the VMS. He says that everyone was truthful, and that it was a wonderful way to solve problems and get the job done.

When asked if techies are the hardest members of the company to sell to, he says yes. He also recounts that DECUS tried to connect the techie with the business manager, and that other companies, unlike DEC, would not always bring them along. Ian adds that techies' comradery helped sales, and that without their backing it would have taken longer to sell products, if not at all.

Ian names customers of DEC such as,

---

[12] Cannot Source: Potentially referring to Jabberwaky, a chatbot function developed in 1988
[13] Cambridge Dictionary: someone who knows a lot about computers or other electronic equipment

- Barclays bank
- British Library
- British Film Institute (Ian adds that he was familiar with them from when he worked with Bemrose, and this familiarity brought trust to their relationship with DEC)
- British airspace
- The MET office
- Blood transfusion service
- Universities, he says all English universities were DEC customers in some way
- Lastly, government organizations like police services also used DEC

00:31:58 DEC Environment: Impressions of Reading, DEC sites and the DEC workspace

Ian recounts what Reading was like when he worked for DEC there from 1985-1994. He recounts the growth that he witnessed in the Thames valley, namely the growing DEC presence all over reading and Basingstoke. He mentions DEC park, how the location near the M4 corridor was a strength and his move from DEC Park to Basingstoke, Stamford Getty House[14] and to the Crescent (which burnt down). He does add that, since DEC used All-In-1, communication across the whole company, exclusive of location, was possible.

Ian describes DEC park in more detail, talking about the many services on site like a bank, travel agent, offices, and open space. He also describes 'The Street' where every department of DEC was represented in little bays. Before making the move to Reading and joining DEC, the salesman who hired him had him visit from Derby to explain what he had been doing with customers. Ian says the salesman was determined and felt Ian could help DEC.

Ian is asked more about what was positive about 'The Street' inside DEC Bark, and he says people could communicate there, and didn't have to organize to meet in an office, instead go and get a coffee. He says it was productive as it created an open-door atmosphere where you could talk about problems. Compared to other workspaces, Ian highlights others were confined to an office, and in DEC you could just get on with it.

00:36:17 Legacy of DEC Part 1: IT in Thames Valley, customer relations and Ian's company

Ian is asked what he saw while he as based in the Thames valley. He talks about seeing other computer companies like Oracle and Microsoft come and join DEC. He also observed that later, when DEC started to lose people to redundancies, there as a lot of cross-fertilization between DEC employees and DEC's collaborators, e.g. Oracle and Microsoft.

At this point, when DEC had lost its way, Ian set up his own company, a DEC partner, bringing his team of 20 colleagues who were being made redundant. There was still a management system, with Ian as managing director, but they continued to train and support the ALL-IN-1 and LinkWorks customers as they had while under DEC. for example, Sussex police trusted them as part of DEC and as their own separate company.

---

[14] Cannot source

When asked if he thinks this trust between customer and supplier still exists today, Ian says he thinks it's not strong as used to be. He says that the salesman prevails more than he used to. Ian feels that what DEC got right was that it wasn't the salesman who led sales, and it wasn't a sales lead organization. He says that the golden days of DEC where when the salesman took an order, and it's not like that today. He recounts how he and his team would work closely and build trust with customers.

Ian talks about having to balance loyalty to the customer and loyalty to the company. He says that often, they had a smart way of approaching things (and overriding the customer) as he and his team knew they understood DEC's capabilities and resources best. Ian recounts a challenge when a salesman agreed to sell WYSIWYG typesetting systems to put on a VT 100, when the customer needed a more expensive system to achieve their goals. Ian's team then overrode what the salesman had proposed and eventually reached a solution.

When asked about DEC's wilfulness to help the customer, Ian mentions that, while not always included in the price, DEC always made sure the customer had the solution they wanted. He says that this came from the culture around them and not instructions. It came from not wanting to disappoint a customer or lose that relationship.

00:41:06 Legacy of Dec Part 2: End of DEC and its commitment to customers, Ian's departure

This wilfulness to help did not last. One of Ian's issues when dealing with DECUS was that Compaq[15] didn't understand the importance of selling the support that came with the product. Ian says that DEC lost that technical relationship with the customer and overlooked the importance of DECUS. That's when Ian joined the DECUS board, and started to understand there was a lot to learn from customer relationships and the technical people who worked there.

Ian summaries: In 1996, he had left DEC, was on the DECUS board, Compaq had lost its way, HP was coming in, and he had a small company of about 20 people in Wokingham. He had a problem where he needed someone to advise him and a customer on LinkWorks. The only other organization who were using it in the UK was British Nuclear Fuels, who soon approached him to buy the company as they wanted a base in the south. Ian describes this as his 'way out' of DEC. After that, he worked for DECUS full time as the general manager. This meant he was no longer employed by anyone was running it as the secretariat from his own company.

Ian is asked about how he felt leaving the company. He says that DEC had lost its way, and the only way to keep going was to make his own business focusing on the customer and the hugely important product LinkWorks. He ways he was sad, but it was one of his biggest achievements, to set up his own company. He talks about how it was a big responsibility and mentions bringing his employees and their families together in his back garden and realising

---

[15] the company that took over DEC

his decisions would now affect their survival. He says BNFL[16] buying them out was the only way to ensure that.

He elaborates on how he felt, saying his team had worked together well and that they had done lot to make headway with DEC, who was declining and, they felt, moving in the wrong direction. He refers to their lively hoods again, talking about how he was 50 at the time and had to consider his survival. He says he was almost waiting for DEC to release a special package to get his pension. As this was not available, he had to find his own way, along with his colleagues, and as Groupware plus in Wokingham was so close to home, it was a no brainer to set up.

00:46:10 Standout customers from Ian's time at DEC and competitor software
Ian is asked about and describes a standout customer as a government establishment that should probably remain nameless. He specifies: a security organization. He is prompted again and talks about bringing together one product that could help solve their operating environment. He is reluctant to say more and goes on to name working on ALL-IN-1 for Sussex police. This was a long-term project.
He then describes how Digital[17] thought that LinkWorks was the competitor to Lotus Notes, and that at that point he was working with the European marketing department who were trying to position LinkWorks against Lotus Notes. Ian says Lotus Notes was the clear winner, as LinkWorks was difficult to install and not a very sophisticated system. He does add that ALL-IN-1 was successful for many years.

00:48:05 Legacy of DEC Part 3: Impact on Reading, socialising, personal connections and the DEC Campus's destruction

DEC was everywhere in reading, Ian uses the example of the Training department was at Shire Hall[18], and also says that everything was focused on Reading even if DEC had offices in Scotland, Wales, the north, the north-east and the north-west, but there was no doubt that Reading was the Hub. Ian says that Reading developer a lot because Digital being there had a knock-on effect.

He also talks about social life within DEC, and highlights that there was no differentiation between senior and junior directors. Ian uses the examples of how he would eat in the canteen with the managing director and played badminton with a senior director. He underlines that integration between sports and social club was tremendous. He goes on to mention the Christmas Fuddle, where everyone would gather nearby and get to know who they were working with. Ian doesn't remember specific names, but he says they would meet somewhere down Grazeley (Rd). He recounts meeting in pub most lunchtimes, or meeting in Binfield, just down the road where they were.

Ian says the DEC campus doesn't exist anymore. And that the workspace has become a housing development, sadly. He says that both Highfield house and the demonstration centre in Basingstoke were lovely environments, the latter of which always looked nice

---

[16] Presumably British Nuclear Fuel Ltd
[17] Presumably short for Digital Equipment Corporation or DEC
[18] Cannot source

when customers came to visit. Ian is asked about how he felt seeing this happen, and he responds that he was sad when he saw the videos of the bulldozers, that it was a shame. Elaborating on the legacy of DEC in the Thames valley area, Ian says he suspects lots of common ground between residents of Reading and DEC employees, who made that continued growth and comradery. He then says that there was probably not that much interplay between the DEC campus and reading residents because it was very self-contained.

Ian says his favourite DEC building or office was Shire Hall when it was the training department because he was very involved with those training groups in Reading. He says DEC park had its character, but that there was more comradery within his team, Shire Hall and Highfield house[19]. He details that Shire Hall was where training took place, where customers and internal people trained together.

00:53:43 Legacy of DEC pt.4: Personal Perspective and the impact of IT in Ian's daily life

Ian is asked about his personal perspective on the legacy of DEC, and he says that it showed him how teamwork could get the job done. He says it was an amazing experience and that he is still in touch with the people he worked with, who are now living across the UK.

He adds that DEC didn't follow the right course regarding PCs, but that its operating systems still work today. He says that people aren't moving away from those legacy applications and that VMs is running today on a raspberry pi and even survives some operating systems which are long since gone. Ian summarises that DEC was at the forefront things that we now take for granted, like Technology and integration with the other technologies of the time, for example Networking or WYSIWYG.

When asked about his career change from chemist to IT person, he says that he can't believe it, and that it was pure luck. He adds that it would be impossible today and that he was at right place right time to change careers. Nowadays, he lives breaths sleeps excel spreadsheets, internet, and email and without his career he would be a bit of a luddite. He contrasts the career change with saying that kids today think they must pick a career now.

He goes on to talk about his retirement, recounting that he became a governor in Woking. He says he wanted to pass on his experience in IT and when he saw that the kids with less access to tech in the Thames area were struggling more than kids with more access, he made sure the computers at his school were using the best equipment for them. He also talks about how he was given equipment by HP to run a homework club and that he saw that when kids in deprived areas were given access to technology, it helped them become better. He concludes that the legacy of tech in the Thames valley speaks for itself.

00:58:10 Charity at DEC and HP

---

[19] Cannot source

When asked about DEC's charitable roles, Ian emphatically says 'Yeah yeah yeah'. He explains that employees could propose who to help, and that he put in a bid to install equipment in High Wickham to computerize the database for Celiac UK head office. Because of this, they received an Oracle database and all the equipment to run office automation in the Celiac Society (Celiac UK today).

Ian says that there was always someone to help charitable organizations with tech, and that even when DEC ended, HP gave computers away for the church homework club. He says it was a godsend to make kids realise what they could do. Ian adds that eventually they sent that old kit off to south Africa to be reused. Ian recounts that DEC had philanthropic strand which came from the top of the organization. He describes an awareness of having to do something for the community, and adds that the relationships with DEC and the community where very close. He uses the examples of him helping with the homework club and the charity in the 1990s (referencing Celiac UK).

1:00:15 Return to the start: DEC facilitating Ian's move to Reading

Ian is asked to return to the start and describe what made the offer to move from Southampton so attractive. He says that DEC offered to help sell the house, so he didn't have to worry, and found property for him to buy in Wokingham. He recounts that it was a DEC customer from British aerospace who mentioned a new development in a meeting, and that DEC followed up on this to hook him up with the new house. He also talks about DEC offering financial support which enabled him to buy this house, and that without this support for him and his young family he would not have been able to afford the move. He says he is unsure if other companies did the same, but that DEC 'were always helpful to make sure you always got what you needed'

01:01:52 End of interview.
Endnotes:
Factual inconsistencies: (Footnote 1) the only issue I had was that when researching university and school names, Ian Servern's LinkedIn said that he did his PDH in London, not at Nottingham.
Definitions or spellings that I could not source and the corresponding footnotes:
 4: STATUS all I could find was an interesting paper on how STATUS works
https://cds.cern.ch/record/122127/files/CM-P00068700.pdf
13: DECset, probably refers to the DECset 8000. I found a review at
https://bitsavers.trailing-edge.com/pdf/dec/pdp8/decset-8000/DECset-8000_A_Review.pdf
but not much else to support this definition
16: Jabberwaky potentially a chatbot function developed in 1988
19: a DEC location sounding like 'Stamford Getty House'
23: a DEC location sounding like 'Shire Hall'
24: a DEC location sounding like 'Highfield House'