THOSE WERE THE LEO DAYS

In 1961 I was working in the Mechanisation and Development Dept of SMBP at Shell Mex House having moved from the Shell Transport & Trading Co. with whom I had been employed since my release from the RAF in 1947. One of my early duties was to go on the roof of Shell Mex House and 'swing' a hand held aerial while my boss, Tony Corringham, obtained fixes on passing traffic on the river Thames on the new marine navigation system he had bought for his boat

With the advent of the first computer in SMBP an aptitude test was held by the 'brains' of LEO Computers, the chosen supplier, to select the first few staff to form the nucleus of the operating team of the LEO111 when it was installed in a building in Hemel Hempstead that was still in the final stages of completion. All the existing Tabulating Supervisors in the eight Divisions of the Company were to take the test with the expectancy that they would all qualify to be part of the first computing endeavour of the Company. I was put in to make the number up for the test, which lasted for three days. In the event Brian Gaskell, Tab Supervisor in Southampton, and I were the only two to pass.

The data Processing Dept was formed under the management of Brian Bowden, his secretary, Pete Catlin (Miss) and Stan Butterworth, ex Tab Supervisor in Birmingham, as Supervisor Computer Operations. Brian Gaskell and I were the two Shift Leaders. Brian, Stan and I were sent to Whiteleys Departmental Store in Bayswater to work shifts on their LEO lll/7 to get practical and theoretical training. We worked shifts, some of fourteen hours duration, for a year. Brian and I learned Machine Code and CLEO (Clear Language for Expressing Orders). LEO rented the top floor at Whiteleys for their computing activities as a Computer Bureau and applications ranged from Payrolls to a Kimble Tag process for the stock control system of 'Richards Shops'. Another interesting application was for Heinz where we ran a stock control program and produced soup recipes every night for them. The Master Program, or operating system, was put into the machine on blue paper tape and as the machine would fail several times on each shift, the Master Program had to be reloaded by hand, a slow and laborious process. During this time I developed a party trick of rewinding paper tape at speed by hand. Any spare time we had on shift we spent at the Engineers Control Panel writing small programs in machine Code to sharpen our skills.

During the final stages of building at Hemel Hempstead I was heavily involved with Roy Dive of the SMBP Estates Dept. and Graham Weatherly, the Architect. We were new to the business of planning a Computer Suite but Brian and I had learned a lot from our time with the LEO Bureau. The fire detection equipment we installed was supplied by Minerva Ltd. During the installation we tested the sensitivity of the fire detection devices by burning the recommended amount of corrugated paper at a set distance from a detector. The failure of the device to activate resulted in us having to evacuate the area as the density of smoke was making it difficult to breathe!

Our numbers were swelled by the arrival of Ted Thomas, from Australia and Bob Hills from New Zealand. It has to be remembered that we were the only people in SMBP who knew anything about computers and the old adage about the one eyed man being King in the land of the Blind never rang more true.

Ted Thomas wore a rather splendid beard and it was on the occasion at Christmas 1962, when we had been impressing people with our knowledge of 'The Infernal Machine' at a meeting in London, that Ted lit a cigarette in the car on the way home and set fire to his beard. We beat out the flames and took him to a nearby Chemist where some noxious and smelly bright yellow cream was applied to the scorched area. We drove the rest of the way with the windows open.

When the Hemel building opened, LEO 111/6 was installed and we ran the first operating shift on 1st April 1963. Outside the operating area other notable people were joining the organisation – Donald Moore (Computer Centre Manager), Arthur Price (Data Processing Manager), Mike Fuller (Personnel Manager), Dick Bayliss (Clerical Supervisor) and later on, Harry Cordwent and Harry Richardson.

Donald Moore, who came from the Army Base at Worthy Down where he was a Lt. Colonel in charge of an IBM installation, was totally biased toward IBM and he found it difficult to accept the LEO installation that we were running. He sent me to Worthy Down to "see how the Professionals run a Computer Centre" I was impressed with the order and discipline of the installation – but then this was the army. The Shift Leaders were Majors, and the Magnetic Tape Librarian was a Sergeant Major. They were all nice chaps and very hospitable. It is interesting to note that during the war Donald Moore was a Lt. Col but Brian Bowden, his boss, was a Naval AB.

Mike Hancock joined the Dept. and we started the development of the Customer Master Record and the Daily Sales systems. In the Divisions of the Company there was an antipathy to computing and those of us that worked in the Computer Dept. were viewed as being rather odd and the work that we were doing as largely unnecessary and doomed to failure. We travelled a lot selling our plans and seeking the support of the clerical functions whose work was to be transferred to the computer.

In 1963 Stan Butterworth suffered a breakdown and I was awakened after a night shift to immediately report and take over the job of running Computer Operations. It was around this time that we, the Operators and Engineers, found a way of creating music by harnessing the sounds made by the computer and amplified through the Engineers Control Panel. We found that each arithmetic instruction to the computer produced a note of certain pitch and duration e.g. 18 binary shifts left would result in an A flat Minim. Small arithmetic programs when run would give us 'Oh dear what can the matter be', Telstar, 'The Esso sign means happy motoring' and 'Colonel Bogey', which always upset Donald Moore.

The amount of Program testing we were doing created a shortage of computer time and we rented time, usually at night on other users machines that had time to spare. We used the LEO at CAV at Acton to run tests on the very big CMR system being developed. I would supervise the operation of the machine while Carol Austin, a Senior Programmer, would bring her programming skills to bear. Carol eventually married Jim Devlin, a friend of mine and I used to enjoy telling people that I spent the night with Carol before Jim did. It was while doing a night shift at Dunlop in Birmingham that Ray Strickland, Leo's Operating Coordinator, had his car towed away and impounded by the Police. Instead of sleeping the next morning we were at the Police Compound for most of the day trying to recover our transport for the return journey to Hemel Hempstead.

LEO 111/14 arrived and program development continued with Daily Sales and Sales Statistics. Wythenshawe began to loom on the horizon with a planned mirror configuration of equipment to Hemel. I was detached from Hemel to provide the Operations liaison with the Architects and Builders of the new Computer Centre. My active involvement with this started when the Wythenshawe site was just a big hole in the ground. It was an exciting project and the lessons learned at Hemel stood us in good stead. We were proud of the building and the Computer Hall was magnificent. The time came for the installation of the first machine and we were disturbed to find that a cat had somehow got under the false floor and was reluctant to immerge. Our fear was that the cat would urinate on the matrix 'earthing' grid and short circuit the system. Hilda Jones, the lady waiting to be the Supervisor of the Data Preparation Dept., eventually caught the cat with the use of bait and a cage. The last two machines LEO 111/29 and 111/31 were delivered and I'm afraid that I cannot remember if we had them delivered direct or if they went to Hemel and we had their machines transferred.

Our Management Team to start Wythenshawe off was John Summers, Centre Manager- Bram Bedford, Clerical Manager- Peter Melrose, Personnel Manager and myself for the Computer Operations. We had our Senior Mess and our small number of members resulted in the lady Catering Manager ringing each of us in turn each day to see what we would like for lunch and then going out and buying it. I had a large Data Preparation Dept at that time run so efficiently by the capable Hilda Jones. She presented a motherly figure to the large number of girls we employed and every morning Hilda would give me a run down on her staffing situation. Apart from the usual 'sick list', she knew which girls were the troublesome ones, which were 'expecting' and which ones were 'worried'. She was a wonderful manager.

I must mention that a major change in the direction of our computing endeavours was when it was decided that the days of the Leos were numbered and that all our developed systems would be converted to run on a Univac 1108. The mass storage device on the 1108 was the Fastrand, a cylindrical device with the outside of the cylinder providing the recording surface for data. At the time it was at the forefront of technology but by modern standards was terribly slow and was so sensitive to vibration that we had to borrow the services of technicians, from Shell's Exploration Dept., Seismologists and Seismographic equipment to ensure that our new computer room didn't vibrate from passing traffic.

I went back to Wythenshawe and was much involved in the conversion of all our systems to Univac Computers and the demise of the LEOs. It was from here that I went to Iran as the IT Manager for the Oil Service Co. of Iran, then to the Sultanate of Oman and finally to the Shell Co. of Nigeria.

A.F.Teal –February 2008.