

## WHY COMPUTER OPERATIONS IS BAD FOR YOUR HAIR



In the late summer of 1963 I was happily plying my trade in SMBP at Partington Terminal. New house (£1645), new wife and No1 of what were to be 4 sons (and eventually 4 grandsons) on the way. All was well with the world. While ‘not getting oil on my boots’ as the drivers (or knights of the road as I preferred to call them), would say I was still close to the actual *raison d’etre* of the Company. A number of us were asked if we would like to take an aptitude test for the new fangled devices called computers. We jumped at the chance of the skiving opportunities of a trip to the Manchester offices. After a puzzling morning being shown the intricacies of putting numbers into boxes (by Don Thake if my memory serves me right) I spent the next hour or so doing 10 short puzzles. Surprise, surprise, I was informed by my Chief Clerk (or God as I preferred to call him) that I was invited to an interview in a land far away that I had never heard of. Hemel Hempstead is one of those places that, once you have heard it’s strange name, it seems to crop up all over the place eg ‘a collision has occurred on the M1 at HH’ ‘someone has burned down the Buncefield site at HH’.

A five hour train trip via Euston and an interview with, among others, Stan Butterworth, Arthur Price and Mike Fuller, and I was introduced to the world that was to occupy and feed me and my growing family for the next 30 years – Computer Operations. I was introduced to shift work (no night shift envisaged) and the challenge of persuading my wife to move to the other end of the world. The promotional rise and the shift allowance totalling £3 a week did the trick and following another 5-hour trip back to Manchester (no overnight stays for mere Operator Material in those days) by November I was living in a caravan in the grounds of The Railway Hotel in Boxmoor. I was joined by a Beatle Wannabe and a man who was soon to be known as ‘Buttons Bert from Bolton’. John Chapman, living in Liverpool, naturally ‘knew the Beatles’ and Bert Rowley’s main claim to fame was to break a leg in the lift in the tower block.

The ‘no night shift envisaged’ turned sour and within a short time we worked 12 on and 24 off Monday to Friday. This was the worst shift pattern I ever experienced because we never knew what day it was and what meals we should be eating.

They were great days with a feeling that we were all pioneers. Three months extra experience was like years when the new intakes joined us. Each shift had its characters, none more colourful than Jim (now James) Hitchen. A book could be filled with his exploits and no doubt many will be retold during the build up to, and at, the Reunion. As I seemed to follow Jim around, filling the roles he vacated, and have met with him socially since, I was probably there for most of them. The highlight has to be when he joined the ‘Emergency Stop’ club. Before Jim’s effort I think the only member of this club was Paddy Dunford, who before I arrived, had thought it would be a good idea to dust the big red button. Jim’s attempt at a drop kick with a reel of black and sticky, with the comment ‘you win if you hit the Emergency Stop’ resulted in a bull’s eye and brought forth the unforgettable line from Ken McLennan. Slapping Jim on the back Ken said ‘Jim – you have won’. Jim then uttered ‘Stan Butterworth’ and legged it out of the computer room at a rate of knots. Over the squawk box the team of III/14 were summoned to Stan’s office to find Stan at his desk with Jim standing arms folded at his right hand. While Jim nodded sagely Stan told us that he had been informed that ‘someone’ had hit the button, and while he did not want to identify the individual concerned, we should all take care in the future that there was no recurrence. Ken, while leaving the office spitting feathers, did not grass Jim up and he got away with it.

In May 1965 it was back to Manchester to await the arrival of III/29, which was installed there before a machine was transferred from Hemel.

The highlight at the time of the move to Wythenshawe was 'The Vision In Gadebridge Park' The main characters were Jim Hitchen (again) and his informant who should remain anonymous. The story started with a long stretch of continuous paper with the question 'WHO IS DUMBLETON'. There then followed a Shift List for the start of Operations in Wythenshawe. Jim claimed that as he walked through Gadebridge Park he saw a vision, which proclaimed the name of "DUMBLETON" and also revealed the list of names and positions. In fact Dumbleton was Eric Dumbleton who had been poached from his employers to fill a Shift Leader slot in Wythenshawe. Mr Anonymous had been prowling the Management Corridor during a night shift and had 'accidentally' come across the information.

There were very few working in Wythenshawe at that time and, with no machines, we spent the time filing CMR cards. We watched as a number of new desks were installed in the large office that was to be home of the Clerical staff. It then seemed that the Personnel Manager, on seeing empty desks, thought they had better be filled and so more staff joined. Establishment Services, on seeing that their empty desks were now occupied, bought in more new ones and this cycle continued until all the space was used up.

Back on three shifts we processed the Northern Regions as they were brought on to the LEO and had spare time at night. So began the intake of work from Hemel and the daily courier run by Finglands at our end. The courier from Hemel would meet the Finglands guy somewhere in the Midlands and tapes were exchanged.

There were several memorable moments including the flood that almost made it to the computer room and the incident when an operator (who shall remain nameless) arrived the worse for wear for night shift. Cue another Hitchen classic who, as the Shift Leader, called an ambulance declaring that the victim was dying. He was carted off to Wythenshawe hospital to be pumped out. Unfortunately the incident was witnessed by a member of staff who mentioned it the next morning. At the subsequent court martial the culprit's case was not assisted by one of his colleague's testimony that 'he had only had about 7 pints'.

The good times could not continue and in 1967 we were advised that the LEO work was to be converted to run on the Univac 1108. This one machine was so powerful that it would 'eat' the workload on two shifts and most of the Operating staff would be redundant once the conversion was complete. However, it was vital that staff stayed until the transfer was complete and special terms were introduced. Ironically the conversion seemed to take forever: the two shifts on the 1108 became the 3 shifts on the 1108 and 1106 and more redundancy money had to be thrown at the operators to stay. In fact the LEO's lasted longer after they were declared obsolete than they had existed already. Ironically a number were to be re-employed when Shell moved it's Computer Operations to Wythenshawe after Brand Separation.

By this time I had managed to join the elite, but ever expanding, group of Operators chosen for the Univac. Back then to Hemel with wife, son and No2 on the way. Because of the pregnancy Pat was unable to travel to view houses so it was left to me to select a house in Dunstable – fortunately she endorsed my choice when we moved in. We spent most of our working day trying to make the Univac look and behave like a LEO. Magnetic Tape Block numbers, improvements to the Paper Tape handling and Program Serial numbers were among the areas where Univac was sadly behind our beloved LEO.

Nothing summed up the Univac disaster more than the saga of the 1106. It was clear that the 1108 was not going to cope and a plan was drawn up to install an additional machine. Initially the intention was to install it in Wythenshawe but eventually it ended up across the main road in Hemel. Tony Carey holds the record for the shortest stay in Wythenshawe. Widely believed to be lined up to manage the 1106 Operations in the north, he had barely moved to Poynton before he was recalled to Hemel. This saga did have a silver lining for me as, along with Ron Owens and Jim Douglas, I was sent to St Paul - Minneapolis to run benchmarks on their 1106.

It was while awaiting the 1106 that Univac made available additional time in Rome and for many months teams of Programmers and Operators were shuttled out there to work the night shift. We bought up every brown carrier bag we could find on The Marlowes and sent off individuals with 10 or so tapes each.

1976		–“pass the Grecian 2000”
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Eventually I escaped the rigors of Shift work and was losing my way in ‘Special Assignments’ when Brand Separation came along. I was offered a Group Leader job in Shell Centre and later, Wythenshawe, so it was back to Operations, where I stayed until retirement in 1995.

1984		“Grecian 2000 Max please”
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Throughout my time in Computing I met some very interesting characters and had some great times on the social scene. The early cricket and football teams at Hemel were not a great success but we did run some successful Motor Rallies. I was fortunate to take part in a number of BP President’s Rallies and was part of the team that came second in Brighton. This success was beaten the following year when Neil Carter, Terry Scullion and Barry Bateman carried away the first prize in Italy. There was also an enthusiastic group in Hemel who built a Hovercraft for the 1968 Brighton Rally. The craft was used in a children’s film ‘Hoverbug’ which is still available on Amazon. My main partner on these rallies was my good friend Jack Yarrow and it was great shock and sadness I was awakened after a night shift to hear that he had lost his life in February 1971 while driving to Tring station. His wife, Christine, returned to Barton on Humber and we still exchange Christmas Cards.

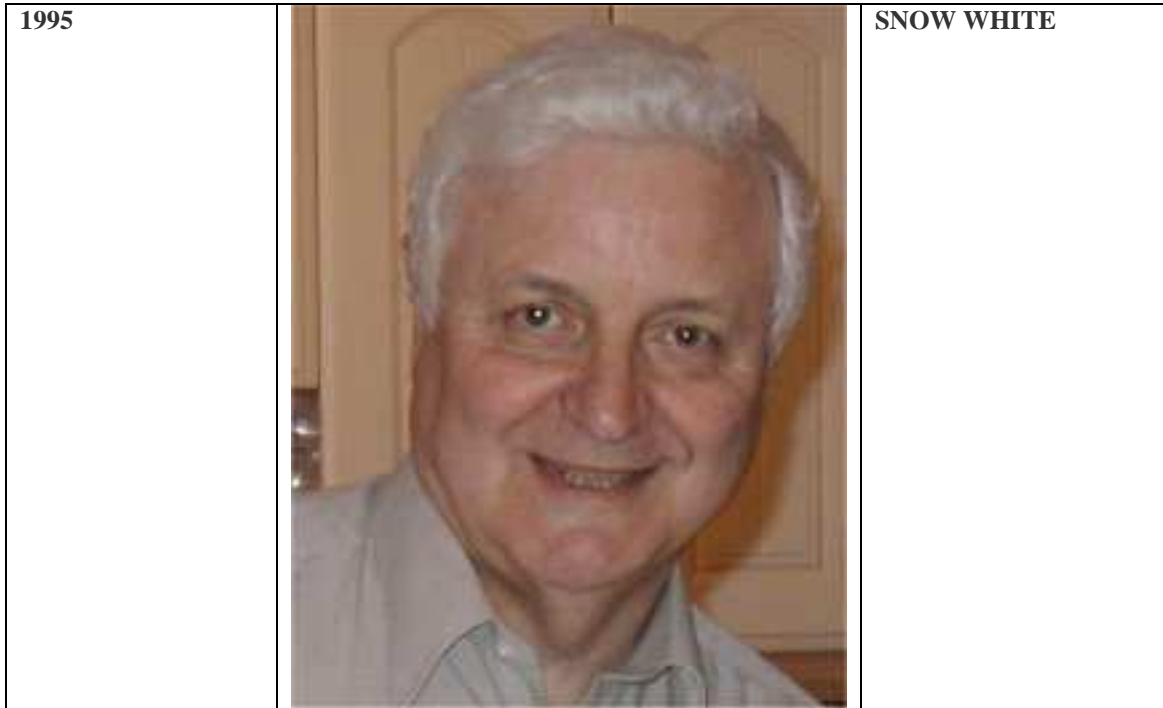
1990		Losing the battle
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Before retirement I had the foresight to take out a life membership of Lancashire Cricket Club and after 20 years this has paid off handsomely. I also got interested in PC’s and love nothing more than playing

about with them. I also enjoy doing doubles over Manchester United when they come along every 34 years.

Following heart problems (a common theme in Shell Computer Operations) I took up walking and now enjoy taking part in the hill walks and organising the flat walks. The latter group consists mainly of ex Wythenshawe staff so we have a great time telling, and retelling, the old stories.

I also keep busy as Membership Secretary and Treasurer of the SPA Greater Manchester Branch and organising reunions for former colleagues.



**Bryan Clarke**