

## **Tom Coventry (Shell) C.V. (With added ramblings....)**

### **28 March 1967. Joined SMBP at Hemel Hempstead - Trainee Computer Operator.**

#### **How it all started.**

On dropping out of my physics course at Edinburgh I initially tried teaching, temporarily, with the intention of re-sitting failed year exams and resuming my degree. It quickly became obvious that I could not survive teaching and that resuming studies was not going to work. I was not a physicist. The last contribution from my director of studies was advice to try 'this new-fangled computing business'. In that week's Observer was a half-page ad for Computer Operators and Programmers at Hemel Hempstead, and 2 months later I started on LEO III -29, B shift (for senior Op one J. T. Brownlow.)

#### **LEO III Operations.**

I am sure better qualified people will describe the beauty and wonder of the machines. Learning the job in ops was like an obstacle course, starting loading printers (keeping all your fingers), via feeding paper tape, cards (only occasional), loading mag tapes to the ultimate accolade of acceptance, being let loose on 'buttons'. If JB were to shout 'Allocate with alternate routes on two' now I'd still automatically hit 2-2-4 (or more accurately 010 - 010 - 100). -(It WOULD be splendid if someone turns up a list of all buttons commands!).

### **01 May 1968 Trainee Programmer - Applications (Payroll).**

Wonderful though Ops were, shift work was beginning to take its toll and I was ready for new challenges. Programming training (in CLEO, Clear Language Expressing Orders! A proper language) itself was exotic -oh the joys of the opulent accommodation at the Drayton Court, Acton. The Payroll application was destined to be a quiet backwater while the mainstream daily sales and customer accounting applications were being converted from LEO to the infinitely more advanced (pah!) UNIVAC 1106. The overall plan faltered, because (as I recall) it was tricky with the system software then available (i.e. none) to emulate the efficiency of serial (mag tape) processing with random access (Fastrand megadrums). This may be discussed. The UNIVAC could send men to the moon, famously, but struggled to price a pallet of packed lubricants. Anyway a new plan required that an 'easy' application be converted while Sales accounting regrouped and Payroll was selected. That meant some instant re-training (COBOL) and a frenetic period of application conversion, and some (fairly muted) celebration as the first application to implement on UNIVAC. Hurrah!

### **1971 - 1975.**

My job path was fairly standard route - programmer - programmer/analyst (or was that analyst/programmer?) - system designer. After some time in Payroll I also worked on Vehicle (i.e. road tanker) Reporting and CB - Costs and Budgets. Oh and also met Brenda and got married in 73, buying our first home in Leighton Buzzard.

### **1975 Brand Separation.**

Like many others the main factor for us was the attraction of the relocation package so off to Wythenshawe, a slightly different world, but one I had visited a couple of times (to get better system testing time). I was just able to convince Brenda we could survive without the need for whippets, pigeons or flat hats.

### **1975 - 2000 Wythenshawe**

OK - quite a change from Hemel - we newcomers in such large numbers were made to feel very welcome by all. After a spell just consolidating the split Shell systems it was off on another conversion to IBM/IMS - it did seem like constant conversion and technology upgrades but with one major new challenge - first time computerisation of Product Stocks, the last large scale fully manual process left in Shell - in the Oil Accounting project.

Now for most organisations 'stock control' is pretty easy - with standard packages available to 80% - 90% 'fit', but not for us. For starters the units required to account in included Tonnes, barrels (US) kilogram's, gallons, litres (ambient), litres (15 deg C). Then there was the nature of the product with evaporation, spillage, volumes changing significantly with temperature, as many different measurement systems as stock locations - I used as a ready reckoner that if any two measurements of the same load or tank actually agreed there had to be some fiddle going on. Also at any given time there were somewhere

between 2 and 10 concurrent separate systems developments happening within the supply chain, all independent and needing to interface with our 'central' project. This could have led to insanity in the small team of professionals assembled for the task - luckily most were either fairly immune from previous experiences or part-way down that road anyway so no great damage was done. I cannot now remember the time or circumstances of my 'release' (on parole) from OA, but I then went on with a range of applications support (mainly) and development (few) jobs across the whole range of systems, mainly now decommissioning the last 'in-house' applications and 'fitting' (with VERY BIG inv commas) package applications (Ugghh) ending (in all senses) with the inevitable SApping of Shell systems. Oddly one of the last that I had overall responsibility for was Payroll, which although there was no reason for any requirement change in the time concerned, bore no resemblance whatsoever to the first (happy) application that I helped develop 30 years before.

### **Out of it**

Having survived several IT reorganisations all tending to drag people and systems out of Wythenshawe (and Stanlow, Carrington etc) towards London there was a certain irony in that my opportunity to leave (a little) early came from the first reorg that went in the other direction - with the UOIT support organisation centralising in Wythenshawe, and the need for volunteers to go to make way for displaced southerners! Luckily a quick check of the famous magic numbers revealed the time was right and so on the last day of April 2000 I packed my bag and left, after 33 years and 1 month of service. That now seems a million years ago.... My first day in Ops in Hemel seems like yesterday...I had started, totally unplanned in a career that did not exist when I was in school, which employed millions of people during my working life and which has now effectively disappeared from the face of the earth. Odd.