



NATIONAL LIFE STORIES

AN ORAL HISTORY OF BRITISH SCIENCE

Mary Coombs

Interviewed by Thomas Lean

C1379/16

This interview and transcript is accessible via http://sounds.bl.uk.

© The British Library Board. Please refer to the Oral History curators at the British Library prior to any publication or broadcast from this document.

Oral History
The British Library
96 Euston Road
London
NW1 2DB
United Kingdom

+44 (0)20 7412 7404 <u>oralhistory@bl.uk</u>

Every effort is made to ensure the accuracy of this transcript, however no transcript is an exact translation of the spoken word, and this document is intended to be a guide to the original recording, not replace it. Should you find any errors please inform the Oral History curators.

The British Library

National Life Stories

Interview Summary Sheet

Title Page

Ref no:

C1379/16

Collection title:

An Oral History of British Science

Interviewee's surname:

Coombs née Blood

Title: Mrs

Interviewee's

Mary Clare

Sex:

Female

Occupation:

forename:

Computer

Date and place of birth:

04/02/1929, London

housewife

programmer, teacher,

water treatment

Mother's occupation:

industry buyer Hospital fundraiser,

Father's occupation:

Doctor, industrial

medical officer

Stereo

Dates of recording, Compact flash cards used, tracks (from - to):

Track 1- 2: April 19 2010; track 3-4: May 7 2010, track 5-7: June 28 2010, track 8-9: 19 July 2010

Location of interview:

Sessions 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, and 8 – Interviewee's home in High Wycombe

Sessions 3 and 4 – the British Library, London

Name of interviewer:

Thomas Lean

Type of recorder:

Marantz PMD661 on secure digital (Sessions 1-4) Marantz PMD660 on

compact flash (Sessions 5-9)

Recording format:

Wav 24 bit 48 kHz (sessions 1-4) WAV 16 bit 48 kHz (sessions 5-9)

Total no. of tracks

Mono or stereo:

Total Duration: (HH:MM:SS)

07:14:40

Additional notes:

Interviewee amendments and corrections are in square brackets and as

endnotes.

Copyright/Clearance:

Open except for 00:56:57 – 00:59:15 of track 7 and 00:21:51 - 00:22:49 of

track 9; these sections are closed for 30 years until June 2041.

Interviewer's

comments:

[Track 1]

Ready to go?

We are ready to go.

Yeah. Well, we might start off a bit differently actually. [laughs] My parents met I think when my father was about twenty and my mother would then have been twenty-eight. She came from a middle class background and was working in the appeals department at the London Hospital, which now of course is the Royal London Hospital. And he at the time was working as a messenger boy I think. He had joined the army at the age of sixteen, having left school at the earliest legal moment. His mother was a very, very hard working shopkeeper in those days and his father was dead, he'd been an alcoholic in fact, and he'd got killed and he was a carrier in a horse-drawn wagon thing and he'd been killed in an accident I believe. My dad was rather ashamed of his background and in fact historically he comes from an extremely well known family which features rather heavily in some parts of *Burke's Peerage* because he is descended from the Colonel Blood who tried to steal the crown jewels, or [is] supposed to be. So, I've not been able... I've tried to link it in with the Blood genealogy but I didn't have any success and I didn't have time to pursue it further, but it would be quite an interesting topic in its own right.

What was your father's name, sorry?

William Blood. He had a brother, Warwick Spencer [Blood], who was killed in the First World War, they were both in the Royal Fusiliers and my uncle's name in fact appears on the Menin Gate at Ypres. Took us a long time to find it, but it's there. Dad had a nasty wound in his knee and it was very badly dealt with, he spent about two years in an army hospital while they tried to get him really mobile again, but he did in fact end up with his knee joint immobilised and he had endless health problems when he was in general practice. No, haven't got there yet have I, come to think of it. Anyway, working in the London Hospital occurred because he needed to matriculate before he could start on a medical degree and of course, since he'd left school at about twelve, he obviously had quite a lot of education to make up. But he vowed he would become a doctor because he

was sure he could be a better doctor than the ones that had treated him for his war wound. He qualified in 1926 and they were married in 1924 and he did his hospital part after his qualification in one of the dockland hospitals [the Connaught] – and I'm not quite sure what happened in the meantime, but by the time I was born he'd bought his way into a general practice which was based on Walthamstow, South Chingford and North Chingford. And I started my life in a nursing home in Muswell Hill and we were living at that time in a Victorian house alongside the railway in Walthamstow. We moved when I was about two months old to Chingford to a brand new house where – on a brand new housing estate – where my father had had the surgery, waiting room and dispensary all built on to the house, so there was access from the house to it and there was also access from outside the house. And we lived there until I was nearly eight when my father had to give up general practice because his health meant he still had ongoing problems because of this leg wound. He got osteomyelitis in the days before antibiotics and he kept on having periods in hospital, having abscesses drained and things like that. My sister was born three years after me while we were still living there, so she was five and I was eight and we moved. My father had got himself a job as Medical Officer at J Lyons. Industrial medical officers were pretty rare in those days and he had quite a distinguished career in that area, as well as doing an enormous amount serving on disablement advisory committees at the Labour Exchange, as the Job Centres were then called, and eventually he was awarded an OBE for his work with the disabled. Did a lot with the Star and Garter Home as well actually, served on committees there. [06:00] I started school when I was not quite [five] at a convent school in Chingford, a Dominican Order which I think is very closely associated with education. They were astoundingly forward in their approach. I mean when I was four that was 1933. I can remember that before I moved out of the preprep department into the main school, which I would have done at the age of seven, in fact not long before we moved - I think I probably only had one term in the main school - I had done all sorts of things in arithmetic, including dealing with decimals in an age where we were doing pounds, shillings and pence and imperial weights and that sort of thing. I'd done long multiplication and long division, things that most children don't reach till the age of nine, and yet I was in a class with children of my own age. And with lots of apparatus provided, things like – did you have Dienes blocks when you were at school? Blocks which represented, cubes which represented a thousand and flat things for a hundred and... yes. Well, that's the sort of apparatus we were using then and I think it

was probably all experimental because these were not the wooden ones you find today or plastic ones, but these were actually made of cardboard, yellow cardboard. But the net result of this is, the teaching was so good that I never had any trouble with mathematical concepts of that sort and it really has stood me in good stead all my life. When we moved my father took a flat for a year, just near Hammersmith Bridge in Barnes, practically next door to the reservoirs where the Wetland Trust's Centre is now, the London one. And he found a house, he settled into his new job with J Lyons and we moved to East Sheen a year later where we had quite a nice three bedroom detached house in a little... it was in a little lane, it was quite sort of countrified, behind a big high brick wall. It had obviously been part of a bigger estate at some point. And we were very happy living there until the war. I had spent the year in Barnes, in fact I think I spent five terms, at the prep school for St Paul's Girls' School, [then called Colet Girls' School] which was handy to where we were living in Barnes, and then when I was nearly ten I started at Putney High School. Sorry, I'm afraid it's all private education apart from two months [laughs] in my life. Though why I should apologise, I don't know. I think it would be quite unusual for a professional person in that era to send their child to a state school, to be honest, I think nearly all would have gone to private schools. [09:42] My mother never worked, she was a very dutiful wife, she always felt she had to be home when my father was home so we had plenty of contact with mum. My father worked hard, always kept up to date with medical stuff, always went off every year for one week of his holiday for a refresher course, was very happy working at Lyons and of course it was far more suitable than general practice; no night calls, just office hours, no strange dogs coming and attacking you when you went to visit, you know, do house calls, that sort of thing. And Putney High School was very nice, except of course that the war came a year later and we were evacuated. When I started at Putney I was in fact put into a year group a year older than I was, came unstuck a bit later on but that was more because I tried to make a fuss about something that probably I'd done better not to. Perhaps it'll come out in a minute. [11:04] The war was a bit of a nuisance, we – well it was more than a bit of a nuisance [laughs] - but I'm just thinking in terms of the actual day-to-day life. It turned out to be quite a happy time actually in many respects. Just for a couple of months we went and stayed in a bungalow in Surrey which was owned by the Commercial Director of J Lyons and this was lovely, it's in the middle of the country, you walked a mile or so up the lane to get there, it was a beautiful hot sunny autumn and all the way along you could see the

adders lying in the bracken and at the side of the road, we had to walk across a field of cows to get to the village school. And the village school was very efficiently run by someone who shortly afterwards in fact moved to be head of the [much larger] elementary school that was near where we'd lived in Barnes, which was quite sort of coincidental. But he was an excellent teacher and, you know, in two months we learnt a lot. Putney High had been evacuated as a school, partly, to start with they'd only found some temporary accommodation and so they'd only just moved into Wiltshire where we started there before we arrived and not long after that we moved to Caversham, which is across the river from Reading, as you probably know, and we shared premises to some extent with Queen Anne's School in Caversham, which left us with... we had two of their empty boarding houses, we had their old sanatorium where we had classrooms for lessons and we shared their beautiful playing fields, and it was great. As you got older you moved into the other boarding house which was more the older children. It was staffed mostly by parents of some of the children who'd come out from London with us and, you know, it was a really happy time. When the bombing stopped the school went back to London and we did as well, but then the bombing restarted in 1944 and then there were the buzz bombs and the V2s after that as well and my father wouldn't have us in London, and so we went to school about ten miles from here, a little boarding school which had been set up at the beginning of the war by someone who'd had a long life with her husband in the Far East and when her husband died and she'd come home as a widow, she'd set her house up to take in people who couldn't go, children who couldn't go home for the school holidays, you know, all the way to the Far East and, you know, you didn't get aeroplanes like we've got today, sort of thing, so you couldn't get home and back in the holidays on a boat. So at the beginning of the war she had turned this into a little boarding school, which was great. Half the children in fact were day children from the locality, but I suppose there were about fifty boarders and about fifty day children and that also was a happy time. [14:55] But when the end of the war came my father got us into St Paul's Girls' School and that was the least happy part of my education really because St Paul's is very much the sort of place that likes you to be really good at something, it's not really geared to all-rounders, or it wasn't then, and it didn't help that I'd got a distinction for maths and I didn't want to do maths. [laughs] I got credits for everything else, except Latin which I failed, but which I had to take again because you couldn't get to university without Latin. Well you couldn't go without maths either, but I didn't have any problem

with that. So I spent three years at St Paul's because after two I could only get a place to do a general degree, because of course there weren't that many universities at that point. There were a few red brick ones, Oxford and Cambridge and London, Southampton – which I think only did external degrees from somewhere else. There must have been Birmingham and a few others, but there weren't an enormous number. And I didn't want to do a general degree, I wanted to do an honours degree. If it hadn't been for the war I would have done sciences, but the little boarding school didn't do science. So I opted to do a degree in French and went to Queen Mary College in 1948. One or two of the teachers at St Paul's had been quite unkind to me. They said what on earth did I want to go to university for? Well the answer really was because my father wanted me to go to university. I wanted to go to the Froebel Institute and learn, do teacher training for little ones, but he said no, you're bright enough to do a degree and do a degree you will. [laughs] And of course you didn't get into primary education by a degree route in those days, or for quite a long time afterwards. University was great, except I didn't have any money and I had to travel – well if I was unlucky it was three hours' travelling a day because I was living at home and Queen Mary College is in the East End of London.

[17:50]

Before we move on to cover your university days in more detail, there are several other things that have come up I'd like to ask you some follow-up questions about. Was your father keen on education?

Oh very, he thought women should have careers, not just jobs. Yes, he was very keen on education and my mother was, well she didn't have any further education but the leather-bound volumes on those shelves are mostly prizes which she won at school, generally first prizes.

Sounds very forward thinking for the age, I was wondering what inspired that?

I don't know. He was a fairly strange man. I notice in Hally's book that I was looking at at the reunion yesterday that it says that my boss, David Caminer, found him a thoroughly frightening and terrifying man. Well I think yes, his children might well have done that, but he's the first person I've heard of other than his children who might have thought that.

No, he definitely thought that children, that girls should have as good an education as boys. He wanted me to be a doctor, I didn't want to be a doctor. I wouldn't have minded being a nurse. But no, no, couldn't be a nurse. He was a bit of an inverted snob really. His sister took over the shop from his mother when she died and Daddy would have liked us not ever to have gone there, but my mother insisted that we had to go and visit Auntie Flo where she lived and worked, and of course we always wanted to go and help in the shop, but even Mummy didn't think that that would be acceptable at all. [laughs] But I mean the area in which she had the shop was at the time really one of the slummiest areas in London and I know that on occasion my father was asked at work, because he used to see all the new staff and examine all the new staff before they were engaged, was asked whether Clara Blood, the shop in North Kensington, had anything to do with his family, and he always denied it absolutely. I think he thought he would be thought less of by the directors of the company.

Did this have any other impact on your upbringing?

Oh yes, in the sense that we probably were only allowed to mix with people from nice families, sort of thing. [laughs] Yes, you couldn't control your children to that extent these days, could you? No, it was a slightly strange upbringing, to be honest.

Did your father ever talk about his war experiences?

No. No, we knew he'd been in the Royal Fusiliers, we knew he'd been injured, we knew his brother had been killed. But no, he didn't talk about his early life much at all in any sense. He had some copies of war poems tucked away in a drawer, but even then I suspect that these were ones that mother had copied down, probably during the war. [21:54] Her father came from Germany, I don't know whether he was sort of first generation or second generation over from Germany. Both my grandparents on that side were dead before I was born. But [her] father has a Royal Warrant, which I've got upstairs somewhere – her father – a Royal Warrant from Queen Victoria, as a storekeeper, which is rather fascinating. I really don't know anything about this. They lived in a rather nice house when they were alive, in Croydon, in an unmade up road, a private road. My mother had, as I say, a good education. But yes. Although, what you can say I think is that in the post-

war period, post First War period and probably before that as well, most people struggled to better themselves and rise up in the world. This business of not criticising people for how they talk or anything really only comes from post-Second World War. Also sort of losing discipline and things like that.

[23:42]

What sort of, how would you characterise your parents' approach to bringing you up?

Well they were fairly strict with us, but I mean we were allowed to go out and play with our friends in the street; we had deadlines for being home. Mother would be out in the street looking for us if we didn't arrive back at the right time. My best friend when we lived in Chingford only just lived up the road behind us and I can remember the first summer I was allowed to go out and play with her. I didn't come home as early as I was supposed to. I didn't have a watch in those days so it's hardly surprising. And mummy was outside, quite worried, looking for me. But equally, seven or eight years later than that I went to a Prom at the Albert Hall which was, I suppose - the Albert Hall was seven or eight miles away from where we were living, with a girlfriend who was a couple of years older than me and it went on longer than we expected and I was coming home on my own on the bus and I literally found my mother out in the street looking for me because she was so worried, it had got to half past nine and I wasn't back. But I mean half past nine in the middle of the summer, it's not dark or anything, and we were living where we'd been living for donkey's years.

What do you think they were worried about?

Well I suppose the sort of things that parents have always been worried about; children being sexually abused or kidnapped or any of these things.

[25:45]

What sort of person was your mother?

Very nice, loving. Definitely not the member of the family that wore the trousers in any sense of the word. My father died in 1963 when he was just sixty-five and she was

seventy-three, and she positively blossomed after he died. My sister wondered, had they been happily married. Yes, I think they had been happily married, it's just that because she was born – I mean after all, she was eleven when Victoria died – she just came from a different age and behaved the way her parents would have expected her to. So she didn't really have an independent life of her own. Oh, during the war to a certain extent, but not the sort of independent life that I've had since I've been married.

What sort of things interested her?

Music. She'd been a violinist and played in an amateur orchestra. She kept in touch with many of the people she'd worked with at the London Hospital. One of them had emigrated to Australia and they exchanged letters regularly and she always wrote her letters in a duplicate book so that she always had a copy of what she'd said, which was rather interesting and of course I found my way into the duplicate book, because she kept it in a drawer with all the photographs and things, so I was quite interested to read what she'd written to her friend in Australia. But she didn't socialise a great deal with - she was very shy and retiring – she didn't socialise a great deal with neighbours or anything like that.

[28:10]

What sort of interests did your father have?

Painting. He'd started painting originally when he was in and out of hospital and although for years he didn't do any, as he got older and couldn't do so much physically, he took up painting again and whereas previously he'd just done watercolours, he did some quite good oils, oil paintings as well actually. Portraits – he went to classes. Used to go off every Wednesday to his classes in Richmond. Always having sardines on toast for tea first. [laughs] He read a lot, mostly thrillers, oh and medical books, obviously. He always kept up to date, he always had *The Lancet* and the *BMJ* every week and read those. And then he was instrumental with other industrial medical officers, it must have been towards the end of the war I should think, in forming a society of industrial medical officers of which he was certainly secretary and I think probably chairman as well, and they inaugurated a diploma in industrial health. And he was a bit peeved not to be given

an honorary one, because he was an examiner for years, from the beginning. So in the end he spent a lot of time studying. His memory was not... he wasn't really an academic sort of person, he'd obviously had to work really hard to qualify as a doctor, and he used me to drill stuff into him and ask him questions. I remember spending evening after evening, sort of thing [laughing] with a medical book or his notes in my hand asking him questions. Anyway, he had no trouble actually getting his diploma but I don't think he ever really liked the fact that he hadn't been given it.

[30:33]

When did he get his OBE?

Well it was after the war. I can't really tell you. I'd have to get something, get the trunk out of the loft and look it all up. We don't have a loft ladder, so sorry, that's out of the question. He died in 1960 [1963]... in the fifties, I'm sure it was. It must have been before I got married, we got married in 1955 so I should think it was in '52 or '53, something like that¹.

What was... how did he feel about this?

Oh, I think he was very proud. Yes, oh yes. Oh yes, he was a real royalist. If the national anthem came on the radio we had to stand up. [laughs] Well you always did in those days of course, and at the end of the showing in the cinema and...

[31:39]

He wanted you to be a doctor originally?

Yes, he would have liked me to be a doctor.

You had other ideas?

I think I was partly trying to be... I was a bit squeamish, so from that point of view I wasn't very happy about doing biology and getting round to dissecting frogs and things, but I think partly it was just a sort of - it's like not doing maths - asserting my

independence, because I was a very, very shy person. I only stopped being shy when I had a handicapped child and had to sort of start fighting battles.

[32:30]

You mentioned something I thought was really interesting a few moments ago, which is you'd have studied science if it hadn't been for the war.

Well, I was doing, at Putney High, I was doing physics, chemistry and biology and Putney High was a school where they set out to complete the syllabus a year before you took the exam, so that you could spend the whole of the last year really on revision. So I was fairly well advanced in scientific subjects. I half thought that I'd quite like to read chemistry at university and then do a librarian's qualification and perhaps end up as a scientific librarian, because that would have kept me out of too much contact with people, which I wasn't good with you see, being very shy, and, yes. [laughs]

[33:36]

What were your favourite subjects at school?

I was useless at English. I quite liked history and I liked the scientific subjects when I was doing them. Well I suppose in a sense maths, but I didn't really want to do it, but I think it was more a psychological decision than anything else because I kept an interest in maths. I can remember when my sister started working for her higher school cert, she was doing maths – she was no mathematician – and I used to try to help her with her homework, her sixth form homework. The pure stuff I couldn't have helped her with, but the applied stuff, well there's nothing very difficult about the applied stuff is there, if you've got a bent for maths, you've just got to sort of see the geometry of it a lot of the time. But she wouldn't accept my help even when I knew I was right, sort of thing. We never got on terribly well. We get on better now, but it's taken a very long time. Totally different in personalities but we've always enjoyed the same interests. It's not quite the best way to be actually, better to have separate interests I think.

[35:20]

What was it like when you were growing up together?

We were always fighting. I cut her head open once, not with a knife, I don't mean. But alongside her bed she had a marble-topped washstand, old fashioned washstand, and we were sort of play fighting on the bed and she wouldn't stop tickling me, it didn't matter what I said, and in the end I just pushed her away and she caught her head on the corner of the washstand. I think she's still got the scar actually. But, yes. She's always felt very superior; she's got an MSc, so in a sense she's better educated than me, because I've only got a BA and a teaching diploma.

Were you competitive when you were growing up?

Well she says I never had any time for her. She was a very demanding child, especially at mealtimes, she wouldn't eat. [Our parents] had endless rows with Ruth about eating and my father when he was in practice would go off to the golf club for Sunday lunch in order to avoid having to sit through yet another struggle to get Ruth to eat. So she was extremely skinny because she really ate very little, very demanding, and I was not only shy, but I thought if I...[needed something] people ought to understand what I wanted or needed without me having to tell them. I'm still rather inclined to that view with regard to children. But I think at that time people had this theory that you should treat your children the same, but what is the same, your children aren't the same so how is it reasonable to treat them the same. You've got to be fair to both of them, but I don't see that that means you've got to treat them the same. I mean I wouldn't give one ten pounds and the other five pounds, but in terms of what they needed as individuals, I can't see that if they're individuals then their needs [aren't] going to be different. I don't know, perhaps I'm ahead of my time in that point of view, but...

[38:00]

You mentioned that you and your sister had similar interests.

Well, we both learnt the piano and we were both reasonably good at games and I suppose in a sense we shared friends to some extent, partly because of our common interests and partly because I was so shy I often got on better with younger children than children my own age. I don't know really.

Who were your friends when you were growing up?

Who were my friends? Well there was the little girl round the corner in Chingford that I was very friendly with, her name was Eileen. I don't remember any others. I remember a few names, I don't remember the children who I was at school with then. I don't remember the personalities. I remember one child was ill and died. Because of course children did die more frequently in those days of common things that, you know, you just give them some antibiotics [for] these days. My chief friend I'm still friendly with. I met her on the first of November 1939 and last... this January I went to her eightieth birthday party. And I've got another friend – actually I've lost touch with her the last two or three years – but I met her during the war and we've been friendly, not so friendly because she didn't marry and have a family and I think that is something that keeps friends together, you know, when you're both living similar sorts of lives. But Cic, I've been very friendly with right since 1939. She's a year younger than me. We weren't originally in the same form at school because I was a year ahead of myself. I think she was a year ahead of herself as well, for which reason we did end up in the same class when I was about fourteen I suppose. I sort of vaguely touched on that didn't I? [40:40] What actually happened when we were evacuated, we all went to bed according to our age. So if you were eleven, say, you went to bed at half past six and if you were twelve you went to bed at quarter to seven, sort of thing. So because I was in a class a year older than I was I had to go to bed earlier than all the others in my class and I made a big fuss about this because I said what it really meant was, I finished my prep and I had to go to bed and I didn't have any time after that to sort of enjoy. So I made a great fuss about that and I got put down a year, which was not my intention at all. So I was back down with my own age group. [laughs]

That seems rather harsh.

That's what I think too, yes. Yes, yes. But there you are, that's what happened, that it misfired. Yes. I had quite a lot of illness as a young child, I had an awful lot of problems

with abscesses in my ears and so I was kept away from getting all the usual childhood infectious things because my father thought that my ear problems would always flare up again if I got anything. So I finally had chickenpox with my best friend, we both had it together, which was nice because we shared a room, [We] had a whole two weeks in total isolation because in those days if you got chickenpox you could not mix until you had got rid of every last scab. And you know what scabs are like, because you pick 'em and then you get another scab where the last one was. And measles, I finally caught when I was almost fourteen, got sent home from Reading in an unheated train on a very cold night in February. The train was absolutely packed with soldiers and they [the school] swore that I hadn't got measles and that I hadn't got a temperature and I got home, my father met me at the station with the car, I got put to bed and the next thing was that I had pneumonia in both lungs and temperature of 106 for about three days. My mother didn't leave the room really, apart from to go to the loo, for about a week and the directors of J Lyons sent dad home some brandy and the uses of a nurse to help take the strain. And no antibiotics [in those days]. I had something called M&B, which is a sulphur drug. They were fairly hard on the kidneys, so you had to take two of these huge tablets every four hours, day and night, and drink a whole glass of water every time. And I can remember being vaguely delirious and imagining that I was sitting on the henhouse. And I was quite convinced that nobody knew that I was finding it difficult to breathe. Because I mean I don't think honesty sort of came into treatment of children very much, you know, "you're fine dear, you're fine." And I was feeling bitterly cold and I kept on having to have blanket baths, the idea being to make me even colder. Well, wasn't really, was it, I mean trying to get my temperature down, but you don't sort of understand that. And at the end of the week I was somewhat better, not well enough to get out of bed, but better enough that my mother was allowed to go out shopping. My father thought he should keep a close eye on me so he came and had forty winks on the bed that mother had been sleeping in and then when he woke up he went downstairs and he made me a cup of tea and he put all the cream off the top of the milk in it, and I have hated milky tea from that day to this. [laughs] I like weak tea, but not milky tea, and a lot of people can't understand the difference. So... ah, it's a graphic description. But oddly enough, I was only away from school for a month and I didn't have any ear problems.

[45:50]

You mentioned that your father had the services of a Lyons nurse.

Yes.

I was just wondering what other sort of perks of his job were there on the Lyons front, if any?

His own director, because the directors of Lyons in those days were almost all either members of the Salmon or the Gluckstein family, he used to get nice presents at Christmas. I can remember a case of wine. That rather strange electric clock [pointing]. Got a set of decanters. I've got a, oh a very nice clock in the other room actually, that he was given. I don't think he accepted perks, just Christmas presents. He wasn't wildly well paid, Lyons didn't pay well. I was rather amazed when I started as a, with Lyons in the offices, as a management trainee, I got £300 a year. Frank Land I think started at less than that, but not as a management trainee. I noticed from some of the paperwork I was looking at at the [LEO] reunion yesterday that one of the trainee programmers several years after I started was offered seven pounds a week.

Trying to convert that yearly salary mentally.

Well, seven pounds a week, £350 a year, roughly speaking. £364 I think if you want to be really precise.

How well off did you feel on that salary originally?

Not very well off at all. Had to give my mother two pounds a week and I think by the time John and I got married we were on ten pounds a week each. But we couldn't get a mortgage.

[48:24]

Did you have any contact with Lyons as you were growing up?

Yes. Actually, yes we did. Dad's director who was the, in fact the chairman's wife, who was the person who dad was sort of responsible to, she used to take us to the theatre in the Christmas holidays. I don't know whether she always did or whether it was only sometimes. I can only remember sometimes. I suppose when we were younger we might not really have been aware of the fact that she was taking us, or who she was. Yes, there used to be big events for some things: new year's dances and things of this nature and dad would automatically be invited to come and when we were old enough, bring the rest of the family, sort of thing. And for the coronation in 1937, when he hadn't been there all that long, coronation 1937 – he must have been there then. May the twelfth 1937... I was only eight, so he can only have been there a few months. Oh no, it wasn't the coronation in 1937, I tell a lie. I think he was invited somewhere, had a place somewhere to see it from. When we got round to the coronation of the Queen in 1952, we were invited to the Regent Palace Hotel for the night beforehand and a "do" and then given places at one of the upstairs windows in – dunno – The Strand Palace or whichever one of the places it was that looked straight down on the route. So I have in fact got a whole load of photographs that I took of that, colour slides that I took from a fourth floor window. [laughs] And it wasn't a very good day, weather-wise, [it] wasn't. Yes, we did get some perks like that and we'd get invited on to a boat to watch the Boat Race and things like that. I'm not even interested in the Boat Race these days. Partly because I always supported Cambridge and John went to Oxford. [laughs]

[51:00]

Did your parents read any newspapers?

Yeah, they always had *The Telegraph* I think. They had the *Mail* as well some of the time, but yes, they had *The Telegraph*. I don't know what they had on Sundays, might have been *The Observer*, because there wasn't a Sunday *Telegraph*.

Did they have any political outlook at all?

I don't really know that we discussed politics. I would have thought that dad would have been a Conservative, as being the thing that he would have felt he was expected to be, to be honest.

It seems that social class seems quite an important thing to your father.

Oh definitely. Very definitely. Yes.

You mentioned a little while ago that your friends were sort of selected by social class or...

Well I don't know exactly they were selected by social class, but I think we wouldn't have been encouraged. We weren't given the opportunities to meet people that weren't of a similar social class because we went to private schools and when I was teaching in a private school we had a very mixed social bag of people, the children there, I don't think that would really have applied. Although I mean to some extent, if you were... school fees didn't cost a lot. You know, if you went to boarding school the conditions were not wildly good, you wouldn't find a boarding school these days that could survive with the sort of standards that we had, it's not just that general living standards were less good, it's partly that the expectations were not the same and going to boarding school was not supposed to be a cushy number.

[53:16]

What are your memories of being at boarding school?

Well you see, it wasn't a proper boarding school in the normal sense of the word, it was I suppose organised rather like a boarding school. We had a fair amount of freedom, I mean depending on how old you were at the time. When we were younger we were taken for walks most days. When we were older we would often be allowed out on our own or on our bikes. Not singly, but you know, a couple of kids together. We'd probably have to say where we were going, whatever. Of course we always had to go to church on Sundays. Although when we were at Caversham we had a choice, we could go to the Church of England church, which most of us were Church of England, or if we went to the Free Church, well there were certain advantages because you could come home before the sermon. [laughs] And oh, we did also... thinking about my best friend, we used to put on little plays and – with our dollies – and make dolls' clothes and learn to do fancy edgings

to... oh, all sorts of things. She had a book of little plays. I don't know where she got it from. And, you know, it was quite a happy time. [54:57] I mean, you know, we knew a little about what was happening in the war but not a great deal. I mean we were aware of the Blitz and that sort of thing because it was difficult not to be. Because I mean you'd see the planes coming over and you'd hear bombs. There were some bombs not very far from where we were staying in the... when we were in Caversham, just round on one of the shopping estates. There's a bit now that looks different from what the rest of it does and that's where the bomb fell. And my mother had a room down near the river in Caversham and she had an incendiary through the roof into her room I think. So we weren't sort of miles away. I can remember going out on to the playing fields late at night the day the docks got bombed to see the glow in the sky, which was unmistakable from Reading. I mean that's quite a distance isn't it? Even as the crow flies it must be thirty miles.

[56:07]

What else do you remember of the war?

I had two Canadian cousins who came over and joined the army – well they probably joined the army in Canada actually – and they both got killed, but they visited us once or twice before that. We don't have [a] very big family, so it didn't have the same impact on us as a family that it would have done. I mean I suppose my father, if he hadn't been disabled from the First World War, might have been in the Second, but some... because John's father was in both and he was older than my father, about ten years older than my father. So I think Daddy would certainly, especially as he's a doctor, have been in the services if he hadn't been disabled.

You were evacuated as well?

Yeah, with the school, with the school, chiefly. Yes, that's what I was saying.

What are your experiences of evacuation?

Well, we weren't evacuated like all queuing up together with our labels on at the station, because we didn't go with the crowd, we went to the little bungalow in Surrey first and then we joined the school when it was in Chippenham in Wiltshire and then we moved with them, I think at the end of the first term actually, I think we were only there a couple of months, to the unused parts of Queen Anne's [School] in Caversham. But no, I mean basically it was a happy time. I wasn't expecting it to be because whereas in the thirties most children were threatened with a policeman if they were naughty, my parents were... never had any intention of us being sent away to school and used to threaten us with boarding school if we were naughty. And you can imagine what effect that had on somebody who was very shy to start with. So yes, it was quite... it could have been quite traumatic but it turned out to be okay.

[58:41]

You mentioned some of your hobbies a few minutes ago - I was wondering what else you did for entertainment when you were growing up?

Oh, well I don't think you'd call it entertainment exactly. I mean *Children's Hour* on the radio, I'm sure we used to listen to quite regularly. Did a lot of reading, I've always been an omnivorous reader of any kind of things, ranging from children's books, which I still read now if I get hold of some that I haven't seen before. Not if I have to pay for them, mind you, but I did a lot of reading of children's books when my children were growing up from pure interest and I thoroughly enjoyed *Harry Potter*, for instance. Reading, sewing, because of course if you were born when I was born and you were a girl, then you were introduced to knitting and sewing and embroidery at a very young age. Not perhaps as young as my mother was, but I can remember being sat down to knit little garments for mother's friends' babies when I was quite small. My mother getting very worked up because they got very dirty. And embroidering chair backs or table mats and oh, when I was evacuated, if I had to stay in bed for any reason, it was either ask for one of the volumes of *The Children's Encyclopaedia* to read or sit in bed and do everybody's darning for them. [laughs] I like to keep busy, I always have liked to keep busy, I'm not very good at sitting doing nothing.

[1:00:35]

What sort of things did you like reading?

Oh, anything; school stories particularly. Not non-fiction, never non-fiction. Needs must is the only requirement as far as I'm concerned, if I have to read non-fiction I do. I discovered when I was teaching, which wasn't till the seventies, that I am very definitely dyslexic. I realise now that this is why when I was in my last year at uni, I used to have a great deal of difficulty getting meaning out of what I was reading, the non-fiction stuff, which obviously explains why I never read non-fiction if I could help it. But with a story you can float backwards and forwards and if you've missed something you can pick up the story. But it was only when I was teaching children who were obviously dyslexic that I realised that it was my problem. It never stopped me learning to read, because I'm intelligent. And oddly enough, my daughter, who's in fact adopted, is very dyslexic and we had a lot of trouble getting this accepted because Bucks was one of the counties that came latest to understanding that dyslexia did actually exist.

[1:02:12]

How did you come to realise that you were dyslexic?

Oh, when I realised that other children that I was teaching displayed exactly the same symptoms as I was displaying. I mean on the face of it my spelling isn't terrible, but when I write, it often comes out wrong. You know, John'll ask me – he's very keen on crosswords and to some extent so am I – and he'll ask me how do you spell such-and-such a word, and I've absolutely no trouble in repeating the letters, but that's not to say they're going to come out the right way round [when I write].

[1:02:50]

Did you have a particularly religious upbringing at all?

My father thought you ought to believe in something and would take us to church on holidays. We used to go to Sunday school when we were in Chingford, except that of course Sunday afternoon was often his only really free time in the week so quite often he would take us out. My mother used to go to church sometimes. She'd been brought up, church three times a day. From university onwards, yes, I've practised a faith quite sort of

– I was going to say religiously, but perhaps that's an inappropriate word in a way – but yes, certainly as an adult since I got married, since we had children we've been to church very regularly, nearly every Sunday. In fact my husband, who wasn't even confirmed when I knew him, has been a lay reader in the church for the last twenty years or so. So yes, it's an important part of life these days.

Why did you start going to church more? Or well, as an adult?

Me or him?

You.

Me. Well, one of my close friends, my best friend, I think is agnostic which is quite amusing really because her husband became a lay reader when he was working as a consultant in the Middle East, he was training on a distance learning course to be a reader and when he came back to England he promptly became a priest, a non-stipendary minister. Which is, as I say, a bit odd given that she is on the whole not a real believer. My other friend was always closely involved with church things. Her parents were very religious and this fact certainly had some influence on me. So I think I decided way back in my teens that yes, I did believe there was a God. At one level I definitely believe it, in other levels, academically, I find it more difficult. But I can't prove to my satisfaction that there isn't a God, definitely, and I have been, until just recently, I've been church organist for twenty years and ever since we moved to this house, we've been to church, well I won't say every Sunday, but nineteen Sundays out of twenty I should think at least. So, yeah.

[1:06:10]

What role has religion played in your life?

Oh quite a large one really. I've never been one to say... I've lost the thread of what I was trying to say. I've never been one to think why has this happened to me. If statistics tell me that one child or two children – two children – in every hundred is handicapped in

some way, why shouldn't I be one of the two to which it's happened, sort of thing. We had a serious[ly] handicapped child, didn't know she was handicapped when she was born, discovered it when she was about two really, when suddenly she wasn't passing her milestones any longer, more going backwards. She lived till she was six and a half and she just happened to catch the flu, not from us, and got pneumonia and died, which was six months after we moved here, which was quite a traumatic time because we hadn't sort of put down any roots or anything. But we had some wonderful people in the village and of course friends, who lived nearby since we hadn't moved all that far, who kept us going. And we'd already adopted one child and we adopted another two. This is a very unchronological interview isn't it? [laughs]

I think it's... it's also a case of sort of talking about things when they come up as well, so although I think most of the interview will be chronological, there are these things that cross across the years really. I think about them as sort of analytical/reflective questions really.

Sorry, I've got the hiccups now.

[1:08:24]

Were you musical when you were growing up as well?

Yeah. I started learning the piano when I was five because my father said I couldn't sing in tune. So I started learning the piano and he said I couldn't give it up till I was sixteen and when I was sixteen I didn't want to give it up. So eventually I sat but did not pass a performer's LRAM and got by since then by dint of doing lots and lots of sight reading and lots and lots of singing in choirs and teaching the piano and playing the organ. I'm not a good organist. I came to playing the... I'm not well co-ordinated as a person, I don't have frightfully good binocular vision, I've got ever such good eyesight but my two eyes don't work wildly well together, so that and being a bit clumsy and having to deal with two or three keyboards and stops and a pedal board, it's a bit beyond me to deal with it all at once, so I can... I play reasonably competently but I should have started much earlier if I wanted to play the organ well. Treat it as a piano. I know my way round the pedal board but the older I get the less I use it.

You mentioned holidays a moment ago, church holidays.

Church holidays?

Yeah, when you were talking about your father.

No, I said when we were on holiday he would take us to church.

Right, sorry.

Yes.

[1:10:19]

Where did you go on holiday?

Well I could practically tell you right from the beginning. When I was about eighteen months they had a holiday... no, wait a minute. When I was two and a half we went to Bembridge on the Isle of Wight and I always had this clear memory of steps down to the beach and an advert for Peek Frean's biscuits on a railing at the top. Couldn't actually find it when we went there a few years ago, but [laughs] a lot has happened since then. We went for a holiday on or near the Broads I think at one point [reflection tells me that I stayed at home with grandma!] and my mother got appendicitis and I'm not sure she wasn't expecting Ruth at the time. We went to Jersey the year after we went to Bembridge because I can remember having a very upset tummy and not being at all well in the night and my parents were down having dinner or something. And after that we went to Bognor for several years running, which of course has lovely sands and we would always go and go to the putting green and we would always swim, sometimes three or four times in a day. My father, despite his bad leg, was quite an active man. He was a good swimmer and he liked to walk. So life would always consist of a swim and a walk. He liked the cinema so we would go to the cinema. I can't remember if we went to the cinema when we were at the seaside, but we certainly went to whatever concert party was appearing on the pier or wherever, and we would go [on] drives out and from Bognor it

would obviously be to places like Arundel and Goodwood and... oh, I can remember going to Abbotsbury one year, that's the swan place and that's down the other side of Weymouth. But it can only have been when we were staying in Bognor. And once or twice I think we had, another doctor was down there at the same time. I don't know whether it was by arrangement, but I do remember playing with a doctor's children who were also on holiday down there. And then dad bought a boat, a small boat. It was a two berth cabin cruiser of the old fashioned variety. He liked to kid himself that it went to Dunkirk to bring back the troops. I don't know whether it did or not, it was probably a bit small. But he only kept that for a year because I made an awful fuss, I was trying to climb straight on to the deck from the bank and my foot slipped so I was left sort of hanging, and making an awful fuss about it. So I think he got rid of the boat after that. And then we went to... the last time we went to Bognor, except for once at Easter during the war, was 1939 and my father had just been off to a medical conference in Switzerland, for which he bought a cine camera and while we were at Bognor, Bertram Mills Circus was in Bognor and they paraded along the front with all their animals and everything and we've actually got a cine film of this. I don't know that it would work any longer because I should think the projector's probably packed up a bit and the film will be so brittle, it probably wouldn't run. And then the first year of the war we went for a week at Easter down to Bognor and that will have been before the South Coast was sort of shut off for everything. And then we went to Paignton I think during the war and... don't remember much about holidays during the war so perhaps we didn't have them. [1:15:03] I spent the odd one during the buzz bomb stage at school in Cookham and the... it was quite an exciting sort of period actually, because of course we were growing up, I was sixteen while I was there and did my school cert. But the housekeeper's eldest son was married to a film star that you may or may not have heard of called Margaretta Scott. She was in the, you know that vet series of programmes, she was in that once or twice with Pekingeses.

All Creatures Great and Small?

Yeah, that's the one. And she came and I was the only one who could cut thin bread and butter. She came to tea so we had to do something posh for her, so I cut the bread and butter and I've got her autograph in my autograph book somewhere. And... yes, that son in fact was a musician who died fairly young, he was in the army in those days. But the

Mary Coombs Page 24 C1379/16 Track 1

other thing that struck me about them was some of the younger children tried to adopt an American deserter in the school gardens and we older children didn't think this was a very good thing to do so we split on them. [laughs] But they were bringing him food and – because of course, I mean there were an awful lot of Yanks round this area, because I mean the, Eisenhower's headquarters was in Wycombe Abbey School that I pointed out to you. [laughs] Strange thing young girls get up to, you know. Yes.

How else were your teenage years?

Mm?

[1:17:21]

How were your teenage years?

Well those were my teenage years, you see. Because I was sixteen and a half when the war came to an end and of course I would have liked to have left school because the other children in my class were leaving school. I was the only one who was being forced into more education and I didn't want it. I think I half hoped the war would last long enough to join up, because I mean I'd only have to have been a year older.

Why did you want to join up?

Freedom, in a sense. My father was a bit dictatorial really.

How was he as a father?

Well, he was kind, yet he was strict. When the war started he [had] just started taking me out to things. I can remember going to a swimming event at Wembley and to an athletics competition and things like that. If there hadn't been a war I expect we'd have done a lot more things like that. My mother was never frightfully good on her feet you see, so she was always quite happy to be left at home. She'd had feet that hurt from when she was a child. I don't suppose shoes were as sort of well made in those days. But no, he was quite kind. In later life it was the cinema twice a week, because we had a cinema where we

lived and there was more than one in Richmond which was a walk away and dad, until lung cancer took its toll, liked exercise, [to] keep as fit as possible. So we would walk down to the one in the village, in the town where we lived one evening a week and on Saturdays we would walk the two miles to Richmond and go to the cinema there and then if he was tired, then we'd get the bus home.

Any particular sorts of films?

Oh, whatever happened to be on I think. You know, all the corny old films, and of course you always had two films in a programme, so... and there was always the Pathé News or the Movietone News.

[1:20:12]

You mentioned a couple of things in passing; cine cameras, radio, cars. I was wondering what the technologies of your childhood were?

We had a radio and we had a wind-up gramophone. At some point we had a radiogram but I don't really remember when we got it. We had television in time for the coronation I think. I mean the Queen's, the current Queen's coronation. Whereas John's father had a television very [early]... they had lots of technology. He was [sneezes], he was the Principal of the [Norwood] Technical College before the war and he set up a television studio with – I don't think he could get the funding for it from the county council so he bought two Baird Televisors, the ones with the vertical tube and the mirrors to see the picture: one for the college and one for himself, which eventually we inherited, both of them or bits of both of them, and that was the only television we had when we were first married, for a long time. And I think we gave it to the Science Museum who gave it to the Norwegian Science Museum, because they'd already got one. [laughs] [blows nose] I'm going to sneeze again in a minute.

Do you want to take a short break? I need to...

Yes.

[end of track 1]

[Track 2]

So how did you do at school?

Well, very well in maths and sort of good, average in most other things. I got distinction for maths. I got a credit for English language, English literature, scripture – which I think was actually called scripture - geography, have I said history? There must have been one other, there were seven of them. And I failed Latin first time. Now there's a very good reason why I failed Latin and that is that I – actually it's a miracle that I didn't fail French, because French at the little school I went to in Cookham was taught by a local solicitor whose accent was appalling and who I don't think was a very nice man actually. And Latin, I used to cycle two miles to the house of a young mother with a couple of children who taught me in her house. And I don't think that was set up straightaway, so I think I, you know, time-wise I hadn't spent enough time on it, because I didn't have any trouble getting the credit that I needed when I started at St Paul's. And then for higher school cert I took English, history, French and Latin. I didn't do wildly well in any of them and I only got a subsidiary pass in English. Did I get as far as saying there was this teacher at St Paul's who said that if I was terribly lucky I might get a third, but it was more likely that I would get kicked out at the end of the first year at uni. [laughs] So the testimonials I got from the college when I got my degree say that they had been expecting me to get an upper second. In fact I wasn't very well two days of my finals and didn't do justice to the papers on those two days, to the extent of not answering the questions that I would have answered if I hadn't been dosed up to the nines with codeine. [laughs]

Oh dear.

So anyway, I felt I did myself reasonable justice and in those days a lower second was considered a good honours degree.

[03:04]

How did you decide which university to go to?

Well, didn't really have much choice because my father wouldn't countenance me going away from home, so it was London or London. It was more a question of which college. He tried to wangle me into King's, but they would only offer me a general degree so I stayed another year at school and got into Queen Mary, which oddly enough, in its original name of East London College was where my father did his first MB.

What subjects did you study at university?

I did French, I read French and subsidiary history. So two years' history and three years' French. And then I had a year abroad after I took my degree, because my father would not allow me to do the year abroad before I took my degree, which might have been short-sighted on his part.

Why did you choose French and history?

Well, because I was quite good at French and I quite liked history and I didn't have a second language, or not enough of a second language. I didn't realise you could go to university and do subsidiary Spanish having spent one year at school learning it, otherwise I suppose I might have done Spanish. I knew some German but not enough. Got a good grasp of the grammatical side of German but not much vocabulary because I only learnt it for... I did the same year twice, put it that way.

[05:05]

How did you find university?

Oh, great. Well, the men were all ex-service, so they weren't spotty little boys. Some of the women were ex-service as well, I think there were about eight men to every woman. Lots of things to do besides work at your studies. I played a bit of hockey. It's a bit tricky because the college sports field was out in Essex so it wasn't wildly suitable for me, but I still played hockey, although the only time I went for a match down in Brentwood it got cancelled because of fog. But we did have family friends who lived near Gants Hill so at least I could have a bed for the night if we played hockey down there, which was okay. I joined the – it's a bit difficult to know – what did I join? Oh, the Music Society, yes. I

even had my only experience of playing with an orchestra. We had several very talented musicians there at the time. Music wasn't a subject you could study there, but a couple of the ex-service people were very talented; one very excellent pianist and there was a cellist and there was quite a good college orchestra in fact, and a choir, which was organised by the college registrar. So I joined the choir. I think I joined the Country Dancing Society. I acquired my first boyfriend. And altogether I had a great time. I went to all my lectures, I don't think I... doubt if I missed any at all actually.

[07:36]

What was your first boyfriend's name?

Ken. He became a banker and he was reading French like me and he was ex-service, he'd trained as a pilot in Canada. He was an English lad, Londoner in fact, but we got on well and we... it fizzled out. We were at college and friendly together one year, he directed the French department's production in French of a Jean Anouilh play and the following year he went for a year in France and the year after that I went for a year in Switzerland, so we didn't do our finals at the same time and at the end it totally fizzled out, sort of just like that. [laughs]

What did your parents think about you getting a boyfriend?

Well, I think as long as, as far as my mother was concerned I don't think she was bothered. As far as my father was concerned, I think as long as it was a respectable young man who wasn't Jewish, that would be fine. [laughs] Not that he had anything against Jewish people, he just didn't approve I think of mixed marriages and until I went to university, as it happens, the only boys I knew were the sons of his friends who were mostly Jewish. And of course when I was at St Paul's, at that time about a third of the girls were Jewish. We had a Saudi Arabian princess as well and all sorts of members of the aristocracy. [laughs]

Sounds quite an exclusive place to go to school.

Oh, very. Oh yes, academically and socially I think really. But you see, this was the point with my father, he was somewhat of a social climber so even if it meant making sacrifices, only the best was good enough for his girls.

[09:55]

How did you get on at school socially?

I had a number of good friends. Oddly enough, the two chief ones in fact were Jewish. One of whom became an architect and designed the house we lived in before we moved here, which we found out quite by chance. I'd lost touch with her actually, she'd moved to America at some point and then obviously came back again. And we were busy looking for a house and we were looking for a house in this sort of area, well, Wycombe itself because at that point John was working near Slough, so it was quite a convenient place to live. By the time we moved in, he was moved to head office in London, but that's just the luck of the draw. So we saw this placard: architect, Yvonne Saville RIBA or whatever, and so I got in touch with her again. I lost touch again and I've no idea what happened to her, because I never kept on with the Old Girls' Association or whatever. Old Paulinas' Association.

What were the other important friendships of your university years?

I don't have any — oh I have one, yes I have one friend, a very loose friendship now but she was actually my bridesmaid, or one of my two bridesmaids, the other was my sister, when I got married. She married a teacher and they lived in Ealing and we kept up with them for a bit. She had children, we had children, we started off living fairly near each other and then we moved out to Wycombe. Her husband was very unlucky; he was a teacher and then he became a lecturer at a teacher training college in Ealing I think it was, and he had a stroke in his thirties and although he recovered to a very substantial extent, not well enough to be an effective lecturer, so he changed careers I think and became an accountant and worked for the borough council and then they moved out to Suffolk some years ago. So we exchange Christmas cards but we don't otherwise have any contact. I think her husband is now in a home because he's immobile, sort of thing. Don't know whether he had another stroke or not. But yes, there were quite a lot of people I was very

friendly with when I was there, but not people I kept up with afterwards. Although, with my very limited social background, I did find a few things sort of amazing, like that the daughter of an engine driver should be one of my fellow students, that sort of thing. Well, I mean I'd had a very sheltered upbringing. I mean I didn't let it affect, I'm not – how shall I put it – I'm not a socially conscious sort of person really, but at the time it was a bit of a shock to the system to find that all these people were not... I was just as bad or good as the next one, sort of thing. [laughs]

[13:52]

Do you have any other strong impressions of your time at university?

No, I would quite have liked to have gone on and done research, but my father wouldn't finance me and I didn't really get a good enough degree to make it possible so I had already arranged really to go on this government exchange scheme and do a year of twelve hours a week in, well, I went to Switzerland which was great in most respects. Most people exchanged in France where all you did was twelve hours' conversation with French youngsters. I went to Switzerland where you were actually expected to teach, but always with another teacher in the classroom. And I lodged in the same flat as my predecessor had done and I became very friendly with a couple of blokes out there; one was Swiss and one was English. The English one came from Woolacombe where oddly enough, we had spent our summer holiday immediately before I went to Switzerland and where my father had had his car looked at at the garage run by this fellow's father. [laughs] His brother, his twin brother had opted to work in the garage and John had opted to go to university. So we did a lot together socially, we got very friendly with the²... we were both interested in music, there were wonderful opportunities for music in Lausanne. My digs were superb. It was one of the, the widow of one of the foremost doctors in Lausanne who had this beautiful apartment over what had been her husband's consulting rooms and she had about eight of us living there. There was a Swiss girl called Pierrette whose father was in the watch industry. There were a couple of Germans, one was from Hamburg and the other was somewhere North German, but I can't remember where. One was your typical Arian German with, you know, tall, fair haired and all the rest of it and the other was dark, and they were both very pleasant. There was an English lad from the Channel Islands who was there at the hotel school, because I think it's one of the foremost hotel schools in the

world, in Lausanne. He took me out on his motorbike – first and last trip. I bought myself a camera with the money that my father gave me for getting my degree. Cost about half what it would have cost in England. So he came and helped me choose a camera and then he took me round and we had an hour's rush round Lausanne, which is a bit like Rome built on seven hills [laughs], and I was absolutely petrified. We didn't have crash helmets of course, he had a powerful motorbike, he was wearing a white shirt which was billowing like this in the wind, and we hurtled round, taking thirty-six photographs of different spectacular sights in an hour. Gosh. I've never been on the back of a motorbike since and I don't want to actually. I'm amazed I survived that. I don't know that he took risks, but I'm not the daring kind at all. I mean I can ski, I can skate, sort of, after a fashion because I've got no nerve. I went on a summer toboggan run in St Johann in Austria once and I was keeping on putting my feet down to slow myself down, and that was as an adult, so... [laughs] Yes. How did we get there? Oh, you were talking about boyfriends weren't you? Oh, the other boyfriend was a much older fellow who played the organ in church and decided to take me under his wing. He must have been forty if he was a day and he was a bit of an old woman of a man, if you know what I mean. You know, the kind that wears trousers two sizes too big held up by braces, sort of thing. And greying hair as well. But any rate, I seemed to go out with both of them. Went out more with John because we obviously had a lot in common because – it wasn't this John – we had a lot in common because we, you know, we were both just out of uni, both doing the same sort of job in different schools and we had some knowledge of each other's background. It wasn't a romantic sort of friendship, it was just a friendship. [19:30] I could have gone to another part of Switzerland with him in the Easter holidays but my dad wouldn't stump up any money and I was earning, I don't know, 450 Swiss francs a month at a time when they were twelve to the pound in England, and I was paying 400 for my digs. I earned a few more francs teaching English and I went to classes and learnt a bit more German and also I went to typing and shorthand classes. Never regretted the typing, the shorthand was a bit of a waste of time because it wasn't an English system and any rate, I've never used shorthand. But the typing has been invaluable.

[20:24]

How did Switzerland compare to Britain at this time?

Well, Britain, things were still rationed in England in 1951 I think. So yes, life was good in Switzerland actually. My landlady did us proud food-wise. She understood about the fact that I didn't have very much money. My predecessor had made a small fortune modelling, as well. I wasn't either the size, the shape or with the inclination to do anything like that. But any rate, she helped a bit by getting me sharing a room with one of the others so that I didn't have to pay quite so much rent, so that went down and I shared with a very nice girl who was younger than me; half Japanese and half Swiss-German and she was over there studying I think. The watchmaker's daughter was still at school, so I think she went home at weekends. The landlady had eight children or stepchildren, one of whom was a very nice girl and one was – yes – her born children were a boy who was just finishing his medical studies and a girl who was, can't remember whether she was teaching or working as a secretary or what, she lived in the canton of Jura and I did cycle over – I had my bike over from England – I cycled over and spent a weekend with her once. I did quite a lot of cycling actually. It's not the first thing you think of, living on the steepish banks of a Swiss lake, but it was fine. I got involved with the Swiss... with the English church there and that made for quite a strong friendship because subsequently the chaplain in the English church and his wife took up a post in Belgium and became very friendly with this John's [future husband's] sister [laughs], so that went on for quite some time actually, it was interesting. And John who was my fellow assistant, he ran the church choir down in Lausanne for the English thing [i.e. church]. So I sang in the choir down there and we used to have breakfast with the priest and his wife and we had Christmas dinner with them as well. And she couldn't have Christmas dinner without clotted cream so we made clotted cream. [laughs] And we went out with them to various festivals, I mean it's a Protestant canton but it's on the verge of Catholic ones and we went over to one of the Catholic cities one day together for one of the big festivals with the processions and everything, which was an interesting experience. And I learnt to ski, I spent Christmas up in the mountains, staying in some digs that they'd found for me, which, where the lady of the house was a young mother who was in fact the daughter of Stephen King-Hall who was the editor of *The Children's Newspaper*, which you may or may not have come across, I don't know when it stopped being produced, but probably before your time. But it's the sort of thing that people hear of. [24:42] So her husband was a ski instructor, so they not only put me up, he taught me to ski and the following year I went back for a summer holiday there with the girl who subsequently was my

bridesmaid. And we climbed up to the glacier level with the ski instructor – this is summer of course – which I found quite terrifying in some respects, and spent the night in a mountain hut where Margaret and I were the only two girls and I think there were about eighteen men sharing with us on a sloping thing with loads of straw. [laughs] I don't remember what we did for food, but I did wonder what my family would have thought of me sleeping, sharing a hut with about eighteen men. It was an interesting experience. Why I found it terrifying was because, going up was alright because you go up quite slowly, but you come down much faster and this business of having not very good binocular vision in my case means that my left eye tends to flick out and we always seemed to be so that the left eye was over the fall. [laughs] So it was a bit terrifying. I've never done anything quite like that again.

[26:09]

What did your family think of the fact you'd gone to Switzerland?

Oh I think they were quite happy that I should go to Switzerland. I found that quite easy to do. What I couldn't have done was what my sister did, which was to leave home and share a flat with friends just a few miles from home, I couldn't have done that.

No?

No. No, no, no, no, no, no. I needed to go somewhere where nobody knew me, somehow.

Why?

I don't know. Something to do with being shy. Something to do with it being easier to talk to strangers, you might not see them again. My most interesting experience, nothing to do with career in computers or anything like that, but my most interesting experience in Switzerland was one day when I was alone in this beautiful apartment and somebody knocked on the door and I went to answer the door and there was this man outside, can't really remember what he looked like, but he was probably in his fifties, and [I] had a lot of difficulty with him. It wasn't that I couldn't understand him, it wasn't that he couldn't understand me, but he couldn't really get the point I was making. I told you she was a

doctor's widow didn't I? Well he arrives at the door and he says to me, 'Je suis le Comte de Paris', (who would be the pretender to the French throne), 'et je veux voir le docteur Curchod'. Well, he'd been dead for a good number of years. [laughs] I explained that he couldn't see the doctor Curchod. Explained at some length he couldn't see the doctor Curchod and in the end he did get the message and he did go away and I didn't discover till afterwards that he was the heir to the French throne, if there was one. I think there's more than one pretender. He's dead now. But I say, the doctor Curchod was obviously a well thought of medic and when I went back to Lausanne, oh, three or four years ago I suppose it was now, we did go up past there and the son is practising, or was practising in the same premises, though I should think he must be retiring age, easily. [28:50] Oh, the one thing I haven't mentioned is I was a Girl Guide for about five or six years.

How did you get involved in that?

Well, we had a Guide company at school when we were evacuated so it was one of the things you did. And in any case, once you were sixteen you had to join something. I mean they may sort of talk a lot about Hitler Youth and all the rest of it, but we were organised in a similar fashion – not with the political ideology, obviously, but you did have to join some youth organisation.

What sort of activities did you do with the girl guides?

Well, lots of things that you possibly don't do now, or certainly there's a limited number, but I mean there were the usual tests to pass to get your badges and the proficiency badges and things like that. And we had – a meeting would always include some drill, so we could all learn to march properly and things like that. And otherwise we did the sort of things you would expect Girl Guides to do in the years when there wasn't so much technology around and people did normal things. But I mean I think you had to do a childcare badge and a cookery badge and similar thing, get your second class, and things like that.

[30:38]

You mentioned photography, well, taking pictures in Switzerland.

Had a camera from the age of about seven or eight. Little baby Browning [Baby Brownie], bakelite thing. And then I think I had a proper box camera. Then I had this [Kodak] Retinette that I bought when I went to Switzerland. I've had several cameras since and I do do a lot of photography.

Were you a keen photographer as a youngster as well then?

Mm. Yes, within the limits of the money that people were prepared to pay out to have my films developed and buy me new films. I mean this is the beauty of the present age isn't it, digital ones, because you've got no real need to print them out. I've got hordes and hordes upstairs.

What was the attraction?

I think having a record of things you've enjoyed doing, as much as anything. So the first ones I've got that I took myself are of the days when we had that boat I mentioned and I was about eight.

[32:15]

Did you do much travelling abroad when you were growing up?

No. When I went to Switzerland was the first time I went abroad ³. After all, you've got to remember between 1939 and 1945-ish, you couldn't. And even when you could, the limit financially – oh no, it wasn't the first time, I went to France before that. I went to France on a school exchange when I was seventeen I think. And I kept in touch with the family for a long time. I had a marvellous time. You really did learn some French if you went on a school exchange in those days because you didn't see the people you went with again until you travelled home again, you see. You went to a family and unless your family lived next door to somebody else's family, you didn't see anybody that you knew again. So my first stay abroad was five weeks in Switzerland [interviewee meant France] at the age of seventeen and I think the arrangement was that I should be given ten pounds pocket money when I was there. And they guarded me with their life, I wasn't even

allowed to go to the post box on my own. Their son had just come home, just been demobbed from the army, at least I think he'd been demobbed by then, so he was always sent off, you know, I wanted to go to the post, to take me to the post. Don't know what he thought about that. And then I went again the following year by which time they'd moved to Paris. So before I got let loose in Switzerland I had spent several months in France, so I wasn't lost for language sort of thing, well you wouldn't expect me to be when I'd been at university and done a degree, but you know what I mean. I could hold my own in a conversation.

[34:35]

I was interested in the fact that when you were in Switzerland you had both English and German housemates.

Oh, and half Japanese as well.

I was just wondering if that's only five years after the end of the war, how did you all get on that close to...

Well, we were in a neutral country, we all got on splendidly. That was, yes, that was seven years, six years after the end of the war. I think the half Japanese bit bothered me probably more than the German bit. For one thing I was aware of having some German ancestry. But I mean these were young people who would have been children during the war, like I was.

Why did the half Japanese bit bother you more? Because you had German background yourself?

Well I suspect so, and also because in the days before a lot of flying you didn't really see Japanese people around. I mean I can remember – I'm going backwards now – the first time I saw a coloured person was in the yard of Cadby Hall where J Lyons's headquarters were, and this was this huge nigger, I mean he was twice sort of life size, and I know you shouldn't use the word nigger these days, but I don't really quite understand why so many

Mary Coombs Page 37 C1379/16 Track 2

words seem to be derogatory even when they're not intended in a derogatory... but I mean it was quite terrifying, especially to a child.

When abouts was this?

When abouts? Well it must have been during the war, so probably when I was eleven or twelve or something like that. Because we would go up there to see my father in his office and perhaps be taken down to the night first aid where he would spend quite a lot of nights during the war, maybe up on the roof to see where he used to do the fire watching, because he would have to take his turn with all this sort of thing.

[37:09]

What did your mother do in the war?

Well I was going to say not a lot. She went on with all the things she normally did like keep house and look after the children when the children were around. She knitted and sewed and when we were at Cookham, she would ride her bicycle and then push it up the very steep hill and come and wash up at school, and then she would obviously ride her bicycle all the way home, not just some of it. It's a very steep hill because you're river level down in Marlow and at Cookham you're probably most of, I don't know, 500 feet up. River level there's about 250 feet I should think.

[38:09]

Can we go back to talking about university for a bit?

Yes.

I was wondering what the sort of workload was like day to day?

Well, I managed to have lectures every day and I think I had about twenty hours a week. There'd be the odd day when I only had perhaps one hour or two, but I seem to think English [French] literature went on for three hours on a Wednesday morning. My first year I was very busy, apart from all this travelling, preparing for this LRAM I took. It's

not what I would call ideal. I was trying to do a couple of hours' practice a day and should probably have been doing more like four, travelling for anything up to three hours a day and trying to keep on top of my studies as well. The second year I did an awful lot with various societies and let the work sort of look after itself. I mean I did any set work but I wasn't studying furiously. And the third year I made myself work eight hours a day, come what may, because I felt I needed to get something under my belt.

Did you have any part-time work as well?

Yes. It was a sort of tradition, as far as I can see, that you should, somebody should, go and work for a little printer's in Chancery Lane. I was introduced to them by a fellow student in the year above me and I worked there virtually every holiday, not from the beginning but certainly my second and third years. Got paid two shillings an hour [= 10p]. It was an interesting little place; it was run by a woman, just ground floor and basement, I don't know what was up higher up, and mostly what she was doing was subcontract work for the Stationery Office and most of it was very dull bills of quantity for various rebuilding works, post-war bomb damage stuff, big estates, government factories, all this sort of thing. And she was a tartar to work for. If you got there a minute or two late you lost a quarter of an hour's pay and unless you clocked up the full quarter of an hour extra the other end of the day, you didn't get it back. And I say, two shillings an hour and it was three-quarters of an hour to get there and three quarters of an hour home again. I don't know what I paid in fares but my season ticket didn't extend past the end of term. You couldn't sit down. If you sat down and there was more work to be done you got told off. So it was all collating documents because there were no, you know, it was the rubber thing on your finger and documents were collated by hand. Your one might involve you going round a table, you know, a full-length trestle table. Or it was using the stapler. That wasn't so often given you to do. Or sometimes it was checking the stencils. [laughs] It was dull and boring but it did give me a little bit of money. My dad gave me a pound a week in term time and my season ticket and bought any essential books. And it went back down to the equivalent of 25p during the vacations. He bought me some clothes before I started but after that, if I needed anything, if I didn't earn some money I didn't get it, it was simple.

Who was actually funding the degree?

My father, I think. Well, tuition, no, tuition was free, tuition was free but I didn't get any kind of a maintenance grant because he wouldn't apply for one. I might have got a little if he had. Money-wise he was a bit borderline I think. So I might just have got a couple of pounds a week or something like that if he had. But no, he didn't think it was the sort of thing a doctor should do.

[43:27]

So, French and history at university. What sort of history did you learn?

I did European and English history from 1485 to, I don't know, might have been 1870 or something like that. Certainly pre-World War One. And because I liked the lecturer very much and he also did some courses in economic history and political theory, I also went to a couple of those, which I found very interesting. I'm not very interested in politics, but I did find learning about all these political theorists very, very interesting. But party politics bores me rigid.

Do you remember having any particular sort of view of history being given by these courses?

I think the time span is too long to answer that question.

How was French taught?

Well that was interesting. We had several different lecturers: Mr Collas, who I don't think was as French as his name might suggest, and his English was impeccable and definitely not with a foreign accent, taught philology and history of language and that sort of thing, old French. He was very good. Professor's name I cannot remember for the moment, but it's something like Braunschwig [ph]. He was quite interesting, he was French. I'm sure he wasn't the only one. Oh, and then there was Monsieur Cammaerts [ph], very interesting fellow who would read his lectures. He did the middle French sort of area, language-wise historically. If you asked him to repeat himself, he would always start with

a preamble about, "I'm not sure that I could repeat it in the same words", and he was so obviously reading it. And he liked you to get it all down, what's more, so it was practically a dictation. There must have been others as well. Don't remember. [Monsieur Derôme suddenly comes to mind!] We must have had some conversational sort of French as well but I can't remember it at all. I'd quite have liked to have studied the language history and the philology in more depth. That's what my area of research would have been if I had done it. I rather enjoyed reading the old *Chansons de Geste* and all about the Song of Roland and things like that. We did Rabelais with someone, which was a bit of an eye-opener. But no, I thoroughly enjoyed the course, to be honest. We didn't have an enormous amount of coursework to do, I mean there were translation exercises and things like that and I normally got a B plus or an A minus for most of my written work. We had some essays to do, we had to do a big dissertation for the literature man and [had to] present it to the whole course, which was a bit tedious. No, but it was a good time, it's a part of my education I really look back on with a lot of pleasure, to be honest, and the social life. It was the period when I gave up sugar in my tea. Because the woman in the canteen took a fancy to me and always wanted to put extra in when she saw me coming and I didn't like it with much sugar anyhow, so I thought the easiest thing to do was to give it up. [laughs]

[48:24]

Were your friends mainly people doing the same course as you or from other courses as well?

A mixture. I belonged to, I mentioned the Music Society and I mentioned the Country Dancing Society. I also belonged most of my time at college to the Student Christian Movement, whereas my friend Margaret who was my bridesmaid, she belonged to the Christian Union. We weren't as in daggers drawn as these things seem to be [now], the Christian Union seems to be a very narrow society these days, I've read a lot of controversy on the subject in the papers over the last year or two. We were a fairly academic group. It included one of the maths lecturers and one of the classics lecturers and we met twice a week for discussions and we even had the odd weekend away and we had the odd visit to. I think it was St Albans Cathedral.

Sorry, what was the difference between the Christian Movement and the Christian Union?

Well I suppose that the Student Christian Movement people were probably mostly Anglicans and the Christian Union ones were probably Evangelical/Free Church. Maybe Evangelical/Anglican, but I don't really know because... but definitely more Evangelical, yes. We also had a German Jewish refugee fellow who went from doing a first degree at college to going off to Wells Theological College and becoming an Anglican priest, who had a splendid obituary written about him in *The Telegraph* when he died a few years ago. I always wondered what had happened to him in future life because he's the sort of person who created quite an impression. He was quite a lot older than most people. He was more lecturer age than – and I mean most lecturers, not all, the classics lecturer was quite a young man, but most lecturers would have been people who hadn't been to war so they would have been verging middle age or older.

What was his name, sorry?

Who, the German refugee?

Yes.

I have not got the remotest idea. I may well have the obituary somewhere, but I wouldn't even begin to know where to look.

[51:21]

So why did you decide to go to Switzerland after university?

Well, because if you were going to teach French, which is what I then thought I was going to do, it was normal to spend a year abroad and my father wouldn't let me spend the year abroad before I took my degree. Might have got a better degree if I had, and nowadays of course people do do the year abroad during their undergrad years.

[51:50]

How did you go from wanting to teach French to working for Lyons?

Well this was very simple actually. The Swiss school year starts at the end of August and the summer holiday is not very enormously long like in England because nowadays of course it's commonplace to have at least a week in October in England, but when I was young all you got for half term was the Monday off. It's a lot of difference. But they would have needed the autumn holiday for the wine harvest, for instance, same as in France. So when I finished my school year in July, my parents wanted to come out and have a holiday in Switzerland, so they joined us and by the time I went back to England with them there weren't any decent vacancies anywhere near where I lived and I wasn't going to embark on travelling for three hours a day and teaching and my father wanted me to live at home. So I got myself a temporary job at Lyons, working in the ice-cream sales office, which I had done the previous year immediately before I went to Switzerland in the first place and while I was there I was offered the chance to become a management trainee. So I decided well, why not.

What did you do in the ice-cream sales office?

Oh, well in this particular case, some very dull work sorting old invoices and getting them filed, because during the war they'd been short of staff and the ice-cream department had been stopped really because they didn't make ice-cream during the war, and they had a lot of old invoices, I think they probably wanted to make sure that they... I don't remember whether they were pre-war invoices or what they were, I just remember that they all had to be sorted, for which I got four pounds seventeen and six a week [about £4.875].

Was that a good wage at the time?

I suppose it was average for a relatively unskilled job. I mean when I became a management trainee I got £300 a year, so there was an improvement. And during that first couple of years, well until I got engaged to John actually, I also did some teaching of French in London County Council evening classes, a couple of evenings a week, which brought me in nearly as much as I was getting for the job. [laughs]

How did you come to be offered a position as a management trainee?

Probably had something to do with the fact my father worked in the company, I would think. [coughs] I don't know what those sneezes are doing to your recording. [end of track 2]

[Track 3]

Right, this is interview with Mary Coombs on May seventh, 2010. Mary, when we spoke last we'd just reached the point at which you had started working for Lyons after returning from Switzerland. I was wondering how things developed from that point?

Well, I had taken up this temporary job because when I came back from Switzerland there weren't any teaching vacancies in secondary schools for French teachers anywhere near where I lived and my father felt I'd been away long enough and he'd like me to live at home a bit longer and this being the early fifties, I still felt at twenty-two that I needed to be a dutiful daughter and do what he wanted. So I'd taken this temporary job and there still weren't any vacancies showing up so I decided I might as well get a proper job and I think through my father I became a management trainee with Lyons at a higher salary, monthly salary, as opposed to weekly. And so I started work, I think it was about the first of November, in the statistical office and I think it was the fifth floor of Elms House, working a calculating machine in a small section that was busily dealing with costing recipes for some part of the catering empire of J Lyons and working under, well we were a small section, I think there were probably about seven of us: the supervisor and the six of us that were doing most of the work. Everything had to be checked and done again, so it was quite a dull job, except at least you were calculating different things each time.

[02:15]

Did you receive any sort of training to begin with in the calculating...

Well, just how to use the calculator, I mean that wasn't very difficult. Just trying to think whether I went on any kind of a sort of introductory course or not. I don't think I did because, I mean I'd already done I suppose three months in total or perhaps nearer four months, in a clerical part of the company and I knew plenty about the company anyhow because of my father's association with it. So no, I don't recollect having anything more than basic training on the actual machine on the section.

Was the management trainee position something you had to apply for yourself or something you were offered?

Mary Coombs Page 45 C1379/16 Track 3

I think I got offered it, but I'm sure that my father would have organised this. But I mean

I qualified as a management trainee because I'd got a degree and therefore, you know,

superior education to most people in the firm.

And the calculating machine, was that part of the trainee part of it or was that part of

your duties afterwards?

It was the first job I got as a trainee. As a trainee one would normally get moved around

different departments learning things. I mean if you were one of the sons of the directors,

then you would have started at the bottom of the company. Most of them started in the

tray wash or the kitchens in one of the hotels or restaurants and worked their way up from

there. So when you got to be a member of the board eventually, as a member of the

family, because they were almost all family directors in those days, you had a really good

knowledge of the company.

[04:10]

Sounds a very family orientated company?

Well it was terribly. There were just these... basically it was the Salmons and the

Glucksteins who'd had this tobacco empire and who took over Cadby Hall and, I'm not

quite sure, I never remember who Joe Lyons was, but he was more a name than anything

else, he didn't have a real position in the company I don't think. And there were other...

there were Salmons, Glucksteins and then there were Josephs who were probably Salmons

or Glucksteins who'd married Josephs, [laughs] and so on.

[04:52]

And so you're working in this calculating department?

Mm hm, mm hm.

For how long?

Ooh, quite a number of months. It was probably sometime the following year. I really can't remember and I don't have any records to substantiate it all. It was probably sometime the following year I was first of all offered the opportunity to go into a new market research section that was being set up, but I wasn't terribly interested in working with people at that point and it was a few months after that that I got offered the opportunity to see whether I was suitable to be employed by LEO.

How did they test your suitability?

We had a little paper to work at and I keep thinking I might have a copy upstairs because it's one of the things I don't think they've got a copy of in the LEO archive, but I can't get into our loft myself, we don't have a loft ladder, and I don't know whether it still exists. But it was a simple, well, sort of intelligence test really, to see whether you could manipulate things, work out the logic of things and so on. [*I have since discovered that I no longer have a copy.*]

How did you do?

Well I must have done alright actually because I don't think that David Caminer would have employed me just because my father thought it was a good idea if I wasn't capable of doing it. Frank Land was on the same course and he didn't join at the same time as me, he came in a few months later, weeks later, can't remember, but it was certainly months, but I mean it probably might have been just sort of eight or ten weeks later, sort of thing. So not many months later.

Who were the other people on the course?

A cross-section. Probably about a dozen of us and I was the only girl. There was one of the management accountants whom I knew slightly and I can't really remember who the others were at all. I know him because his girlfriend was someone I'd been at school with who was a neighbour of mine at home.

As the only girl on the course was it unusual for a woman to be on that course?

I think it may well have been the first such course, so I can't answer that question.

Did being the only woman on the course carry any particular connotations?

Don't think so.

You were treated the same as everybody else then?

Yeah.

[08:21]

So after filling in the aptitude test for LEO...

Then we had this week's course.

And this involved?

Learning about how the computer worked, which of course was pretty different from how modern computers work really, because it was valves and mercury delay tubes. But we learnt about binary, we learnt about how the actual computer was organised, we learnt about what were known as the initial orders, which were the instructions which we used to take everything in and set it up on the computer. There were some things that you couldn't at that stage do. You could add and subtract and multiply. You had to use a subroutine of instructions to divide, you know, repetitive subtraction, sort of thing. You could test for positive or negative and zero, but I don't... you couldn't test for greater than or less than, I think. Well, I'm just trying to think. I keep trying to remember what all the instructions were. But certainly there was one aspect of testing on the result of a calculation which you couldn't do and which came in later, and the other thing you couldn't do was in one action clear the accumulator and add into it. So you had first of all to dump the contents of the accumulator and then add if you wanted an empty accumulator when you added. But subsequently another instruction was developed and wired in so that you could clear the accumulator and add in. You can see the need for this because I mean

when you use an ordinary calculating machine you clear it, unless you want to go on adding repetitively.

So initially you sort of had to program, do these small steps rather than having more automated processes?

Yes, it wasn't quite machine code, but it very nearly was, yes.

[11:15]

What did you know about computers when you signed up to do the course?

Well only what little I'd got from this young Cambridge lad's father's conversation when he visited my father. I think I told you about Michael who was the son of the boss of the ice-cream department.

Don't think you mentioned Michael, no.

Didn't I, no? Well he was an undergraduate at Cambridge and of course EDSAC was being developed at Cambridge and Lyons were being, taking an interest and supplying money towards the development of it, and Michael got involved with it as an undergraduate because he was interested in it. So what he was doing, what was happening in the development of it came into the bridge games that my father and his father and a couple of other blokes used to have every week where I sometimes filled in if one of them was away, because my mum didn't like bridge. Haven't played bridge since those days, I might add.

Do you remember what he said about EDSAC?

No. No, I don't remember anything about it except that I found it very interesting.

Why did you find it interesting?

Well probably because I ought to have done maths for higher school cert and maybe even a degree in maths. Neither of which I of course did.

Were you still interested in maths then, despite having gone down the humanities route?

I think I've always been a bit interested in maths. Nowadays my interest is, generally speaking, [limited] to a few puzzles in newspapers, doing sudoku in a compulsive fashion every day.

What about maths interested you?

Well I think because the sort of maths that I knew how to do was sort of, you know, quite definite, it always had a right or a wrong answer to it. I think I might have been a bit flummoxed by pure maths where you're thinking more ideas. But certainly the applied kind of maths.

[13:51]

On this introduction to computing course, were you actually interacting with the computer itself at this time or was it...

No. No. No, I expect we must have had a look at it but no, we didn't do anything with it at all.

Was it up and running by this point?

It was being used for scientific work and it was being used for some development work on the commercial side, but nothing live. And of course, it was still being developed because they were working on getting suitable input and output for it. It's all very well having a computer that works at a phenomenal speed, but if you can't input your data you've got problems. And they started off when they were first developing it, with just paper tape, teleprinter tape going in and out, and at the point where I joined LEO, half the room was filled with these huge reel-to-reel tape machines which Standard Telephones and Cables, I think they were called, they were the people who were working with Lyons on this. But

they weren't satisfactory, I mean it was fairly early days I think for the reel-to-reel tape anyhow and took up a lot of space and I don't think they could get the timing right between the tape machines and the computer. I think that's what the problem was. Frank may know more about that than me simply because he was involved with the company for much longer than me. And it was then decided to use punched cards as being something where I think the company were already using punched cards, I think that was in the tea shops they were using punched cards, and it was Hollerith's punched cards that they used and so they were, they then had those in and then of course it was a question of printing because you needed to be able to print faster than you could just printing telegraph fashion with the punched paper tape. And so I got involved with – I can't remember what... and originally obviously it was just however they used to print out telegrams and things. Still paper tape wasn't it, because telegrams used to come with stuck on paper tape on your sheet of paper, so it must have been something like that originally. But they got involved with Bull printers in France and [I] got involved for quite a bit of time in doing some technical translation. But then I suggested that since I was doing most of this technical translation in my own time, perhaps they might pay me for doing it, and they didn't want to do that so they proceeded to employ a firm of translators to do the translating, which to my mind is a bit cutting off your nose to spite your face, but... [laughs]

[17:42]

So what did you learn on the training course altogether?

Oh sorry, I've jumped rather far ahead from the training course. Altogether, just basically how one would set about programming a computer, having a clear breakdown of what you were trying to achieve, making sure that the requirements fitted the department that wanted the end result and what sort of routine you needed to adopt to get there.

So not sort of just abstract programming, but programming that was connected to some office problem?

Well the real programming we only really learnt, except in the most simplistic fashion, when we got engaged in the department.

So the sort of training, it's sort of how to specify problems for the computer then, rather than...

How to understand what, yes, what was needed.

[18:52]

Any particular techniques that were used?

Lyons was fairly systems oriented. David Caminer had been engaged, when he came back from the army, in dealing with things like systems analysis and work study and things like that so that he could have a good understanding of it. And I mean this was the point, you had to start by getting the details down to the real great detail of exactly what was required of a program, how it [the task] was currently done and written out so that it could be checked by the department that was going to use it. And once you had got to that stage, which I mean hopefully you got some written details from the department of what they needed broken down into how they currently did it, and they'd probably have extra things they wanted that they couldn't reasonably do at the time, though they might not bring those up till later, and then you had to interpret this in terms of how it would be done on the computer. So there was an enormous amount of checking between you and your client, which would at that stage be a department within the company or the management of the same.

How do you do that, how do you translate a real world problem into a computer program? What are the steps between the two things you were talking about?

Well, once you've got a specification in detail which has been agreed, you then have to draw flowcharts to show how this would be done on the computer, with boxes and arrows and... and every place where you need to make a decision. You know, somebody on a payroll for instance may be on emergency tax because he's just joined the company, they don't know how much he's earned in the tax year to date, they can't put this in, so he had to be taxed on a this week only or this month only basis, whereas most people would have to be taxed on their pay for the year to date, less the tax [already paid] for the year to date. So you would have to interrogate the person's tax code, so it's a question of deciding what

bits of information you need to hold on that employee's record if you're talking about payroll – it's far easier to talk about payroll than most other things, apart from the fact that I know it better. And then some people may have some deductions and other people have different ones. I mean you could save money in a post office savings account from your pay. You might belong to one of the friendly societies. I seem to remember there was something called HSA – Hospital Savings Association – and I think we used to deduct fourpence a week for those people. [laughs] And so it went on. So whether these would be lumped together or had to be put separate[ly] would depend on whether your client was relying on you to provide total information of how much money had to be paid to that organisation.

Is flowcharting there from the start then, or is it something that develops over the period of your employment there?

Well, the flowcharting is from the start. The flowcharts tended to get more complicated as time went on because the programs tended to become more complicated.

[23:53]

So you complete this course, you said it was a week long?

I think it was a week long. And then we went back to what we were doing before.

What was your impression after completing the course on computers?

I thought I was very keen to join, I was quite glad that I was chosen to. I don't think it was much longer before I started. I've got all my old diaries somewhere, but I've no idea exactly where they are, the very old ones.

So how did you come to join the computing team in the end?

Well I was invited to, so I did. But I was attached to John Grover. As far as I can remember there were only three programmers at that time: Leo Fantl, John Grover and Derrick Hemy, which is H-E-M-Y. And John taught me sort of everything I knew.

What did he teach you?

How to program. [laughs]

How did he teach you to program?

By giving me exercises to do, making sure I learnt the instructions so that I could use the right instruction to do the right thing.

[25:39]

What did programming consist of at this point?

Well, the original bakery job, which I never had anything to do with so you'll have to find out about that from somebody else and I don't know who, because I'm not sure that Frank had anything to do with it and certainly, I'm sure John Aris wouldn't have had anything to do with it because he joined a lot later. We got involved in payroll pretty quickly after that, Lyons payroll, because it was an obvious one for getting things done quickly. Had to work to a fairly tight timetable on the computer when it went operational. I got involved with that, as I say, just about as soon as I was doing anything at all. And then there were obviously decisions to be made as to how you went about it all.

So the bakery job you mentioned was the original...

The bakery job was the first thing that went live on the computer that wasn't a purely scientific application, because there were scientific applications dealt with virtually every evening.

When you say scientific applications, do you mean...

Well all sorts of things. There was some people came in and did some crystallography applications. There were some things done for the what was I suppose still a war department; gun trajectories and things like that were all dealt... anything to get a bit of

money in I think and to use the computer. Because I mean using it assesses its reliability better than anything else. And I've got a feeling there was some work on, Met Office work, but I think you need to check this sort of thing up with some documentation.

How much contact did you have with the scientific work that was going on in the evenings?

Well none really, because on the whole different people operated the computer from who programmed it. I don't know whether any of the others had anything to do with it or not. Not a clue.

[28:22]

So John Grover was your mentor when you first started there?

Yes.

What sort of person was he?

Well I learnt quite a lot about him the other day. He was a very pleasant fellow, he'd been in the forces. I have only recently discovered that apparently he had a Sword of Honour or something as a pilot I think. It's mentioned in one of the books, probably the *Electronic Brain* one that Mike Hally, Hilly [Hally], whatever his name is, wrote that I've only just had a copy of. There's something said in there and I didn't know anything about that. He and I played tennis for the LEO team. Can't remember whether he played hockey as well, but we certainly had a mixed hockey team. Oh I think he did actually, not sure he isn't the fellow who nearly got his shin broken by me. The trouble with mixed hockey is that in those days particularly, the men tended to sort of hold back a bit, whereas I mean the women were sort of full on. Well, I mean when you play with your own sex you don't hold back, so you just get on with it. I do remember giving somebody's shin a hell of a whack.

[29:49]

Were there many sort of social activities connected with...

Well Lyons had a very active sports club. One of the post-war high jumpers worked for Lyons, one of the Olympic competitors. I mean the heights being jumped were piffling compared to today. And every year Lyons at its very good sports ground at Sudbury Hill would have a competition, inter-departmental competition, but it also invited members of the Athletics Association to send people for competitions between themselves, sort of thing. So sports day was a splendid day actually. Usually seemed to be fine as well.

So you had a company sports day?

Mm.

Were there any other sort of company...

There was a very keen Amateur Dramatic Society – very good they were too. I can remember getting so carried away by one thriller I watched that I absolutely shouted out at something. At least in my mind I shouted out, I don't know whether I did. I can't remember my father erupting because I was making a noise and I was sitting beside him, but it was, you know, they were good, really good. And they had a Choral Society, which I belonged to. Not that that went out to Sudbury Hill to practise, but obviously the sports activities happened up there.

[31:45]

Sounds a very social sort of company to be working for?

It was an excellent company to work for. The pay wasn't good, but you were terribly well treated.

How else did they treat you well?

I think that's a fairly impossible question to answer really.

I'm just sort of wondering, what were the perks of working for Lyons apart from that?

Well you didn't get sacked readily, for one thing. That was quite a good perk. You know, an awful lot of people worked there for a very long time; it was not unusual to join at fourteen and still be there till you retired. Different world.

Very much a job for life, by the sounds of it?

Yes. I mean you'd have to work hard but you wouldn't be sacked if you were ill for several weeks. In some areas there were unions, but in... not all, by any manner of means. Don't think the clerical people ever belonged to a union of any kind.

[33:07]

What do you think people within the company thought about the company?

Well I mean I don't think they would have stayed if they hadn't thought they were good people to work for.

I'm just sort of wondering, you know, companies have got different sort of atmospheres and I'm just wondering what it's like working for Lyons? If you had to characterise the nature of the company in a few words, how would you put it?

Oh, fairly benevolent really. Innovative. Yeah, I think those are the two things I would say were chiefly...

You mentioned as well earlier on the company director's son starting in the kitchen. [This should be "company directors' sons"] That's quite an egalitarian sort of...

They might have graduated from Oxford first too.

Was it still sort of very much a family company and you saw family members around as well then?

[both speaking together]

Oh very much, very much, yes. I think in the early days when I was working there, there were probably two or three directors who were not members of the ruling family and I mean they were things like the Chief Accountant and the Director in charge of all the clerical functions. And the Personnel Director I think.

How much do you get to see sort of family members on a daily basis?

Well you might see them because they, each one would have certain responsibilities in departments, you would see them visiting the managers of the departments. You've got to remember that we were all very formal in those days, you weren't on Christian name terms with anybody really.

No?

No.

So were you on Christian name terms with John Grover or was he Mr Grover, Dr Grover.

Mr Grover... I should think we probably got down to Christian name terms fairly quickly, yes, in there because we were working in a different fashion from everybody else. It was... we were all engaged in a big adventure. But I never called David Caminer, David, until I went to dinner at his house about twenty years or so ago. And I think he always called me Miss Blood until then as well, so you know, just meeting again after all those years just reflected the changes in, you know, the way people behave.

[35:54]

So where do you fit in when you start working with LEO, what's your place within the department?

Oh, very junior because I've got to learn, haven't I. And then other people started joining and so we ended up taking on several people at once and as we got past LEO I to LEO II,

then we were doing work for outside companies more, then we were also working with programmers from other companies. So they would come in, they would be trained by us, we set up training courses where we would – they usually lasted three weeks, I'm not sure about that, it might have been longer but it certainly wasn't less, might have been five weeks actually – and we would all be given different things to lecture about. I think we may have written our own lectures but we had to have them vetted before we gave them to make sure we got it right. And we would also have some of the students allotted to us so that we were a mentor to two or three different ones probably. [mic noise] A couple of times I also provided a bed for the person I was mentoring at the time.

[37:39]

So what do your duties involve after you've had a bit of training?

Oh, working on a job and first under considerable supervision and then supervising other people to do parts of it.

What does working on a job actually involve?

Taking the job specification, doing flowcharts of how it would be done by the computer, breaking it down into sections and organising the programming of it and then working out suitable test data to test it on the computer.

Sort of organising the programming of it was somebody else actually inputting it to the machine or was that your responsibility?

Somebody, no, somebody else would type what you programmed into a suitable form to go on the machine.

And you're inputting in punched cards still at this point?

I think programs were still going in on paper tape actually. It's a very long time ago Tom.

[laughs] I'm just quite curious. I know what my notion of a programmer is now, sort of someone who sits down and types out the code, but the activity you're sort of describing to me seems so much larger and more encompassing.

Well yes. I mean as you went, as it went on we did more get divided into systems analysts and programmers and programmers if you like are just coding something which somebody else has organised for them. But I mean until we built up a number of qualified people you couldn't really do that, you had to do it all yourself, really.

So which side do you end up on when this split happens?

Well, for most of my time I was in charge of a section of programmers. So that would tend to mean I was doing quite a lot of systems analysis work and writing specifications and doing quite a lot of checking of the programming that other people were doing. I did tend to be dragged off something that was nearing completion to help somebody else who wasn't meeting their deadlines and that sort of thing. Always had a shrewd suspicion that I was too useful to be promoted to management. [laughs]

[40:51]

How much do you need to know about the machine itself to program it?

Well, when it was LEO I you had to know a lot about the machine itself because there was so little room, storage, whatever you like to call it, that every instruction had to be essential or it had to be knocked out. What did we have? 2k in total, plus the actual calculating bits, and some of that was taken up with these initial orders that interpreted the instructions that you put in and turned them into machine code. But it was very, very hard work getting it down so that you could get it all done and of course if you're doing anything that involved money in particular and bearing in mind the unreliability of valves, you had to have a lot of check figures built in as well. Some of these would obviously be actual totals which were needed for payment purposes. I mean if you're doing payroll then the treasury is going to want to know how much money it needs in total for this week's payroll. But equally we had to have totals of the cumulative totals in order to be able to check the input against the output. So this is more stuff that you need to have

room for. With – we didn't go into tax did we, last time? No, must have been the BBC girl I went into tax with the other day. Income tax, I mean when it's done manually you take the person's code, you look at a table that tells you what the allowances are for the week or month to date, you take that from their gross pay for the period, then you look up another table and find out how much tax needs to be deducted, and then you add it on to the tax to date and carry forward the to date figure and you print this month's – well you print both of them probably on his payslip. You can't do that in an old-fashioned computer. You may well not do it in a modern one, I don't know. But the only way you can do it on an old-fashioned computer is effectively by recalculating the tax as if you were doing the tax tables.

I'm not quite following why you need to do it again.

Because you can't hold the tables.

Oh, you haven't got the space for them?

No. [laughs] Yes.

Right. I was going to ask where you're holding the tables, but no...

No, no, no, that's the wrong question.

[44:14]

Are there any other problems with working with LEO when you start off?

No. No, no. Poor pay.

What was your salary at this point?

As a management trainee I was getting £300 a year. I think it may have gone up a bit when I got to LEO. By the time I got married in 1955 I'd got up to £500 a year I think.

Did you have any sort of, were there any problems with working with the delay lines, programming round their activity you had to be careful with?

Well, the delay lines just cut the speed down to something less than the speed of light.

[45:10]

Was the machine reliable?

No. So we spent many evenings sitting with the engineers, because the only way to find out which valve wasn't working was to try and find out where in your program it went wrong, so you could pinpoint the rack that held the instruction or the data where it was going wrong. And this could take hours. I can remember one particularly long evening when it kept going wrong and we were there all evening, because you had to have a programmer involved in this, the engineers couldn't do it on their own. And we eventually discovered that the management lift which went up to the fifth floor where the boardroom etc, was, was interfering. But it took an awful long time to work this out, because somebody had to think of it as a possible explanation when all else had failed. Because obviously if the lift wasn't working, it would have been an intermittent sort of fault. So it was quite, quite difficult.

But were the errors frequent as you were going about programming tasks?

They tested the computer every morning. They had a series of programs that were specially set up to test the computer. Can't really tell you how often it went wrong, but not the sort of reliability that you would expect from a computer these days, definitely.

You mentioned...

I mean mine occasionally freezes, but I've never chucked a computer out because it wasn't working any longer, touch wood. And I've had about four or five now.

[47:18]

You mentioned working late into the evenings or looking at trying to solve problems with the machine when it went wrong...

Well, doing that and also programming.

What is a typical day's work like for you at this point?

Well in theory I think we were going home at half past five, but frequently it would be nine or ten. We'd get a free meal in the managers' mess if we stayed late. Occasionally we'd get restive and suggest that perhaps we ought to be paid overtime. Occasionally they would decide they would pay us overtime but then they would try and make sure that we didn't have to work late.

How do you think other people in Lyons saw the work you were doing on LEO?

I don't know how many of them would have had a detailed knowledge of it. I mean management, yes, in the departments that were involved with the jobs that we were doing. But the ordinary rank and file I don't suppose really knew what it was about, and if they did they would probably be thinking this is a... this is going to cost me my job before long.

Was that a worry for some people?

I would have thought it must have been. In practice I don't think it would have proved so for that generation of workers, because I mean it all took so, so long and I mean the employment possibilities these days are so different from what they were way back in the fifties. I mean the service industries in general have expanded to such an extent and leisure things and all that, work does seem to expand to...

[49:20]

Could you talk me through how your career at LEO developed from when you started as a programmer?

Well, I got married in 1955 and I had a baby in 1961 and I was programming up till then and I came back after I'd had my baby and I was still programming up to the end of 1963 I think. Slightly part-time, but not very because I was working in London, and instead of working till half past five I tended to catch the fast train home from Paddington at four fifteen, because I got home in half an hour on that one. And that was, I think probably I didn't lose any pay for doing that, I think I probably just didn't get a rise when I would have otherwise got a rise. By the time it got to 1961 I think I was working in Mayfair for quite a lengthy period on British Oxygen premises with a big team of programmers, about half of whom worked for LEO and half of whom worked for British Oxygen. And we were involved in doing a big suite of statistical, largely statistical programs, some were stock control – well I suppose you'd call that statistical in a sense – but useful statistical whereas some of the other programs that we were working on were of dubious usefulness. One of the things they wanted was analysis of sales by six digit grid reference – I think it was six digit grid reference. [laughs] Quite difficult to do. Before that I got involved, heavily involved in helping John Lewis who was engaged with developing payroll programs for army and RAF officers. That was something which was done by Glyn Mills, who I don't know whether they were at that point part of the Bank of Scotland, the Royal Bank of Scotland, but certainly subsequently were and then I think they became part of ANZ, Australian and New Zealand Bank. And I got heavily involved in that again because I was responsible for rewriting those programs for LEO III. That would have been in '61, '62 I suppose. Maybe even '63. Sorry, I've lost the thread of what we...

Just describing your career progression from the time you started onwards.

Well I did, I got involved in... I helped Frank Land out when he was involved in a tea blending program which was a stock control program. Tea blending seems a bit of a funny idea, but I mean if you think of one make's teas, there are several different brands within that trademark aren't there, and these teas are all made up differently with different proportions of teas from here, there and everywhere, plus generally sweepings, which is what it sounds like. Sweepings off the floor. So I got involved in helping him meet deadlines on that I think. I got involved in a statistical program for – this increased my mathematical [mic noise] skills actually, because it was a program developing a matrix of information. I'm not quite sure who it was for. Somebody Robeson or Robeson

somebody. Robson and Morrow? Does that ring a bell as a name? It may or may not be the right name. [54:30] At the Ford payroll, I had a lot to do with the Ford payroll. We went straight into the Ford payroll after we had finished the Lyons payroll. I never had anything to do with the teashops' orders, which was a very interesting program, I know quite a lot about it. It was a program which was developed to cut down the amount of work that the teashop manageresses had to do every day. They did a big study of their orders and found that each teashop had a fairly standard order which might vary from day to day, but didn't really vary over much. What you ordered on Monday was probably what you were going to order next Monday and the Monday after, so they developed a system using the punched cards where every day a manageress was rung up and she had to give the variations to a standard order. And so it was written to do that. I didn't have anything to do with that. What else did I do? Oh yes, we did payroll programs for a consortium of local authorities, including the Borough of Greenwich. We trained their programmers, one of them was one of the people I gave a bed to, actually. And we did that for them. I don't think we sold them a computer. I think it was on the cards that we were going to, but I don't think we did. And their payroll of course was rather different from the Lyons payroll, but I can't remember much about the detail of it now. And of course I got involved in learning to program in for LEO II which was rather different. And the hardware changed at some point for LEO II, had a different kind of store.

[57:09]

It changed to core memory I think.

I think so. Can't remember how much that affected the programming. Might not have done a great deal, but it certainly didn't involve us in learning a new language or anything, but LEO III was more of a proper programming language than LEO II or the original LEO I.

Do want to take a break for a cup of tea?

Yeah, I wouldn't mind.

[end of track 3]

[Track 4]

I'll go back in time a bit to start with, I think.

Okay.

When I first went to work for LEO, we were working in WX block at Cadby Hall, which is where the LEO I was being built. As we gained more staff we moved into Elms House which was in Brook Green, the far side of Cadby Hall from where the computer was, and we were in one of the open plan offices in the part, the building where in fact I'd started working as a management trainee, only I was now on the second floor I think instead of the fifth. And we were there for quite some time and then we, some of us went down and worked in the factory, which was down in Park Royal, not that far from where the Guinness building was really and not far from Wormwood Scrubs and a few places like that. And this was one of a number of factory, well factory buildings; long sort of brick sheds, single storey and joined sideways. Can't really remember why we were down there, what we were doing down there, but I do recollect that we were there for some time and it was during that period that I passed my driving test I think, so it must have been 1959 I should think. And then we moved to part of the Whiteleys building in Queensway, which we named Hartree House after Professor Hartree who I think had had quite a lot to do with, must have been EDSAC. And we had some modernised offices there and I think LEO II/5 was installed there. The first LEO II was installed in Elms House. It was quite interesting working there [Hartree House]. By then we had quite a large programming department with about five separate sections of programmers all in one long room, but we had a visit from the Duke of Edinburgh while we were working there and the room was redecorated for the occasion and we were all turned round the other way, because the way it was organised it was not organised so that logically he would talk to the group leaders. So we all got turned round and it didn't work, he still only talked to the rank and file, he didn't talk to the group leaders, but any rate, it was an occasion. And while I was there I became leader of a group that was working with British Oxygen programmers and on British Oxygen premises in Mayfair. And we've moved on quite a lot because this must have been about 1960, '61. [04:30] Lovely fine summer I remember when we were in Hartree House. We would go down to Whiteleys and buy our sandwiches, mostly torpedo rolls or half torpedo rolls and milk and fresh fruit and then we would go and picnic in Kensington Gardens or Hyde Park, whichever was opposite the end of Queensway. Or we would go to one of the many restaurants that were in Queensway or Westbourne Grove. I can remember a Chinese one and an Italian one where there were cockroaches on the walls but the food was good. [laughs] Indian. So we had a good choice and we specially went out to these if we were working late in the evening. So we had quite a big social life. We were working jolly long hours but we had an enjoyable social life that was built into it really, because of having to go out to eat, whereas when we'd been at Cadby Hall or Elms House then we'd eaten in one or other of the canteens, depending on our status. [05:42] Up in the British Oxygen premises of course we had the opportunity to visit some of the restaurants in the immediate vicinity. I remember some places, there were two or three of them called The Stockpot, I think, which were Conran restaurants where mostly you got soups or stews or things like that and we had enjoyable lunch times. And we had to queue to get in there because they were so popular, but it was worth it really. And of course it was handy if you wanted to go shopping, or nice and near to the Curzon Cinema if you wanted to go to a film after work. And the work just sort of went relentlessly on. The British Oxygen time was not really as enjoyable as the time I spent working on the army and air force officers' payroll for Glyn Mills. [06:48] That was particularly enjoyable because as a payroll it was quite different from anything we'd done before, because so much of officers' pay consists of different kinds of allowances and also we had quite a lot of contact with people from Glyn Mills on an ongoing basis, which was quite good and occasionally we could get out of the office and go down to where that particular management was based, which was off the end of Heathrow in the early days of, well, early-ish days of Heathrow. I'm sure there was only one runway in those days, but there was a lot of noise because we just seemed to be on the end of the runway. So if the weather was hot you couldn't sort of have the windows open and there certainly wasn't air conditioning. I got involved in the original programming of that for LEO II with John Lewis in charge and then eventually in 1961 or 2 I was responsible for rewriting it for LEO III, to do which I had to sort of learn the LEO III coding language from scratch, because it was still not the sort of language like COBOL or BASIC or whatever that is partly language based. It was still mostly numeric sort of codes. And the LEO III conversion, I think I more or less did on my own actually, whereas we'd been working in a group of several people on the original and as I think I said earlier, working on the

British Oxygen jobs there were about fifteen of us programmers. I don't think they ever – it was associated with the sale of a computer – but I don't think that that was a sale that actually was completed in the end or if it was they sort of backed out after the event. You'll have to find out about that from one of the books or somebody else. But it always seemed to me to be a bit of a futile operation because so much of what we were programming for, I think there was another team working on other aspects, but ours was mostly statistical, most of it seemed futile, producing far too much paper that it always seemed to me that nobody would ever have time to really look at. I think this was always the trouble with computers in the early days. People thought, oh well, then I could get this kind of statistic or that kind of statistic or the other kind of statistic and I don't think they realised the vast amount of paper that was going to be involved, because of course you didn't view it all on screen like you might do these days. [10:23] If I can digress a moment, my husband who started off in Lyons with the programming department and LEO, which is how I met him, eventually was engaged more as a user of the computer. He had an administrative management post in ice-cream sales – funny how it keeps cropping up in our lives – and he was responsible for getting all sorts of statistics from one of the LEO IIIs which was actually sold back to Lyons. And his experience was that most of this paper, stacks and stacks of which was produced, wasn't really looked at. Nowadays of course we try our best not to use more paper than we can help. But in those days it seemed to be that a computer was a paper machine as much as anything.

[11:30]

So how did you meet your husband?

Well, we programmed together, sort of thing. He had spent ten years in the regular army and he just looked like being sent back to the Canal Zone for his third posting and he decided enough was enough and he'd like a family life, so he persuaded them to accept his resignation and he joined LEO while he was still on demob leave.

And you were both doing the same sorts of work?

Well he was training and I was well experienced by then. Yes, so he was part of the team. But he moved elsewhere in the company after we got engaged. How was your engagement seen within the company?

Well we were the first of the couples on LEO to get engaged, though far from the last, and I think at this stage they probably didn't relish the idea of a married couple working together. Afterwards they'd have lost too many staff if they'd imposed this, but that's certainly what we felt at the time, was that they didn't really want us to stay in the same place.

[13:02]

Who else is actually working on LEO when you start there? To give me some idea of this broader team that you're part of?

When I...

When you started working as a programmer on LEO.

Well, when I started as a programmer on LEO there was just John Grover, Derrick Hemy... who was the other one I named?

Was it Leo Fantl?

Leo Fantl, yes. And me.

It's a really small team.

Yes. And there was an engineering team. There was Tony Barnes who was ex-navy. I'm not quite sure what he was actually doing at that stage, but eventually he became sort of Head of Operations and then he left and I think he must have fallen out with someone because he left quite suddenly and went off to work at Molins, which oddly enough had its factories just down the corner from where I was living by then. [laughs]

You mentioned an engineering team in the early stages.

Oh, John Pinkerton, Ernest Kaye, various other people.

How much interaction is there between the software people like yourself and the engineering people who work...

On LEO I, a lot, because of the fault finding problems. And also it would have been the programmers who would have initiated certain changes to the instruction code which would have to be engineered into the machine, like the clear accumulator and add, as opposed to doing this in two instructions. If you think about it, you've only got 2k altogether, if you've got to put two instructions in where one would do the trick, it's better to wire in one, because you so often need the accumulator clear.

How well did the software people get on with the engineers?

Oh, we got on very well, we were all one big happy family really. I mean, you know, there's the aloof bit of the management versus the troops, you know, because we were all, as I say, very formal.

Could you give me an idea of the atmosphere of working on LEO in the early days? What was it like working there?

We've done this bit. You've said, you've asked me this before.

[both laughing]

[15:42]

Very friendly. All one big happy family, that's what I really look at it as, yes. I mean obviously there were people you got on better with and because, I mean obviously it depends on the personalities of the actual people. After I joined Frank Land joined and then I think the next one was probably Ernest Roberts. Don't know who came as a programmer sort of after him, but I think there were one or two that came fairly shortly. And gradually, I mean we were taking on quite large numbers, either on our own account

or trainees for clients. Or would-be clients. And of course some of the Lyons management will have gone on training courses to increase their know-how of the computer and how it could be used and so on.

Did you have much contact with the EDSAC team at Cambridge?

No, none whatsoever, I didn't. The people who were in LEO before me may well have done and certainly the engineers will have done; John Pinkerton worked up in Cambridge for a long time and I suspect Ernest Kaye as well.

[17:14]

What was the first proper programming job you actually did with LEO?

The Lyons payroll.

And that was in 19...

Well, that would have been when I first joined, which I think was probably early in '53. Because my husband joined in '54 and we got married in '55.

After a while you said you became the head of a section of programmers.

Yeah.

How do your duties change at that point? How many people are... I'm just trying to get an idea of the sort of structure around you.

Well it probably started as just three or four of us. And I say, by the time we got to the British Oxygen one there were about fifteen I think. But I wasn't a manager, I was only a supervisor.

What's the difference?

Money, status. If you were at Cadby Hall and you were a manager, you had [a] separate mess for eating in and separate toilets as well. [laughs] Nothing egalitarian about life in those days.

No?

No, no.

Sounds a very structured sort of environment to be working in.

That's what life was like.

How did you get on when you were working with external customers?

Fine, yes. Yes. Had a few problems with our own management once or twice, but...

What sort of problems?

Well on this British Oxygen one we had a consultant from our side who worked with their management on, you know, deciding what should be done and things like this and I couldn't persuade him that a lot of what we were doing wasn't really worth doing.

This is the statistics stuff?

Yeah, yeah. But, as I say, it is true to say that I don't think we actually delivered that computer to them, or if we did, then it was subsequently rejected. We may have installed it and then it was taken away again, I don't remember.

Can you just talk me through the sort of process of how you actually work with an external company? Do they come to you with a problem and then they send people in to talk to you or do you go out to them as consultants – how does it work?

Well I wasn't involved in those early stages of it ever, so that's a little difficult to answer. They would have come to us wanting to know if we could help them with their problems and then it would otherwise, once you get that far, then it's going to work exactly the same way as it does for an internal client in that you've got to establish the same things. You obviously are establishing them on a more formal basis because you've got to, well you've got to do what they want to a greater extent [laughs] than with your own management. You might be able to persuade your own management that they don't really want what they say they will.

But working with external customers the relationship's a bit different than...

Yes, yes.

[21:06]

What did you think the future was going to be for computers at this early stage?

Well, not being an engineer I couldn't really foresee how computers were going to develop, except that patently they took up too much space and one needed to make programming simpler. I mean in terms of the computer, simpler is more complicated because with the computer's speeding up, you don't have the same requirement, not only speeding up, but having much more store, you don't have the same requirement to be economical in your programming. Our programs on payroll, we were extremely fast. I think it was about six seconds per employee. That is a figure that needs checking with someone. But I'm sure with a modern computer, I think how long mine takes to boot up even, and it's fairly modern, I've only had it about two years, you know, it's quite a different state of affairs. And I've got so many gigabytes of store and mine is quite a small computer and I've only used half of it. But the programs take up an awful lot of that, I'm sure.

I was interested a minute ago when you mentioned the visit of the Duke of Edinburgh to see the computer. Why did the Duke of Edinburgh want to see the computer, was my question?

Well, his wife as Princess Elizabeth had toured the factories and I think he liked to keep up to date with things. I imagine they would have angled their way for it, I mean there were a lot of connections between Lyons and the royal family because of the catering thing, you see, they did all the royal garden parties, and so on. They did any sort of outdoor catering that was needed for the royal family I think. And, well I mean you must have noticed from newspapers over the years of your life that royalty do a lot of tours and open this and visit that and so on in all sorts of spheres.

It just seemed interesting to me that they were people who were visiting a computer, you know, it seems a little strange to me now.

Well yes, but you've got to remember that at the time when they, he visited LEO, we were about five years ahead of IBM in terms of commercial work. It's only because we couldn't get any government money really that the whole thing ended up more or less fizzling out.

Were these things that people worried about at the time?

Well I would have expected so. I would have thought that, you know, LEO would have liked to have been able to develop...

[25:03]

You mentioned the development of LEO II, how much change was that from working with LEO I?

Quite a lot. The programming language was different. Funnily enough, although I used I'm sure, the LEO II programming language much more than the LEO I, it's the LEO I one that I can remember, sort of thing. But I mean it could do much more, it had more scope, it was faster. It had more developed input and output facilities. We were... I'm not sure when we chucked out the Bull printers and had, Rank Xerox printers were used for a long time. So they'd be dot matrix wouldn't they? I think.

Possibly line printers.

Yeah, yeah.

How did the computer language change from your point of view?

This is the bit I can't remember, so I'm sorry. You'll have to ask someone else that.

Let me tackle this from a slightly different angle. Was it easier programming LEO II than LEO I?

Probably, yes. Because you didn't have to be quite so economical. Because, whereas on LEO I we'd had to develop sub-routines to cut space because it was obviously easier to have a sub-routine for anything that you needed to do the same calculation in umpteen different places in your program, to have a sub-routine of instructions that would do that, so you only needed two instructions: one to go in, one to come out, extra to that to do it. I'm not sure whether they ever put division as an instruction into LEO I. If they did it was very late on, but certainly on LEO II we had a division instruction. And it became even more of an assembly language. LEO I coding was fairly close to machine code. But I can't remember, for instance, how much bigger the store was, available space was on LEO II, or come to that, LEO III.

As these LEO computers are developing, how much were software people like yourself involved in the development process of the new computers?

Only really those people who opted to join the software team which was led by John Gosden. I had the opportunity to join it. Retrospectively, I quite wish I had, but by then I was enjoying working with lots of different people and clients and things and I thought I'd prefer that. I couldn't quite see where software development was going, so it may be that there wasn't enough instruction from our management to show us how it was thought computers were going to develop.

[29:00]

Talking about management again, could you just give me some idea of where you fit in in the hierarchy of the computer department then? So, who's your manager?

David Caminer. But in, as we sold computers, more people were offered management posts within the company. Two of the trainees I'd mentored became managers quite surprisingly quickly. One was Helen Clarke who became Helen Jackson, whom I saw for the first time since the sixties at this LEO reunion the other week. Another one was Peter Herman who went off to... after LEO he worked for Dunlop I think and for British Airways or British European Airways or BOAC or whatever it then was. And John Lewis, who was the fellow who joined well after me and was in charge of the army and air force officers' payroll before I got involved, he left and went to British Airways or whatever.

When you start off there, are you the only woman on the team?

Yes. If I joined three men and I was the only woman on the appreciation course and I was the first one. [laughs]

I was just making sure I'd got that clear in my mind. Were you treated any differently because you were a woman?

No. [pause] No, we weren't made to work all night when other people worked all night. That was about the only difference. One of my younger friends, who married John Lewis actually and was one of our programmers, she did stay all night. But I stayed till midnight lots of times. I stayed till half past two or something once, but she actually stayed all night. I can't remember why in particular, but she did. It might have been chiefly because she was John's girlfriend by then, I don't know. [laughs] It's possible.

[31:58]

Talking about working late into the evening an awful lot, what time did you actually get into work in the morning?

Usually fairly late if we worked very late at night. So maybe on a really late night I wouldn't get in till eleven. But it has to be said that I was barely seeing my husband at

this point in time when we were working so hard, because he was also working very hard. By then he was running an ice-cream depot and he would often be staying all night and getting home – in fact there's a funny story about this – getting home after I'd left in the morning. And it is a funny story, because Leo Fantl came to pick me up to take me to a meeting one morning and when John came home from work the neighbours were out in the street to tell him all about it, because Leo had arrived a bit early so we'd spent some time in the house with a cup of coffee before we went out. [laughs]

What did your father think about the work that you were doing?

I don't recollect discussing it with him very much. I mean nowadays you're on the end of a phone to people all the time or you're sending them emails, text messages and all the rest of it, but in those days, once you were married you saw your parents if they invited you over or if you invited them over. So yes, I might go from one week's end to the next without speaking to my father. He probably asked me how I was getting on.

I was just thinking because you've described him as working in the same company, I was wondering if you saw anything of him?

No, no. Not really.

[34:10]

What did you actually do – can you just talk me through what a day's work is like? So from when you get into the office in the morning, what do you do then?

Start work from where you left off last night, really. So no, it was just whatever you needed to do, you did. So if you were in the middle of flowcharting something you'd get on with it, you'd look back over what you'd done, probably. If you were in the middle of coding something, the same thing would apply. If you were programming something and somebody else was working on something, then you might swap over to check each other's against your flowcharts. I seem to think I did a lot of writing memos for people, which always had to go in front of David Caminer who would always send them back to

be rewritten: once, twice or three times. By the time I'd finished I could write English as well as I could write French, but...

Sounds like your job is very much defined by the job you're doing, you know.

Yes, definitely.

Not many other distractions there. That's the impression I'm getting, I'm just checking that's right.

No, the only, the distraction in the early days would be the tea trolley coming round and then eventually we had machines.

[35:55]

How much oversight over the work you're doing is there or were you left to carry on as you see fit?

Oh, quite a lot of oversight. I mean Lyons's tendency in the offices was to check everything. So the days when I worked in the stats office costing out recipes, someone would check my calculations, I would check somebody else's and then probably the group leader would check them both. And so this was perpetuated to some extent when we got through to the computer because we didn't want to waste computer time testing something if there were palpably errors in it. There are going to be errors in it anyhow. And then when it went wrong on the computer you see, you then had to start by finding out, is this something in your program or is it the computer. Because with the reliability not being very great, it could just as easily be the computer.

How do you know when something had gone wrong?

Because you didn't get the right answer out. You calculated it by hand for tests.

[37:11]

Oh right, okay. Could you describe the way that your workplace is laid out? So do you have an office on your own, are you sharing an office with other people?

No, no, it's open plan.

And are all the programming teams in the same place?

Eventually possibly not, but certainly in my day, yes. Well, if you take apart the fact that when I was working with British Oxygen I was working on their premises. But when we were working in Hartree House immediately before this, we had about four or five programming teams working in the one office.

Could you describe the office at Hartee House to me?

Well, it was just a long office with desks set out in sections. So you'd have two desks joined together, two desks joined together and then one facing them, sort of thing.

Sounds almost like a classroom.

Yeah, yeah, a bit like an old-fashioned classroom, yes.

Where's the computer in this?

Oh, somewhere else in the building, because no longer are you right close to it, sort of thing. We started off very close to it with LEO I, but then there were very few of us, you see.

How much do you actually get to input stuff to the computer yourself or is it sort of a step removed from your activities?

Well eventually it tended to be a step removed from your activity, but originally no, you were very involved. I mean you wouldn't actually punch the paper tape that put your

Mary Coombs Page 79 C1379/16 Track 4

program in originally. We had a couple of ex-teleprinter operators who did that and one of them eventually became leader of a section that was punching data to put in on paper tape. So it was only the records, the cumulative records that were on the punched cards. It was paper tape that went in with the data for that particular run.

Did you enjoy your time working with LEO?

Oh, very much. Yes, I was quite sorry that family circumstances stopped me going on.

What about it appealed to you?

The variety of the work, the fact that didn't matter how hard you had to work, it almost seemed a pleasure to do it, that you would almost do if you could exist that way without any pay for it. Mind you, most of the jobs I've done I don't... I've done some boring things in my time, but the way round boring things is to find something, how to improve on what you're doing. You know, speed or efficiency generally.

I think we're at forty minutes.

Yeah, I thought we might be by now.

[end of track 4]

[Track 5]

This is interview with Mary Coombs, twenty-eighth of June 2010. Mary, I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit more about what it was like to program LEO – what sort of languages did you use?

Well they were specially designed languages for LEO. LEO I, it was more or less of a computer language but it was a bit interpretative, but not terribly. LEO II was becoming more akin to a modern day language, but it was still all numerical codes that we were using, I don't think we were using any alpha in the actual programming. [dog barking]

[laughs] When we got to LEO III, which I didn't do a great deal for, I just translated one application from LEO II to LEO III, that I think was beginning to get more like the more modern languages, but it was still quite detailed probably compared with anything in the way of programming today. You have to remember I don't know much about programming today, you see, so it's difficult to answer that question actually.

Could you give me an idea of the sorts of commands you had to enter?

Well, LEO I, you would start with an instruction in the left-handed column of three columns and that might be, I think fourteen [mistake: this was twenty-eight] was add, twelve was subtract, fourteen was clear the accumulator and add – we didn't have that straightaway – seven was copy what you've got into a location. Seven... no, wait a minute, did I say seven was... I've lost the track of what I was saying. Seven was keep what you've got in the accumulator but copy it somewhere in your storage. Five was copy it and leave the accumulator empty. And then twenty-seven was test negative, the contents of the accumulator, whether it was negative or positive. Twenty-nine I think had two versions; one was test whether it was greater than or equal to zero, or just equal to zero. I may have got this wrong, haven't seen them written down for such a long time, I mean we are talking about fifty something years ago. Did you ask Frank these questions? He probably knew better than me, so...

He mentioned there were three columns, you were working on paper.

Yes. The second column said where in the store you selected something from or where you stored it, and the third column was equivalent to long or short, in other words you could store the contents of your accumulator as a long number or as a short number. Not that that means long and short in real terms, but I mean obviously a single addressable bit would go up to 65535, whereas a full length one would go up to... more powers of two. [laughs] Sorry, I can't do this in my head any more. Well I could, but I'd have to work up to it very gradually.

And this is the sort of programming template you're working with here or a sheet of paper?

A sheet of paper you're putting it onto, yes. And then somebody else would put it onto paper tape and then it would be read into LEO I and then you would provide data to test it with. There was a multiplication one which I think was twenty-one. It wasn't twenty-one, it was thirty-one, but there was no command for division. Division was done with a subroutine.

[05:08]

Did you get more commands as time progressed?

There were very few changes, as far as I can remember, from the original language for LEO I. One of them was the introduction for clear and add into the accumulator. Before that you always had to have a five command to clear the accumulator before you started. So if you've only got 2,048 locations to put your program in, it's quite important that you save as many as possible. And I think there was the extra command to copy without clearing the accumulator. That I think was one that was introduced after I was first there. And there was the third alternative on the testing, whether the contents of the accumulator were zero, negative or positive. I think those were the only ones that were added, but of course they made a huge amount of difference.

What sort of difference?

Well they saved you space in your storage you had available for the commands. And it was frightfully important that we got the job done within the space available and also that we did it within the timescale that we wanted to do it in. I have a feeling that one person's payroll was done in six seconds. On the whole I think it's true to say that in a modern computer everything is actually sort of slower in one sense because you don't have to be so economical in the number of instructions that are followed to get the result. Computers of course are enormously more speedy.

[07:20]

I was wondering actually, are there any sort of tips and tricks involved in squeezing a program into that smaller space?

Well lots. You had to think about whether you were doing the same performance later with different figures, so that you could turn things into a sub-routine. And a sub-routine would have to have... would take two instructions to get into it and out of it again. But if you were – how shall I say – able to put twelve instructions that occurred half a dozen times in your program in the sub-routine, then you were saving those everywhere at the expense of two each time. So you were saving ten for each time you were doing the thing in that particular example.

What did good programming practice mean to you?

Getting the job working, getting a pat on the back, maybe getting a raise if it was a good, you know... you had to earn your raises, you didn't sort of get them automatically, you had to achieve something to do better.

Pat on the back from whom?

Your section leader or Mr Caminer.

Who was your section leader?

Originally John Grover. I'm not sure, strictly speaking, whether I ever had another one. I mean I got involved in one of Frank Land's jobs, for instance, so he would have been my section leader at that point. But we were very much on a par with one another then, so...

So you would sort of be assigned a different section leader depending on which job you were working on then?

Well yes, I mean a job was given to a section leader to cope with. But I mean to start with we didn't have sections because there weren't any to put into sections.

Does sound like you were a very small team originally.

Mary Coombs Page 83 C1379/16 Track 5

Well we were. There was Derrick Hemy, John Grover and me. Don't think there were any other programmers at that point.

Were you close to the other people in the team?

Er... Derrick Hemy was older and I don't think we were quite as close to him. John Grover and I used to be first pair in inter-departmental tennis matches. I'm not quite sure whether I played well enough to justify this, but... [laughs]

What about the others?

What others? I mean we hadn't got any others.

Oh, they're not there yet are they, no. [laughs]

[10:32]

How did the team develop?

Fairly fast. Frank joined very shortly after me, two or three months I should think probably, and after that we started engaging people from outside the company. Oh, Leo Fantl, he was the other programmer of course, I forgot about him. Yes, I worked for him for quite a long time after I stopped working for John. And we mostly were engaging after that university graduates straight from university, I think. [11:24] But we were always all terribly busy, so socialising was really just lunchtimes when in fine weather we went off to the park and picnicked. That was when we were in Hartree House. When we were at Cadby Hall still or Elms House we would eat in the supervisors' cafeteria, some of us together.

Who would you have lunch with, for instance?

Oh, quite regularly I had lunch with Frank, I mean almost on a daily basis, then we would go for a walk round the block before we got back to work again. When it was, when we were up in Hartree House in Queensway we would walk to Kensington Gardens in fine

weather and have a picnic as a group, and I mean there'd be probably seven or eight of us there, so enjoying weather rather like this on that particular summer.

Hot and sunny then?

Mm, mm definitely.

[12:37]

Could you describe Hartree House to me? I've seen pictures but I'm wondering what your own personal recollection of the place is?

Well, it was the unused part of Whiteleys department store, Whiteleys being I think the oldest department store in London, and it was quite big and roomy. We had LEO II/5 up there I think and we had a big long room for programmers which had four or five sections of us I think by then, so there'd probably be about twenty-five programmers or maybe a few more, some of whom might be belonging to other firms because we had three or four people from the, I don't know what they were officially called, it included Greenwich Council, one or two others who were doing a joint computer venture. Can't think what they called themselves. They had a particular name, this group [Metropolitan Boroughs]. For some reason or other I only remember Greenwich. One of their programmers was a girl who came to stay with us during her course and then much, much later I met her again because she was working for Steve Shirley. So that was interesting.

Who was that, sorry?

Steve Shirley. Dame Steve Shirley, who pioneered homeworking for computers and presumably many other people really nowadays.

I was wondering who your friend was who was the contact between the two of you?

Oh, the one who first worked for the borough, the metropolitan boroughs of – yes – well she was known as Margaret Bushell or Bushnell, I'm not sure whether it had an 'n' in it or not, when she was with us, but she was known as Sally to her friends so when I met her

Mary Coombs Page 85 C1379/16 Track 5

when she was working for Steve Shirley I got to know her as Sally. But I mean I didn't spend much time working with Steve Shirley as I think we've already been there once haven't we?

I think you mentioned it in passing, haven't got to it chronologically yet.

[15:24]

Did many other ladies join the programming team?

Well yes, there were quite a few girls actually and eventually two of the girls who worked with LEO, David Caminer's secretary, she became a programmer and Kate Keen – I'm not sure what Kate did when she joined LEO - she might have been sort of operating department stooge or something like that, you know, glorified office girl probably, and she also did programming. Joan Hyam who was Caminer's secretary was somebody I'd been at the same school with at the same time, so I knew her already. She was also quite a talented pianist. In fact she was the girl I've mentioned before also who came from India I think, but Jewish.

No, don't think you've mentioned her.

No. Well, trouble is I've done several interviews so it does make it a bit difficult.

Sorry, you were saying she was from...

So eventually she got married and some years later she went and lived in Israel and was secretary to one of the very important politicians of his day, which was interesting. I kept in touch with her for a very long time but not for the last twenty years or so, which is a pity really.

[17:08]

How did your duties change as the programming team expanded?

Well I became responsible for more people and more parts of the job. And when you get that far you end up being the most direct liaison with the client as well. Not in the decision making area so much, we always seemed to have somebody who was nominated as a consultant, in my case when I was working with the British Oxygen team the consultant was Doug Comish who – has he come across… have you… no? Not by name, even? No. Well he was someone who had been a management accountant for J Lyons and he got brought into it. Don't think I really want to talk too much about him actually.

No?

Well, I won't say we fell out because he was one of those people you couldn't possibly fall out with somehow, very pleasant fellow. But I didn't feel that the work we were doing was of any great use to the client.

[18:28]

What sort of work?

Well, we were doing it for British Oxygen. The part that I was associated with had this huge suite of programs they wanted which were all statistical sort of stock control. I can't remember a great deal about them but it would have been quite a large suite generating an awful lot of paper at very regular intervals that I didn't reckon anybody could possibly have time to look at. I mean one program we were embarking on was to do the sales of all the various gases that British Oxygen produced according to where they were sold on a grid reference basis.

Sounds quite a detailed job.

Yes, yes.

Is this something that they had asked you to do or...

Oh yes, oh yes, these were all things that they thought they wanted and I couldn't see how it was going to function. For some reason or other this computer order was cancelled at

some point, so somebody must have seen sense somewhere I think. But I imagine because we were sort of new, we were not exactly clutching at straws, but nobody had the experience to see what was a good idea and what wasn't, other than the most obvious things like payroll and stock control and life expectancy for insurance purposes and that sort of thing. You know, some applications you could see were always needed, whatever happened. And newer ideas, well they might or might not be useful in practice.

So were there other ideas for uses for the computer which came up along the way?

I've no idea. I've no idea.

It's interesting it almost seems to be trying to find a use for it outside its, you know, the stock control and payroll functions you mentioned.

Yes. I mean anything in the cost control and stock control thing you can understand are always going to be useful, you're going to have to produce them by hand if you haven't got a computer. But other things, I think you needed to think, they needed to think more carefully and of course I didn't have the status to be involved in the discussions with the client about what might be useful and I don't think on the whole that Doug had the experience with the computer that would enable him to assess whether this was sort of sensible or not. But I mean my judgement might be at fault, I don't know. But I mean you can see why an interview of this kind is quite difficult from my point of view.

[21:48]

Obviously if you want to open up about anything and you're worried about other people hearing it, you can put restrictions on it later, locking it for thirty years sort of touch, that sort of thing.

Yes, yes. When we finish this do you end up putting it all into a chronological order or does it still just stay as it is?

We leave it as it is in the raw product. So the recording's there for people to listen to, the transcript's there for them to read. They've got the summary as well which, you know,

acts as a guide to the two of them. But you basically get to put access restrictions on it. So you can for instance say you didn't want this particular section to be brought up in your lifetime, for instance. You could just mute out the whole thing. You can restrict entire tracks, you can just restrict sections of it or rather, I think we mute sections of it rather than restrict them, so it's still there on our master file somewhere but nobody gets to listen to it until thirty years has passed, or whatever other suitable number.

[22:49]

Yes, yes. In fact this business with British Oxygen, I've got a sort of vague parallel in my water treatment days much later on in my career, or my careers. In the water treatment industry we did an awful lot of work through big consultancy firms, producing water treatment plants of one kind or another, either pure water or processing dirty water so that the residue can go into the rivers or whatever. Well, the residue of the water, not the other kind of residue. And the sales director at the firm I worked with, all he was interested in was getting work and meeting the deadline and when it came round to problem solving after the plant was officially working, he would always want to put everything on the back burner. And I with my tuppence ha'pennyworth of experience of the water treatment industry didn't think this was right. We were doing an awful lot through Japanese consultants, apart from anything else, and I mean they are absolute sticklers for good manners. And things that went wrong he would tell me to ignore because I was supposed to be on another job and a lot of the time I didn't know about them, but in the end I got so worried about this that I got the fax operator to pass me details of everything that went to him on these jobs that we had so far completed so that I could at least acknowledge the fact that we had received it and that it would be looked at in due course. Because I could see what he was doing interfering with his success in getting new work. So, you know, it's not exactly a parallel, it's sort of a parallel, it's sort of the other side of the coin.

I can see the similarity.

Our consultants were too busy trying to sell computers or sell services without assessing enough whether these were sensible things to be selling.

Do you think that there was a sense perhaps that some people got carried away with all the things that a computer could do?

Yes, probably. Specially customers. [laughs] Clients, perhaps I should call them.

Can you think of any other examples apart from the British Oxygen job? It's a really interesting area.

Well, it's the biggest job I had anything to do with. Most of the things I had to do with were sort of single applications where if you did have more than one job on the computer it would probably be just because you couldn't get it all into one from the point of view of the storage space available and everything. Because I mean by the time we got round to computers with a lot of storage for information I was out of it.

[26:28]

Can we return to the British Oxygen job for a moment? You mentioned that you weren't present at the negotiation stage of it, so where do you fit into this relationship with the client?

Well I would liaise with the client after we'd got the job on detail, on stuff I hadn't got enough information for, things like that. But if it was a question of needing to make decisions about things, extra things to be added or anything, it would all have to go through our consultant.

And the consultants were people who hadn't necessarily started off in the same place as the computer team as you, they'd come in from outside?

Mm. Well, some of them would have done. This one in particular had been a management accountant for Lyons.

How much difference did this make for when you were trying to implement a whole system? I guess from my reading of the history, this is what LEO is quite well known for, it's the building up of a system.

Mm.

I'm just wondering what this sort of situation actually means in terms of building up that system, does it cause problems?

I'm not entirely understanding the question actually.

Sorry, it was quite badly phrased. Let's actually move back to this in a minute once I've got it straight in my own mind.

[28:14]

Did you enjoy working with clients?

Yes. Yes, I had a particularly good relationship with the client when I took over from John Lewis dealing with the army and air force officers' payroll for Glyn Mills, the bank, or the ex-bank.

What was a good relationship with a client like? How does it work? Are you friendly socially, do you ring each other up as well?

No, we weren't friendly socially, we were... we obviously did our own thing, but Miss Hanney was the lady from Glyn Mills that I met most frequently. I think Glyn Mills eventually got taken over by the bank which is now known as ANZ, Australia New Zealand, and the senior person from Glyn Mills at the time when I was dealing with Miss Hanney principally, became a director of ANZ. But no, we got on well together, we could talk together, she would appreciate and her colleagues would appreciate the efforts that were being made to do it. We didn't have anybody standing in the way, information was readily available on a two-way basis. So it was a nice easy relationship. It was quite different from any other kind of payroll we'd ever done. Well, army and air force officers' payroll was almost entirely, consisted of allowances of one kind or another.

Whereas the normal one consisted of?

Pay and possibly a production bonus or something like that, depending what it was. You still had to take the tax off the army and air force officers, but it was set up in quite a different sort of fashion and of course it was a monthly payroll, not a weekly one.

[30:37]

Did this cause any problems, doing something different to the normal payroll operation?

Well, by the time I'd got into it, it was complete as a job. So I was looking after it on a day-to-day basis and then I was eventually responsible for changing it to LEO III. John Lewis was responsible for actually doing it, which is another name you must have heard bandied around, I'm sure. Yeah.

You've mentioned him before.

I would have thought Frank might have mentioned him too.

I was wondering as well, what sort of information do you actually exchange with clients, such as Miss Hanney in this case?

Oh, just progress reports of how a job is going and whether we're able to do whatever it is they've asked us to do.

Did you have to travel round a lot?

I used to visit her down in Hounslow, she was just on the end of one of the Heathrow runways. Just where the A30 and the A4 meet. No double glazing or anything like that in those days, so you just had to stop every time a plane went over. I think we did meet sometimes in our office too. That was better, it was just constant traffic noise where we were.

Did you have your own office by this point?

No, I never had my own office, no.

[32:25]

So where were you working? Still at Hartree House?

By then I think I was working in Hartree House, although I was probably still in Elms House at one point. We moved around quite a bit over those early years, but once I went to Hartree House, I mean that was where the programmings people were based. The only other place I worked after that was in British Oxygen's own offices in Mayfair. But can't remember how long I was up there. But we're sort of getting around to 1960 and – '59, '60 – when we're talking about that. 1960 we moved out to High Wycombe, John and I, and 1961 I had a baby, so I did the alterations for LEO III for the Glyn Mills payroll after that, 1961 or early '62. But I didn't do a great deal more in the office after that.

Can I ask you just one other quick question about the people you were dealing with, these other organisations like Glyn Mills?

Mm.

How did they feel about computerisation – did you ever encounter any apprehension about it or enthusiasm?

[coughs] I don't remember any, but as I said, this is a job [coughs]... I don't remember any, but don't forget this job was completed before I had anything to do with it.

[end of track 5]

[Track 6]

You mentioned that you had a child in 1960.

'61.

'61, sorry. Sorry. What was her name?

Anne. She turned out to be very handicapped, which wasn't at all apparent when she was born, but when she was about oh, eighteen months to two she didn't sort of make the progress you would expect. She'd seemed very forward if anything up till then. But she was very physically handicapped. I don't think she was all that mentally handicapped, although Great Ormond Street thought she was, but I think they know a lot more about children and handicaps these days than they did then. She didn't fit into any particular box, which was a bit tricky. She had balance problems and they thought she was more mentally handicapped than physically handicapped and I thought she was more physically handicapped. And she died when she was six and a half. Just six months after we moved here, she got flu. We both had flu and she hadn't caught it off us and she must have picked it up in a routine visit to the hospital and she got pneumonia and died in a couple of days, which six months after moving is not sort of a very easy thing to cope with really. But well, we got by. We'd adopted a boy by then anyhow and we then went on and adopted two more.

[01:50]

When did you adopt your son?

The eldest one we adopted the year before we moved here actually. And the other two after we were here. Not both at once, certainly not all three at once.

What were your other children's names?

The three we've got now are Andrew, Paul and Gillian – with a 'G'.

And which was the oldest again, sorry?

Andrew's the oldest, yes. And Gillian's the youngest.

What did people at Lyons make of you - did you go off work when you became pregnant?

No. The baby was frightfully late arriving but no, I went on working till a couple of weeks before she was supposed to arrive. But she didn't arrive for most of another month I think after that. No, I worked slightly shorter hours after Anne was born because we were working in London and it made such a difference to me to be able to catch the 4.15 from Paddington instead of going up to Marylebone because I could walk up to Paddington from Hartree House and it was a fast train that got to Wycombe in thirty-five minutes or something, whereas most of the others were stopping trains and took most of an hour, and I've have to go to Marylebone for them as well. And they were quite good about that.

Did working those slightly shorter hours affect your pay?

No. Well, it probably affected it in the fact that it probably didn't go up when other people might have had rises but no, I didn't lose any money over it at the time, no.

When did you get rises, payment-wise?

Oh, I've no idea.

I was just wondering, was there a sort of set scale or were they sort of bonuses?

No, we didn't have bonuses and most of the time we didn't get overtime pay. Sometimes we made a lot of fuss about overtime pay or overtime not being paid, because we were working several evenings a week [plane noise in background] up till quite late hours in return for just a free meal and I remember we made a lot of fuss at one point and all of a sudden we were being paid for overtime but there wasn't any overtime. [laughs]

Did the amount of work change or was there the same amount of work just without the overtime to do it in?

I think there was the same amount of work but we weren't being encouraged to stay and do it. And of course you had to fit in, with your own work you had to fit in lecturing on the courses for the new programmers and mentoring them, the students on them as well.

Was there a lot of flexibility in your timetable then at this time? In sort of terms of sort of arranging different sorts of jobs?

Well you just had to sort of fit it all in, whatever it was.

[05:33]

What sort of was your career progression path at this point?

Well, I'd got as far as I was going because I didn't in fact stay working all that long. I stopped working for, working in the office I think, about the end of 1963, I think. And I did a lot of work at home. Of course you've got to remember that the company is changing over this period. I can't tell you when different things happened, but by the time I finally stopped working I think I was paid up to the end of '69 by Lyons. But for a lot of this intervening time I was doing things like editing manuals and contributing to training manuals and things like this and working mostly at home. It's all a bit of a blur, because when we discovered that Anne was handicapped, that would have been sort of towards the end of '63 and then I had a series of people living in to help so that I could work, but I can't remember a great deal of what I actually did. So I'm sorry, it's a bit of a blank. But I know that I worked for ICT, did some work for them down in Loudwater because they had an office down in Loudwater at the time and that was closed down, but while I was there one of the things they used me for, which was paid for by Bucks County Council I think actually, was to go teaching – I think I've also mentioned this actually – I taught programming, I learnt BASIC in order to teach it. Can't remember a thing about it now. Teaching BASIC to a group of severely physically handicapped cerebral palsied adults who were at the Princess Marina Centre, which is now called something different, it's at Seer Green and it's still run by the same society. [08:24] And also one borstal boy – have I talked to you about this at all? No, right. Had a bit of a soft spot for the borstal boy. The borstal was in some fairly temporary sort of buildings. I think it had been a prisoner of war camp or something like that during the war, partway between the neighbouring village and Marlow, and after the war it became a young offenders' institute – in those days they were called borstals. And the boys – it was an open borstal – and the boys were encouraged to go off and work and do things so that... and various local people were encouraged to go in and teach. And this one boy, he wanted to learn computer programming and because nobody else down there wanted to learn computer programming, he was given a cycle to cycle up here and then he would get in my car and go with me over to Seer Green to the Princess Marina Centre, as it was then called, and I would teach this mixed group computer programming. And in fact after he was discharged from the borstal he was able to get himself a job in computers. He was a bit mentally unstable and I think he didn't actually last the course, I don't know what happened to him eventually. Had a bit of a soft spot for him as he had the same surname as some of my cousins [laughs]; he wasn't related.

What was his name?

Something Ball, I forget what his first name was. Might have been John, it was a very common name. No, I don't remember what his first name was.

[10:24]

How did you get involved in that line of work particularly?

Oh, through ICT I think.

Was it something you were just assigned to or did...

I think more or less, yes, they didn't quite know what to do with me since I wanted to work mostly at home at the time. And after that, they were working, they had an office near West Ealing station, I was based there while I was turning the Glyn Mills payroll into LEO III. I remember that now, I'd forgotten all about that. It was just a building that was right alongside West Ealing station – tube station that is, on the central line I think – and

then I think both these offices got closed down and they had a place in Hedsor, which is the other side of the... was it the... yes, it's the other side of the... no, it's not, it's the same side of the river as we are here. It's over towards Burnham and Slough. And eventually they wanted me to go and work there fulltime and I couldn't cope with working there fulltime so that's when we parted company at the end of '69. But I say, it is difficult to say what happened between these two things.

[12:06]

When you first become pregnant, were Lyons supportive?

Well they didn't put anything in my way, I didn't... I was paid full pay the whole time I was away from work. But I was setting a precedent really.

How did people at work react?

It can't have been very long before Jenny McLeman was pregnant as well. She became pregnant fairly soon after, she married John... no, she didn't marry John Lewis, who did she marry? She married George McLeman, whom I probably haven't mentioned. No. They're mostly people who left LEO and went off elsewhere and George was a very bright lad, got on quite quickly. He and John Lewis both I think went off at much the same time as Peter Herman and I think they all at some point worked for... Peter worked for Dunlop, but I think all three of them worked for British Airways or BOAC or whatever it was then called, because British Airways was the amalgam of BOAC and BEA, British European Airways.

Did you ever think about leaving to work for a different company?

Yeah, I got as far as having a job offer, not long after I got married actually, I decided I wasn't very well paid and I applied for a job with one of the well known firms of accountants. My father had a cousin actually who worked for them and I saw the advert I think in the paper. And I would have accepted the job at quite a big increase in pay and an expense allowance, except that my first project was going to mean six months in Sheffield and when you've only been married about six months you don't really fancy six months in

Sheffield. So I turned it down and that was my only attempt while I was working for LEO to move anywhere else. Oh I tell a lie actually, because when LEO started off in Australia, I would have been quite happy to have gone to Australia if they could have offered John a job as well, because we knew people in Australia, I had cousins who... one of my cousins married somebody who was an accountant with Hoovers and he was sent out to do a management job over in Australia for Hoovers and my father had friends from his medical school days and I knew both sons of this fellow because they'd been over to England. So we would have known people apart from the people that we would have been moving out with. But the company weren't interested in that suggestion.

[15:45]

You mentioned that you weren't particularly well paid. How much did you get paid at this time?

Which time are we talking about at the moment?

The time at which you mentioned you weren't well paid.

By the time I finished working fulltime with LEO I think I was earning about £1200 a year, which was more than double what I started in LEO.

Do you know if you were paid the same as men workers on the same level?

Ah no, because they introduced equal pay, but they did it in an interesting way. Well, the grades in Lyons sort of went from A to F, F being supervisory. I started at F when I became a management trainee, I was F1. Frank was still E when he joined LEO, but earned more than me I think, and when equal pay was introduced he was re-graded, but he still earned more than me. I think I got a raise but I think he was still ahead of me.

Did you say anything at the time?

I don't think there would have been a great deal of point. No, probably harboured resentment. [laughs] Had a few laughs about it since, but... I think there are plenty of areas where this sort of thing still applies really.

What did you feel about it at the time? How did you find out?

Well I don't think it was... you can't really fail to find out because if you weren't F1 at least, you couldn't eat in the supervisors' cafeteria, so... [laughs]

I meant to ask about this as well, the sort of different grades of cafeteria and bathroom. What's the difference between the different grades?

Oh, well, the supervisors – people who are F1, F2, F3 – ate in the supervisors' cafeteria – this was at Cadby Hall or in that area – the managers, there was a junior managers' mess and a senior managers' mess, my father ate in the senior managers' mess and if we all had dinner in the evening we ate in the junior managers' mess. And then there was the canteen for the rest. The manual workers and the tray wash probably ate somewhere different from the clerical staff I expect. But we all shared the same toilets unless we were management, in which case each floor had its own management toilet. They didn't have to have a ladies and gents or anything because I mean there was only one, sort of thing [laughs]. They were all men.

[19:00]

So you didn't actually rise to a management grade? I know you mentioned originally you were a management trainee.

No, no, no, no. It was a bit of a... I think I get a lot of sort of perks these days, like opportunities to talk to the likes of you because I did, when everybody started getting friendly with me again a few years back, I think I did say that I had been rather upset at the time because nobody had made me one of the managers. Because there were people whom I'd trained, one in particular, Helen Clarke she was, she was one of my ones I mentored. Alright, she was a bright girl, but she was the first woman manager and she was younger than me, I don't think she was more competent than me. I met her for the

first time for years at the LEO reunion just before I met you for the first time, which was interesting. She married one of the other programmers in the office. And who else became a manager very soon? Can't think offhand of any women but there probably were some.

Why do you think you didn't get promoted?

I suspect there were probably a couple of reasons and one of them was that Lyons was beginning to move rather sharply away from nepotism. It had got many more managers, senior managers who had nothing to do with the founding families. So I think it probably had something to do with the fact that my father had a senior position in the company, and I think it had a lot to do with the fact that I was very useful and obliging. So if anybody was in trouble, it was always me that had to go to help them all out, which meant that I didn't have many opportunities to start a job from scratch and see it right through. I think that is the biggest thing, actually.

I was wondering as well actually, this thought did occur to me when we were talking about, was it Doug, the consultant, you seemed to have a better grasp of the problem than he did almost in that situation. I just wonder why you weren't at that level where you could have done something about it.

Well I think probably the answer is I might, if I had a better grasp of the problem it's probably because I had a higher IQ⁴.

Was there any way that you could have talked about this sort of issue with anybody?

Possibly other people might have done, but no, I don't think I could have done actually. I wasn't a great one for stirring in those days. [You've] No idea how much more confidence you get when you have to deal with the medical profession and your handicapped child. Because I was really rather a shy sort of person.

[22:49]

There were two questions that occur to me. The first is, you've talked about dealing with clients before and enjoying it, that doesn't seem an activity that a shy person would enjoy.

No, but I'd grown into my job hadn't I, so...

So you found it easier as it went on?

Yes, yes, easier to get on with people and even getting married, you know, if you're a shy sort of person, a fairly – well domineering, it's perhaps a bit unkind to call my father domineering - but he knew what he wanted his girls not to do and things like that and you did think twice before you sort of did what he didn't want you to do. Well more than twice probably. So yes, I think getting married made me feel much more confident about life.

[23:50]

How did your father react to you getting married anyway? Do you remember telling him?

Yes, I think he was probably a bit sort of surprised because I hadn't known John all that long. It can't have been a bad thing though, can it, because I mean we've been married fifty-five years so... [laughs] No, he wasn't against it. I didn't want to rush into actually getting married so I said I wouldn't actually get married until we'd known each other for a year, I thought that was a sensible amount of time. But dad did get a bit worried over the months about walking into rooms in which we were, sort of thing. [laughs] 'Can't you get married now?' And I said, 'No, I said I wasn't going to get married till I'd known him a year'. And I think that was sensible.

[24:50]

My other question was about dealing with the medical profession.

Ye-es.

What sort of attitude did they have when you first found out that your daughter was handicapped?

Well I had a rather dreadful time with a young doctor in Great Ormond Street Hospital leaning over the side of the cot and telling me with no preamble that my daughter had a mental age of nine months and a motor age of eight... no, a motor age of nine months and a mental age of eight months, and she was two and a half by then I think. It rather put me off Great Ormond Street, and the consultant, the local consultant was horrified at the very idea, vowed he'd never send me back there again, because I don't think he agreed with that. She had a post mortem after she died and she had some kind of cell, type of cell missing altogether. It either was dying and not regenerating or it just had never existed, I don't know that anybody ever clarified that. They said it was probably hereditary, which I thought was very unlikely, because John comes from a – you know, recessive gene thing – John comes from a big family and I thought there would have been problems of one kind or another within his many, well his immediate family wasn't that big but I mean his father had about five brothers and sisters and his mother had a brother and a sister and there was no hint of any problems in the family, so I thought that was a bit unlikely. But I'd taken Thalidomide as a sedative for about five months while I was pregnant, I'd also had shingles while I was pregnant, which was, shingles is an encephalitis type virus which causes brain inflammation, things like that. And I did read somewhere that, about somebody, a child that had been born and was quite handicapped after the mother had had shingles. Only one odd one. And of course I didn't take the Thalidomide at the point in pregnancy that all these people with the limb deformities did, I took it because I couldn't... I'm always a restless sleeper and I was a much more restless sleeper pregnant than I am normally and John absolutely refused flatly that we slept in separate beds while I was pregnant, so [laughs] the only solution was to take something that made me a bit less restless. But there you are, no way of knowing is there?

Did your dealings with the medical profession actually improve? You mentioned that you had a consultant nearby who sounded a bit more sympathetic.

Oh yes, he was a very senior figure, he and his predecessor, they were the pair who pioneered sleeping in for parents whose children were in hospital. I'd had a couple of weeks in hospital when I was five and it was terrifying, to be honest, I can remember it

clearly. It made me... I had to go to hospital for an X-ray when I was about sixteen and I had, positively had, hysterics at the very idea. Really, it marked me for life.

What was the consultant's name, if you remember?

Oh, Dr Garrow at Wycombe, yes. Was a paediatrician. And Dr McCarthy was his associate and boss who was, I think he'd probably retired by then, but he was also very well known. So Amersham Hospital was the first one that had accommodation for parents in the side wards.

Did your daughter's treatment improve?

No, not really. It was definitely a degenerative sort of condition she'd got. But I didn't feel that mentally she was particularly handicapped. I thought, I was teaching her to read before she died. But I mean physically she had been able to climb the stairs well before she was two and well, before she was eighteen months old even, she was going up and down stairs. But there you are. You have to take what life throws at you I'm afraid.

[30:37]

You mentioned that dealing with the medical profession during this phase had an effect on you and made you more confident.

Well yes, and then having other children. I mean I practically lived in casualty with my younger son, because whatever it was, he could always manage to hurt himself doing it.

Do you mind me asking, why did you adopt three other children?

Well, we always wanted more children and we didn't succeed in having any more of our own, so the adoption was the easiest one. And the eldest one was practically handed to us on a plate because my sister-in-law is a physiotherapist and one of her patients, someone she knew quite well at the time, had a niece who had a son that she didn't, a baby she didn't want to keep, broken marriage, and so we adopted him. Not long after that, this wouldn't have been possible, but at that point private adoptions were still possible,

although you still had to go through the legal process, obviously. But apart from being vetted by a local social worker, there weren't any real formalities other than to go to court after six months and to sign the appropriate forms and the mother to have signed the appropriate forms. And the other two we adopted through the Children's Society. And funnily enough, when we got round to Gillian they said we couldn't have another baby because we'd already had a baby. The second one – well, Andrew was six and a half months, Paul was five and a half months when we had him and as it came to the point, Gill was three and a half months, so I don't know what they call that except [laughing] having another baby, but there you are.

[32:46]

How did you fit work around family life? You mentioned that you went part-time for a while, but I was just wondering...

Well, we only had... I was working on manuals at home when I'd got the others. And when we had Gill I wasn't working at all because I took three years off. When I finished 1969 with ICT I flirted a little bit with Steve Shirley and F International, or wasn't called F International, F something else. I think it was called F Plan originally. No, that's a dieting thing. Don't remember what it was called originally. But that didn't come to anything because they lost the contract for which I was being employed.

Can I ask you a little bit more about – you were working for ICT eventually – I was just wondering from your point of view what difference the merger of LEO with other computer companies actually made?

Well I think when you were actually working it didn't really make a great deal of difference at all, except you might work in a different location. Otherwise things I think went on pretty well as normal. I think we were all sorry to lose the LEO bit. But I mean we got as far as English Electric-LEO-Marconi Limited or something. It's too much of a mouthful isn't it?

Did you have to have contact with the people from English Electric or Marconi as well as part of your work?

No, I didn't, no. But then I think again, by then you see I wasn't so much in the office, so I don't remember when all these things happened and I've managed to lose the books, I've managed to lend them to people who haven't given them back. I always vow I won't lend anything without putting my name and address in it, but I always do.

[35:12]

What does working from home actually involve?

Well in those days, not a lot really. I just had these manuals that I was editing, so periodically I would take work into the office or get sent some more in the post or whatever. So it was not a very productive time. I think probably if I'd been particularly well paid I would have had a bit of a conscience about what I was doing, but no.

Did you feel, did you miss going into the office every day?

Yes. Yes, I mean it's not as if those were the days of internet connections and mobile phones you see, so yes, it was... yes, I definitely missed going into the office.

What did you miss about it?

The routine I suppose. I was quite well organised in the days when I went into the office every day. I mean domestically I was quite well organised. And I don't flourish if I'm not working, to be honest. I don't flourish nowadays, that's a different matter though, except there's an awful lot of mess that I ought to have cleared up, everywhere. But in the three years that I didn't work at all, John says I was hell to live with, because I was always worried about running out of things to do, so I wouldn't do anything, know what I mean, so there was always something left. It's a bit like the very bright child who's afraid of failure and therefore doesn't try and doesn't end up achieving very much at all, which sums up one of my three.

[37:34]

When did you become involved with Steve Shirley?

Well I always knew of her existence because she lived in Chesham and one of my closest friends, well my oldest and closest friend lived in Chesham and you read about her in local papers as well as sometimes in the national press. So when it was obvious that I was coming to the end of what I was doing with ICT I got in touch with her to see whether I could join her lot and she thought that yes, I would fill a gap or two for her. And I went about with them for a few weeks exploring different bits of new equipment. I remember we went up to Imperial College to look at things like plotters that they were developing in their engineering department, and I learnt something about this new project, this very big new hospital design project that she thought she was almost certainly going to get, and I'm sorry it all fizzled out actually because it would have been a fascinating thing to get involved with. I mean this would have been computer aided design before it existed really. It was a great pity. Did I mention to you that my best friend's husband was a consultant who was actually working on this project and could have told me that it was all about to fold, but obviously couldn't tell me that it was all about to fold.

What had you heard about Steve Shirley? You mentioned reading things in the papers.

Well, about her enterprising set-up of providing programming work for mothers and people who had to stay at home. It all sounded just what I needed. And of course nowadays I mean it's so easy to do anything like that. Then it must have been really quite a struggle.

What was she like as a person?

I think she was quite a forthright sort of person, I didn't get to know her well so I can't really tell you a great deal about her. I mean I know she ended up as a Dame, so she obviously has quite a lot of clout.

[40:27]

I was just wondering, when you were working at home, what a sort of day's work would be like?

Mary Coombs Page 107 C1379/16 Track 6

Being relatively idle I think, and doing as little as possible, or doing it for as little time as

possible. I'm fairly bright and I'm quite quick. I'm slightly handicapped on the written

thing because I'm definitely dyslexic. Never stopped me learning to read, but it certainly

impaired my ability to read well for meaning. But nobody knew dyslexia existed when I

was a child.

When did you discover you were dyslexic?

When I was teaching children who showed the same symptoms as I did, so not till I was in

my late forties I should think.

What sort of manuals were you actually editing?

Training manuals for programmers.

You mentioned that you've taught on these training courses yourself as well at some point.

I taught on the LEO training courses when we were still LEO, yes, I lectured on

something for... on every one virtually, and definitely always mentored somebody.

Sounds a very sort of supportive environment to be mentoring somebody through a

training course like that, you know, within a commercial organisation.

Is it unusual?

I don't know, I'm asking.

No, no, I don't know whether it's unusual or not. Seemed quite logical, because I mean

it's a lot to take in, especially, you know, in the days when nobody is used to computers.

After all, home computers didn't exist, so it will have been new to everybody.

[42:44]

What sort of training and progression opportunities were there for you during your career at LEO?

Well I don't think I went on any formal courses, except obviously when we had a new language to learn, I obviously had to learn it. I don't recollect having any particular course to change from LEO I to LEO II, I think we just sort of got on with it. But yes, I went on a conversion course from LEO II to LEO III because that was a much more detailed language, much more scope. Can't remember a thing about it, because I didn't use it for long enough for it to stick.

You mentioned as well that you learnt BASIC somewhere along the way.

Well only in order to teach it. I mean, I learnt recorder in order to teach it when I was teaching primary school. Comes into about the same.

Do you think you had the same opportunities as male colleagues when you were working at Lyons?

[pause] Yes and no. No, in that I didn't seem to get the same opportunities for promotion. I don't think this was entirely because I was a woman, but we've sort of been into that, so I don't think I've anything to add to what I've already said.

[44:27]

To think back to the start of the LEO period, did you think that the work you were doing at this time was significant, it was something new, important?

Oh yes. Oh yes. Wildly exciting. Yes, it was, I mean if I hadn't enjoyed myself so much I don't doubt that I would have baulked at the relatively low pay, you know. But yes, computer programming, it was really great fun. And I'm a bit of a perfectionist so I think it suited my mental outlook. Drive my husband round the bend because he says I'm terribly critical, but I say well I'm just as critical about myself as I am about other people.

Something I've picked on as well is that did you not have to check each other's programs as well?

Oh yes, yes. Lyons had a definite checking mania. But yes, you do need to, especially in LEO I days when it was terribly important that what you did was as economical in the use of space as possible.

I can sort of see how that works quite well with the perfectionist angle. Is there anything else about computer programming that attracted you to it?

It was new, it was challenging. I think it was just what I needed, to be honest.

How did it feel to be teaching it to other people?

Well I mean it wasn't like being a class teacher because I mean alright, so you taught the class something, but because you all had your own work to do, I don't think anybody except those that were just involved in training most of the time ever gave more than the odd one or two lectures and they would always be on the same subject. So I mean I can remember, I wrote my original lecture, I can't remember whether it got altered by other people on the way or whether I went on giving the same one indefinitely, but I would have thought that I went on giving the same one indefinitely.

[47:11]

What about later on when you were on the ICT course teaching handicapped children?

Well that was quite slow. They weren't children, they were adults. I mean even my borstal boy was nearly eighteen I think and the others would have been, some of them might have been in their thirties, I'm not sure. I mean strictly speaking it was a home for young adult people, but it's, on the whole I think people tended to sort of get older as they stayed there. Well I mean you do, don't you, but you know what I mean? It wasn't for sort of seventeen to twenty-two year olds sort of thing, and that kind of young, I think some of them had been there quite a few years.

How does one actually teach programming at this point? I say this as someone who's been taught programming with a computer there in front of me and I'm guessing it's different in this case.

I don't remember really. You have to teach them how a computer works and after that you would need to show them that you have to get in terrific detail to program a computer, especially in those days. And I can't remember BASIC and I don't possess a book of it, so it's not something I've ever been able to look at again. There was the book I was teaching from. Then obviously, if you know how to program a computer and you have something as basic as BASIC put in front of you, it's not that difficult to understand it, so it wasn't a hard learning curve. But I mean it's like if you have to learn something off by heart to recite you don't necessarily still know it six months later, do you? So it's a bit like that.

I was just wondering if you can remember how you felt at the time about something that was a beginner's computer language compared to the real programming languages that you'd been using in the LEO and ICT projects.

Well yes, you say a beginner's programming language, but on the other hand it was a language that had been developed to make it easier to program. I mean you didn't need quite the same amount, to go into the same amount of detail to achieve your result. I don't think you could have embarked on teaching it, LEO I language, I don't think you could have embarked on teaching that to my group, put it that way. [50:30] There was at least one very bright lad in the group with ginger hair, who I think went on to become a programmer and to be fairly self-sufficient and of course over the years much more effort has been put into allowing handicapped people to live independently rather than – well independently with support – rather than in homes. I mean whether it's always a good idea, I really don't know. I'm not entirely in favour of this modern business of wanting to educate everybody in the same schools because I know it's good for handicapped people to have a more normal life, but a handicapped person can slow down the learning of the other people. I had a very bright, when I was teaching primary school, I had a very bright, very deaf child in my class, but I mean anything that you did with the class like a tables test or a spelling test, you had to go so slowly to make sure she heard it all with her two

Mary Coombs Page 111 C1379/16 Track 6

hearing aids and her extra amplifier, that you were no longer stretching the rest of the

class. Actually she went to a more specialised school later, her parents moved out of

county for that purpose, but you see what I'm saying.

How did the handicapped children actually take to the programming?

Handicapped adults.

Sorry, sorry, adults, yes.

Well I'm not sure that all of them really could cope with it. But I don't think anybody in

the time that I was doing it, which was only a few months, bailed out of trying. And I say,

this one boy and my borstal boy both did pretty well.

Could you describe to me what one of these training sessions would look like and what

sort of space were you in?

Well, just sitting round a table mostly, in their wheelchairs. So just like any other sort of

setting. We were only a small group; there were eight or ten of us I suppose in total. It's a

long time ago, this is the trouble with your questioning. Do you want to take a break for a

bit?

Sounds a good idea I think, yes I will.

It's quarter past four.

[end of track 6]

[Track 7]

I was just wondering if you could tell me one or two more details about the Steve Shirley freelance programming job?

Well just that what I would have been involved with was a big contract for the Ministry of Health on hospital design. As far as I know this was a generalised project on hospital design. I'm not sure that it was one particular hospital or anything like that, and it was a project which in fact didn't come to fruition, or if it did it didn't go Steve Shirley's way. Can't tell you a lot about detail because it was very early days and what we were chiefly concerned about was finding out as much as we could about new developments in hardware; peripheral equipment that would be needed if you were going to do a computer aided design of any kind, for instance plotters. I do recollect that we paid a visit to an engineering department at Imperial College in Kensington to have a look at a plotter in action and I seem to recollect that we went somewhere else as well to look at something on the same lines, but I can't remember where.

Did you have an interview for this job at all?

I think I'd describe it as a friendly chat. I think she would probably have been aware of the fact that I had been instrumental in mentoring the training of someone who appeared to be her sort of first lieutenant now, so some idea of my competence I think would have got there from that source.

When did you discover that this job wasn't going to happen and how?

Well, she told us, she told us. My best friend's husband could have told me the same thing but it wasn't his job to tell me. He was working as a consultant I think to the government at the time and he knew that she wasn't getting this project herself, so he was keeping his mouth tightly shut, as he should.

Was there any particular expertise you would have brought to this job, do you think?

Well just programming expertise which I had plenty by then. I would have been working with computers for about eighteen years by then, so... or more.

[03:04]

What did you decide to do next?

I did nothing for those three years and then – this was largely because I was having trouble finding suitable people to cope with the children while I wasn't available. It's not everybody who wants to look after a handicapped child, especially not when you've also got a toddler in tow. And so I decided I would do nothing for a while and then I got the opportunity to apply for a job to teach the kindergarten at Godstowe School in High Wycombe which is one of the leading girls' prep schools in the country. And in fact I spent – how long did I spend there – five terms I spent there and then they had a new bursar whose wife was a fully qualified, very experienced teacher of young children. I was qualified by reason of having a degree, but I hadn't done any proper education training. So I actually left after five terms and applied to go on a teacher training course, a Post Graduate Certificate of Education, at what was then Lady Spencer Churchill College in Wheatley and I got on to that and spent the intervening term teaching what were then called SSN children at one of Wycombe's special schools. [05:12] Just spent a term there. I would quite have liked to have stayed or gone back there, but the head wanted somebody who was fully trained and while her adviser from the county thought I could probably do, for instance, the deaf course in line with the ordinary teacher training course, she wasn't really in favour. I think I was too independent for her liking actually, I don't think she liked people who were prepared to make their own decisions as to what they told the head about and what they kept to themselves, notably a case of a child whom I took with the group on a shopping trip who thought he might pick up a bar of chocolate and have it. He didn't eat it, he was told to put it back and he put it back. So it was only when she read my class diary, which I had to keep, that she heard about it, you see, and oh, she thought everybody should make a big fuss about absolutely everything. I think that it's not a very strange thing for a child to do, he was an eleven year old with a mental age of about five and I can imagine my five year old picking up something from a counter without really having too good an idea that this was something he shouldn't be doing and I thought just telling the child off at the time was plenty. I don't like inquisitions... I'll tell you about another one later on.

Was this at the Wycombe school or...

This was at the special school which was also in Wycombe, they're both in Wycombe, but one's a state school and the other was a private school. I went to Lady Spencer Churchilll College in the end of September, I suppose in 1975, and finished in the summer of the following year and then I spent the next term doing a bit of supply teaching and waiting for a vacancy to come up. I'd really chosen quite the wrong moment to do this course because this was the year when falling rolls meant that a lot of teachers were being laid off. But I was lucky enough to discover that there was going to be a vacancy at Christmastime in the next village and in fact I stayed there for about seven years, I suppose, sharing the class with the headmaster, who I suppose I should call the head teacher, getting on very, very well with him and the classes that we shared also were doing pretty well, considering. These were the days when Buckinghamshire was sending children to secondary school at twelve plus, not eleven plus and this meant that in this village school, which had about ninety children, the top class consisted of all the elevens to twelves, all the tens to elevens and the brighter half of the nines to tens. So I think I started with about thirty-one in a Terrapin, which was quite sort of cramped. But it was most... I very much enjoyed my years at that school.

[09:21]

What was the school called?

Frieth. Frieth Church of England Combined School, it was called in those days. I think it's probably called Frieth Church of England Primary School again now because it's eleven plus in fact. It was an old, unimproved school. It's been modernised a lot now. There were outside loos, a Portaloo for the staff and any older girls that had reached puberty. The headmaster was somebody, I think he'd been a sergeant in the army or the air force during the war and he'd done the shortened training course after the war, so he was learning things to teach. So although I was a fairly accomplished musician, he did a lot of the music teaching and although I had a degree in French, it was he who was

teaching, the top class I think, French with a bit of help from one of the parents. And what was good about it was that he made them all work hard, he did no special coaching for twelve plus exams, other than to make sure that children did in the course of things the sort of things that they would be expected to do, but he did no practice tests or anything like that, and this was in the days when some of the schools were coaching their kids like mad and the secondary schools were finding they were getting some totally unsuitable kids into grammar schools that really shouldn't have got there. So in the end the rules changed so that you had to give them a certain amount of coaching. But it was great. He set children on... he did the comprehension, I did all the other English and maths. I did a few other things; singing, with singing together on the radio and that sort of thing.

Singing together on the radio?

[11:42]

Singing together with the radio. Yes, in those days the BBC programmes for schools included a couple; one for younger primary school children, one for older primary school children on singing, which was quite good. And *Music and Movement* of course and various things, I did *Music and Movement* with them. But he did the games and the art and things like that in the afternoon. He was very good.

What was his name?

Very good teacher. Ted Carpenter. It was all Mr Carpenter when I was teaching there. But it was very good because he set the children to do comprehension every day and they worked their way through a set of books, started from when they could first read. So it was all individual progress on that and all the maths was individual progress. So I did extraordinarily little actual class teaching. And it's quite hard work. The oldest child when I took over was somebody who was going to be going to the school for the children with IQs of about seventy to ninety, and the brightest child in that year I think would just about have passed a GCSE, not that GCSE existed, but I think he could have got a C in GCSE at that point. He'd worked his way right through all the books we'd got and was doing extra material. So it was quite a challenge and you couldn't possibly have done class teaching really, and I think it worked very well and is something that could be used

as a method much, much more. The only thing is, it does give the teacher an awful lot of marking to do. I mean I'd done some teaching practice in a school where the children then swapped books and marked their own, their friend's book, sort of thing. Well you don't learn enough about what the child understands doing it that way and I was never one of these people who thought that maths should be taught with a view to writing down answers only. Doesn't tell you anything. [14:15] But it [ie the individual teaching] was extremely good, only trouble was that after seven years, or thereabouts, we still had this falling rolls problem and so he had to lose a fulltime staff, member of staff, and I was only part-time and he decided that he would lose two part-timers and the woman who taught the next class down, she would have been quite happy to go part-time so I could stay but no, he didn't want to. It was a great pity because a year later she left altogether and gave up teaching so, you know, perhaps he cut off his nose to spite his face, I don't know. And I moved to another school and that was not nearly as satisfactory. We got on well socially, he says he couldn't fault my teaching ability, but we did not get on well in the classroom, (once again I was sharing the classroom with the head, it was a bigger school, had about 240 I think on roll) because it was a dreadful classroom. He hadn't been there terribly long, the head and the previous head wouldn't have more than thirteen in it including the teacher and we'd got twenty-nine plus the teacher. It was a long narrow room and one door led into the top year group and the other door led out to the cloakroom area and it was very difficult to know how to arrange the desks so that you could keep order, move around and everything else. And my third year there, we had the most difficult class in the school, it had been the most difficult class from when they were five year olds and now they were nines to tens, so it wasn't me saying that they were a difficult class, it was a well known fact, and very difficult to keep order and he was one of these people who would have a full inquest if somebody did something. To my mind the important thing was to make sure that everybody understood that this behaviour was antisocial and I didn't want it. But no, he'd have to find out exactly who it was and who had started it, etc, etc, etc, wasted an awful lot of teaching time. And the other thing, I came in one Monday morning to find that all the class reading books had been moved out into the cloakroom area. So there we were with a class that was difficult to control and me being the one of course who was doing all the reading stuff in the morning, and you had to let children go out, not just to the loo, but to pick out new books and things like that. Oh, it

was a recipe for disaster. After three years I decided that I didn't think it was in either my interest or the children's interests to stay, so I left and gave up teaching.

[17:19]

What had attracted you to teaching in the first place?

Well it was what I originally wanted to do. If you think back to the early stages of the interview, the thing I said I had wanted to do was teach young children, under seven sort of thing, or under eights, but my father had wanted me to go to university and when I was that age university was not the way into that sort of teaching. Or if it was it was a very long-winded way into that sort of teaching. So yes, I mean teaching is something I love doing. I was the kind of child who would help all the other children, when we were evacuated during the war, with their homework and things like that. Specially their maths.

Did you have a particular subject speciality?

Well it should have been either French or music, but no, we didn't do any French in that thing. Yes, I taught recorder in that class because Bucks was going through one of its periods of saying recorder should be a class lesson. Don't think that's a very wildly sensible idea, but you know, if you're told that this is the form, this is what you do. I can remember one of the children decided to borrow my tenor recorder and take it home and it came back broken. And he hadn't asked me if he could borrow it, so I made his parents buy a new one.

I'm wondering where to start, I have several follow-up questions. [laughs] I'm trying to decipher my handwriting.

Must get through a lot of those pads. [laughs]

Yes, the job is the first time I've actually ever finished notebooks properly.

Yes, I remember you saying in the first interview that you'd wanted to study teacher training. I can't remember the college name.

The Froebel Institute in Roehampton.

[19:35]

That's it. What was Lady Spencer Churchill College like?

Well it was very nice. I was just doing a one-year course, of course, and a lot of the students were doing four-year courses because it was the beginning of the BEd days. No, it was a pleasant year. Some of the course I thought was a bit silly in that if you're only teaching students for teaching careers for one year and you waste time talking about the history of education – and I rather think we had an hour a week for a whole term on history of education – and you think, you've got three ten-week terms, your students are going to spend two five-week stints in schools and you're going to have to throw in a few exams somewhere along the line, you really can't afford to clutter up the course with non-essentials like the history of education, which probably isn't even going to form part of your final exam on teaching. It's not to the point is it, you could do with more on psychology or more on classroom control and things like that.

More on the practical side of it then?

Yeah, yeah. I mean the psychology, yes, that's useful, but... and the practical side, yes. I mean we did things like PE and, yeah.

So what subjects did you do altogether as part of this?

On the teacher training course we did everything together because we really had to do everything as teachers you see, or be prepared to. So there wasn't much you could get out of. Music I think, I don't think you had to do music. But you had to have some special interest. I did music.

So music, PE, history of education, psychology – were there any other subjects that they taught you?

Oh well, yes, yes, yes. Reading and writing, arithmetic, you know. Yes, anything that you can think of that you would teach in a primary school, you had classes in, yes. We had two five-week things in primary school so I spent five weeks in Watlington School, which was an interesting school to do teaching practice, just dead-heated with when the travellers' children took up their winter quarters in Watlington, so you get a sudden influx of children who are only being educated for part of the year, some of whom of course had been there before and some of whom were new to the school. So that was quite interesting. The class teacher of the class I was in was, well she was going to leave at the end of term I think or the end of the year anyway, and she went, moved from there to Chinnor. She was a bit critical of what I did, but obviously what I was directed towards doing was obviously not necessarily going to be what she said, because I mean one had to do a big topic and that sort of thing. I did a big topic arising out of native Australians, so Aboriginal art and all sorts of things like that, which I thought went quite well and which the children seemed to enjoy, but she couldn't see the point of it. But I quite enjoyed my five weeks there. And then my second teacher training in the summer term was at Stokenchurch, just up the road from... just up the road in that direction from here, which was nice and convenient, because it was a real rush every morning getting down to Watlington. Well, Watlington yes, to college, to Lady Spencer Churchill. I mean it's on the M4 just this side of Oxford, so I'd have my children to get to school and I'd be haring down the motorway at about ninety miles an hour in order to get there in time. But daren't do that these days. I mean there weren't so many speed restrictions, or they weren't being imposed, put it that way, so much, I got away with it. Funnily enough, the other day, where was I? I met someone who was there at the same time as me, just out of the blue, but she was doing the four-year course, so we didn't know each other but it was quite interesting. I can't think where it was that I was. Didn't think I'd been anywhere very strange in the last few weeks.

[25:10]

What was Lady Spencer Churchill College actually like? Where is it actually? I'm not sure.

Mary Coombs Page 120 C1379/16 Track 7

Well if you travel up the motorway from here, it's on the right-hand side before you get to

Oxford, just before you turn off to go into Oxford. Whether that tells you anything, I

don't know, and it's back from the road on the other side from the villages on the left of

the motorway and Lady Spencer Churchill College, which is part of Oxford – well it was

taken over by Oxford Poly and so now it's part of Oxford Brookes – is on the right, it's

got a tower block which is the residential accommodation for the four-year students, and

then it's got the classroom block. It's quite pleasant. Most, quite a few – there were one

or two that had come straight from university and straight from school – but quite a few of

us on it were people who'd had a few years doing other things, or in my case more than a

few years. There was one student who worked for one of the London museums, had a

history of art degree and was going to go back to working in her museum at the end of the

course. She just had a sabbatical year and she wanted to do something different.

Oh. Was it a modern building?

Oh it's modern, yes, it's post-war, yes.

So what did it look like – concrete or brick?

Brick. Brick.

What was a...

Flat roof tower block.

So you were a fulltime student there?

For that year, yes. Well, if you call fulltime three ten-week terms with ten weeks in

schools. Had a nice little video exercise at the end that we could volunteer for where they

videoed us doing some teaching tasks. Think they had some kids in from one of the local

schools for the purpose, which was quite interesting.

You mentioned that there were four-year people there as well as one-year...

Yeah, yeah. So we didn't have any contact with them.

Was it a busy timetable?

Yes, quite. Well yes, because there was quite a lot of lectures to attend and you definitely had to attend them.

What sort of backgrounds were the children you taught in the schools over your training period? Was there a great variety between different schools?

Well, the Watlington one, as I say, included the current year's influx of travellers' children and apart from that it would be your usual country mix. There's quite a lot of posh housing round that area and obviously quite a lot of social housing. Stokenchurch probably you could throw in some service children, I don't know, because of course we always had – well originally it was Bomber Command up here at Walters Ash and then Strike Command, now it's just called Air Command. It's still there, much smaller numbers, but the married quarters are all over the place and quite a long way from there, for instance, one great stretch of new housing built in the sixties in Stokenchurch was married quarters and I can only think it was attached to Naphill and Strike Command, or whatever it was then. We have a whole load of what was married quarters; two estates' worth of married quarters down at Booker, near Booker Aerodrome, because that was used by the air force during the war. So I think at Stokenchurch, some of them would probably have been service children, a lot of them would have been country children and it's a dormitory town for Wycombe and maybe Oxford and London as well, so quite a few middle class children as well.

Sounds like a real mix.

Well yes, I think most country schools are a real mix.

[29:38]

Could we go back to your favourite school, which I think you mentioned was at Frieth. Could you describe it to me?

It was your typical redbrick Victorian church school and because it, schools aren't run the same way as they were when they were built in the 1850s or seventies or whatever it was, it had too a double Terrapin out the back and the original toilet block. Had a rather nice playing field and the educational authority owned two houses and the headmaster had one that was just up the road from the school and the other one was let out to a teacher from some other school. But we had quite a nice field behind that was splendid for sports days and games and things like that. And they used the village hall, which was next door to the school more or less, for gym and PE and performances of one kind or another, because we didn't have a school hall as such. What would have been the original school hall was used as a classroom and the other original room was used as a mixture of the staffroom and the storeroom and the headmaster didn't have a separate room.

That's quite a small school.

Well, I suspect that in its heyday it might have had as many as 150 kids in it before it had the Terrapins, because I mean all these country schools would have taken kids up to fourteen you see. I know Cadmore End where my own kids went, that has had a big roll at one time or another. That had already been modernised by the time my kids went there, but it's been modernised again very thoroughly since then, it's lovely buildings now. It's just had a... it's incorporated the head's house in the school, it's had new classrooms built, new toilets built and it's now had a big new library. I mean the days when I used to go up there, specially in that three month period before I got the job at Frieth, I used to go and help up there. One of the class teachers, the one that had the six and seven year olds, was terrible at maths and I used to do a lot of maths teaching for her and help with all sorts of things. She left eventually, but... I've lost my thread again. That's the trouble with waffling on, you forget what the point was you started from.

We were actually talking about Frith originally, but then branching out...

Frieth.

Frieth.

R-I-E-T-H. F-R-I-E-T-H.

Thank you. What sort of facilities did you have there? Books and teaching equipment, for instance?

Plenty of books, plenty of books. We had the Dienes blocks and things like that. Enough. The head was very keen on chess so every child of about seven upwards was expected to play chess at lunchtime. He was always busy organising leagues and teaching kids and running a district chess competition and all sorts, he was very, very keen on chess.

Were there many other opportunities there for extracurricular activities?

No, there weren't any extracurricular activities and he didn't encourage parents to come into the school to help with reading or anything like that. He had a teacher for the reception class, he had a teacher for class two who had all the... she had all the eights and... who else did she have? She had the eights and half the nines to tens, and she may have had a few of the sevens to eights as well. Because there was a part-timer came in and sort of taught the top end of the youngest children in the mornings and then I think they formed part of her class in the afternoons. I'm not absolutely certain of that.

Were there any classroom assistants or teaching assistants?

Oh no, no, no, we didn't have anything like that, that all started after I finished with teaching. Yes.

[35:06]

Were there any particular books that you taught?

Well I taught with, to start with, with whatever was already there, but eventually I got some different maths books for the older children because I didn't think the ones that they were using gave enough guidance on practical maths topics. Think it's easier to keep children's interest with practical stuff and if they're working individually. Worked quite well actually, they would go off in a pair to go measuring or whatever, whatever they needed to do and you could rely on them not disappearing, they'd come back when they'd finished their task, because it was a school that was pretty well disciplined. One or two children with difficult backgrounds that were difficult to deal with, but yeah.

This is before the National Curriculum isn't it?

Oh, much before. The National Curriculum follows, yes, any of our children, my children who went to primary school, yes.

'87, '88-ish isn't it?

Yes, yes.

I was just wondering how much freedom over what you taught did you have?

Well, you knew you had to get to a certain point before they went off to secondary school, if you humanly could. Lesson plans were a bit difficult to do because the teaching was sort of individual. I did give a couple of... do a couple of maths lessons as a class and I think I did one or two lessons in English as well on sort of points of English grammar. Joining sentences together with other words than 'and'. We did a lot of free writing, which I think the children quite enjoyed and I learnt a lot from. Found I was better at English than I thought I was, but perhaps that's David Caminer's fault, if you call it fault. Because it was he who made me keep on rewriting things till I satisfied him. I'm sure I've been into that on one of these interviews.

Yeah, I think David Caminer has come up, I don't think we've talked about this specifically.

Yes, yes, yes. Big influence.

[37:52]

To return to this for just a second, I was wondering, was there any way you were expected to behave?

When?

When you were at LEO. Was there a set of values where...

I think in those days, properly is the only sensible word to use. Yes, you were expected to dress properly and behave properly, yes.

What would you actually wear to work?

I think I'd just say clothes, but I mean, you know, fairly respectable clothes, yes. I don't remember that I wore trousers to work in those days, but then that might have something to do with the fact my father was still alive. [laughs] He didn't approve of women in trousers.

Could we go into the other part of that, behaving properly, I was just wondering what that involves? Or to put it another way, what were you not supposed to do?

Well you wouldn't be making private phone calls or spending too much time chatting with the people you were working with other than about work. Life is quite different now.

[39:20]

While we're on the discipline question, is this still the period of corporal punishment in schools or have we just avoided it?

When I was at Frieth, yes. Yes, yes. Ted had a cane he kept in his office, he has been known to use it. I have to say, I slapped the face of a child I knew quite well. I know I shouldn't have done it and I never told the head and I was fairly certain that if news of this

got home I would probably be questioned about it myself because the parents went to our church so I knew them reasonably well. He was just a boy that was always taking advantage and was terribly insolent. I can't remember what he said, but it was just a gut reaction. Felt terribly... I never felt terribly guilty about it, but wouldn't get away with it now.

Did corporal punishment actually get used much in your school or was it...

No.

...just there as a threat in the background.

It was more there as a threat. I do think that he did occasionally use it. He was more likely to sort of tread on somebody's foot, not too heavily, but he had large feet in Doc Martens, I think it made a point. I don't remember anybody complaining. And he never sat two boys together or two girls together, he always sat a boy with a girl, sort of thing, so that they... well I mean they weren't on the whole old enough for that to be a problem in itself and it did stop too much chattering. But with individual work there was quite a lot of chattering that went on because you couldn't be walking round the class helping people with their problems and sort of maintaining total silence at the same time, didn't work. And I wasn't good at total silence anyhow.

You mentioned sharing a classroom with a head a while ago, I was just wondering...

Not sharing the classroom with him, sharing the class with him. I did the mornings and he did the afternoons and this happened at both the primary schools I taught at.

[41:48]

You mentioned church a moment ago, I was wondering what your life outside work is like in say, the 1970s.

Well, ever since we moved here we've been to church pretty well, well after the first few months we've been to church pretty well every Sunday. We're both on the parochial

church council in fact. I've been the church organist for about twenty years. I'm not fulltime any longer, I play once a month regularly and occasionally on other months, about four other months and I play for funerals and I don't play for weddings if I can help it. My co-ordination's never been brilliant, I mean look at all the bruises on my arm where I keep bumping into things, and I've got very painful thumbs; you can see they don't flatten out any more, so practising is rather painful, so I don't. But I sight read fairly well so I get away with it. [laughs]

Did you have any other musical outlets in this period?

For years now we've had subscription tickets to the London Philharmonic Orchestra at the Festival Hall, so that one we went to after I'd been up to see you at the British Library, that's one of the... it was either the last or the last but one of the season, because the new season starts at the end of September.

When did that interest actually start?

Well music, I learnt the piano from the age of five onwards and I had some more piano lessons after I started work. I did do a performance diploma but I failed it and I didn't do it again.

What else is there in your wider social life in the 1970s, what do you do for fun?

Well, we were very short of money in the... well, we've always been pretty short of money. We thought we were going to be better off in retirement but it didn't work that way because of the banks. In the seventies we certainly weren't going off to lots of concerts because we had three young children. Well, there's always lots of fundraising events around the place. Our church in our small village nowadays has to raise about £25,000 a year to pay to the Oxford diocese. Well, we've got about ninety something people on the roll so it's quite hard work. We had a garden party on Saturday which raised over £1,000, which was a good start. But there's something going on quite often. I mean I don't know about in the seventies, there wasn't as much going on then. But we, every month I get the opportunity to go and play Scrabble once a month and I get the

opportunity to go and play whist once a month. My husband used to come to whist as well when we had a very elderly friend down the road who we took, but once she was dead [laughs] he gave it up because he doesn't like whist. He likes something with a bit more punch like solo whist, with a bit of money changing hands. [45:15] But no, country pursuits, big garden. Family, friends. Nothing in particular. No wildly exciting holidays, we didn't take the family abroad till the mid eighties. 1986, we went to Austria for a fortnight and then we did start going abroad, but not generally with the whole family, generally only with... we often went abroad when the boys were at Scout camp and then we'd take Gill and one of her school friends or something like that. But no, it was just keeping up with everybody really.

Did you watch television?

Oh we've always watched television, my husband in particular is dreadful with television. Doesn't always watch it, that's the trouble, he turns it on then bends forward reading his book.

Any particular programmes?

Oh he likes all these American crime ones and he likes factual ones as well so he often watches the things about the war. The trouble is, his memory's not as good as it was when he was younger so he doesn't always remember that he's seen this programme before, because I mean you get so many repeats on the digital thing. And I'll say, 'We saw this the other day'. 'Well I don't remember it.' And I said, 'No, that's because you've got your head in a book all the time'.

What about further back as well, has the TV always been there in your lives?

I think we had one not quite as soon as we were married, no. Then we inherited John's father's one, which was one of these old upright Baird Televisors where you saw the picture in a mirror, an upright tube. Yes, I think that one went to the Science Museum in the end and then it went to Oslo or somewhere. But no, John was a great doer of things in his younger days. When I first met him he would go off to the Rifle Club a couple of

times a week probably, and he went to evening classes at some point and he was still rowing when we first got married I think, until we moved. And of course, the garden. And I think I told you I did some evening class teaching, I was still doing when we first got married.

French?

Didn't go on. Yes, yes. I was on the panel for English as a foreign language but I didn't ever do any teaching of it in this country.

I think we're approaching the end of today.

Yes, I think we've sort of had enough, haven't we really?

[48:33]

I was just wondering if I could finish by just asking you a couple of questions about your children really?

Yeah.

You mentioned them all by name, but what were they like when they were growing up?

Well Andrew is exceedingly bright but exceedingly lacking in self-confidence, which wasn't helped when he had a change of head teacher in his primary school at just the wrong point where the previous head would have put him up as one of very few into the next class in the September, and the heads changed in the April. And the new head put everybody, except the two youngest, up at the end of the terms, and left the two youngest down and Andrew and this other boy were the two youngest, and he's never really recovered from that in terms of confidence. So he didn't get a place to go to grammar school, he always kept up with the average of his class and at one point he was in a streamed class and he was in the top class of two streams, and he was the average of those. The next year they un-streamed them and he remained the average of that. So he's not really done very well at all and I think he suffers from depression and well, he's a lovely

chap but he's not really got... He had a very good job with Johnson & Johnson at one point. He got it as a temp and they wanted to keep him and then he moved down to Christchurch with them, but after his marriage broke down he lost his job because he couldn't cope with his marriage breaking down. So he's up here limping around at the moment; he broke his ankle last September or October. It's not healed properly, he's not seeing the consultant till the end of August and he last saw him six months before that and I say if he's worried about it he should ring up the hospital, say he wants his appointment brought forward, but do you think he'll do that? No, he'd rather limp around and complain. It should have been plated when he first did it, he was helping some friends move a shed and they managed to drop it on his ankle. So lots of tissue damage as well as the break. Really nasty. But you can't make your adult children do things just because you think that's what they ought to do, so here we are. But very bright, I should have thought that he had an IQ around 140. I did an adult IQ test with him when he was about fourteen – I did it and he did it and he scored higher than I did, so yeah. [51:43] Paul is the daredevil, do absolutely everything, especially if it's sport. So at school he did netball – no, not netball – basketball, tennis, athletics, football – not rugby – football and he just was sport mad. He got chosen to throw a javelin for the county at some meet or other that got cancelled and then for some – I presume he was put in as a stopgap for someone else because he never got asked again, so it can't have been because he performed badly because the meet didn't take place. He played cricket for a local team, he only doesn't play cricket because he's a builder so summer Sundays are rather busy doing stuff on his own place. He still plays football at the age of forty-one, coming up forty-two. He did demote himself to the second team because he didn't really feel he had time to train enough.

Did you spend sort of his childhood driving him round to all these sporting events?

Yes, yes, quite a lot, yes. But he was always in casualty because he'd had an accident doing this, that or the other. Had a nasty bike accident actually. It's why I worry so about all these potholes, because he was cycling down the road here and he thought he heard a car coming down behind him. Well it's quite a steep hill so he wouldn't have been terribly in control, but he looked round and his front wheel went into a pothole and he

went over the handlebars and somebody brought him home with his bike in the boot and he had a headache for about three months. Didn't actually break anything, but...

So the potholes after this winter?

Yeah. Worried me a lot from the point of view of cyclists as you do get quite a lot of cyclists. A lot of the cycling clubs cycle round here. The Willesden in London club used to come and have a monthly meet down here on a particular route. Well, they would have had an awful time if they were still doing it this year. But any rate, he's still surviving, he's not actually married. All three of them are divorced actually. Andrew's living with a slightly older lady that we've known longer than he has, down in Marlow, she's very nice and she seems to be good for him. Paul is living with the girl who was Gillian's best friend at school and they've got a seven year old. Andrew and his ex have got a fourteen year old; that's her at the age of about twelve. Now she looks seventeen going on twentynine, in photographs. She fancies being a model. I don't think it's a very good idea. She's also very bright and not really doing as well at school as she ought to. [54:50] Gillian, well, Gillian... is the sort of person who totally lacks confidence in herself, but is very good at role playing so it was never evident. Secondary school was a nightmare because she got on the wrong side of the deputy head, who was also acting head at the time, early on, and oh, had half the staff fighting over her really because the deputy head was very down on her. Wanted to cancel the pantomime one year because of Gillian, or wouldn't allow Gillian to go in the pantomime. Gillian got one of the principal parts. Sadly, other staff who were running the pantomime said well then there won't be a pantomime, so she had to climb down. And it went on all the way and she suddenly bucked up in year ten or whatever it is when they do the GCSEs. She did the last CSE/O level year actually and didn't do, well she did better than we expected and ended up with the progress prize for that year. I don't know what the deputy head was thinking about that, because I don't think she would have approved. And it was... and she went off to Amersham and Wycombe College, which is sort of sixth form college and did a few more, which was GCSEs, then she did A levels there. And then she had a rather unhappy personal life, as a result of which she went to Florida. She got married in Florida, she got divorced in Florida and then she went off to Costa Rica and spent five years in Costa Rica. [closed between 00:56:57 and 00:59:15]

[59:15]

Do you think you had any particular approach to parenthood when you were bringing them up?

Yeah, I think in a way I was too... I was always firm in the sense that if I said I would do something if they didn't do something, then I did it. I would never... it was never, 'no' never meant 'perhaps'. But I think I over-reacted to the fact that my father was very strict with us and I probably didn't oversee their schooling and their homework and things like that as much as I ought to have done, if the truth be known.

Did you have any particular hopes for them when they were growing up?

Well I certainly hoped that Andrew would achieve something because I'd been told that both his mother, his birth mother and her father had been Senior Wranglers at Cambridge. And he certainly showed every thought of having mathematical ability when he was very young indeed. I mean he would sit in the car counting backwards and saying table numbers backwards and getting them right every time when he was only five or six, so you know, there's no reason to think that he wasn't educationally very competent. But yes, Paul is quite bright but not very quick. Got lots of common sense but... And Gill was always drawing attention to herself, so I say, she appeared to be extra confident, but proved to be the opposite.

Do you think becoming a mother changed your outlook on life at all?

No, not really. Because I mean on the whole I don't come from a generation that really sort of – I mean you might make choices as to whether you got married or not – but I think you took it for granted that if you got married you were going to have children and I certainly thought that I would have more children than my mother had done, so I was a bit surprised... My mother didn't get married till she was thirty-four. My dad is eight years younger and I think she had me when she was just on thirty-nine and my sister three years later, so perhaps unusually for those times we were children of older parents, older mother any rate, and I always thought it would be nice to have a family very young, which of

course I ended up not doing because I didn't get married till I was twenty-six and then it was five years before we had a baby. So I've ended up almost copying my mother, but not intentionally.

[1:02:56]

It's interesting, we talked quite a lot about your father, but not so much about your mother.

Well in the days when they were married, she was very much the dutiful wife. I mean she would always be in when dad came home from work, until we were, well until I was at least sixteen she would always be in when we came home from school. But I mean even if she was just having tea just round the corner with a neighbour, close neighbour, she would always be home when dad came home. And I mean she would always get his breakfast and because he was physically handicapped himself, she would wait on him hand and foot. Always brought him breakfast in bed because he had generally to dress his bad leg after he'd had his breakfast, or a lot of the time he did. So, yeah. But she blossomed after my father died. My sister wondered if they were happily married, but yes, I think they were happily married, it was just that perhaps she wasn't as independent as she otherwise would have been because dad was so much younger, so she didn't want to do anything that he might sort of feel that she wasn't good enough for.

What was her name, I don't think you mentioned it?

Ruth. My sister's Ruth as well. My dad was William. I think his sister called him Will and my mother called him Bill.

My final question, and I will make this my final question. I've got a good sense of the influence of your father on you growing up. I was wondering what was the influence of your mother?

Well she would have done whatever dad said. She wouldn't have been independent I don't think.

Whereas you strove to independence, doing things like going to Switzerland and getting married, that sort of thing?

Well yeah, my sister left home by sharing a flat with friends. I left home by going to Switzerland for a year. I don't think I could have just moved down the road, I wouldn't have been brave enough for that. I think the answer partly was that when I was in my shy period it was easier to get on with complete strangers, in a way, because you might never see them again so it didn't really matter so much.

[end of track 7]

[Track 8]

This is interview with Mary Coombs, nineteenth of July 2010.

My teaching came to an end after three years in the job down at West Wycombe, because I was not getting on very well in the classroom with the head teacher and we shared the class: I was working part-time and he did afternoons and I did mornings, and of course I filled in for him any time when he was busy with other things in the afternoon. But we just didn't see eye to eye in terms of things like discipline and so I decided that I would hand in my notice and there weren't any more teaching jobs going because this was still in a time of falling rolls and so I went and tried to sign on at whatever the job centre was then calling itself and found that because I had voluntarily left my job I wasn't entitled to anything for at least six weeks. I thought well blow that, so I did the rounds of the agencies in the town and got signed on with one of them and I did two weeks before I got into – or two separate postings – before I got into water treatment. One, I just cannot remember what it was, but the other was at the research centre of Wiggins Teape, the paper manufacturers, and I was engaged in – oh, I do remember what the other one was actually, I'll get back to it in a minute – I was engaged in setting up various experiments on paper. It was quite an interesting time, I wasn't being paid very much, obviously. It didn't require any terrible skill, just care in cutting paper and sticking things around. But it was quite an interesting place, they were a very friendly lot and so we had some enjoyable chats over lunch and that sort of thing. The other temporary job I did there, from that agency, was in the Mastercare place that was run by Curry's or somebody like that, and they were endeavouring to set up statistics about their fleet cars, I think it was. How much mileage, how much had been spent on maintenance and all this sort of thing. So it was another fairly soul destroying job and I think it lasted three weeks. And then I got sent to a water treatment company and that turned out to be very interesting and I stayed there for seven years. I started off as sort of dogsbody in the buying department and ended up as the only member of staff left after a lot of redundancies, which was in itself quite interesting. I expect I was the one that was left because I was hard working, intelligent and they were paying me a pittance. But I can tell you, it is absolutely soul destroying when two-thirds of the people you work with are made redundant and you're one of the people that's left. You almost I think would feel better if you were made redundant,

especially if you hadn't been working there very long. Should say that for the first few months I was only a temp working through the agency, but then they had taken me on permanently to the extent of being part of the pension fund and all the rest of it. And I was being paid more than teaching part-time, but not much. I was working fulltime. But it was convenient because it was closer than where I had been teaching most recently and even that was only three and a half miles away, so it was, with a youngish family still, it was quite an advantage. [04:33] So I did all the odd jobs in the buying department for some time and gradually got involved in actual buying of the equipment that was needed. The company was one which at that time was owned by a Dutch company of the same name, who had themselves been bought out by Hoogevens - that's H-double O-G-E-V-E-N-S, I think, who were a big steel working firm. They're the ones that bought up Corus in the UK who previously had been British Steel and nationalised, and who I had had – well - when I worked for LEO, in fact LEO had sold them a computer I think, one of the early computers went to British Steel or work was done for them. I can't remember, to be exact. So it was quite interesting. But water treatment, they did both processing clean water to make it extra clean and dirty water, not sewage as such, but effluent from manufacturing plants of various kinds. The pure water, the first job that was happening while I was first there was the water treatment for the atomic energy place at Aldermaston and I think we put in two water treatment plants there. But that was taking clean water and making it even cleaner for the processing purposes. A previous job they'd had, which I got involved with on the spares side later, was for water treatment for electricity plant, I think it was, in Harare, although I think it was probably still called Salisbury in those days, or had been when the original plant was done. That was taking water from the Zambezi I think, river water and making it clean to use for treatment. Another job they were involved in was extra clean water for the electronics industry, a job they did in Glasgow, I think it was, or somewhere near Glasgow. And then we did some work for Kodak. That was processing their dirty water, making it suitable for going into the sewage. I had quite a lot to do with that. But it was a bit of a surprise when all of a sudden, there had been rumours of redundancies, and all of a sudden about two-thirds of the staff were taken upstairs and the rest of us were left at our desks and we rather thought that they were going to be the ones that stayed and we were likely to be the ones that were sent packing, but it worked out the other way round.

Did you know there were troubles?

Yes, I think we all knew that there were troubles. It was a very competitive industry with lots of relatively small companies. We have a water treatment company that was based in the village, but that was purely doing pure water. But there were others in the locality who did either I think. And then of course there's always the problem of being a subsidiary company to an overseas company. So anyway, we had, by the time this happened there were five of us in the buying department and I was the only one who wasn't made redundant so... yes, it was interesting.

[08:49]

What was the company actually called?

ESMIL Water Systems Limited. That's E-S-M-I-L. And the sales director, his number plate was ESM 1L. Had it changed from car to car as he got another car. Most of the work we did was given us via the big firms of consultant engineers and it was, you had to know how to get on with these people. I think I've referred to this earlier actually, that with for instance the Japanese you've always got to remember that you've got to be terribly polite and very formal and they don't like being pushed off because you haven't got time to deal with them, you've got to find some time to deal with them. But we had Korean management consultants, I think one lot were, and the Japanese. We did some work for a Greek shipping magnate. I think that must have been through some consultants or others.

So where do the consultants fit into this between you and your customers?

Well they were the ones who put out the tenders, who worked out what the requirements were in detail and put out the tenders for the actual water treatment firms to tender for. So we didn't have day to day contact with them once the job was placed, but woe betide us if we got late with anything or something wasn't satisfactory. I found a few solutions to problems actually. I know I've already said something about the director needing to keep the consultants happy when a job was technically complete but there were still odd things to iron out, but there were other similar things to bear in mind as well. Jobs needed

spares, you needed to make sure that you had quoted for spares for the obvious things that were almost expendable things. I mean for instance, we have a probe in our oil tank which has a wireless connection to the kitchen so we know how much oil we've got. And probes like that, they are practically expendable items, you have to replace them relatively regularly, so you did need to make sure that things were available and could be provided and provide costs. I've lost track a bit of one thing I was trying to say, it just sort of flashed into my mind while I was speaking and flashed out again just as quickly I'm afraid. [pause] No, it's gone completely at the moment. Couldn't even tell you what it was about. I mean it was water treatment, but it was relative to something, but it's gone at the moment. Sorry, I'm too old.

You've been doing pretty well actually, over the last few weeks.

[12:46]

Any rate, we were working down in Wycombe at the time, this end of Wycombe, the district called Sands, where the football ground is also these days, and they got in somebody whose job in life was to get companies on their feet again, either with a view to selling them on or something. And he took over, he was a man who lived in Dorset actually and one or two of our remaining staff had come across him in previous jobs doing similar things. And so he was keeping things going and looking for the main chance and in the end we got moved to posher premises in Amersham, this was just at the time that the M40 was being widened, so this was 1990 1993. And so this meant instead of travelling three and a half miles to work I had to go about fourteen, obviously there was expenses paid on this, but it meant I had to go by a roundabout route in order not to be held up by the motorway widening. So I used to zizz off by a long way round to the M40 at Wycombe and go down to Beaconsfield and then go through to Amersham from Beaconsfield, whereas the most direct route would take you much the same way, because that was the Amersham Hill that the station's on, and straight up the Amersham Hill and then on from there to where we worked. It was the far side of Amersham, the Watford side. So the most direct route was several miles shorter than the route that it was more expedient to travel. So we set ourselves up there and functioned for a year or two and then the firm got sold to Yorkshire Water. Seems fairly improbable, but it did and most people that were left moved up there. And well, I was already over official retiring age anyhow

and I declined to go up there and so I was left to clear up the building and shut it down. So there was I swimming in this quite large building all on my own, day after day, sorting things out, odd leftover bits of my own jobs I'd worked on and the general clearing up, dealing with things. It was quite a sort of cushy job in many respects, you didn't really have anyone to answer to. And I was being paid a reasonably adequate amount by then. [16:20]

And so that brings me up to when I was sixty-four, they managed to – just before I was sixty-four, the oldest at which you can pay redundancy and claim something back from the government. So I got my redundancy pay for my seven years' work, which was reasonable. I'd been part of a non-contributory pension for those seven years and so they undertook for me negotiations to get the best rates for an annuity. I can't fault Yorkshire Water, they were very generous. I can't say they paid me a huge pension, but then you wouldn't expect it for seven years' work would you. But it's a useful addition, put it that way.

[17:20]

I have several questions about what we've just talked about, as you might expect. Shall we take them in a roughly chronological order? I was thinking about the decision to leave teaching. How did you feel about it at the time?

Well I loved teaching, but in that particular situation it wasn't good for me or for the children I was teaching and if you have been re-employed because you've been voluntarily deployed, you only have four years' security and then your head can say no, I don't want you any more. And I was pretty sure he would do this because he had already edged an older teacher out of the school before I got there. He hadn't been head for all that long so he was a bit of a new broom sweeps clean, sort of person. He did stay there till retirement actually and it's the school my granddaughter spent however many years you spend in primary school at, subsequently and he'd just left by the time she started. So yes, I was sorry to go but it did seem the right thing to do and I still had the possibility of my piano pupils and I also had the choir at church and until not long before then, I'd also been running one of the local Cub Scout packs. Many sides to me. [laughs] I think it's called how to keep young, actually.

How did you become involved with the Cub Scouts?

Well, I was a Girl Guide when I was a teenager and my elder son joined the Cubs and then I went to fetch him one evening and I said to the Cub Scout leader, when can Paul start, because Paul was just coming up to eight. And she said, well he can't unless I can get some more help, so there I was, the sucker who joined and became the... eventually I became the Cub Scout leader.

Is that Akela then?

Yeah, Akela.

Yeah, that takes me back.

And we ended up with two Cub Scout packs after that because we had too many kids wanted to come and I found somebody who'd always been very into scouting.

What about it did you enjoy?

Well everything really, because I mean it is a sort of teaching job in a way isn't it? So it was more teaching and lots of activities. So yes, it was great. It was an excuse to do the sort of things that people of my age don't generally do really, I suppose. So I mean I went camping and all sorts. Went on the... [21:15] The only thing I didn't like was the advanced training course that I finally went on because it was very interesting, but my fellow Cub Scout leader had just got married and discovered a day before the wedding, literally, that he had a large brain tumour, that he would have to cancel his honeymoon and go straight into hospital as soon as the wedding was over. And we'd known him for oh, seven or eight years I suppose, because we knew him through my husband's and my interest in the Spastics Society because he was the local appeals officer for this area. And I knew his new wife, she was quite a lot older than him and she was the mother of two of the cubs in his pack, and I was rather preoccupied with this and there was another Mary on the advanced course and the advanced course is all tented, you camp in sort of dormitory tents and she was... I ended up feeling extremely inferior to everybody else because she

Mary Coombs Page 141 C1379/16 Track 8

was the sort of know-all of the group and a lot of my mind was on poor David in hospital,

because the day after he'd been operated on he had to go back into surgery because he'd

developed a blood clot or something and so I didn't enjoy the advanced course as much as

I should have done. It was a very good course, but I didn't like all the way they were

doing some of their training. They went in for encounter groups. This is a – it was very

much the in thing around then and it was something my husband had held forth about and

been very conscious of the destructive effect that they had on people's confidence quite

often. And I'd expressed some views about it at the course and subsequently, so I

probably wasn't very popular.

What actually is an encounter course?

An encounter group. Well it's a group that gets together to discuss things. I think you

need to look it up, I'm too remote from it I think to... try and look up encounter groups

online and see what you can find. Then you can always ask me some supplementary

questions at some point.

Does scouting have its fads then in the period when you were involved with it?

Well I think anything that sets out to train people has its fads from time to time. I mean

these multi-question tests that they give you when assessing you for employment, they're

a bit sort of funny in many respects aren't they, because they give you plenty of scope to

say something quite different one minute to what you've said a bit previously. That's the

phone...

[pause for phone call]

[24:50]

We were talking about Scouts weren't we?

We were.

And fads in Scouts.

Well fads in any kind of, sort of selection and training process really. I mean after all, education curriculums change every umpteen years or so don't they, or even sooner, and ideas of how you mark exams and all this sort of thing. Can't see why you can't go back to the old-fashioned method of marking exams and give them all a numerical grade. Something a bit more absolute than we have at the moment.

[25:25]

Can we go back to teaching actually, there's just popped in my head, a question into my head. I was just wondering what were the changes you saw in your teaching career?

Well, I suppose I came into teaching at about the same time that that woman who became Dame something or other, Mary somebody, I think she was, had written a great book about literacy, I suppose. But it was before the National Curriculum, definitely. It was in the days when secondary school ended with O levels at sixteen. My daughter did O levels and CSEs at sixteen and then she did some GCSEs the following year at sixth form college to add to the number, so that was after because she was in her... she was in her last year at primary school when I was in my first year at my last teaching job. You see, so we're talking quite a long time ago. So no, I didn't see many changes, it was fairly static at the time when I was teaching.

What would you say the major emphasis was in teaching?

Well at the school where I was happiest, definitely on getting children literate and numerate by the time they went on to their secondary schools and encouraging other interests, particularly chess, he was very keen on chess. It was only a small school so there were some football matches and netball matches, but not very many. And there was quite an emphasis on art, so they had a good all-round education at that school.

So you think in terms of preparations for exams at this point or just getting a basic allround education?

Well in that particular school, there was no preparation for exams except in terms of teaching children what they needed to know. So there was never lots of practice tests or anything like that. You know, if you got your children to the right point then they could read and understand the questions and answer them. But, he did go in for a lot of testing. It wasn't a lot in terms of what I had had when I was at school myself, but in terms of today I think they'd be thought to be quite hard done by. They did standardised tests in February and they then did his own selection of tests in June. And the standardised tests, well I mean they were the typical, they were Richmond tests, I mean you could find out about them I'm sure online if you don't know about them. But they enable the teacher to gauge what the children have grasped, what the children understand. But I mean the actual papers were quite foreign to what the children normally saw and they weren't given any practice in doing them beforehand or anything like that, you went straight in and did it, it was a proper test of what you'd been doing in school. His maths test in the summer was interesting; he had hordes of small bits of paper and every child from the first year in the junior school upwards did the same test. You did that bit of paper and when you'd done that you brought it up to the teacher who gave you another piece of paper and you did that, and it went on. So some of them didn't get all of them done because they hadn't covered the work, but they all got tested once a year using the same material, which was quite interesting actually. I think some people might think it was invalid as a test, but I don't think it was at all. Because I mean you don't remember from one year to the next what the particular sums were that you were set down to do, do you? So it worked quite well, yes.

[30:20]

How much notice do you actually take of test results afterwards - are they used for streaming pupils or...

Well no, because in a small village school it's very much the opposite of streaming, you've got several year groups in together. I mean we had two and a half year groups in. I think I've probably already said this. When I started, the oldest child in the class was going to go on eventually, rather later than others went to secondary school, to the school for children with IQs less than ninety. And the brightest I felt could have taken an O level and passed it, you know, a low grade pass, then at twelve, so we had everything in that

class. And then we had the bright ten to eleven year olds as well. Ten to eleven? Nine to ten year olds as well and all the ten to elevens, and all the elevens to twelves.

Do you think there are any advantages of having the school groups mixed that way?

Well I think that there are few advantages in having them mixed like that, but as long as you're prepared to cope with a lot of marking and you do a lot of individual work, the children do a lot of individual work, not class work, I think it works extremely well, I really do. I mean one year something like twelve out of sixteen got through the twelve plus and went to grammar schools. It didn't always happen because it obviously depended partly on how intelligent that year group was, something that I think parents often lose sight of when they look at the results of schools and they've got to choose a school for their child.

[32:24]

Were you still in teaching when computers started coming into schools?

Yes, oh yes. We bought a BBC computer ourselves at home and yes, they were beginning to be introduced into the primary schools when I was teaching. I don't think I had much to do with them myself, I think the head would have kept it very much to himself.

Why do you say that?

Because anything he really, that he thought was really interesting I think he liked to keep to himself. Very nice fellow, he was.

What did you think about the fact that computers were coming into schools as someone who'd been involved there at the beginning – was it something that struck you at the time at all?

I did think at the time that I wasn't certain that this was necessarily a very good thing and I'm still not certain that I think it is a very good thing.

Why the reservations?

Well I don't think children who are using computers learn to write fluently with their pen or pencil and it's a bit easy to do calculations with calculators and things that you perhaps don't really understand what you're doing, but you're doing it.

I've been struck quite a bit by how much the heads of the schools you're in seem to set the character of the school.

Well, don't heads always set the character of schools?

I don't know. I've only ever been to ones as a pupil, so I'm asking you, what is the most important thing in setting the character of a school?

Having staff who fit in with each other and with the head's view of how he wants things to function. I can remember saying something to him once, probably to do with maths textbooks, because I was fairly hot on maths teaching, and he said yes, that's why people become head teachers, because they can make decisions about things. Well I mean if you were to take a very big primary or secondary, I mean a very big secondary school is obviously going to have 1,000, 1200 pupils, but a very big primary school would be something between 300 and 600 I suppose, I don't... I haven't heard of any more than about 600, and that is an awful lot. But I suppose that when you get to the stage of having to have year heads, sort of thing, that you do get more chance then to have your way with some policy decisions. But not having worked in schools like that and never having been to one that had more than about 450 pupils, yeah, I can't really answer that.

[35:43]

I've been struck quite a bit by how much teaching seems to come into so many of your activities. It's there as a job both in the LEO days and when you're actually teaching. Cub scouting, you pointed out a little while ago, is a lot like teaching. And there's piano teaching as well, you mentioned.

Mm, mm. I took Sunday school too for a couple of years, yes. I used to help fellow pupils with their homework when I was in my teens. And I taught one of my friends the piano for a bit when I was about thirteen or fourteen, thirteen I must have been actually.

What's the attraction?

Oh, it's the one-to-one contact as much as anything actually. That's why it was so nice at Frieth, because you did have a lot of one-to-one contact with the children. I was always very struck, my parents used to say that you have to treat your children the same, because the children aren't the same so why should they be treated the same. They've got to be treated equally fairly, but I don't think that what is fair for one is necessarily fair for another. So it may be where I've gone wrong with parenting, you don't know do you? Nor do I, really. Because you can never go back and do it again.

If you did go back and do it again would you have been a teacher from the start?

Yes, possibly. Or going back knowing that I didn't even seriously consider being a doctor, I might have considered it a bit more seriously, although in today's thing I would never have got the number of A grades at A level you would have to get to be accepted as a medical student in these days.

[38:04]

Something I've realised I didn't ask you was, were you sorry to leave computing?

Yes, but I didn't really have time for it and it was quite nice to decide at the time to pursue, when I started work again, the teaching option which had been sort of back full circle to where I started. Because yes, I did spend quite a lot of time thinking I would like to be a teacher in the younger age group of primary school.

Was it something that crossed your mind over the computer programming days as well?

No, oh no.

Which did you actually prefer – the teaching or the programming?

I think I tend to prefer whatever I'm doing at the time.

To return back to, I suppose, the chronology for a moment – actually I have one final question about teaching. What's a Terrapin?

Oh, a temporary building. One of these wooden buildings that they stick down, you know, like a prefab bungalow made of dark painted wood with far too much glass in it for the amount of insulation. Probably better these days as they probably double glaze them, but oh they did get cold and you just had these so-called Tortoise stoves in them, which were, originally they were solid fuel stoves and by the time I was teaching they were oil stoves that sat in one bit of the room with a big fireguard round it and was supposed to heat the whole room.

All sounds quite basic for...

Some schools have still got Terrapins, temporary buildings. It's just a trademark of a temporary building.

Did they tend to last a long time?

Far longer than their official shelf life, I think is the answer to that. I mean after all, if you think that the prefabs that were put up during the war were put up to last for ten years or so. And certainly when we were living the other side of Wycombe, from 1960 to 1967, there were still prefabs near at hand, quite a lot of them, and people were quite happy with them.

How was it actually to teach in a Terrapin?

It was okay, unless the weather was bad. But I mean you had to go out and cross the playground to get to the loo, back into the main building. But otherwise, except in extremes of temperature, it was fine.

[41:15]

You mentioned something else in passing I was wondering if I could pick up on. You said you were involved with the Spastics Society at some point.

Haven't I mentioned that before?

No, no.

No, we were very involved with the Spastics Society because our daughter, the daughter that died, she was, well it's difficult to say exactly what was wrong with her, but she was... she couldn't walk, she couldn't sit terribly well, she needed special care and the Spastics Society had been formed in about 1950 by parents who were aware that they had children who needed more help than they were getting, so it was one of the first of the specialist charities that were set up. And locally there was a group formed which we became part of where they used one of the village halls about ten miles from here and they had children up there, I don't know, a couple of times a week I suppose, and laid on physiotherapy and lunch and things like that, and well, like a modern day playgroup, nursery school. And in fact we then went on and ended up setting up a specialist building, about the same distance from here, but about five miles from the original one, where we employed somebody to run it and we laid on transport to bring children in, and there was a certain amount of education. What you have to bear in mind is that before one of the Education Acts, which must have been in the sixties sometime, children who were deemed to have very low IQs, children like Down's syndrome children for instance, or severely physically handicapped children, didn't receive any formal education. They went to occupation centres of one kind or another, but nobody thought of teaching them to read or write or anything like this. So there have been huge changes on that front. Eventually the Wycombe Spastics Society was instrumental in getting the, the Spastics Society, which had headquarters in Park Crescent [near Regents Park in London] at that time, to help lobby for funds and they actually built a small school adjacent to one of the primary schools in the centre of Wycombe for physically handicapped children and it was near the

one that had been set up at much the same time for mentally handicapped children. And now the whole thing has combined and anybody remotely normal goes into mainstream schooling and the others are in one of the closed down schools in a different area of Wycombe, so it's moved around an awful lot. [44:51] But my husband got very involved and he was in fact the regional chairman for quite a large number of years. The Spastics Society has actual schools that it runs itself. It's now called Scope. It doesn't get nearly as good publicity since it changed its name, but with the fact that spastic as a word is rather derogatory, they changed it and it was only a limited diagnosis of brain damage because it was only a certain type of brain damaged person, so they called them, there's... oh gosh, there's spastic ones who tend to go very stiff and not be able to move properly because they can't relax the muscles that require, you know, muscles are in opposition to one another aren't they, so all of theirs tend to be contracting at the same time, sort of thing. Or ataxic or... oh, athetoid when you've got lots of involuntary movements. I think athetoid children are often deaf as well. And while some of these conditions arise because of brain damage during or immediately after or immediately before birth, some of them do arise from other things, genetic things or things of that nature can cause the same symptoms. I mean if you get a build up of certain things like, I think copper's one of them, in your system then you can get all these brain damage symptoms. Or lead poisoning even. But no, we got out of the Spastics Society again, really at the point where it changed its name and changed its function slightly and started working in a rather different fashion. I don't think we entirely agreed with the way things were going and it seems easier to get out. Our daughter had been dead a long time, we had other children, so it was perhaps unfair to devote so much time to previous things of importance.

[47:30]

What sense didn't you like the way it was going?

Well, there were one or two very – sounds dreadful actually, to say this – one or two very... can't think of the word I want... articulate people with cerebral palsy who wanted to be at the beginning of a new stage in the society's development. And I don't know that it was really working as well as it might and I think that changing the society's name lost a lot of supporters actually, because I used to go house to house for them and did until relatively recently, well about the last five years or so, and I found that people would look

blankly at me until I mentioned the Spastics Society. Well I mean the whole idea was to put the Spastics Society behind, so, you know.

You mentioned one or two things in passing, you doing door to door stuff, John being the local chair, but...

Well local chair, regional chair. The whole of East Anglia and the South of England I think.

It's quite a lot of involvement then?

Oh yes, he was very busy with it, yes.

Oh what about you, what part did you play in this?

Ooh, I sold Christmas cards on a big scale, organised raffles, drove the ambulance to take the children sometimes. Sometimes I used to help at the day centre, but that was in the early days before I had any other children.

What sort of support did you get from it early on?

Well, just that Anne had continuous physiotherapy for the time that she was at the centre. I don't mean continuous, but I mean, you know, ongoing. And it was nice for her to go to other things. There was a local disabled riding group they used to go to and that was a good thing actually. I'd help take the children over there, sometimes help lead a horse around.

What about talking to other parents with children in similar situations – was that helpful at all?

Well, it's always self-supporting to talk to other people with similar problems. I also went out talking, public speaking on the subject of the Spastics Society quite a bit, talking to organisations.

What sort of organisations?

Well, women's organisations mostly I think. Long time ago. Don't ask me more.

We started this little diversion when we were talking about the Cub Scouts didn't we?

Yes.

[50:50]

How long were you actually involved with the Cub Scouts for?

1968, 1976... ooh, from about '76 till about, I don't know, '82, '84. Quite a number of years, yes.

What did you enjoy about it?

Well, doing active things with youngsters.

I've always wondered, what sort of training do they actually give you to run a Scout group, if any?

I think you're talking too far back, because it probably isn't the same now as it was then. I mean the uniform's changed and almost everything's changed. In fact the uniform's probably changed twice since I first started doing things with it.

What was the uniform when you first started?

What, leaders or boys? Boys wore green sweaters and grey trousers and the scarf that belonged to their group, ours were two shades of blue held with their toggle. You weren't ever a Cub or a Scout?

Was actually.

Mary Coombs Page 152 C1379/16 Track 8

You were. Well then, you shouldn't need to ask me these questions.

Which two shades of blue? Ours were two shades of blue as well.

Pale blue and dark blue. Yes. And county badges or district badges and...

Did it occupy much of your time?

Well in theory, I mean it was an evening a week plus a few days out and camping weekends, things like that. I enjoyed it.

Why did you decide to leave it?

Because the teaching was being a bit troublesome and I thought it would be better to concentrate on just one thing and not two. It didn't really actually have any good effect, but I had found somebody suitable to take over from me who'd also been in scouting for a long time.

Did you think about going back afterwards?

No, because I mean I was always one of the older leaders and they do have age limits for leaders. So, no.

I've got a few questions about the water industry actually...

Go on.

...which I'd like to go through now.

I can see us having another session yet.

[53:47]

Mary Coombs Page 153 C1379/16 Track 8

I was just wondering, how big was the company?

The company? Not terribly. We had two... just trying to think. We started off more or less down in the basement. Well it wasn't the basement but – it was actually the ground floor – but it was almost like being in the basement because it only had windows that sort of height.

So up off the ground then?

Mm. It was a fairly lofty ceiling. So you couldn't see out. And then the drawing office staff - and of course it was all drawing by hand in those days, not computer aided - was on the first floor and then the sales and administration staff were on the top floor.

What sort of office block is it?

Well it was a relatively modern – that is post-war – block down on the Sands industrial estate. It was attached to a plastics factory and it was Stewart Plastics. I don't know whether this is the same Stewart Plastics that makes a lot of garden plastics or not, or whether it was a totally different firm.

You mentioned the drawing office a moment ago. I'm just trying to get an idea of what's your actual role in this organisation.

I was on the buying team.

What does a buying team do?

Buy the equipment that the engineers require in order to make the water treatment plant. So pumps, valves, salt, chemicals of other kinds. Motors of various kinds. Anything that was needed to... and you buy in services as well. For instance, if you wanted a load of brickwork done then you would put out tenders to construction companies to do your brickwork for you.

Mary Coombs Page 154 C1379/16 Track 8

Where do you actually acquire all this sort of equipment from?

Well the sort of people who make it. Sorry.

So you'd go straight to manufacturers then, there are no intermediaries?

Some of them must have been intermediaries, but I don't know that I was always conscious of which was which. The engineers would provide a list of what they needed, you know, pumps of a certain size, valves of a certain size, valves with a certain kind of function and meters of all sorts, electronic meters and things. We sourced quite a bit of stuff when we could locally. It's possible I even bought some valves from our current chairman... treasurer of the church council, because he had a valve company in Wycombe. [coughs] I didn't take my antihistamine pill this morning, it may not be a good idea.

Do you want to take a short break now?

Yes, that wouldn't be a bad idea actually.

[end of track 8]

[Track 9]

I was wondering, you mentioned quite a few different sorts of customers; sort of industrial and laboratories – how big were the systems you were typically selling?

Well they varied enormously. I can't really give you a sum, but I mean a large water treatment industry for the atomic energy place at Aldermaston would have been quite expensive and we did two of them. I honestly can't tell you how much... they were just about finished by the time that I got there so I was only involved in getting materials for things that went wrong afterwards or things that you ran out of like, I mean they use salt for water treatment even in that sort of situation, so one had to buy more salt for them from time to time. I can't put a cash sum. But we did a very, a big job for one of the shipping companies, Greek shipping company. Don't know where it was for – oh, it was for an oil refinery, yes. It was for a firm who were chiefly noted for their interest in shipping but this was for an oil refinery I think, and that was quite expensive and I had to do a big order for spares for them as well for the same plant and then there were complications about how we would be sure that we got shot of the job, you know, that it was actually finished when it was finished, because one does have problems with shipping shortages. And so I said to the director, well why don't we say to them that they need to send a representative to check the shipping as the packing cases were packed. He thought this was a bit of a funny idea, but I thought it was a sensible idea. So we concocted a statement that, you know, they couldn't claim for shortages once the goods had been shipped in their presence, having been packed in their presence. So I met this Greek-Cypriot who was assigned to check it all and we counted it all out and watched it packed and then retired to his hotel room at London airport to do the paperwork. So that was that job done. But I can't give you any pounds, shillings and pence sort of answers.

[03:15]

No, I was actually wondering as well about their physical size. When you say water treatment factory to me, I'm seeing something sort of vast and large like a sewage farm or something – are we talking that big or something smaller?

Well you could be, well be talking that big, yes, yes. Yes. I think the Kodak plant had three big settlement tanks and lots of other stuff as well. I mean it wouldn't have been as large as a municipal sewage plant, obviously, because we're only talking effluent from one factory. But yes, proportionately.

[04:01]

Interested as well, the electronics industry – what actual need do they have for the products that a company like yours provides?

Well they need the clean water, they don't need the products that we provide, except as a means of getting the clean water, the ultra clean water, yes. I mean this water treatment firm that was located in the village and is still partly in the village, they did clean, very clean water for various purposes; domestic or probably pharmaceutical, things like that. But then that's needing pure water to use in whatever processes they're actually doing. And they were selling water, I don't know whether they also installed plants or not as I don't know enough about them and they were taken over by Vivendi a few years ago. I think all their admin's moved down to Marlow now but we've still got the factory at the back.

I was just interested that you mentioned pure water and their water not being pure enough for these purposes and...

Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Ordinary tap water is not clean enough for a lot of purposes in things like electronics and pharmaceuticals.

I was wondering what are the different grades involved?

Oh I couldn't tell you. I'm not technical, not really. I'm technical enough to understand things I read about, but not to talk about them.

[05:46]

Did you need any technical knowledge in the job you were doing?

Well it helped to know one end of a pipe fitting from another, but I'd learnt something about pipe fittings in my very first temporary job, which if you remember, I worked at a printers on bills of quantity that were mostly for plumbing installations of one kind or another, or seemed to be.

The stock control and costings – were these things you were already familiar with as well?

As processes, yes.

How did you get on with your colleagues?

Oh, pretty well really. Yes. I mean I haven't got any sort of lifelong friendships arising out of most of them but I still meet one or two of the girls who worked there around the place, or there's at least one that lives in the village.

What sort of other people actually worked there?

Well most of the girls I think were doing office work and things of that nature. I mean there was one girl that dealt with all the faxes and teleprinter messages and things like that, that we still I think had a few of. And one or two did odd things which I'm not aware what they were, for members of the drawing office. But I think I was the only one who was working for the buying department.

What sort of activities would occupy a typical working day?

Well, reading the spec for something, deciding where you would source it from, and obviously you would have to get quotes from several places. Sending out the quotes, receiving any that came in, passing them on to whoever had asked for them to be provided, and eventually doing purchase orders to get them.

[08:16]

Was your company involved with any sort of... did you have to worry about environmental legislation with the work you were doing in terms of purity of water output?

Well, obviously we didn't have any... we were just an office building, so in terms of the building, no, no more than anybody else would have. In terms of the plants that we were providing the materials for – and I don't think we normally actually did the labour ourselves, though we would supervise it, or you know, engineers would supervise it on our behalf, who were either on short-term contracts or employed by us, I wouldn't know which - I mean the requirements for cleaning up effluents would have to meet whatever the environmental requirements were of the day, wouldn't they?

I don't know.

Because otherwise we'd be in trouble or the customer would be in trouble.

This is not an industry I'm familiar with so I'm...

No, no, no, no, no, but it's more common sense really.

No, I'm just wondering, are there any sort of specific environmental guidelines that you do have to worry about?

Well there may well be today, but you see even now it's seventeen years since I retired. Dreadful thought, but...

Sort of thinking, you know, because we're so concerned about the environment these days, I'm wondering if these concerns are there seventeen years ago in terms of purifying water output?

There must have been rules, yes, there must have been rules and we would have had to have made sure that our plant kept to them because otherwise we would be in trouble because our clients would have been in trouble.

Talked about the relationship with the Greek, with the shipping company – what was the shipping company's name?

Oh don't ask me, I have no idea.

Okay. I was just wondering what were your other typical relationships like with clients?

Well I mean you dealt with their staff, generally speaking. If things went well, relationships generally were fine. If you got lots of delays then relationships would deteriorate. And whether you got delays or not was not necessarily in your own hands.

What were the sources of delays?

Supply. We had, I can remember a huge order we had, I think it was for this Greek job, the oil refinery job. The oil refinery was in Saudi Arabia, incidentally. It was a huge order for all sorts of different valves and we needed them all by a deadline and they were saying they couldn't possibly do it. So I said, well why don't we offer them a price structure with penalties, increasing penalties for being late and bonus payments for being on time. That also was thought to be a very peculiar idea but it didn't half work. We got it all on time.

Who thought it a peculiar idea?

Oh, well they were so intent on not paying more for anything they could possibly help that it wouldn't have occurred to them.

So it was a company that watched the bottom line a lot?

Yes, yes. But as far as I can see, the best thing is to satisfy your customers because that way you get more work, either from the same people or by recommendation. But that was a bit... oh, I left my saucepan on, I can smell it.

[pause in recording]

[12:44]

What were ESMIL to work like as a company?

Erm...

How did they treat you as staff members?

Well, there was, the pay was pretty appalling, but on the other hand there was a private medical scheme and a non-contributory pension if you qualified for it. Which for some reason or other I did, although I would have thought by most company standards I was a bit too old to start qualifying for a pension fund membership. But there you are, so from that point of view it was quite good.

How were people in the office, were they friendly, caught up with work?

Oh, both really. There was always a lot of pressure to get things done. Because there tends to be this artificial level of pressure coming from the consultant who advised on the placing of the contract in the first place and therefore stands to get money at the end, at completion, for themselves as well as our money, sort of thing, coming to us, our company's money coming to our company.

You mentioned consultants – I was wondering what your relationship was like with those?

I think I got, when I had contact with them I got on with them pretty well, but of course officially I didn't have contact with them.

How not officially? Or why not officially?

Well, why not officially, because I was just the dogsbody most of the time. It was mostly the sales director's responsibility to get things done, you see, he was the one who was cracking the whip. I told you about this one that I got involved in quite a bit because I felt that the sales director was – I'm too independent, that's my trouble – the sales director

was not being wildly sensible in not wanting to tidy up loose ends at the end of a job, just dead keen to get on to the next one, the next deadline when I was busy feeling that I really needed to be sure that sufficient attention was paid to tying up the loose ends, that ESMIL didn't leave a nasty taste in the consultancy's mouth. I think I was right.

Did you ever find it frustrating at all?

Well I did think it was rather frustrating when the sales director didn't listen to what I was saying, either wouldn't follow my logic or maybe couldn't follow my logic. But I mean I just said to the girl in the post office, just make sure you copy everything to me please. I mean I couldn't go out buying things, but at least if I knew what was needed I could, you know, stir until something was done. Because we're not talking about any single thing that was going to take very long. I mean it's like when you try to clear your desk, it's much better to get lots of little things out of the way because then you've got time to devote to the bigger things, haven't you? My desk is currently on the ironing board, which means the ironing is about this high again, but I have cleared my desk. Just got to put the rest away. But I mean it is that sort of problem, if you're too overwhelmed with new jobs and you're not satisfying the bosses of the old jobs, then you can't possibly win in the long run, can you? It just isn't logical. Well I don't think it is.

[18:05]

Overall, did you enjoy working in the water industry?

Well, I think I said to you before, I think whatever I'm doing I enjoy it. I tend to be that sort of person, if I'm bored by what somebody sets me to do then I look for ways of making it more interesting. I mean I wouldn't like to sit on a production line just putting the same screw into the hinge of a car or something like that, but I was given a brain in order to use it, not to just ignore things that might be improved.

You mentioned that, well ultimately the company had troubles – when did this start becoming clear to you?

Well I think it was probably clear from the beginning that it was a relatively small company in quite a difficult sort of position and that it either needed to expand, or whatever. We had this fellow they sent over from Holland with a view to computerising us, that's what it was. But he didn't know anything about computers as far as I could judge. He'd been a lingerie salesman or something in his previous job. And I mean I wasn't up to date with computers but he certainly didn't seem to know as much as I knew and we never did end up really computerised until later on when they employed a general sort of admin manager under this new managing director who was there to sort of kill or cure, and he was very methodical in trying to get us at least so that we had computers that at least would do word processing and stock control, what amounted to stock control, we didn't keep much stock. So some people learned how to use spreadsheets and databases and things like that.

How did the staff take to computers coming into the office?

Well not many people had any use for them. I think we only had three or four in total. I think computer aided design was beginning to come in. I think that the draughtsmen who were a bit long in the tooth were a bit reluctant to start doing anything else. But I do seem to remember that there was sort of something edging in on that line before the company closed down. In fact it didn't entirely close down when Yorkshire Water bought it out because there is a small company still in Wycombe called ESMIL water systems, run by one of the engineers who was there when I was there [closed between 00:21:51 and 00:22:49]

[22:49]

And you mentioned you were responsible for wrapping up the company's loose ends when Yorkshire Water took over.

Yes, that was just a question of disposing of office equipment and so on, making sure things got transferred to the new premises in Sheffield or Leeds and I went up there once or twice actually. And finding homes for what was left. Not terribly difficult. I mean I was doing odd bits of buying and keeping old things going at the same time and they appointed somebody to take over from me from Yorkshire Water and he came down for

three weeks before we closed the business down to get to grips with the things we'd done and how we did them and all the rest of it. He kept in touch with me for several years after that, sent me newsy letters about his family whom I'd never met. You know, the usual Christmas round robin, sort of thing.

[24:07]

And so you retired at sixty-four?

So I retired at sixty-four and then spent the next fourteen years or so doing all my son's paperwork for his building business and his VAT and his tax. But he's now actually got a tax accountant and his live-in partner is doing all the paperwork, though she does get a bit bogged down. I still get called on to tell her what's wrong or right.

So you actually carried on working until you were seventy-eight, with the paperwork?

No, with the paperwork, no I think I must have been most of eighty actually, I was still doing it when I had my bad back three years ago. I gave it over to her, oh it's very nearly two years since she's done most of the paperwork, but I think this month is the first time she'll have done the VAT.

Fourteen years' worth of filling in tax returns – has there been any change in the system you've noticed over that...

Tax returns. Well yes, the tax returns seem to have got simpler to fill in actually. I mean I filled my first one in for my father when I was about seventeen. [laughs] They certainly got a lot more complicated after that. I had to fill one in every year for myself for a very long time because my pension comes from three separate places and of course I get money for playing the organ in church and things like that, so it was a bit too complicated, but now I just have two sides of a piece of paper to fill in. That's quite simple and straightforward, and John doesn't have to fill any because all his income is taxed at source except for his state pension and that's coped with with a tax code.

[26:13]

So apart from your son's paperwork, how else have you spent your retirement?

Oh well, I used to play the organ in church every Sunday until relatively recently. I think I've not been doing it every Sunday for about the last three years, but I still play most of the funerals in our church and every fifth Sunday I play for the Sunday service and every third Sunday I play for the Sunday service. Of course there aren't that many fifth Sundays, but there are always third Sundays. And I play for the Methodists when they haven't got an organist. And look after the Methodist organist's dog when she goes away. So the weekends we have the dog we've usually also got me playing the organ. [laughs] But I'm not very good.

Have you acquired any other interests?

I don't think I've got any new interests that I haven't had for many, many years. I mean I've got a stamp collection that nothing ever happens to these days except I put stamps on one side. I still do as much gardening as I can cope with. Used to do a lot of dressmaking. I can't seem to be bothered with that any more.

[27:50]

How did you feel when you got an email asking you to do this interview?

Oh I thought it might be rather fun, I mean it wasn't the first one, you weren't the first one that has interviewed me, as you know. But I have been a bit sort of startled that you wanted to know every last detail of every year of my life, sort of thing.

Has that differed from previous interviews?

Well I don't think the one with the researcher in Maryland was quite as comprehensive. I mean we did get it done in one session.

Who have you been interviewed...

The BBC one so far, or maybe that's all I'm going to hear, was just preparatory questionings ready for somebody else to put a programme together, so I mean it'll be up to the programme producer to decide what they're going to put into it.

So who else have you been interviewed by? Was it Janet Abate in America?

She was the Maryland researcher, yes. Yes, I think I'm supposed to have heard from her again, but I haven't. I suppose I could chase her up. And around the time of the fiftieth anniversary of LEO when all the wires were humming, there were all sorts of people who seemed to think that I'd be suitable for writing papers about this, that and the other and contributing to journals, not even on subjects I had any knowledge of, so...

What sort of people?

People from journals with funny names, that's all I can say. I've no idea. I don't know whether they were like so much spam or serious suggestions, I really don't.

Why were they interested in you in particular?

Oh, just because of the computer connection and the fact that I'm a woman. And then obviously I had lengthy interviews with the likes of Peter Bird when he was doing his original book. And I mean I seem to have featured in all the books that – all the books I've seen anyway – that deal with computers in the fifties.

[30:37]

How do you feel about all this attention?

Seems a bit odd because it's such a long time ago that you end up not being quite sure whether you're talking nonsense or sense, a lot of the time. I mean talking to an excolleague is quite different from talking to somebody like you because I mean they know what you should know, whereas I mean you're coming at it sort of blind aren't you?

I suppose I've done a bit of background reading, but it's...

Well I'm sure you've done a bit of background reading, but...

...yeah, well it's different, it's...

You're not in the industry and you've not been in the industry so it is a bit different.

How have the questions differed from – you've mentioned quite a few sort of different sorts of people there, so academics, me, the BBC, colleagues in the industry – what are the sort of differences between the questions?

Oh, just that I think that you're just a lot more detailed actually, and you've sort of gone back to things. You're a bit like those question papers I was talking about that they use for placing people in jobs. You ask me something and then you ask me it again perhaps in a different way and who knows, I might have contradicted myself all the way through.

[32:12]

How do you feel about all this interest in LEO?

Oh, I'm delighted that there should be the interest in LEO because I think LEO deserves to have the interest. I think it's a crying shame that we couldn't get finance to expand and sort of just ended up fizzling out.

How have you seen the interest in LEO grow? In fact when... as a historian I'm curious about this as to when this interest in LEO as something valuable from the past actually starts. When does it start from your point of view?

Well I think really it was all about the time of the fiftieth anniversary that it really started. I mean the LEO Computer Society was started a lot earlier than that, but I've not always managed to get to the meetings. In fact I've rarely managed to get to the meetings because they were usually in London and for a long time we had a young family and, you know, the complications about abandoning your children and going off to meetings in

Mary Coombs Page 167 C1379/16 Track 9

London. And lunch was always quite expensive at these meetings, which was another

little problem.

What does the LEO Computer Society meeting actually do?

Well... it reminisces, it talks about – well mostly it reminisces actually – it talks about

publications on the subject. Yes, it reminisces. You can really leave it at that, at one level

or another. You do hear how people are collecting things for museums and about old

computers in general.

When did you become involved with it yourself?

Well I probably became involved with it when it was first set up, but I just haven't been a

very active member. I mean one of these days I shall have to get my trunk down from the

loft and have a look and see whether I've got any more old material that somebody's

interested in perpetuating. I might have a copy of this original appreciation course test,

you never know.

I've got an archive survey form for you somewhere as well.

Mm?

I've got an archive survey form for you somewhere as well actually.

Mm. Have you? Somewhere here or... [laughs].

[35:27]

Probably in my bag, I hope. What do you think are the highlights of your career?

Hm. That's a bit like – I do a TV, radio survey sort of more or less daily on the net and

yesterday the question came out, what is the most outstanding television programme

you've seen, and then it came up, what was the most outstanding radio programme you've

heard, and I couldn't really answer either question.

Shall I ask the question in a different way?

Yes.

Which jobs have you found the most interesting?

Well in a way that goes back to what I said earlier today, that... the one I'm doing at the time. But no, I think the thing I'm happiest to have done has been involved with the earliest, earlier parts of LEO, because you really did feel you were pioneering something. Whereas I mean if you're teaching or buying things for anything that's being made, you're doing things that have been done for hundreds of years. You may be doing them in a different fashion, but they're still things that have been going for a very long time. Whereas this was new, you can't really compare an electronic computer with an old fashioned calculating machine. And I don't think really you can compare it with the stuff they had for code breaking during the war. It was nothing like it really. All steps towards the same sort of development in the long run, but not a bit the same in practice.

Was this something you were conscious of at the time or is this something you thought about looking back?

Oh no, I always really felt that the LEO thing was what I was keen to get into. I mean I think my father may have set this going because he knew I was interested, that I always wanted to know what Michael had been doing up at Cambridge last term and, you know, how it was all getting on.

[38:18]

I've seen you listed as the first, the first female programmer of a commercial computer in the world – is that correct? Or as far as you know?

Nobody has disputed it. I mean it, it's been discussed and there were definitely scientific women computers in the States earlier than I was, before I was a computer programmer, but it would make sense if we were five years ahead of IBM, that I was the first computer

programmer in the world. Unless somewhere in the world like China there were earlier developments that we so far know nothing about.

What do you feel about that status?

I'm rather proud of it really, because I enjoyed my programming days.

Proud of any particular part of it or just overall?

No, just overall really. Yes, this feeling that you were breaking new ground.

[39:39]

Could you briefly just sum up for me in a moment just what you thought the LEO team actually accomplished in the early days?

Well, we certainly got commercial programming off the ground. And we might have perhaps got further if it wasn't a catering firm that we were involved with, but can't tell. It wasn't surprising that it rose from Lyons because they had these two extremely talented far-seeing senior people on the admin side who were hot on anything which improved efficiency and who were always looking for new things to introduce into the company to improve efficiency, whether it was things like work study or systems analysis – which isn't quite the same thing, they're allied – or whether it was getting a computer and using it to its best advantage. And with what we'd got at our disposal I think we probably did use it to its best advantage.

Do you think you learnt anything in those early days that went on to equip you for the rest of your careers?

Sorry, can you say that again?

[41:32]

Do you think you learnt anything in those early days that equipped you for the rest of your careers?

No, not really. No. No, because working on a big mainframe computer's totally different from using a PC. Using a computer for educational purposes is totally different from the sort of things that we did on the mainframe computers that we used. So no, only to the extent that I was always having to use my intelligence and therefore it didn't go walkabout as I got immersed in family affairs.

Immersed in family affairs, do you think your family's had much effect on your career path?

Well if I hadn't had a handicapped child I would probably have stayed in computers. If I hadn't had a handicapped child I might have not gone on and adopted three more. I mean we did think we'd like a largish family and we did have a largish family. The fact that it wasn't by quite the normal channels was fairly immaterial I think really. I think if you feel differently about your adopted children from the ones that are born to you then you probably shouldn't have adopted.

[43:24]

I'm actually running out of questions. I just have one or two to finish this off. I know we've talked a little bit about how this interview has compared with other ones, but I was just wondering how you'd found it in itself?

Well, I've quite enjoyed it actually. I think by the end of the third session I sort of felt I'd had enough, or got far enough, but no, it's okay, it's been quite agreeable, it's different. Stops me having to do the ironing.

How do you feel about taking part in this project as a whole?

Well it's interesting because I had no idea that the British Library did things like this, in fact I didn't know that the British Library did anything really except store copies of books. In fact until they started rebuilding it I don't think I knew the British Library existed even, so total ignorance.

Have you got any final thoughts on this before I turn the recorder off?
No, I don't think so, thank you.
Thank you.
It's been an agreeable time.
[end of interview]

Interviewee notes

¹ Since making the recording I have found the certificate, signed by both George VI – at the top – and the Princess Royal (his sister, Mary) as Grand Master of the Order, and dated June 7th 1951 (page 9)

² I think I was going to mention the chaplain at the English church in Lausanne and his wife at this point! (page 30)

Actually, even with the correction in place about visits to France 'en famille' this is not true. The previous year my father took the family on a Mediterranean Cruise on the P&O ship Chusan. Very luxurious existence, when you think of rationing in full swing in England. We visited Algiers, Malta and Casablanca and were away for two weeks. I imagine that as we were on a British boat I wasn't thinking of it as abroad! (page 35)

That sound's a bit presumptuous on my part! (page 99)