JOHN ARIS

Early champion of computer users

John Aris was director of the National Computing Centre (NCC) from 1985 to 1990, where he championed the importance and the skills of computer users as distinct from computer manufacturers. He was also a classicist, a musician, an art collector, a major in the Territorial Airborne Brigade, and a traveller who set foot in more than 200 countries.

He entered computing, then an obscure backwater, in 1958, immediately after completing a degree in classics (he said, "the great advantage of studying classics is that it doesn't fit you for anything specific"). He joined LEO Computers, a subsidiary of J Lyons of teashops fame, which, remarkably, had built and put to productive use the world's first business computer.

After a few years of programming, he moved into systems design and the uneasy borderland between business computing and business proper. When a series of mergers brought about the formation of ICL (Aris had by then worked for five British computer companies without changing jobs) he became its chief systems engineer and had the unusual experience of explaining to the board of the new company what, in the eyes of its customers, its products were for.

After a spell as technical director for Western Europe, based in Paris, he left ICL in 1975 to join Imperial Group as head of computer development. Computing was then still thought of as a suppliers' world, with expertise primarily in the hands of IBM and the seven dwarfs. However, on moving from a supplier to a user company, Aris discovered that what he had thought he knew about users was not wrong, but was seriously incomplete.

As a result. he became devoted to developing and promulgating the experience and knowledge of users, both within Imperial and more widely. In the process, he recognised early, in the late 1970s, that the future of business computing lay more with smaller, cheaper machines than with mainframes, and with widely available pre-programmed applications rather than custom-built software. He was one of the first computing managers in the world to oust a mainframe in favour of end-user-managed minis and to encourage the advent of personal computers.

A ground-breaking project he led at Imperial was a chief executive's information system. The CEO's specification for this consisted of one sentence: "make me a computer system to help me run the group". This, clearly, did not lend itself to the orthodox procedure of writing, and getting signed off, a detailed description of everything the system should do before implementing it. So Aris's team developed it piecemeal, by trial and error, on an early personal computer with a colour screen – all hazardous novelties at the time. The project was (not surprisingly) politically fraught, but became an important and much-used resource.

Aris was elected during his time at Imperial to be the NCC's non-executive board member for the South West, as well as representing computer users on several Government committees.

In 1985 he was invited to become the NCC's full-time director and CEO. Again he found that his previous knowledge of a CEO's activities and preoccupations, gained close up through the Imperial CEO system, was seriously incomplete.

At the NCC he took a high profile as spokesman for computer users, but had to concentrate on moving the NCC from a heavy financial dependence on Government contracts (there was no grant-in-aid) to a viable independent existence. Perhaps the most striking achievement of his term of office was selling NCC-developed telecommunications standards testing software to the official standards bodies of both the USA and Japan as their main enforcement tool. He succeeded in raising the NCC's non-Government revenue by 71% and its associated gross margin by over 100%. Nonetheless, he had to reduce the workforce substantially when the Government contacts dried up and he resigned in 1990.

He then ran a club for computer users, IMPACT, whose purpose was to stimulate users at CEO and IT director level and to facilitate their learning from each other. Many of the UK's leading companies and public sector bodies participated: in reviews, detailed comparisons with best practice, seminars, debates, and distinguished lectures. IMPACT was sponsored initially by the NCC, then by KPMG. It then operated independently, and Aris retired gradually from the mid-1990s onwards, finally leaving in 2000.

John Aris was born in June 1934 just beyond the World's End (a pub in Chelsea) and was educated at Eton and Magdalen, Oxford, winning scholarships to both colleges. His father was a medium-level insurance executive (badly wounded in World War I) and his mother was a painter who had studied under Tonks and Steer at the Slade. His brother was the well-known professional actor, Ben Aris.

A keen clarinetist and composer, he played in several respectable amateur orchestras, his finest hour being performing Holst's Planets under the conductor of its first performance, Adrian Boult. His most ambitious composition was a 27-minute divertimento for soprano and nine woodwind instruments.

He was also a collector of art and acquired many paintings, watercolours and drawings, including works by Reynolds, Fragonard and Heath Robinson.

He did two years National Service between school and university as a second lieutenant in the Royal Artillery in Korea. He followed this with 15 years in the territorials. Distant and exotic locations he experienced in the army stimulated his travelling hobby, visiting Iran, China (in 1976), Madagascar, Antarctica, Albania, Bhutan, Sudan and many other places – over 200 all told - long before they became established tourist destinations. He recalled that he was once overtaken, while walking along a Bangkok street, by a pink elephant. He was completely sober at the time.

John Aris was one of a talented group headed by David Caminer, the extraordinary Lyons' manager who created business systems engineering from scratch, who together wrote a book on the LEO (Lyons Electronic Office) story. The book ran to American and Chinese editions. In 2001 the group organised a two-day celebration in the London Guildhall to mark the 50th anniversary of the world's first business computer system.

He retained his interest in LEO to the end as an active trustee of the LEO Foundation.

John Aeberhard

John Bernard Benedict Aris, b.6 June 1934, d.6 August 2010.