

Computer engineer who encouraged the use of PCs in business



Aris was a devotee of classical Greek.

John Aris, who has died aged 76, was a pioneer of the application of computers for business use. In the late 1970s, he was one of the first to recognise that the future of business computing lay with smaller, cheaper machines more than with mainframes; and with widely available pre-programmed applications rather than custom-built software. Working at the Imperial Tobacco Group, 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.

John's career in computing began in 1958 when he was recruited to the Leo (Lyons Electronic Office) computer team by J Lyons, then the major food business in the UK, and initiators of the notion that the future of computers lay in their use as a business tool. At the time, the prevailing view was that work with computers required a trained mathematician. The Leo management thought otherwise and recruited using an aptitude test. John, an Oxford classics graduate, passed with flying colours, noting that "the great advantage of studying classics is that it does not fit you for anything specific".

When a series of mergers brought about the formation of International Computers Ltd (ICL) in 1968, John became 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 ICL's technical director for western Europe, based in Paris, in 1975 he joined Imperial as head of computer development.

With this move from a supplier to a user company, John discovered that he had underestimated the knowledge and skill of users at all levels. He used that insight at first within Imperial, and subsequently, from 1985, as full-time director of the National Computing Centre (NCC), set up by the government to encourage computer use, and of the computer club Impact, a forum for users. Many of the UK's leading companies and public sector bodies participated in Impact: in reviews, detailed comparisons with best practice, seminars, debates and lectures.

As NCC director, John had to concentrate on moving away from a heavy financial dependence on government contracts. 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 US and Japan as their main enforcement tool. He succeeded in raising the NCC's non-government revenue by 71%. Nonetheless, he had to reduce the workforce substantially when the government contracts dried up, and in 1990 he resigned.

Born in London, John was a clever child, and his parents, an insurance executive and a painter, who were far from rich, gambled on his winning an Eton scholarship, which he did. His father was a keen amateur actor and John's brother Ben became a well-known professional actor, but John's stage career never progressed beyond schoolboy productions.

Aged 15, he decided that classics was more interesting than mathematics, his best subject, and pursued it, despite teachers' disapproval. Before going to Magdalen College, Oxford, John did two years' national service in the Royal Artillery, including some time in Korea. Subsequently he joined the Territorial Army and rose to the rank of major, specialising as a parachutist. Later in life he took up scuba diving, which he said was easy compared with parachuting.

John was a man of many parts. He remained a devotee of classical Greek civilisation and language. At Eton he had learned to play the clarinet and he went on to compose works including a divertimento for soprano and nine woodwind instruments. It was recorded by musicians of the Northern School of Music. He played in several amateur orchestras, and once performed Holst's Planets under the baton of Sir Adrian Boult. He was equally at home in the world of art, and his collection included works by the topographical artist David Roberts, as well as by Joshua Reynolds and Jean-Honoré Fragonard, and cartoons by Heath Robinson.

John was a great traveller and visited at least 200 countries. Another hobby was gastronomy, both eating out and cooking. While living in Paris, he tried to eat at every Michelin-starred restaurant in the city (he managed 80 out of 90). He strongly believed in eating local food, however exotic (his meals included on various occasions fried frog skins, bat, egg with embryo, and guinea pig), and was especially fond of 100-year-old eggs.

John retired gradually from running Impact, and left the project in 2000. But he retained an active role in computing. As a member of the Worshipful Company of Computer Technologists he helped establish the annual Pinkerton prize for a promising computer engineering apprentice. As a trustee of the Leo Foundation, he never missed a Leo Society reunion. He played a leading role in organising the 2001 conference at the London Guildhall commemorating the 50th anniversary of the first business application run on the Leo computer.

John is survived by his sister, Hilary.

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