

John Aris – a personal memoir

My first contact with John should have been at school, at King's Wimbledon in 1947. For a year he was my first House Captain until he left for greater things at Eton. We found out this connection when we were programming together in 1960. John was a bit mortified to hear that I had absolutely no recollection of him from school. But it wasn't long before made a real impression on me.

In the 1950s, Joe Lyons and Company – more famous for its Corner House and Teashops – recruited a team to design and build what turned out to be the world's first business computer. That was LEO, the Lyons Electronic Office. In 1958 after leaving Oxford, John joined the project and he quickly proved to be ideally suited to the new skills of systems analysis and programming. He was often to be seen in a brown study, chewing one arm of his spectacles as he wrestled with what were, in those early days, novel and complex issues.

Later, John moved into Government Sales for LEO. He managed the marketing and implementation of several very large systems, on many of which I was lucky enough to be his bag-carrier. I suppose we formed a relationship rather like Stephen Fry and Alan Davies on QI. There was certainly just as much erudition on John's part but maybe fewer laughs. John continued to anticipate potential problems that many of us had difficulty in understanding and he was a past master at working out the best way to resolve them.

During the 1960s a series of mergers concentrated UK computer manufacturing into a single company, ICL. As the mergers gathered pace, John rapidly advanced through the management levels and had a number of significant roles in the growing company. In particular these included advising Governments on IT issues at the most senior level, both here in the UK and across Europe. Soon after that final merger, John moved to the Paris office where he was Technical Director of ICL Western Europe with a wide range of responsibilities.

But, being John and despite the challenges of multilingual negotiations, he set himself a personal goal. He aimed to eat in every three-starred Michelin restaurant in the city. In pursuit of this he used to entertain visiting customers and even hold management meetings in suitable establishments. But, whether he managed to fully achieve that gastronomic ambition, isn't recorded.

After four years in Paris, John returned to the UK and was tasked with advising the ICL Board on all aspects of user-driven computing. However, when he eventually left the company in 1975 and joined Imperial Group in Bristol, he discovered that users' actual needs differed quite substantially from what the IT industry imagined. Users at all levels had skills and expertise but didn't use computer terminology to define their IT requirements. And why should they? So John set about clarifying those needs systematically. And this led to him being invited to join the board of the National Computing Centre – the NCC - as a non-executive director.

In 1985, when Imperial was taken over by the Hanson Group, he left and took on the full-time role of Director of the NCC. Under his leadership the Government gradually relinquished its financial involvement, enabling the NCC to become fully self supporting.

John had many other professional activities. He was a trustee of the LEO Charitable Foundation. While at the NCC he initiated, then helped to run, IMPACT, a Top Users club, specifically for company CEOs and IT Directors. He was also an active member of the Worshipful Company of Computer Technologists. All of these activities he cheerfully put at risk by parachuting. He jumped out of planes 34 times. Luckily he did no irreparable damage to himself, although it's possible the drop zones may have taken a battering.

I expect that probably everyone here knows that John had a life-long love of anything cultural: art, music, theatre, literature – and cricket. As with his work, in every one of these spheres John's knowledge was extensive. But he never talked down to people. Another colleague has reminded me of John's frequent opening phrase "as you probably know...". This was typical of him and he was always generously surprised if you didn't have a clue.

John had two enduring hobbies, or perhaps one should say passions: music and countries. As we have heard, he had wide musical interests, including playing and composing. Interestingly, John denied having perfect pitch but there was an intriguing occasion in the very early days. We were in a café in Westbourne Grove. Someone, probably me, dropped some pennies on the tiled floor. Amid the clatter, John immediately said, "There's a dud one in there" – and, of course, he was right. Perfect pitch or not, he certainly had an expert ear.

His other hobby was "collecting" countries. He famously arranged his early travels to avoid the Antipodes so that, sometime in the 70s, he was able to send around a note which just said "I got 100 in Australia!" In September of last year he said he had 196 and felt that getting the double century might prove difficult. However, by April he had placed both feet on the ground in seven more. His achievement of having visited 203 separate sovereign states must surely be worthy of the Guinness Book of Records.

He may have another, rather bizarre, claim to fame: John was probably the only serving Artillery officer to be hit on the head with a sledgehammer by one of his gunners.

This happened while they were on active service in Korea and for some reason they had to erect a pole in the rock-hard ground. John, foolishly as it turned out, held the pole. The gunner missed the top of the pole with the hammer head but hit it with the wooden shaft. The head broke off and dropped onto John's head, laying him out. Luckily it was only a short distance so there was no lasting damage. Typically, there were also no recriminations although John did say that he really earned his combat medal for that alone.

I'd like to finish by recalling an early occasion in the mid 1960s. Anyone who ate in their Hammersmith flat will no doubt recall with affection and some apprehension the meals conjured up by John – an experimental gourmet if ever there was one – and his brother Ben.

We arrived promptly at 7 but didn't eat until around 10.30. Their sister, Hilary, tells me we were the lucky ones: we ate before midnight. And we didn't faint from hunger, unlike a previous guest!

The preparations for the meal involved these two big men alternating in the tiny kitchen. John first made sure we had drinks then put on an eclectic selection of classical records. I hadn't heard of most of the composers and was unfamiliar with much of the music, but John's knowledge and enthusiasm were captivating and endlessly interesting.

John eventually disappeared to start preparing the meal, whereupon Ben, who was a very popular actor, singer and dancer, whipped off the current record and replaced it with Songs from the Shows; *Salad Days* and *Share my Lettuce* were popular. When John came back in, he sent Ben to prepare the starter - and changed the record. And so it went on for three very entertaining hours.

We ended up with parts of the Magdalen College recording of Offenbach's *Orpheus in the Underworld*, which Jolyon has already told you about. John conducted flamboyantly in time to the record, with considerable danger to the furnishings. We almost forgot to be hungry, with John and Ben doing their dizzying double act. The evening was one of ribaldry and delight.

It was a pleasure and a great privilege to work closely with John on so many important and successful projects. I will always remember and value his friendship and I know all of us, family, colleagues and friends, will miss him deeply.

Ray Hennessy
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