

## The Early Days of Customs & Excise Computing ; Some Impressions by Bill Sant.(written in 2003)

1. My introduction to C&E computing was via Omnibus Weekly Order 10/1965 (remember OWO's?) which advertised vacancies for Programming Staff in the Automatic Data Processing (ADP) Unit at Southend-on-Sea. This was a trawl of the Department “---to find about 6 Programmers and 3 Higher Programmers to augment the planning staff at Southend”.
2. After a full day of aptitude tests at The Civil Service Commission, Saville Row, I arrived in August 1965 at Southend to be met by Derek Oakes, Officer, ADP. Derek, along with fellow Officer Jack Ottaway, owned a large guest house in upmarket Thorpe Bay called “The Haven” which was staffed by ‘au pair’ girls and had draught Guinness on tap. The Haven was used by young C&E Officers coming to Southend (or passing through after training) and was referred to as a “den of iniquity”; either affectionately or censoriously depending on one’s viewpoint. I regret to have to say that The Board ruled it off limits eventually.
3. Derek Oakes ferried me to work every morning to 39 Victoria Avenue, which was a large semi-detached house in which the new ADP teams developed Payroll, Warehousing and Mechanised Accounting programs ; the Statistics Suite team and the computer and Operations Staff were in a 2-storey building further down the avenue to which Portcullis House was attached eventually! Our computer was a LEO III, named after Joe Lyons of the Corner Shops, who was the first to use a computer commercially in the UK. The computer occupied the ground floor of this building and the ‘database’ filled a room the size of a badminton court. The power and capacity of LEO III was a tiny fraction of that of today’s laptops; programming this monolith was a challenge !
4. At this point in 1965 the whole of Customs Computing comprised 4 suites of programs; Statistics, Payroll, Warehousing and Mechanised Accounting, plus the Operations and Data Preparation sections (which contained most of the ADP staff).. In all there were about 70 people but over the next 20 years this expanded to about 2000, during which time in-house promotions were rampant and aptitude test pass marks got lower to achieve the required numbers. However, to balance this strain on resources programming got easier as the ‘machine-code’ language (Intercode) gave way to the more powerful ones (eg COBOL) which were easier to use.
5. In charge of this egotistical, undisciplined but enthusiastic bunch were managers the likes of Bert Alcock, Don Vandenberg, Ron Williamson, Charles Vince and Claude Pilgrim; ably supported by Ben Butler, Tom Essam, Bill White, Nobby Clarke, Roy Gilson, George Smith, Ian Gillies, Arthur Gregson, and Ken Box. This new technology was an exciting challenge to the young incomers, who gave the older ‘planners’ some headaches; but the motivation and entrepreneurial spirit of all these new ‘technocrats’ fired the development of Customs & Excise Computing. The only other Civil Service computer user at the time was the Post Office. There is much more to tell about the thrills (and spills) of these early days but I will end for now with brief notes on some of the ‘characters’ of the time.

### Bert Alcock, CEO, Computer Manager.

I never met him at the time but it became clear from word of mouth, reinforced by my later encounters, that he was a sharp operator with enough verve to ‘kick-start’ ADP in Customs. However, typically, he was once asked to leave a prestigious golf course for playing topless.

### Ken Box, HEO, Statistics Team.

His exhaustive, in-depth study of cases always produced the right analysis—but sometimes too late. Could be relied upon to identify the origin of famous lines from literature (an ‘oracle’). Mostly staid but occasionally and surprisingly wild; once, having demanded, and got, his entrance money back from the Crazy Horse Saloon I had to restrain him from going back for his cloakroom fee.

Ben Butler, HEO, Operations.

A real gentleman and a gentle man. Became Ops. Manager and was, in due course, awarded MBE. His wild side was going on golf holidays with 3 other blokes in a tiny caravan. Best joke “eggs for breakfast, I’ll be bound”

Laurie Fenne, CO, Stats.Team

Eternal jester. Remembered for (inter alia) being admonished by Arthur Gregson for sitting for some time on top of a coat rack. Arthur never found out that Laurie had been plonked up there by Ken Box and Fred Baynham and couldn’t get down! Laurie later became Captain of Ballards Gore Golf Club and arrived on his opening day by helicopter.

John Fisher, EO Programmer, Stats.

Bane of OPS off-line staff, who organised computer runs. John believed in using the energy of the machine rather than his own so he only ever corrected the ‘immediate’ fault, so his programs crashed again a few lines further on. I think he was much more interested (and talented) in creating songs and music than computer programs !.

Bob Fowkes, Officer Programmer, Stats.

Already a bit long in the tooth as an Officer in Dover he took to computers like a duck to water and was with me on our programmer training course at Ealing in 1965. He was a member of MENSA, a slightly reluctant (but good) golfer and liked fast cars. Rose to become Assistant Secretary in charge of the Computer Development Division.

Arthur Gregson, Assistant Accountant, Payroll.

A generous-hearted, clean-living, violin-playing patriarch. Golf and computer-challenged but an enthusiast of both. I was with him at Belfairs when he got a ‘hole-in-one’ after missing the ball completely with his first swipe. Memorably once allowed one of his staff to grow mushrooms in boxes of horse manure on cabinets in the Payroll room (but he had the first ‘flush’!).

Stan Harwood, HEO, Warehousing.

Cynically amusing, eccentric. Boolean algebra freak. Spoke with a laid-back and confident drawl. Could not be ignored but gave impression of living on a different planet.

Johnny Milsom, OE Ops.

Wheeler-dealer, sometime golfer. Once charged me half-a-crown to borrow a putter. Think of Arthur Daly.

Betty Mines, HEO, Stats.

Eccentric, giggly, simpering, incisive, technically brilliant.

Claude Pilgrim, Accountant, in charge of Payroll.

Ex RAF Officer. Probably had a handlebar moustache. Good manager but somewhat computer-challenged. Took the team out to the Alexander Yacht Club whenever a program ran to its end during trials (irrespective of the results).

Reg Salmon, EO Programmer, Stats.

Great table-tennis player; stood close to the table and took shots very early, hardly ever moving his feet. He sometimes left his desk for hours with pen on paper and part-way through a sentence. I think he made HEO Programmer before he left the Service.

Bill Sant, EO Programmer, Payroll.

Arrived on promotion from DCO, Chester. Probably the most astute of the new programmers and by far the best behaved; rarely getting tipsy at the numerous celebrations of computer successes and never lusting after the Data-Prep girls. Nevertheless he blotted his copybook by declining nomination for a Queen's Birthday Honour in the 1980's; a decision he has since much regretted.

Ernie Saville, EO, Operations.

Led a 'chequered' life. Served in the Royal Navy on Corvettes in WW2 and, not being a natural sailor, was constantly sick with subsequent damage to his stomach. Could charm the birds out of the trees and was put in charge of a mostly female Paper-Handling Section (what else?). Married four times and was very happy with his 4<sup>th</sup> wife (who was somewhat younger than some of the kids from his earlier marriages) and with whom he had 2 children. Would warrant a book and a film.

Bob Shemmings, Officer Programmer, Warehousing Suite.

Left soon after I arrived. Went to work for Freemans (catalogues) on their computer. Became Managing Director of Freemans and was a typical case of talented C&E staff making good 'outside' after C&E computer training/experience.

George Smith, HEO Stats.

Spoke words of wisdom out of the side of his mouth. Being a bit deaf I found it easier to read his lips by standing next to him. He made an 'aside' after interviewing me for promotion to SEO that I was a "rough diamond" (I was not sure what that meant at the time and thought I had been insulted). George rose to Assistant Secretary in charge of the Computer Operations Division.

Mac Vann, CO, Operations.

Responsible for arranging programmer jobs in a queue for running on the computer. Assiduous in the performance of his duties, and a source of terror to programmers who did not fill in the 'run' forms meticulously.

Doris Vidler, CO, Data Preparation.

In charge of the Data Prep. girls who worked on the top floor of Portcullis House and who had to assemble and type Programmers' codings. Doris was sometimes referred to as "Vidler on the Roof", and the programmers had to get past Doris to even talk to her girls! (a matriarch supreme).

Charles Vince, SEO Statistical Suite.

A laid-back opportunist. On being appointed Computer Manager over all of the early programming teams he became a prolific, but shrewd, delegator. I once accompanied him to a computer conference at Harrogate, where I attended all of the sessions and reported back to Charlie each evening on his return from excursions to The Dales. He spent a lot of time in his office, but eventually was asked to remove a sofa and camp bed. He always knew where you could get the cheapest tin of paint.