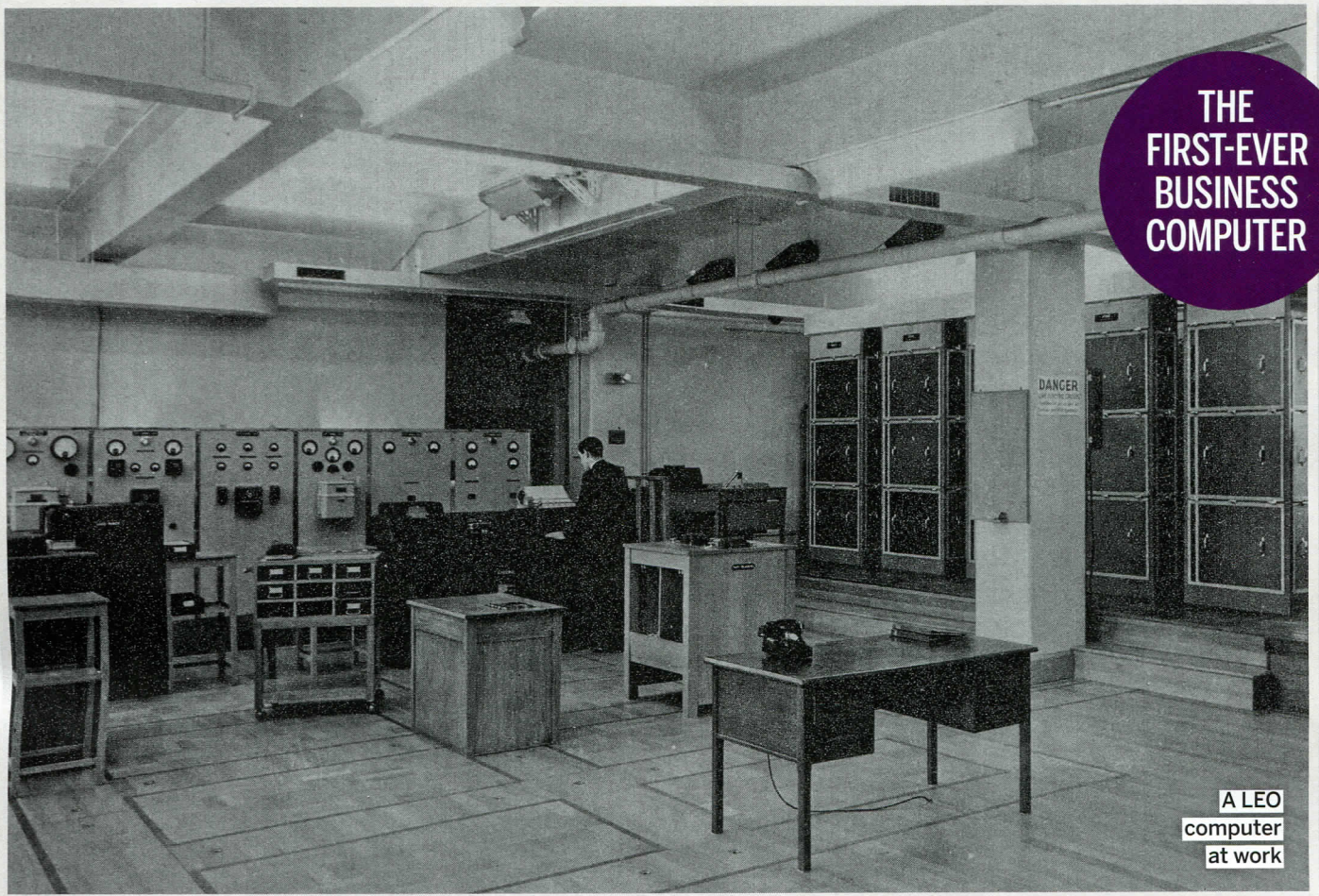


fast rewind

HOW A CAKE-MAKER DEVELOPED THE WORLD'S FIRST BUSINESS COMPUTER;
THE SINKING OF THE LANCASTRIA AND SPORTING HEROES FROM THE 1970s



Byting the biscuit

Many U3A members will be familiar with LEO, the first business computer developed by catering company J Lyons & Co. Here, Guildford U3A member **Neville Lyons**, a relative of Lyons co-founder Sir Joseph Lyons, describes its history and how he hopes U3A members can help to preserve it

Much is known about the way American companies such as Microsoft and IBM dominated the computer industry over many years. Comparatively little publicity, however, has been given to the pioneering activities in the 1950s of the giant British catering company J Lyons & Co – famous for its teashops, Swiss rolls and ice cream – in paving the way for computers that would be used around the world.

This forward-thinking company was ahead of its time when it developed LEO (Lyons Electronic Office) to manage its payroll and other office

admin work. Recognised by Guinness World Records as the first-ever business computer, Leo went on to be used by many blue-chip companies such as Ford Motor Company, British Oxygen, Shell-Mex and BP, as well as government departments including the Post Office, Inland Revenue and Met Office. The

*U3A members
have told the story
to local groups*

company even exported its computers to Eastern Europe, Australia and South Africa. It was last used by the Post Office in 1981.

Now, the LEO Computers Society is looking for people who worked on LEO to be part of a project to preserve its history.

I know that many U3A members know about LEO, some may have worked on it and several have told the LEO story to local groups.

So how did a catering company develop the first commercial computer? >



The first Lyons tea shop, at 213 Piccadilly, London, which opened in 1894 and, below, in 1953

TEA AND CAKE FOR THE WORLD

J Lyons & Co was founded in 1887 as an exhibition catering company and opened its first teashop in Piccadilly, London, in 1894. It soon developed into a chain of teashops across the country. They were noted for their smartly dressed waitresses known as "nippies". The company opened the iconic Trocadero in London's West End and four huge Corner House restaurants, each several storeys high, with a food hall on the ground floor and restaurants above. Lyons' 40 hotels included the Strand Palace, the Regent Palace, the Cumberland and the Tower Hotel by Tower Bridge. The company had factories at Cadby Hall and Greenford in West London. Its teas, cakes and biscuits were sold around the world.

“I was the first woman in commercial programming. It was very exciting”

Lyons was founded in 1887 and by 1939 it employed around 33,000 staff and had more than 250 teashops. During the Second World War, early computers had been used to help break German coded communications, but no one was using them to do routine and monotonous office work. Armies of young men and women were employed by J Lyons & Co to do things such as stocktaking and ordering food items using adding machines, and Lyons wanted to automate this.

In 1947, Cambridge University was developing a computer for its own academic purposes. The Lyons board decided to help fund that project in return for technical advice in the development of its own computer. By 1951, LEO 1 was up and running.

LEO, as well as being very large, was also very noisy, as a number of YouTube videos demonstrate.

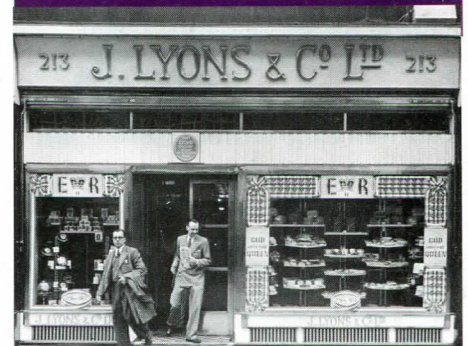
Speaking to the BBC, Mary Coombs,

the first woman commercial computer programmer, told how she joined Lyons and at first worked on collating ice-cream invoices before joining the LEO team. She had always been good at maths and was the only woman on the computer course to learn how to program.

“When we started, we were about five years ahead of any other firm,” she said. “We were all pioneers in programming. It just happens I was the first woman involved in commercial programming. It was a very exciting atmosphere.”

The LEO Computers Society, a registered charity, is an active organisation, most of whose members worked on LEO computers. The society is keen to raise awareness of LEO and to seek support for the preservation of its history.

The society, which has 800 members all over the world, is working with the Centre for Computing History in Cambridge on a project funded by the



National Lottery which includes digital archiving of documents and collection of physical material, development of a virtual-reality simulation of the original LEO and interviews with those who worked on LEO machines.

The project will help understanding of how computing technologies developed and their impact on our daily lives. The society holds regular reunions for people connected with LEO.

When LEO went into "retirement" in the 1970s and 1980s, some of those who were employed on it were allowed to keep items of hardware, documentation etc. as mementos.

The society now seeks help in obtaining such items as donations to the heritage project and to identify individuals who may have had LEO experience and would be willing to be interviewed.

● If you can help, contact secretary@leo-computers.org.uk. For



more information about LEO, visit leo-computers.org.uk or facebook.com/LEOcomputers



The Lyons Corner House on Coventry Street in London