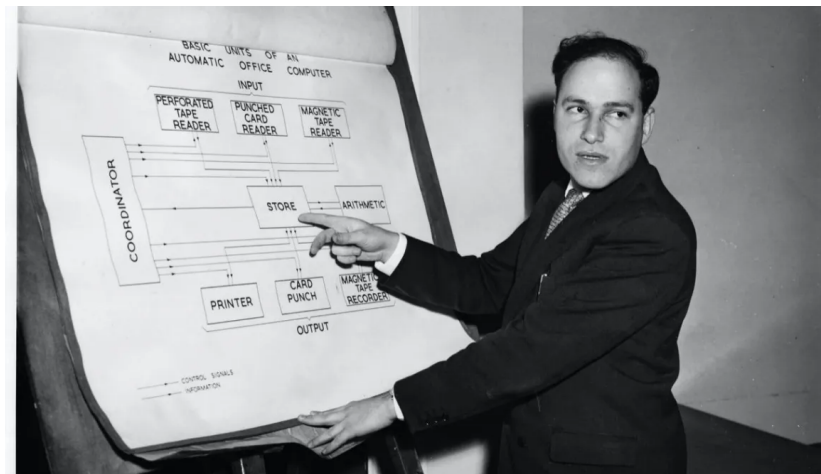


Frank Land obituary: programmer of the first business computer

Computing pioneer for Lyons who became Britain's first professor of information systems at the LSE dies aged 97



Land demonstrating the workings of the Leo

LEO COMPUTERS SOCIETY AT THE CENTRE FOR COMPUTING HISTORY.

Thursday June 18 2026, 12.01am, The Times

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For decades Lyons Corner Houses were a comforting part of the fabric of Britain's towns and cities. Cheerful young waitresses in black-and-white uniforms traversed the vast tea houses at speed while deftly bearing steaming pots of tea and platefuls of buns, serving with a

smile to refresh foot-weary urban travellers.

Lyons epitomised the traditional family business, but by the start of the 1950s the company was at the vanguard of an information technology revolution that would result in the world's first business computer. As the firm had grown to more than 250 high-street teashops and expanded into owning hotels, tea and coffee estates, meat pie companies, ice-cream making, jam and soft drink factories, confectionery and frozen food to become the biggest food company in Europe, the challenge of keeping account of stock and distribution, costs and profits was mounting by the day.

Lyons had been innovating with management information systems since the 1930s and a research trip to America in the late 1940s to observe some of the early mainframe computers inspired the company to build its own.



The tea bar in the Lyons Corner House in Coventry Street, London, in 1923

GETTY

The world's first business computer, Lyons Electronic Office (Leo), was built in 1951, taking its inspiration from the Electronic Delay Storage Automatic Calculator (Edsac) developed at Cambridge University. The machine was already pulsing ominously in a huge room at the Lyons headquarters at Cadby Hall, Hammersmith in west London, when a young trainee cost accountant called Frank Land was informed one day that he had been chosen to be one of its programmers. Leo already had an almost priestly order of operatives, who had helped to develop the machine that comprised some 6,000 thermionic valves and 64 tubes of mercury delay lines, each 1.5m long, that were housed in a vault beneath the main machine and served as the memory system.

A Jewish refugee who had escaped from Berlin with his family and arrived in Britain as a ten-year-old in 1939, Land was sent on a week-long crash course of programming, starting a process in which he would become one of the world's most influential academics on information technology. Yet Land admitted that he wasn't a natural coder and passed the course only because his girlfriend and future wife, Alisa Dicken, a mathematician, helped him with his nightly homework.

He was immediately put to work on writing the programs on a card that would be punched into the computer, which would make systems calculations for payroll. The machine broke down regularly, and programming mistakes would inspire David Caminer, the head of the Leo programming and systems division, to make the sort of interventions that would not be acceptable today. "He was meticulous, but he was also an extremely strict taskmaster. If we didn't do things right, he would throw things at us," Land recalled.

Land was responsible for automation of tea purchasing, keeping account of the company's thousands of tea chests, its distribution and sales. "There was a buzz," he told the British Library's National Life Stories in 2010. "There was not a single day when you didn't do something which had never been done before."



Land in 1967

LEO COMPUTERS SOCIETY AT THE CENTRE FOR COMPUTING HISTORY.

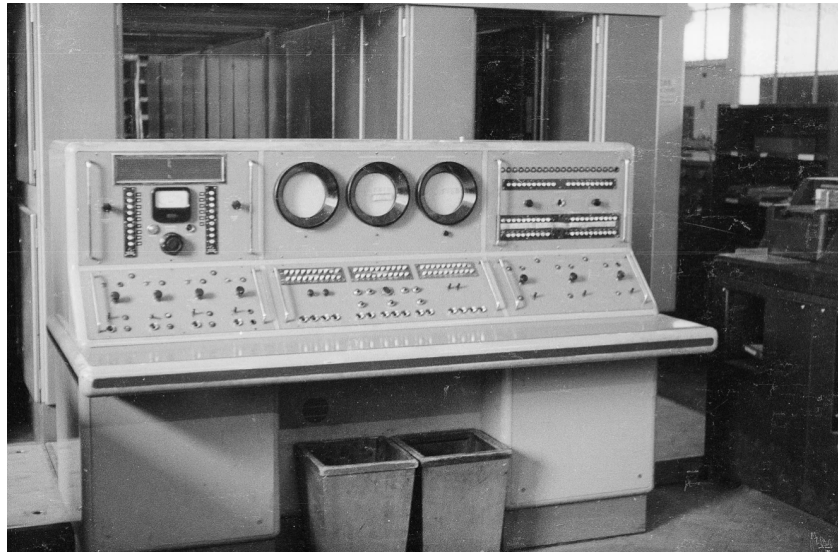
Calculating employees' pay had taken an experienced clerk eight minutes per employee. Leo did the job in one and a half seconds, a big saving for a company that employed about 30,000 people, including its famous waitresses.

Unsurprisingly, many other companies took a keen interest and Land was put in charge of liaising with a growing list that wanted to buy time to use Leo, including Ford, Smith &

Nephew, Renolds Chains, Standard Motors, ICI, Durlachers and British Oxygen. Lyons' subsidiary Leo Computers Ltd was formed in 1954 to manufacture Leo computers for corporate customers. Now a senior consultant, Land was in charge of custom-designing programs for company clients.

Leo computers would remain in use until the early 1980s, but by then Land had long left the company. In 1967 he returned to his alma mater, the London School of Economics, to take up a research fellowship in systems analysis. As the university became one of the first to offer graduate programmes in the fast-expanding field information systems, in 1982 Land became the first British professor in information systems and would lecture in the subject all over the world.

Foreseeing the personal computing revolution, he developed a specialism on the needs of businesses and of individual users and collaborated fruitfully with organisational behaviour specialists, notably Enid Mumford at the Manchester Business School. Much of their work together would heavily influence the sociotechnical design of computers as they became smaller and more personalised.



The console of a Leo

SSPL/GETTY IMAGES

Frank Landsberger was one of identical twin sons born in Berlin in 1928. His father, Louis, ran a prosperous motor accessories company; his mother, Zofia (née Weinberger), was an artist. After the antisemitic violence and destruction of Jewish property on Kristallnacht in November 1938, Louis Landsberger's business and property were "confiscated". Frank said: "My father's business partner actually sold him down the river, stabbed him in the back." The final decision to leave their home country was made after one of Frank's uncles, who had won an Iron Cross for bravery during the First World War, was sent to the Dachau concentration camp in Munich.

Because Louis had business interests in Britain, the Landsberger family emigrated to the country in April 1939. After the outbreak of the Second World War, Louis was labelled an "enemy alien" and spent a year in a prison

camp in the Isle of Man.

Zofia made handicrafts, including handbags and dolls' clothes, which she sold to support the family. She had come to England with a rather old-fashioned view of how Frank and his twin Ralph should look. "We wore knickerbockers because we thought that they were used in England — of course, they weren't." They ditched the knickerbockers and learnt English as quickly as possible.

The two boys won a place at Willesden County Grammar school, which was evacuated to the village of Abbots Langley in Hertfordshire; they would cycle into northwest London on the weekends to see their mother, who was bombed out twice. They also both won a place at the LSE in 1947. Frank graduated in international trade and transport in 1950 but by then had changed his surname to Land on the advice of a careers adviser, and was duly recruited by Lyons in 1952 to work in its statistical office.



An operator using the Leo at Cadby Hall in 1955

DAILY MIRROR/GETTY IMAGES

In 1953 Land married Dicken, who would go on to become a professor in operational research at the LSE. She died in 2021 and he is survived by their children Frances, Richard and Margi.

In 1986 he was appointed to the chair of information management at the London Business School. After retiring from full-time academic work in 1991 he continued to work part-time as an emeritus professor at the LSE for several years. In retirement he collaborated with other early movers on the Leo project to write a book on it.

Having spent his professional life at the vanguard of change and always open to new ideas, he made a tandem parachute jump with his twin brother at the age of 82.

Frank Land OBE, information systems expert, was born on October 24, 1928. He died after an infection on May 16, 2026, aged 97

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Vincent Bodsworth



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Ian Brotherston ⋮
18 JUNE, 2026
Wonderful. What a interesting and great life that undoubtedly benefited many. RIP
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- L

Laurence Wolff ⋮
19 JUNE, 2026
He was born in the same year and the same city as my father, Professor Heinz Wolff. There is a book, Hitler's Gift, describing the astonishing influx of talent into the UK from Nazi persecution of the Jews.
[Reply](#) • [☆ Recommend \(18\)](#) • [Share](#)
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N

Nathan Brown

...

18 JUNE, 2026

Frank's life began almost 100 years ago, just before the rise of the Nazis, and the intense anti-Semitism which gave rise to the Holocaust. Sadly Jew hate has risen again, and the Western nations are failing to stem the hate.

That is some life story. Condolences to the family, and may his memory alw...

See more

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T

Trevor Crow

...

18 JUNE, 2026

Incredible that he escaped from Hitler and brought electronic computing to London.

I was in Liverpool Street railway station in London last year and my daughter and I had lunch at the McDonald's there.

On the concourse is a small statue of two kindertransport children (because the trains from Germa...**See more** *(Edited)*

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J

Jayne Barnhoorn

...

18 JUNE, 2026

Incredible. I love discovering the amazing cleverness and tenacity of people..I hope we still have many in this world made of the same stuff.

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D Daniel Finkelstein STAFF ...

18 JUNE, 2026

A wonderful man and intellectual pioneer, much admired by my family. We all ended up with systems qualifications, a field shaped and led by Professor Land.

(Edited)

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H H Cochrane ...

18 JUNE, 2026

Well said - but have you included a greengrocer's apostrophe in your comment?

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P P Sinclair ...

18 JUNE, 2026

Another story of an immigrant coming to Britain seeking sanctuary from a brutal regime, and how great a contribution he made!

It's a bitter-sweet story because we had the leading computer industry in the world for a while, and then lost it all.

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S S Faith ...

18 JUNE, 2026

J Lyons & co was also founded by German Jewish immigrants the Salmon & Gluckstein families ..

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Peter Bottomley



18 JUNE, 2026

Memory lane: in 1957, I assumed the task of agreeing form outings for the week after 'O' level exams. Our first trip was to learn about the chemistry of beer at Watneys Stag brewery between Victoria Station and Buckingham Palace, seeing Red Barrel and other drinks including cola.

The second was to ...**See more**

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Mike Finlay



18 JUNE, 2026

How sad to learn of Frank's passing. I worked under him at LEO in the early 1960s and he was an inspiring leader.

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Patricia Dennis



18 JUNE, 2026

Of all the sections in this paper, it is Obituaries that I 'enjoy' the most. This week I was struck by interviews with school students, asking them how they would cope with a social media ban. One 15 year old, who admitted to scrolling for ten hours a day, said - gormlessly - he would just stare at...

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Brian Sobey



19 JUNE, 2026

Actually he was a she

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Peter White



18 JUNE, 2026

My Saturday job while studying for A levels was at the local Lyon's corner house. I started washing up in the kitchen, but soon got elevated to clearing tables and working the prolific tea making machine. I learnt a lot about people, my work colleagues, the old age pensioners who nursed one cup of ...

See more

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M**Mary Bleasdale**

...

18 JUNE, 2026

Just to clarify. The programming of these computers. Programs were punched onto either 7 track paper tape or 80 column cards.

When punched onto cards each instruction was punched onto a single card with a program consisting of a stack of cards. These were then assembled into the machines binary inst...

See more[Reply](#) • [☆ Recommend \(9\)](#) • [Share](#)**B****B Handley**

...

18 JUNE, 2026

I remember using both. Errors could be corrected by punching new holes. God forbid that you should drop the stack of cards. My experience was on IBM 360 computers.

[Reply](#) • [☆ Recommend \(8\)](#) • [Share](#)[↪ 2 replies](#)[↪ Show 1 more reply](#)**S****scott smith**

...

18 JUNE, 2026

Wonderful bit of computer history, very interesting about the LEO and for reference, the UNIVAC was the first commercially sold general-purpose electronic computer, also in 1951.

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Geoffrey Coles



18 JUNE, 2026

He and his brother in tandem? Or the two with separate experts?Great story

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Edmund Jones



18 JUNE, 2026

A very clever and far sighted man.
The Midland Bank (as it then was in the early 1960's) used a version of the system originally developed for Lyons .If my memory serves me they were the English Electric Leo Marconi KDP10 and KDF8. They were used to process work in some London branches with of cours...

See more *(Edited)*

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N Hughes



18 JUNE, 2026

Amazing. R.I.P.

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Barry Hawkins



18 JUNE, 2026

An absolute inspiration. Well done, sir

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David Walkington



18 JUNE, 2026

A sad reminder that we once led the world in computing. The rot started to set in when Lyons sold LEO computers on to English Electric in 1963 which itself was swallowed by ICL in 1968. ICL was effectively government run with protected government projects The dead hand government control effecti...

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B Handley



18 JUNE, 2026

Very impressive life and career.

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C Gott



18 JUNE, 2026

The first business computer, where is the UK today?

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Iain Smith



19 JUNE, 2026

ARM is British and is used in nearly every smartphone in the world. Also the Raspberry Pi.

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[↩ 1 reply](#)

P

Peter Morris

...

18 JUNE, 2026

I wonder if he ever crossed paths with Margaret Thatcher who also worked at Cadby Hall in the same period? I had also wondered if he was related to the Polaroid inventor Edwin Land (also a Jew from parents from eastern Europe), but it seems unlikely.

(Edited)

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M

Michael Law

...

19 JUNE, 2026

My thought also...

Wiki has Edwin's parents as Jewish with his father being "Harry Land" from a village near Kyiv.

As you say, it seems unlikely that they were related.

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A

Alex Riley

...

19 JUNE, 2026

He was part of my interview panel at the LSE in January 1965. Every other person in the room was a Professor except for Mr Land who was a mere "Reader in Computer Science" and who was clearly rather looked down upon by those from more established disciplines. How times change!

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J**Javier Pes**

...

18 JUNE, 2026

The Science Museum has part of a LEO I computer in its collection made by J. Lyons. The London Museum has part of a LEO III, the first to be used in the Square Mile. Respect to pioneer engineers and programmers.

[Reply](#) • [☆ Recommend \(1\)](#) • [Share](#)**M****Mary Martin**

...

19 JUNE, 2026

CAV's Leo III was one of the first mainframes that I ever worked on. Way ahead of IBM at the time and it had a version of MVS.

[Reply](#) • [☆ Recommended \(0\)](#) • [Share](#)[↩ 1 reply](#)**C****Charles Gray**

...

18 JUNE, 2026

Striking elegance and quality (first picture above) of the 1920s Lyons in Coventry Street, now a nightmarish waste land of Kurdish souvenir and vape shops.

[Reply](#) • [☆ Recommend \(1\)](#) • [Share](#)



Stephen Guss



19 JUNE, 2026

My career in IT started in 1979 as a trainee cobol programmer and took me all over the world. I was standing on the shoulders of giants such as this. Sir I salute you. What a fabulous life to lead after such hardship. The rise of antisemitism today stands as a stark warning

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Philip Albert



21 JUNE, 2026

Would have liked to read more...
Condolences to family - Interesting chap

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Paul Sav



19 JUNE, 2026

RIP Prof. Frank Land. Very good read. When I joined Plessey's as a graduate engineer I remember the punch cards and the punched fan-fold paper tapes being used as the computer program storage and input media with IBM and Univac based computer systems. I also remember one of the senior engineer show...

See more

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C Goodwin



18 JUNE, 2026

The LEO mark 2 and three were my introduction into the world of Computers. The way in which the data files were set up was for a long time better than the few other products in the market. It was a vey useful start to my knowledge of computers and the way in which applications were designed. I mov...

See more

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A Davis



19 JUNE, 2026

Very good obituary on a great guy. Interesting course from Nazi Germany to Hammersmith. Just goes to show how such pure hates inevitably shoots itself in the foot (and elsewhere).

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Iain Smith



19 JUNE, 2026

Remember very fondly being a postgrad student of Frank's in 1978, and more recently (10 years ago?) his disapproval as he listed the multiple omissions made in a then-recently published history of AI. Can imagine his reaction to the current uninformed hype on AI!

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Andy Diss

18 JUNE, 2026

Did Lyons not bring the Wimpy bar into their portfolio in the 50's, missed off the list under their broolly and some 20 years before the big "M"

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K Dolan

19 JUNE, 2026

Brilliant, RIP you genius.

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