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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

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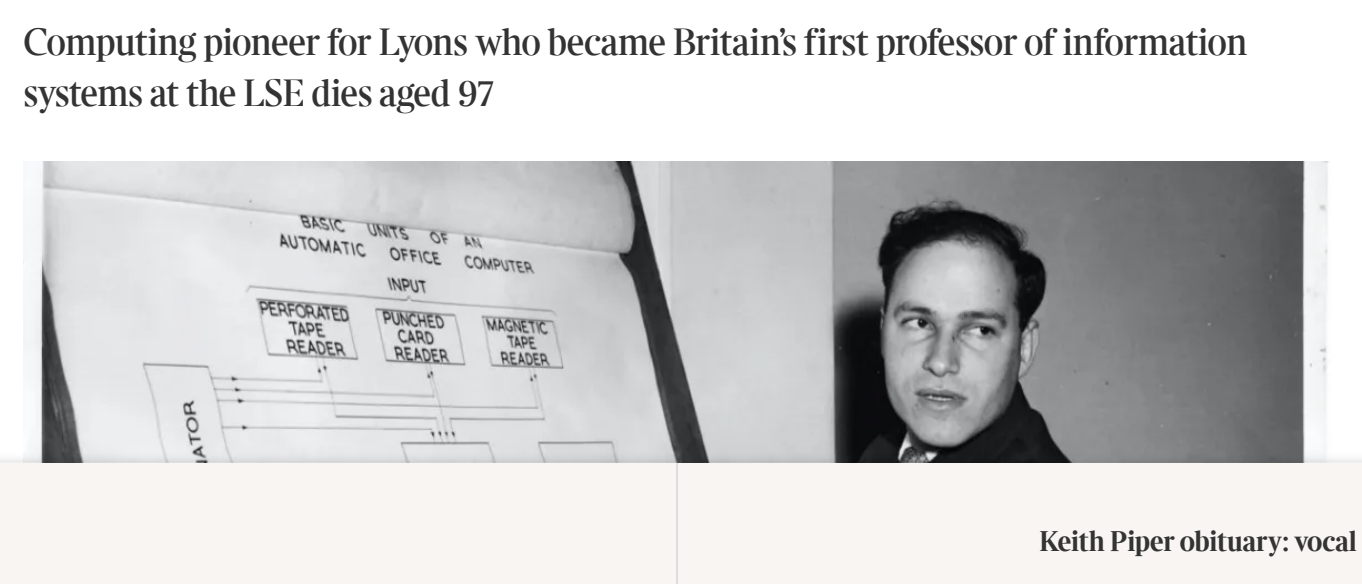

Land demonstrating the workings of the Leo
LEO COMPUTERS SOCIETY AT THE CENTRE FOR COMPUTING HISTORY.

Thursday June 18 2026, 12.01am, The Times

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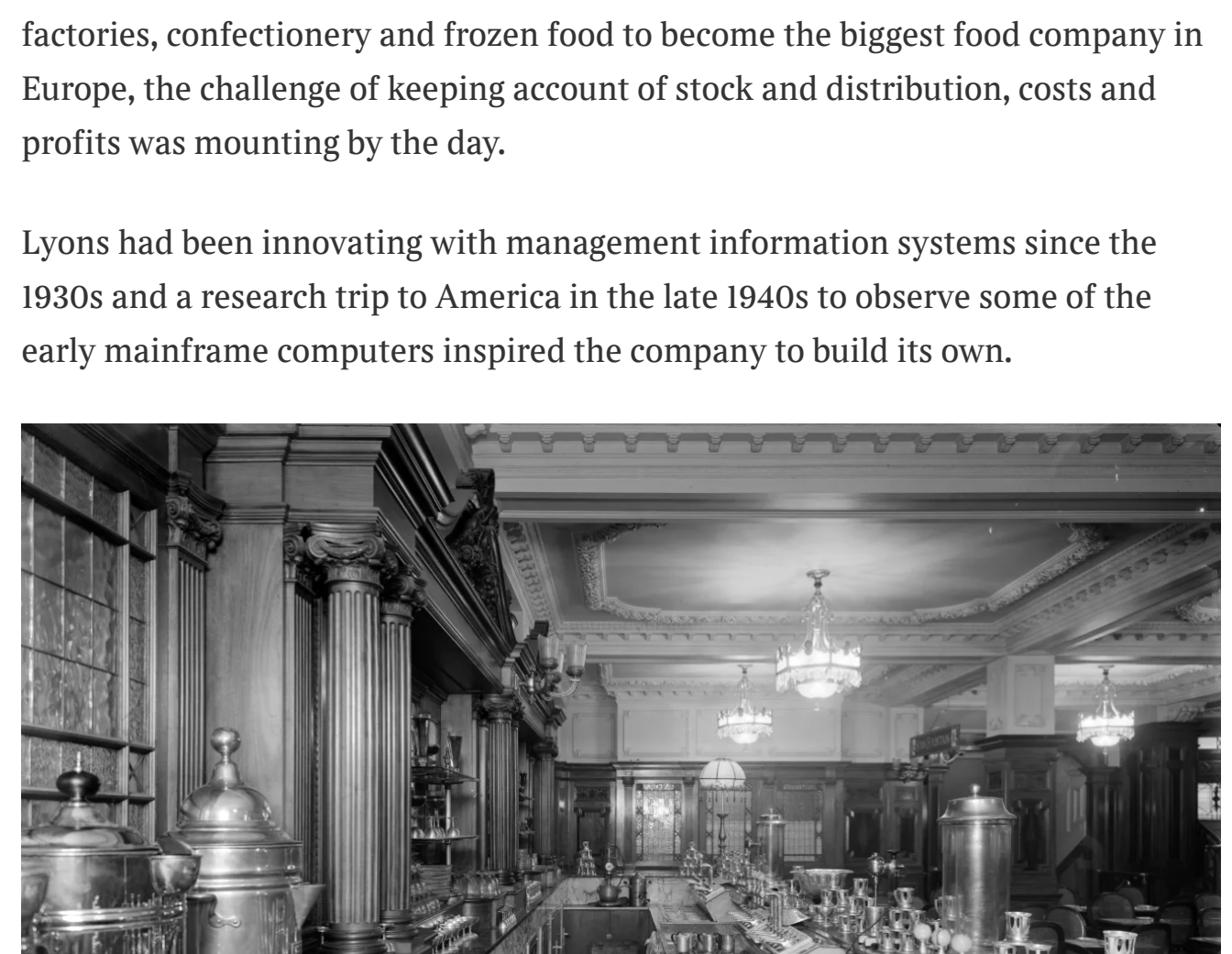
For decades Lyons Corner Houses were a comforting part of the fabric of Britain's towns and cities. Cheerful young waitresses in black-and-white uniforms traversed the vast tea houses at speed while deftly bearing steaming pots of tea and platefuls of buns, serving with a smile to refresh foot-weary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

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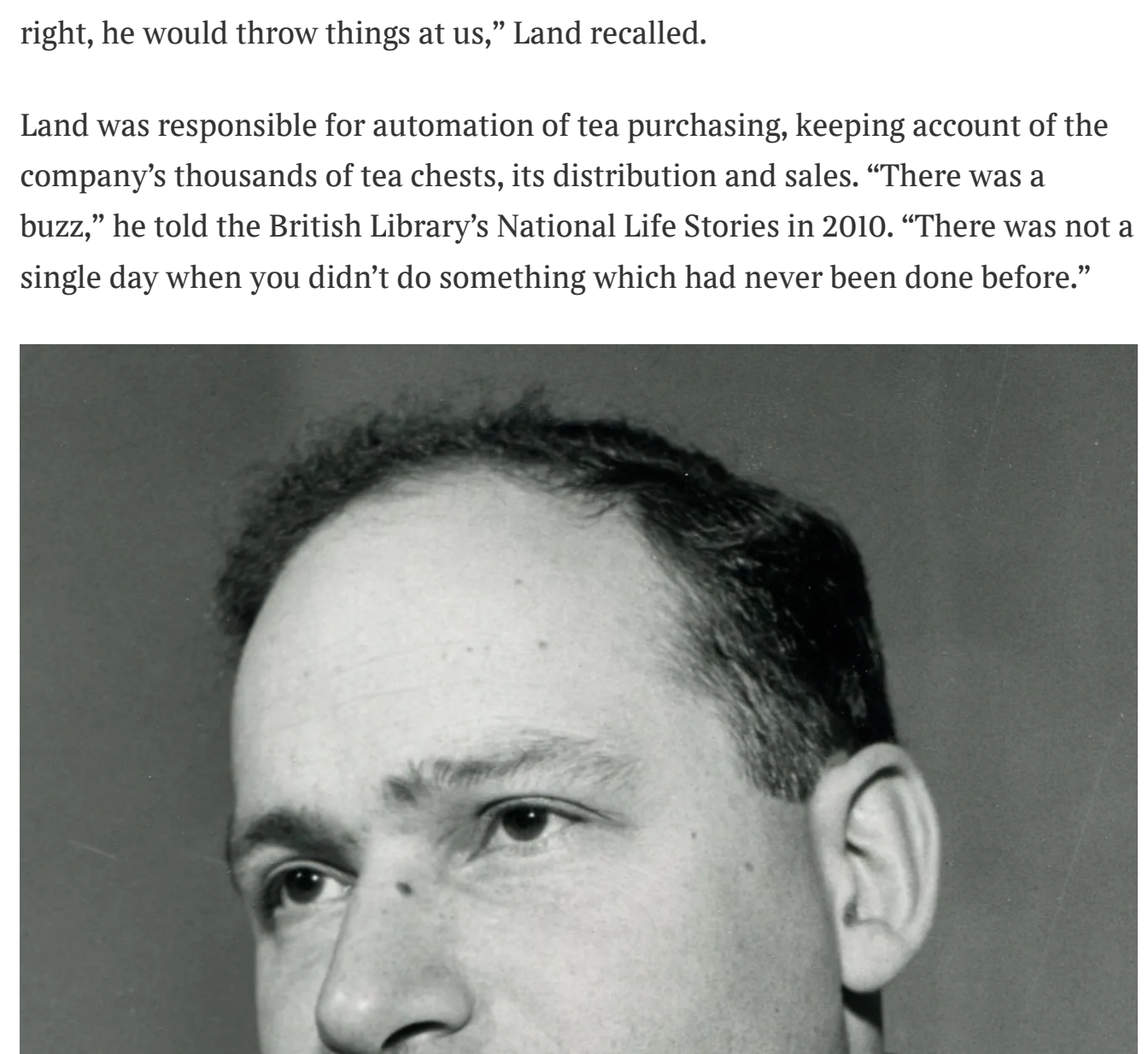
He was immediately put to work on writing the programs on a card that would be punched into the computer, which would make systems calculations for payroll. The machine broke down regularly, and programming mistakes would inspire David Caminer, the head of the Leo programming and systems division, to 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.

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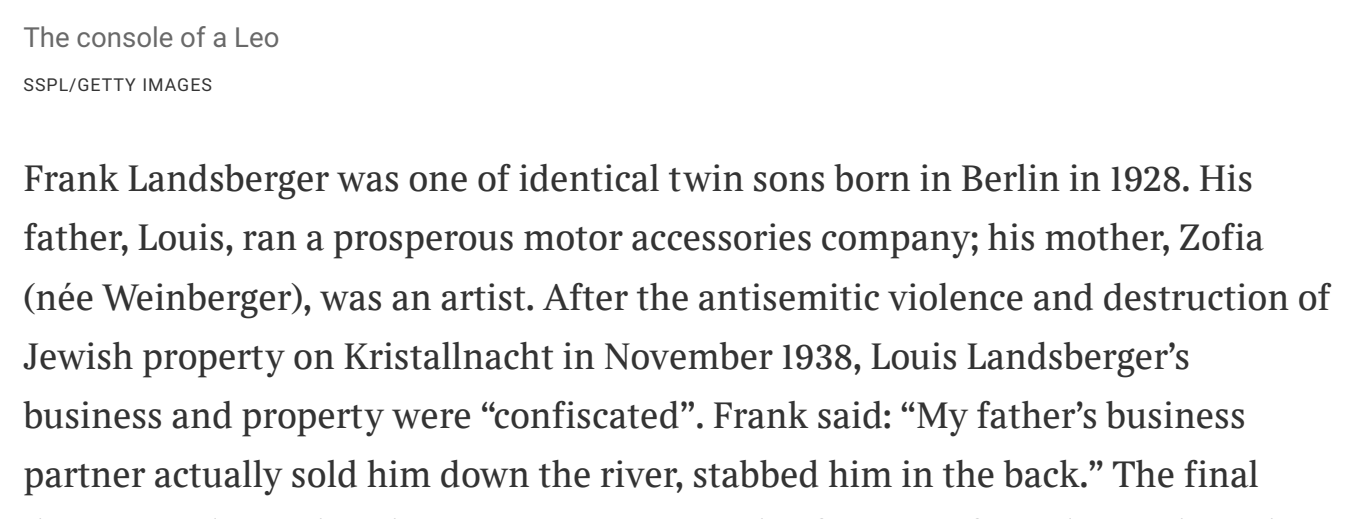
Foreseeing the personal computing revolution, he developed a specialism on the needs of businesses and of individual users and collaborated fruitfully with organisational behaviour specialists, notably Enid Mumford at the Manchester Business School. Much of their work together would heavily influence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

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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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Ian Brotherston
10 HOURS AGO
Wonderful. What a interesting and great life that undoubtedly benefited many. RIP
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Nathan Brown
7 HOURS AGO
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...
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Trevor Crow
2 HOURS AGO
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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Jayne Barnhoorn
6 HOURS AGO
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.
Reply · Recommend (13) · Share

Peter Bottomley
2 HOURS AGO
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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P Sinclair
4 HOURS AGO
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.
Reply · Recommend (4) · Share

S Faith
3 HOURS AGO
J Lyons & co was also founded by German Jewish immigrants the Salmon & Gluckstein families . .
Reply · Recommend (7) · Share

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scott smith
3 HOURS AGO
Wonderful bit of computer history, very very interesting about the LEO and for reference, the UNIVAC was the first commercially sold general-purpose electronic computer, also in 1951.
Reply · Recommend (2) · Share

Geoffrey Coles
2 HOURS AGO
He and his brother in tandem? Or the two with separate experts?Great story
Reply · Recommend (2) · Share

Patricia Dennis
2 HOURS AGO
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...
See more
Reply · Recommend (2) · Share

Daniel Finkelstein STAFF
1 HOUR AGO
A wonderful man and intellectual pioneer, much admired by my family. We all ended up with system's qualifications, a field shaped and led by Professor Land.
Reply · Recommend (1) · Share

Mike Finlay
46 MINUTES AGO
How sad to learn of Frank's passing. I worked under him at LEO in the early 1960s and he was an inspiring leader.
Reply · Recommend (1) · Share

N Hughes
1 HOUR AGO
Amazing. R.I.P.
Reply · Recommend (1) · Share

Peter White
2 HOURS AGO
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 ...
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Charles Gray
2 HOURS AGO
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.
See more
Reply · Recommended (0) · Share

Edmund Jones
13 MINUTES AGO
A very clever and far sighted man.
The Midland Bank as it then 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 course pap...
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Mary Bleasdale
17 MINUTES AGO
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...
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Andy Diss
3 HOURS AGO
Did Lyons not bring the Wimpy bar into their portfolio in the 50's, missed off the list under their brolly and some 20 years before the big "M"
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Barry Hawkins
43 MINUTES AGO
An absolute inspiration. Well done, sir
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