10 The Computer Centre

When we boarded the liner in Bombay on the 28th of July 1967 we had no idea where we would sleep when we arrived in England. We had written to friends in South Croydon who kept a guest house. In our cabin we found a letter from them. Some of their guests were away for ten days, and we could stay in their room during that time.

Just out from Bombay we ran into a typhoon. Being bad sailors, this kept us from the dining facilities for some time. For the first time in our lives we crossed the equator (with due ceremony for the children). After calling in at Durban, Cape Town and Dakar (Senegal) we arrived in Southampton.

A couple of days after, I was up in London looking for a job. SOAS did not have funds to take me on. They suggested the new Computer Centre at University College London, which had recently taken delivery of a new IBM 360/65. The Director was out, and the secretary said they had no posts free, but I said I would call back to ask whether the Director had any suggestions.

Outside the Computer Centre I met a member of a church in West Norwood whom I knew. She said that a couple in her church were wanting to let their house while they went up north. They had wanted to find Christians to occupy the house, and so far had drawn a blank.

When I told the Director of the Computer Centre of my computing experience, he asked for my date of birth. I told him I knew he had no posts free. His reply was, 'Will you or will you not give me a date of birth?' He asked me to go out of the office while he rang some official in College. Then he told me that they would let me know whether they would employ me. Several days later I received confirmation in the post. I would be an Applications Programmer.

We made contact with the couple who wanted to let their house. The day they moved north, and so we could transfer to their house, was the very day when the guests came back to the guest house in South Croydon. The West Norwood house was let unfurnished, and we had no furniture. Friends told us of an organisation that received second-hand furniture and sold it to raise money for missionary work. By visiting their warehouse we were able to furnish the house for around £30. When at the end of the first month at work I received my first salary, we were down to our last £1, but we were not in debt.

Being employed as a programmer felt like being a small boy in charge of a sweet shop. I could learn all I wanted, run what programs I wanted - it was wonderful! Shortly after I began at UCL Computer Centre a senior programmer took me for a walk round the College rectangle, ending up in a coffee shop for a relaxed chat. When he suggested another coffee, I took fright. I said I thought I had better be getting back. After all, I had not yet discovered for whom I was working. I should not have bothered. I was working for him. He was Head of Applications (a post I was soon to fill myself when he moved elsewhere) and the Director had suggested that he have a chat with me to get me to take things a bit more steadily.

We were not able to rent our current house for more than three years. When we had lived there for two years we started looking around. We prayed that God would provide a suitable house for us and our four children. We found a likely house, but one problem we had was that it was not just a suitable house - it was a very good house! This one proved to be the right one for us to buy.

At work I was given a free hand to do pretty well what I wanted to do. This actually resulted in much work which was of benefit to College users of the computer. After giving a talk to the Librarianship Department on how computers can be used for non-numerical work, the head of department suggested to me that I should write these things up as a book. This resulted in the first of my books, *Fortran Techniques*, published by Cambridge University Press, which sold tens of thousands of copies over a good many years.

As a Computer Centre we were called on to teach computer programming. This meant that we put on regular Fortran courses, both for all-comers and also within departments who requested it. This was fast becoming a chore. It was decided that we should put the course on videotape, which would save us having to repeat the same information over and over. I was chosen to present the material. The book accompanying the videotapes, *A London Fortran Course*, published by Athlone Press, sold many tens of thousands of copies, so this must represent the number of people whom I taught to program.

Other books and technical papers on computing were published over the years. I became a Fellow of the British Computer Society and did some editorial work for *The Computer Journal*, the main organ of the BCS. My work in the Computer Centre involved me in supervising a team of applications programmers, writing programs which our users would need, in technical writing to provide information bulletins, and in taking turns on Advisory, a sort of first-aid post to which users coule come with their programming queries.

There were various conferences to attend. I was a delegate to a programming standardisation conference in Washington DC. One conference was in Israel, which gave opportunity to be a tourist as well as an attendee. When I landed at Ben Gurion Airport, I saw a Hertz rent-a-car advertisement. The words were in Hebrew, however. As I had studied Biblical Hebrew, the red and white notice seemed to say, 'rent a chariot!'

In time I was no longer Head of Applications. I was made Consultant. This was a difficult time, as I seemed to have no area of responsibility, and no one consulted me. Then a new division was created in the

Computer Centre, Word Processing, and I was put in charge of it. My staff and I had to install word processing equipment in the non-science departments around the College. Departmental secretaries who had not used much more technology than an electric typewriter soon became expert in word processing. Language departments required extra characters, or even whole alphabets, which I designed and supplied.

A related area which we covered was desk-top publishing. Whereas word processing imitates what a typewriter can do, desk-top publishing enables one to produce similar output to a typesetter. Learning what was needed for the layout of printed books was of great use to me personally, as I was then able to produce my own books this way. The Bible thesaurus was one example of this. The publishers did not have to perform any of the typesetting work, apart from advising me on the design.

After a few months of travelling to and from work by train and tube, I realised that I could avoid the expense and hassle by cycling. I bought a push-bike, and for 16 years I travelled this way, covering about the same distance as twice round the world. I had a seat to work every morning. At the end of that time, since my knees were starting to wear out, I changed to a moped.

There were hardly any hills on my route, but I remember ferocious headwinds, drenching downpours and punctures to be mended by the side of the road. One evening I was at the back of the house, seeing to the chain, my hands covered with filthy grease. A young man selling roofing treatment knocked at the front door. When Jean opened it, he asked to speak to her husband as well. 'Oh, he's repairing his bike, and he's black,' Jean told him. The young man bridled. 'I'm not a racist!' he said indignantly.

I finally retired from the Computer Centre in 1992. Over the years I had worked there I had seen many developments, not least the emergence of the personal computer. In retirement I could have my own computer at home, producing quality typesetting not dreamed of in my early days.

And what about computer grammar analysis, the dream which had led me into computing in the first place? Every now and then through the years I took up the problem again. Each time I made a tiny amount of progress, and each time ran up against seemingly insurmountable problems. I am still doing the same. Maybe one of these days . . .