

Working life memories and early days of computing in Hull

On leaving school in Southwell, Nottinghamshire, where we lived at that time, Hull became familiar to me for a few years as I graduated from Hull University with a maths degree in 1961. My first job after graduating was with ICI Fibres Division in Teesside working mainly on quality control schemes for the Terylene works – that dates me! Even at that time we were using a mainframe computer housed in a very large office for much of our work.

In the next few years I completed further studies and exams in statistics and various statistical methodologies and eventually qualified as a fully-fledged statistician. During this time I held one further post in the London area before moving to work at a state aided Research Institute in Sussex in 1965, which specialised in glasshouse crops. Here I was involved in the design and analysis of experiments in plant pathology, entomology and crop protection. Most of the analyses were carried out using a large Ferranti Orion computer located at Rothamsted Experimental Station in Hertfordshire, as we didn't have a suitable computer on site. Computer code was prepared on tape by a team of girls who were also very proficient in using the larger calculating machines available at that time – Marchant and Monroe models spring to mind. Mainly we used a software package called Genstat which was first developed at Rothamsted - where the seeds of modern statistics were sown. However it was a slow process for us as the reels of tape were sent by post to Rothamsted and it could be several days before the results were available.

In 1971 we (by then I was married with a family!) moved to Hull as I accepted a post at Reckitt & Colman in Dansom Lane in the Statistical Services Dept., providing a service to the various departments and laboratories. Upon divisionalisation in the mid-1970's I worked in the Pharmaceutical Division with a change of emphasis as more of the work was involved in the design and analysis of laboratory studies and clinical trials using Statistical Analysis Software (SAS) which is still in use today – though much enhanced. Report writing also played a large part in the job as the different phase studies required approval from various world authorities. I well remember that the US Food & Drug Administration regulations were always meticulous and time-consuming to meet – though I note that President Trump can seem to sidestep them when he wants to now!

Now for a slight digression. When I was interviewed for this job the Head of Statistical Services Dept. was a Mr Bill Pridmore who became my mentor and I got to know him well. My wife Joan & I joined Swanland U3A in about 2015 and I immediately joined the Family History Group as it is a keen interest of mine. Soon after joining, a presentation was given by one of our members,

Sue Smart – who I'm sure many of you will know. She talked about her own family history and I soon discovered that she was the daughter of the aforementioned Bill Pridmore – my boss, what a coincidence! When Bill moved on prior to his retirement I was appointed to succeed him and remained with Reckitt & Colman until 1995. I then did some further consultancy work from home for a few final years before retiring – most of it for Reckitt's!

It's my observation that Statisticians are currently receiving more publicity during this Covid epidemic than I can ever recall – both good and bad. But I must say that I found it to be a most interesting career and the role it plays in so many areas of life I think is not always well understood.

As convenor of our Science & Technology Group you can imagine that I was keen to arrange a visit to Reckitt Benckiser as it now is – this was following a merger between Reckitt & Colman plc and the Dutch company Benckiser NV in December 1999. I eventually managed to arrange this, but it took a while to find the right contact! So on 14th February this year twenty-six of our group visited the newly opened Science & Innovation Centre at Dansom Lane which I think proved to be a very interesting visit. Apologies to those of you who would have liked to join us but unfortunately our allocation was filled very quickly. For four of us in the group it was a particularly interesting and nostalgic visit as I discovered that we had all worked for Reckitt & Colman at some time previously.

Finally, I thought you may be interested in the attached video which Sue Smart passed on to me. The film documents the installation of the first National Elliott 405 computer at Reckitt & Sons in Hull in 1959 - and her father is featured. I also attach some background information for the film, précised from the rather lengthy notes, which I hope will make interesting reading. For those of you who have visited the Dansom Lane site before, I'm sure you will recognise some of the buildings. The video is only about 14 minutes long so do have a look at it – I'm sure it will make you smile as you see something of the sheer size of computers then compared with what is available to us today. The progress made during our lifetime is unbelievable.

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