

# Events and Sightings

**Mary Croarken**

*National Maritime Museum, Greenwich*

**Nathan Ensmenger**

*University of Pennsylvania*

---

## **The 2001 LEO Jubilee**

The veterans of LEO gathered in November 2001 and celebrated 50 years of business computing: the golden jubilee of the world's first business computer. LEO (Lyons Electronic Office) began operation in November 1951. Lyons was a gigantic British chain of teashops and had developed a corporate spirit that valued independence and self-reliance. When they needed reliable and efficient delivery vans they built their own, and when they needed better business machinery, they also built their own. In launching the first business computer—the LEO I—they were years ahead of the business machine industry. LEO later developed into a separate business line and a separate company that manufactured LEO computers and operated LEO service bureaus.

The jubilee celebration was held in the ancient Guildhall of The City of London under the auspices of the Worshipful Company of Information Technologists. This company is the guild for computing (granted Livery status in 1992) and ranked now among the other London guilds, some of which date from the 14th century.

The LEO originators were a surprisingly youthful bunch, old, but not that old. They have more in common with recently graduated computing students than pensioners. They were excited when they spoke of computing. The program of the two-day jubilee conference reflected continuing interests. Only three sessions—two lectures and one panel discussion—were predominantly historical. The panel considered the question, What have we learned in 50 years? David Mowery lectured under the title “LEO to Linux: An Economic Historian's Perspective on the Development of IT and Its Applications in the Business World.”

David Caminer delivered the Institute of Electrical Engineers (IEE) Pinkerton Lecture as part of the LEO jubilee, entitled “LEO and the Computer Revolution.” Caminer is distinguished as both the first systems and programming manager and the first systems analyst to chart a routine business computer job (for LEO, naturally). Caminer's lecture sparked a lively debate over the history of commercial leadership of British and American computing. Caminer charged that British computing had lost the lead and had a lot of catching up to do. Participants extolled the elegance of LEO systems software written in only a few weeks by a few programmers (in contrast to the

later massive software developments described by Frederick Brooks in *Mythical Man Month*). Others lamented the 1963 English Electric merger that spelled the demise of the LEO production line. In a closing comment, Frank Land highlighted the remarkable achievement represented by LEO in fundamental learning about business computing and described how this had in no way been diminished by the computing shake-out of the past decade.

It is often said that in war, the winner writes the history. So also might it be said about commercial competition—the winner owns history. LEO was eclipsed by IBM's 1964 introduction of the OS/360 operating system and their family of computers that provided a common software environment across differing computer scales. The development of the OS/360 cost \$5 billion and required the hiring of 60,000 new employees and the construction of five new plants, but it helped IBM eclipse its competitors, including both LEO and such American electronics giants as RCA and General Electric. As a result, the last LEO 326 was switched off in the British Post Office in 1981.

The LEO jubilee Web site is <http://is.lse.ac.uk/leo/> and photographs of LEO can be viewed at <http://www.leo-computers.org.uk>.

Richard Baskerville  
*Georgia State University*  
[baskerville@acm.org](mailto:baskerville@acm.org)

## **Electronic abacus**

In its 8 December 2001 online edition, *The Economist* reprinted an article, “Electronic Abacus,” from its 12 March 1954 issue. The article described the introduction of a “full-size electronic computer” into the main office of J. Lyons, then Britain's most famous caterer and a leading manufacturer of foods and beverages. The article is a charming and informative historical snapshot, encapsulating the then common business attitudes toward computing.

The writer uses the terms “thinking robots,” “electronic brains,” and “some measure of intelligence,” and marvels at the speed of the pulses, the number of valves (5,000), and the unrevealed cost (£100,000). He wonders whether this is an expensive experiment or a major revolution in business methods. Coping with the idiosyncrasies of British currency is mentioned as one of the justifications for using elec-