

# Bye bye big blue

THE SALE OF IBM'S PERSONAL COMPUTER BUSINESS PROMPTS A LOOK BACK IN SORROW AT AN EARLY FX SYSTEM IMPLEMENTATION.

I was shocked to read last year that IBM was selling its personal computer business to a Chinese company, Lenovo, for \$1.75bn. To me, this was more of a shock than if Unilever had announced that it was going to stop making soap powders, or Boeing making aeroplanes. The IBM PC was part of my early life.

Most of my readers are probably too young to remember the days before the PC. I can go all the way back to the 1960s. In the 1960s, I can remember the army of girls who punched holes in cards, which then were passed to another army who verified that the holes had been punched in the right place but, sadly, punchers and verifiers have joined the list of professions, headed by comptometer operators, whose skills are no longer needed. By the 1970s, computers had moved into their own buildings, with attached electricity sub-stations, and air-conditioning units, and security locks on the door. I was never allowed to know the code that would open the door, but I was told that inside the room were big boxes as large as double wardrobes – though I have been told that they could have been as large as double-decker buses in the 1950s – with winking red lights, and wheels of magnetic tape whirring away.

Back then, IBM was supreme. A parking space would be reserved beside the front door for the IBM salesman. No-one, it was said, had ever lost his job for buying IBM, and, in case anyone dared to defy that truth and move from the IBM fold, legend had it that his Chairman could expect to receive a letter from the IBM Chairman questioning whether the straying computer manager had enough knowledge of DP – as we used to call IT back then – to continue to be employed by the company.

Rivals of IBM began to bring out mini-computers. These were efficient, and cheaper, and no larger than a single wardrobe. The single wardrobes began to chip away at the IBM double wardrobe market share, but, sensationally, IBM fought back by launching its first PC in 1981. (At this point, I would refer you to the many histories of Microsoft which will tell you how Bill Gates managed to get IBM to load his PC-DOS software onto their PC, and how, after that start, he became the richest man in the world – until he decided to give most of his money away to good causes.)

This is when I come into the story. Widgets had run a FX system centrally for years, built around a metal filing cabinet. I had been transferred to Widgets Treasury, a burnt-out accountant, an ex-controller, whose Small Fire Extinguisher Sub-Division had been shot from under him – not before time, all rational folk would say, for it

had been ailing for years. My immediate task was to transfer the contents of the metal filing cabinet onto a computer. I made many, ever-more-depressing, journeys down to London to try to find a system that would fit.

The hardware choices lowered my spirits. The offerings were either single or double wardrobes, or a telephone link to a giant machine over the mountains and far, far away. I decided that what we needed was an IBM PC, which had just been launched on the UK market. The cost would not break Widgets, but, when we opened the box and had cleared away the polystyrene chips and switched it on, it just sat there blinking away. What I need, I thought, is some FX software.

The software choices were even more depressing. I suppose that nowadays shoppers can buy an FX system from the shelves at Tesco, or pick one up from a car boot sale. Back then, there was no such thing as a standard FX system, and all that the software houses could offer was a bespoke package, costing the price of a three-bedroom house. The price was so ridiculous that I decided that I could write the system myself. Remember that I was just a burned-out accountant, completely ignorant of software. I had heard of Visicalc, and I had tapped a few lines of Basic into the Commodore in my son's bedroom, but I was doubtful whether I could squeeze my FX system into either Visicalc or Basic.

By then, I had few friends left in the Widgets Computer Centre, since it would take a brave man to give even a tolerant smile to a rank amateur like myself, who was still thinking of handling a task best left to the professionals. I had one remaining friend, who read the computer magazines, and who had come across a review of a piece of software called Dbasell, which was part database and part programming language. He thought that it sounded promising. Dbasell was made by a company called Ashton-Tate, which sounded a reassuringly aristocratic name, such as might be borne by one of Prince Harry's young fillies. (I have later learned that the company name was derived from the name of its founder, Charlie Tate, and his pet parrot, Ashton.)

We bought a copy of Dbasell, which was remarkably cheap, and with it loaded onto my IBM PC, I built with my bare hands the finest FX system the world has ever seen. (Well, at that time it was the finest FX system.) Dbasell looks as though it has now joined the list of failed software ventures. The company was taken over... and parts were sold... and the name was changed... and Windows came along. Dbasell seems dead, and with the IBM PC now being sold to the Chinese, my best years have vanished with them. J.F.

