Feb. 27th

Ferranti

Feb. 27, 1905

Ferranti was a UK electrical engineering firm that operated for over a century from 1885 until it went bankrupt in 1993.

Today was a far from happy one for Sebastian Ziani de Ferranti, the major shareholder, as the company was restructured, following years of losses, and his role in the business was reduced to mostly that of a technical advisor.

In the late 1940's, Ferranti (the company) began collaborating with various UK universities to develop computers. Their first effort, with the University of Manchester, was the Ferranti Mark 1, which was delivered on [Feb 12] 1951. At the time, Feerranti's computer division operated out of a former steam train factory in West Gorton, Manchester.

The Pegasus, introduced in March 1956, was Ferranti's most popular vacuum tube system, (38 units were sold) due to its noted reliability and ease of use. The hardware was developed by Bill Elliott, and software by Christopher Strachey [Nov 16]. Pegasus number 25 held pride of place for many years in the computing gallery at the Science Museum in London. It was regularly demoed until 2009 when it developed a severe electrical fault, and was retired in early 2014. It held the title of the world's oldest computer until 2012, when the WITCH [April 00] took its place.

In the early 1960's, Ferranti began work on a completely new design, the Atlas [Dec 7]. A version for the University of Cambridge's Mathematical Lab became the Titan (aka Atlas 2) [Feb 9], and was the mainstay of scientific computing at Cambridge for nearly eight years.

Ferranti's computing division was merged into International Computers and Tabulators (ICT) in 1963, and then into the Large Systems Division of ICL [July 9] in 1968.

Helmut Hölzer

Born: Feb 27, 1912;

Bad Liebenstein, Germany
Died: Oct. 12, 1996

At the start of 1942, Hölzer completed the first fully electronic general-purpose analog computer, based on his electronic integrator and differentiator from 1935 [Jan 2; July 23]. The analog elements included multipliers, dividers, and square root function generators.

At the time, Hölzer was head of the radio guidance beam division developing rockets at Peenemünde. At first, there was considerable opposition to him "wasting" his time on the computer, and he worked on it in secret. After its completion, views changed, and it was soon being used by many departments at Peenemünde; for example, to calculate V-2 rocket trajectories.

Although Hölzer's was the first electronic analog computer, there were earlier digital machines: the Atanasoff-Berry computer [Jan 15] and Konrad Zuse's Z3 [May 12] both date from 1941.

Helmut Hölzer. NASA.

After the war, Hölzer came to the US as part of Operation Paperclip, along with Wernher von Braun and most of the V-2 rocket team. In the early 1960's, Hölzer was director of the Computation Division at NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, which coincidentally hosted a large analog computing center.

It's most forgotten now, but until the 1970's, analog computers were the only systems fast enough for real time simulation of dynamic systems [March 21], especially in the aerospace field.

Grady Booch

Born: Feb. 27, 1955;

USA

Booch developed the Unified Modeling Language (UML) with Ivar Jacobson and James Rumbaugh in the 1990's. This was preceded by the Booch software development method, which he outlined in his book "Object Oriented Analysis and Design".

Booch has also served on the board of the Computer History Museum [Sept 24] where he's focused on software preservation, and conducted numerous illuminating interviews with computing veterans.

A quote: "The class Dog is functionally cohesive if its semantics embrace the behavior of a dog, the whole dog, and nothing but the dog."

Sir Jonathan Paul (Jony) Ive

Born: Feb. 27, 1967;

Chingford, UK

Ive's involvement with Apple began with the design of a new laptop's case, which led him to be hired to design the look of the second-generation Newton MessagePad [Aug 3]. He took up residence in a hotel near the factory in Taiwan where the

Newton was being made in order to troubleshoot any manufacturing problems.

Ive played a prominent role in the design of the limited-edition Twentieth Anniversary Macintosh (aka TAM [March 20]), appearing as the "talking head" in its promo video.

After Jobs' return to Apple [Sept 16], Ive became the Senior Vice President of Industrial Design, and his team's first assignment was the iMac [May 6]. Success followed success, including the Power Mac G4 Cube [July 19], iPod [Oct 23], iPhone [Jan 9], and iPad [April 3].

In 2013 the BBC's children's TV show "Blue Peter" awarded Ive a gold Blue Peter badge, a singular honor since only 1,000 have ever been presented; the previous year he'd been knighted.

As a student, Ive was originally enrolled at the Royal College of Art (RCA) in London, but he described the environment as off-putting: "The classes were full of students making vroom! vroom! noises as they drew". Ive moved to study industrial design in Newcastle.

In 2017, Ive was appointed Chancellor of the RCA, and said at the time: "I am thrilled to formalize my relationship with the RCA, given the profound influence the college has had on so many of the artists and designers that I admire." The suggestion that he made "vroom!, vroom!" noises during the ceremony is unfounded.

IBM 7950 HARVEST

Feb. 27, 1976

The one-of-a-kind IBM 7950 HARVEST supercomputer ceased operation after 14 years of service at the National Security Agency (NSA) [Oct 24].

One of the machine's tasks was to search text for keywords on a watch list. It was eminently suited for this, being able to scan over seven million documents for over 7,000 keywords in under four hours.

HARVEST was specially designed by James H. Pomerene. A later NSA-conducted evaluation found that it outperformed commercially available machines by a factor of 50 to 200, depending

on the task.

HARVEST was attached to an IBM 7030 (aka STRETCH [April 26]) to add a small number of instructions to that machine. In this respect, it performed a similar role to today's math co-processors, but was about twice as big as the entire 7030.

Another innovative feature of HARVEST was its IBM 7955 tape library, known as Tractor Tape or TRACTOR. TRACTOR ran six tape drives that employed robotic arms to mount and unmount its large tapes cartridges. Each one was 11 inches high, 24 inches long, three inches wide, and weighed 15 pounds. TRACTOR could swap one cartridge for another in just 18 seconds, and could read two tapes simultaneously while writing to a third.

A HARVEST tape cartridge. NSA.

Sadly, HARVEST's novel hardware forced its early retirement because when parts wore out, no replacements were available.

Harvard Graphics Released

Feb. 27, 1986

Software Publishing Corp.'s (SPC) "Harvard Graphics" was an extremely popular graphics and presentation program for MS-DOS [Aug 12] in the late 1980's, until Microsoft's PowerPoint [April 20] conquered all on MS Windows. Like many MS-DOS stalwarts, Harvard Graphics jumped to Windows too late.

It was the first presentation program to include text, graphs, and charts. For example, you could take data from Lotus 1-2-3 [Jan 26], mix it with text, and produce a vector-based presentation that looked good on a printer or plotter.

During the height of its popularity, SPC was forced to run disclaimers explaining that "Harvard Graphics" had nothing to do with the university of the same name.

CompUSA

Feb. 27, 2007

CompUSA was a reseller of computer gear and services which peaked in the early 1990's with sales of over $2 billion. It was the standard "big box" store, a business model that didn't survive long into the 21st century.

The company was founded in 1984 as "Soft Warehouse" by Errol Jacobson and Michael Henochowicz, and began its national expansion in 1985, with a megastore in Atlanta. In 1998 it bought one of its biggest competitors, "Computer City", a sister company of RadioShack (another victim of modern times) [Feb 2].

On this day, CompUSA announced that it was closing 126 retail stores and restructuring its remaining 103 stores. In Dec., its current owner, Grupo Carso, a Mexican conglomerate, announced that

the remaining locations were to be liquidated or sold.