

£70K LITTLE BROTHER SOON NEEDS MORE MEMORY

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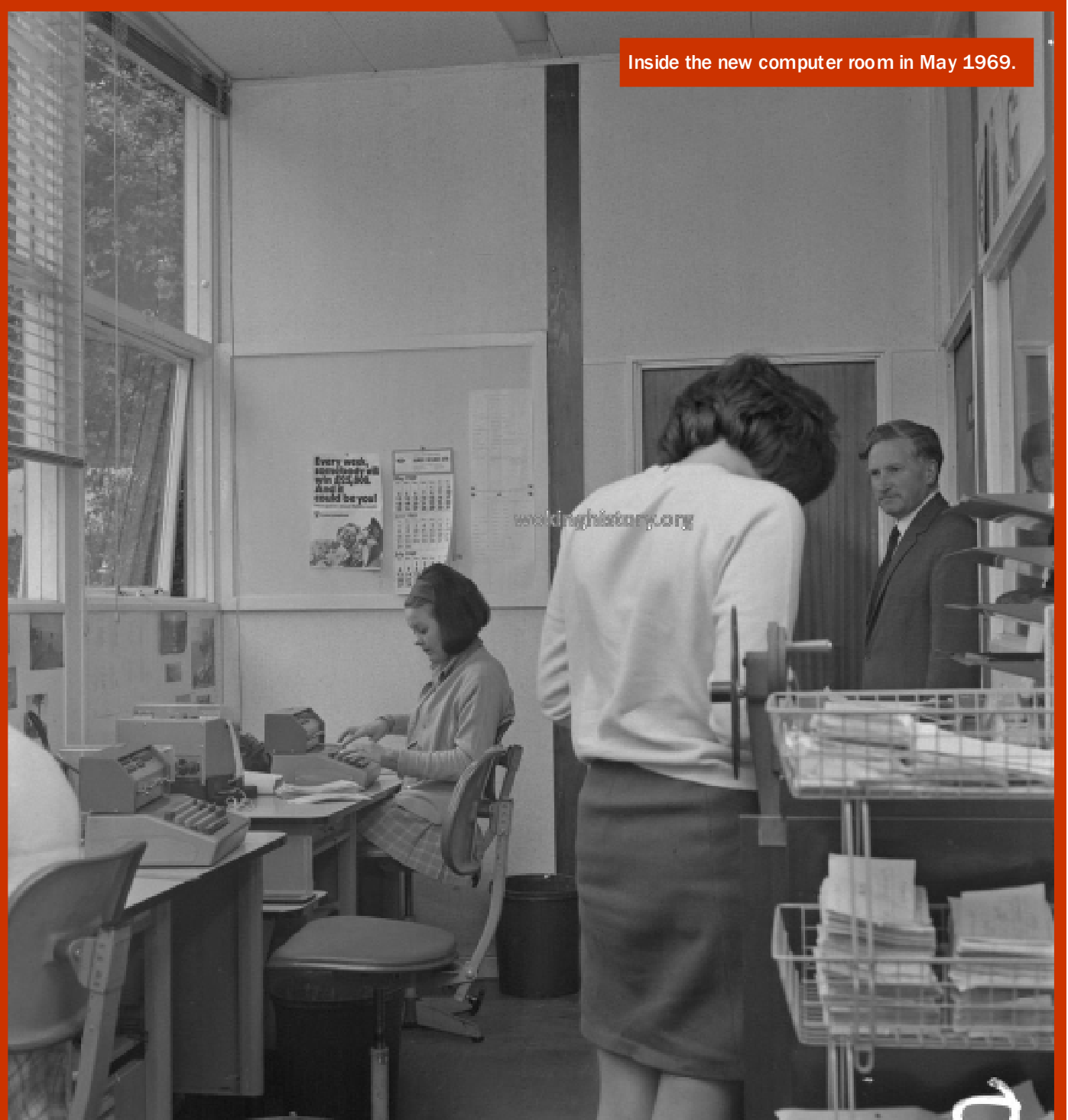


Woking Council Offices in York Road.

In January 1966 a Ministry of Labour survey revealed that 'in January 1964 there were about 600 computers in use in the country, with about 400 more on order' with numbers predicted to rise 'to at least 6,000 by January 1974'. But as the local press at the time noted, the spread of computers would be limited because of their cost - 'even most of the largest firms in the Guildford area are too small for the use of a computer to be economical', they claimed and computers would only be found in large multi-national companies, or government bodies such as the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, whose office in Guildford had recently installed four machines, with further mechanisation planned.

But they were not the only ones with an eye to the future. In February 1966 Woking Urban District Council announced they were considering 'buying, leasing or renting a computer costing £49,250' which would employ four operators and need '1,100 square feet of floor space'.

The computer, to be supplied by International Computers and Tabulators Ltd (ICT), could either be leased for five years at a cost of £11,524 annually (plus a maintenance fee of £1,668 per annum); bought over the same period for £11,769 (plus the annual maintenance fee); or rented for six years at £13,386 (although in the case of the latter, ICT would no longer offer a 'trade-in' of £1,420 for the Treasurers Department's old accounting equipment).



Inside the new computer room in May 1969.



Things got quite heated at the council meeting held to discuss the various options when Cllr Coombs (who along with Cllr Boorman was described as 'electronics experts') claimed that a cheaper and more advance International Business Machines (IBM) computer would be a better buy. The IBM machine had already been rejected at an earlier meeting of the council and when Cllr Mrs Collard (Labour, Central Ward), apparently rose to point out that fact, she made the mistake of starting her comment with the words 'I don't understand what Mr Coombs is saying...', to which Cllr Coombs (Conservative, Byfleet), angrily replied 'you never understand anything I say! You are a nit!'

After a brief moment of stunned silence the chamber apparently erupted into accusation and counter-accusation, with the member for Byfleet eventually being persuaded to 'withdraw his remark' – and a motion to buy the cheaper IBM machine lost by twenty votes to thirteen.

For those of you interested in such things, the state of the art new 'ICT 1901' that the council were looking to buy apparently included 'a central processing unit with just over 8,000 words of core storage, linked to a console typewriter which gives the computer instructions, a paper tape reader which reads 300 characters per second, a line printer that prints 300 lines a minute, and four magnetic tapes.'

But although they had decided what to buy, they still hadn't decided how to buy the machine, until May that year when the Treasurer of Woking Council informed the committee that the price was set to rise by £2,000 on the 1st June - the machine finally being delivered to the council offices in June 1967 at a cost of £56,400!

That, of course, was just for the machine, which had to be housed in a completely new building

– a 'cedar wood extension' with air conditioning designed to keep the double-glazed unit at 'a constant temperature of around 70 degrees and humidity in the region of 50 per cent'. That cost £6,500, which together with training and other ancillary costs, meant the original £49,250 machine had actually cost almost £70,000 to install.

To add insult to injury it was not long before it was found that it needed upgrading, as the 8,000 word 'immediate access store' was soon found to be not enough. In November 1969 under the headline 'Little Brother needs bigger memory' it was noted that to double the computer's memory to 16k would cost an extra £9,500, with a faster printer (1,350 lines per minute) adding an extra £17,000 to the bill.

When these pictures were taken in May 1969 progress had certainly come to Woking Council – but at quite a price!

