Computing at York: The Early Years

Peter Roberts reminisces...

Also in this Issue:

Using ColdFusion with the Data Warehouse
Staff and Graduate Training Courses
Managed Learning Environments
Windows 95 News
From the Editor

The cover stars might look like spin driers, but they’re actually disk drives. On page 6 Peter Roberts, now semi-retired, recalls the introduction of Computing to the University of York in the 1970s.

Managed Learning Environments, which provide the facilities for remote learning are attracting an increasing amount of interest within the University. On page 5 Debra Fayter gives an update on the progress of the evaluation of Web CT and Blackboard.

Joanne Casey

Keynotes on the web

Back copies of Keynotes can be found at: http://www.york.ac.uk/services/cserv/offdocs/keynotes/
The Computing Service building, including the Information Desk and entrance lobby, will be closed on Good Friday (13 April), Easter Monday (16 April), the Early May Bank Holiday (7 May) and the Late May Bank Holiday (28 May). All computer systems, including the PCs and printers in the colleges, will be available as for a normal weekend.

It is our belief that the pigeon holes in the entrance lobby to the Computing Service are no longer used outside normal hours. In consultation with the University Security Manager we are looking to relocate the pigeon holes and lock the external door. If you do still require this service when the main building is closed, would you please discuss your requirements with Brian Souter, tel 3814 or e-mail bs1.

The York Millennium Volunteers project is both a city wide initiative and part of a national campaign, designed to help anyone aged 16-24 to share their skills, ideas, time and energies with their community. Participants may earn nationally recognised certificates for giving 100 or 200 hours to community work over a period of a year.

Of course, many voluntary organisations require help with their computing needs. Therefore Millennium Volunteers has linked up with ILIAD for the Workplace in the hope of placing some of our students. We hope that this will encourage students to enrol for our courses and to take part in the project.

Congratulations to Robert Demaine for his success in his D Phil viva. His thesis, entitled “Individual and Institution in the Musical Life of Leeds, 1900-1914”, is the result of six years of study in the Music Department as an antidote to computing, and also illustrates the wide range of backgrounds of the staff of the Computing Service. As Head of Infrastructure, Robert is deeply involved with technology, but it is good that excellence in a wide range of disciplines, traditionally associated with the Renaissance, is still possible today.

A total of 45 problems were detailed, an average of 3 per user over the course of a week (5 working days in most cases). Nearly half of these problems were concerned with the internet and email, and it is apparent that some of these were outside our control. Computing Service staff are looking at the results which we hope will enable us to get a clearer view of our users’ experiences of computing.

Once again we have a programme of basic and intermediate courses scheduled for the summer term. All course registration will be done by the Computing Service Information Desk and may be carried out by internal mail, by phone (ext 3838), by email, or in person (9am-5.15pm Mon-Thurs, 9am-4.15pm Fri) up to the end of the Friday preceding the course, when courses will be confirmed or cancelled and participants informed. When registering:

Make sure that you are registered as a Computing Service user and know your username and password.

Make sure that you fulfil the prerequisites for the course.

If after registering, you find that you cannot attend, please let us know. We may be able to reassign your place to someone else.
Windows 95 news

John Robinson gives answers to common problems

---

Message of the Day display

The application that displays the message of the day on supported Windows 95 PCs was replaced over the Christmas vacation. The new application is in fact a mini-web-browser, so that one application can show both the urgent notices (planned maintenance, etc) and longer news items. The application is better sized and has scroll bars, thus making reading the text of messages much easier. Please do read these messages, as they are a primary means of letting you know about restrictions (and improvements!) to the service.

Self-help, and helping us help you, when you have problems

We are well aware that campus computer use is a 24/7 activity (to use the jargon), but the Computing Service is only staffed during office hours. We have tried to provide access to on-line facilities to help you get over problems whenever they occur. Here are some of the things you can do:

Search YorkWeb

There is a search engine that covers the University’s web pages and a number of departmental pages (including the Computing Service at: http://www.york.ac.uk/services/cserv) have search engines restricted to their own contents. Either of these can help with common problems, such as getting the correct margins for footnotes in a WordPerfect document. Just start Netscape, go to the University or Computing Service home page and click the Search button on the toolbar near the bottom of the screen. Type ‘footnote margins’ into the Search For box, and press Enter. You will be shown a summary of a number of likely web pages and can click on the most useful looking ones to get the answer you want. This is often quicker than following the ‘proper channels’ of Start | Programs | Text Processing | !Help and Documentation | WordPerfect 8/9 Hints.

Ask on newsgroups

We provide local newsgroups, including york.csrv.help and york.talk.technical where you can ask questions and others members of the University may provide answers. There are also lots of Usenet news groups and groups hosted by the major software suppliers. So if you have problems with C++ programming, you are very likely to get an answer from comp.lang.c++ on news.york.ac.uk, or from borland.public.cpp.language on forums.inprise.com. A good way to find out about suitable newsgroups is to type some keywords into an Internet search engine such as www.askjeeves.com, www.ixquick.com or www.google.com.

If you need to contact the Computing Service with a problem using a supported PC, it will help us to give you a speedy answer if you can tell us as much about the problem as possible. It is very useful to know if the problem affects just a single PC (try a different PC), or a single username (get someone else to log into your PC). Does the problem affect all applications (eg, “I can’t print anything, from WordPerfect, SPSS or Netscape”), or just one (“I can’t print from Corel-draw”)? Does the problem affect only one document, or every document (“the equations in this week’s essay don’t display, but last week’s essay is fine”)?

Recent problems

We have had a couple of recent problems which are not so common as to warrant full-scale alerts, nor so rare as to be considered isolated cases.

One is a problem concerning Quattro Pro 9 spreadsheets growing very large. The original network installation of QP9 left the maximum sizes for spreadsheets at the supplier’s (stupidly large) default values. Some operations extend the spreadsheet rows or columns to these very large sizes, resulting in large, cumbersome and fragile files. There is a fix, and instructions as to how to compress large files back to a sensible size, at: http://www.york.ac.uk/services/cserv/help/spread/bigfiles.htm

continued overleaf
Withdrawal of Windows 95 OEM version
Doug Moncur

continued from page 2

Video driver problems

A known problem with certain video cards, which causes Maple plots not to display or print (see http://www.york.ac.uk/services/cserv/help/win95/maple-noplot.htm) has re-surfaced in a couple of new guises. SPSS Interactive
Graphs suffer in the same way, and with a few PCs WordPerfect 8 toolbar icons turn into black squares (very odd, and why has it started to happen now?). Turning off the video card acceleration (as in the fix for Maple) seems to cure both these problems. In fact, if you are having troubles with Windows 95 displays, this can often solve them, and unless you play 3d space war games during your breaks, you are unlikely to notice any slow down.

Similarly, a number of people have had problems with printing which have been traced to printer driver problems. And, strangely enough, Windows printer driver functions also interact with the screen display. We can keep the printer drivers on classroom PCs (where the range of available printers if limited, and known to us) up to date. But on office PCs, where you can use local and networked printers of virtually any sort, we cannot keep track of which printers are in use and we cannot remotely update drivers on these PC's hard drives. So if you are having trouble with printing (lines missing, text boxes turning black, mis-aligned text, wrong fonts etc), check that you have the latest drivers for the actual model of printer you are using.

As of 31 December 2000 Microsoft have withdrawn the OEM (Original Equipment Manufacturer) version of Windows 95, effectively signalling that Windows 95 is scheduled for withdrawal. We understand from Microsoft that the probable withdrawal date will be sometime during summer 2002.

The OEM version is the version that manufacturers buy from Microsoft to install on the machines they supply to the University, and which they can customise to a limited extent.

Viglen have indicated that they can continue to supply machines with Windows 95 for the time being but that there will be a £25 additional charge for doing so as they will have to supply the retail version which is packaged differently and supplied at a different price.

Compaq cannot supply machines directly with Windows 95 but machines can be degraded to Windows 95 by buying machines with Windows 98 and obtaining and installing Windows 95 separately.

Dan expect to be able to supply machines with Windows 95 for the time being but it is not yet clear if there will be an additional charge for doing so.

It is currently possible to obtain Windows 95 under Select and degrade a machine from Windows 98 to Windows 95, but users should be aware that some features of newer machines may not be fully supported under Windows 95. In particular machines with Intel 815e Easton motherboards require a separate sound card, as the onboard sound circuitry is not recognised by Windows 95.

The Computing Service is working to implement a supported Windows 2000 service from this summer. This service will eventually replace the supported Windows 95 service. Until the new Windows 2000 service is up and running people who require a supported connection on a new machine should continue to specify machines with Windows 95. Anyone who wishes to purchase a machine and does not require a supported connection should specify a machine with Windows 98 in preference to Windows 95. Laptop users should specify machines with Windows 98 where possible to circumvent the increased memory and processor requirements of Windows ME.

Desktop machines should be purchased with a minimum of 128Mb RAM where possible to simplify any later upgrade to Windows 2000. In the case of laptops obtained from Toshiba with Windows ME, again an upgrade to 128Mb RAM is recommended.

Windows 2000 machines can only currently be connected to the network as unsupported connections.

Further information regarding operating system availability will be made available as soon as possible on the Computing Service web site.
The Computing Service course “Connecting Databases to the Web” provides an introduction to the ColdFusion development platform. It is generally aimed at staff who are interested in collecting/disseminating information over the Web, to and from a database created and ‘owned’ by that member of staff.

A new course “Using ColdFusion with the Data Warehouse” has been designed to build on these ColdFusion skills by exploring the specific issues around connecting the University Data Warehouse to the Web. The course is aimed at members of staff who are already experienced in using the Data Warehouse.

Topics covered include:
· how to access Data Warehouse databases and tables
· an overview of tables and relationships
· current Data Warehouse security & the potential for ColdFusion to breach this
· options for maintaining security
· authenticating user access
· future developments

If you would be interested in attending a future run of this course, please email Geoff Houlton gph2@york.ac.uk

Training Room

H/B40, our staff IT training room near the Print Unit in Heslington Hall, should have been refurbished by the time this goes to press. It should now look like a properly designed training facility, rather than a room furnished with second-hand bits and bobs and a few PCs. It is being fitted with proper PC tables - like those in the Langwith PC classroom, with all the cables out of the way. It will have new chairs upholstered in green, a new carpet, and will have been repainted. There will be 6 flat screen PCs for those attending courses, a tutor’s PC, a permanent projector and a new printer. It will also be possible to use it as a meeting room or project office.

A TESA lock is also going to be installed. Members of MIS, the DBAs and anyone else who regularly uses it for courses will have access via their security cards. A card will be available for signing out from Computing Service for anyone else who needs access.

JACS codes

The JACS (Joint Academic Coding System) group has looked at harmonisation of the course codes used by UCAS and HESA. They want us to change about 50 of our undergraduate course codes for the 2002/2003 entry, which we would have to have in place this September, ready for 2002 admissions. It will cause us a few problems where we will have to re-use codes that were previously used on old courses - we need to keep the old course details so our historical records will be complete, but the MAC system insists on a unique course code, regardless of date. It is also proposed that the code currently in use by History of Art be used for Archaeology in future, presenting us with a situation where live courses with the same code but different start years are entirely different courses.

Departments and sub-departments

In the MAC system, we are only permitted 2 levels of organisation - departments and sub-departments. Everything has had to be squeezed to fit into this model, which has led to some strange reporting, and departments having 2 codes in areas like Estates, where they really have 4 or 5 tiers of organisation.

As part of the YIMS project, we want to make sure that any new systems we acquire can more accurately reflect our organisation. There is a group now looking at the departmental structures and trying to map how they actually work. For instance, some departments are held as sub-departments of another department, when in reality, they are independent. Departments like the Centre for Medieval Studies run courses, but don’t employ any teaching staff directly, so with our current systems we cannot work out the staff to student ratio for their courses. Such matters are issues the group will be considering and consulting with departments, where appropriate. If we want good, accurate management information out of our new systems, we need to get our fundamental reporting structures right.

Using ColdFusion with the Data Warehouse

Geoff Houlton

Oki have produced a website containing online manuals and details of where to obtain spares and consumables for older Oki printers.

To check out the site go to: http://my.okidata.com
Managed Learning Environments

Debra Fayter writes about the WebCT project

Since Autumn 2000 the Computing Service, in collaboration with staff from the Department of Economics and Related Studies (DERS), has been running a pilot project to evaluate WebCT, a managed learning environment (MLE). MLEs allow for provision of Web-based teaching materials and for extensive communication amongst students and between lecturers and students, whatever their physical distance. They generally include bulletin boards, whiteboard presentations, chat rooms, self assessment and testing tools, email, calendar facilities and so on. Although the project has concentrated on the evaluation of WebCT the group has kept a watching brief on other similar products. One MLE which has emerged as a competitor is Blackboard. Carl O’Keefe from Blackboard came to York to give a demonstration of the product on 31 January which was extremely well attended, proof of the growing interest in new modes of course delivery within the University.

Blackboard is currently offered at three levels. Level one is the managed learning environment offering features such as those described above. Level two includes an Education Portal and level three includes facilities to link the managed learning environment to back office applications. Levels one and two are being offered as a CHEST (Combined Higher Education Software Team) deal, which makes pricing more attractive for a commitment of three years.

Blackboard is now being used across the UK and worldwide in the education and business sector. At first glance the level of functionality offered was similar to WebCT, and the user interface appeared fairly intuitive. It certainly merited a more detailed consideration and indeed several participants at the Blackboard demonstration were keen to try it out.

Choosing an MLE for the University of York network is not a decision to be taken lightly. It is necessary to obtain feedback from prospective users and to address issues such as management of the software, resourcing in terms of staff and hardware, training implications for both staff and students, and interfacing of administrative data. These issues are being considered by the WebCT project group which is due to report in April this year. The group should be able to recommend the way forward for York: the provision of a fully supported WebCT service, an unsupported WebCT service or the installation of another product which will better meet York’s needs.

Solutions to Keynotes Crosswords

December 2000

|---------------|-------------|---|-------|----|---|-------------|---|------|---|-----------|------------|---|---|---|------|---|-------------|

January 2001

The story of computing at York began in November 1964 with a meeting between two members of the Mathematics department, Paddy Kennedy and Victor Hale, with the University’s architect to discuss a building to house an as yet unfunded computer. Following this meeting, in February 1965 the Vice - Chancellor, Lord James, wrote to the UGC requesting £120,000 for a computer at York. At about this time the Flowers Committee was considering the question of computing provision at British universities and, as a result of its report, the Computer Board was set up to provide and overseer computing facilities at universities. It recommended in January 1966 a grant to York of £50000 to obtain an “upgrade able Elliott 4100 configuration”. The Elliott 4100 was originally scheduled for installation early in 1967 and was finally installed and accepted in November 1967.

In April 1966 the sub Department of Computation (within Mathematics) was set up, with David Burnett-Hall appointed as Lecturer in Charge and Director of Computation. The initial 4100 system comprised a 4130 processor, 16K (24 bit) words of memory, a card reader, paper tape reader and punch, 3 tape drives and a graph plotter. The system was to run under the T30C operating system. However, even before delivery, it was found that the operating system would not fit into the 16K store, so this was upgraded to 32K of 6 microsecond store. At the end of 1969 the Computer Board funded a further upgrade of three 4megabyte discs, together with an Autonomous Transfer Unit which allowed data transfer directly between the store and tape and disk subsystems, without interrupting the central processor. At the same time the University considered purchasing with its own funds a fourth 4 megabyte disc drive but decided not to, because it was inconceivable that the University would ever generate that amount of data.

At the beginning of 1970 a Computer Manager was appointed...

In the first full year of use of the system, 66% of the work was done in Fortran, 26% in Algol and the University’s administrative work (payroll, cheque printing, invoicing and statistics) took 8% of the available power and was done in NEAT and Language H. In that year Physics used 40% of the power, Chemistry 22%, Biology and Mathematics 10% each and Economics 6%.

At the beginning of 1970 a Computer Manager was appointed, to be followed in the summer by two fellows, one to look after systems programming and one for applications. A Computing Assistant was also appointed. During that year the DES1 disc based operating system was withdrawn and the DES “multiaccess system” introduced. However the older single access disk system DES1 continued in use, due to the unreliability of DES2.

In the summer of 1972 Dr I C Pyle was appointed as Professor of Computer Science and plans were laid for a new computer building to house a replacement for the Elliott 4100. Pending such a replacement system the Elliott was further upgraded to 128k of store in August 1973, together with a 1200 line per minute printer. Then in the summer of 1974 a DEC PDP11 was connected to the system, to provide a front end server with a 56Mbyte disc and a multiplexer supporting 32 terminals. Two visual display units were purchased.

By now computing both as an academic discipline and a University Service was well established, so the University looked forward eagerly to the next stage of computing at York. However the University rejected the suggestion that a British made system from ICL be obtained and, instead, wished to purchase a system from the USA. This matter had to be referred to the Department of Industry, so it was not until the summer of 1976 that the 4100 was finally replaced.
Computing Service Address

Computing Service
University of York
Heslington
YORK YO10 5DD

Telephone: Switchboard (01904) 430000
Direct dialling (01904) 43 followed by ext no.
Fax: (01904) 433740
Email: username@york.ac.uk

Also, try the World Wide Web: http://www.york.ac.uk/services/cserv/

Information Desk

Telephone: ext 3838
Email: infodesk

The Information Desk is open from 9am to 5.15pm Monday to Thursday, and 9am to 4.15pm Friday (may be closed for training Wednesdays 2pm-3pm), for problem solving, advice and information, fault reporting, network connections, file conversion, sales, course bookings, registration and documentation. Printed output can be collected from the lobby entrance which is open from 8am to midnight.

Computing Service Staff:

Director: Mike Jinks 3801 kmj1
Departmental Secretary: Lorraine Moor 3801 lsm1
Head of Infrastructure: Robert Demaine 3808 rld1
Head of User Services: John Illingworth 3803 jji1
Head of MIS: Kay Mills-Hicks 2101 kmh8
Head of Technical Services: Doug Moncur 3815 dgm1
Head of Systems: Andrew Smith 3809 abs4
Operations Manager: Brian Souter 3814 bs1
Head of Networking: John Mason 3813 jrn13
Information Officer: Joanne Casey 3805 jmc8

Sue Bolton 2102 sbj28
Mike Brudenell 3811 pmb1
Lisa Burkinshaw 3818 lj4
John Byrne 3812 jcb1
David Chambers 3742 dac6
Michael Clark 3745 mpc3
Arthur Clune 3129 ajc22
Paul Conacher 4346 pac1
Steve Downes 3741 sd21
Debra Fayter 3839 dfc3
Ken Finch 4452 kf1
Rob Fletcher 3816 rpf1
Kevin Gardner 3739 kg4
Chris Gowland 3823 cg1
Peter Halls 3806 phj1
Linda Hearn 3800 lch8
Sue Hodges 3839 sh32

Paul Hodgson 4347 ph25
Geoff Houlton 2100 gph2
Jenny Jackson 4455 jji5
Chris Kilgour 4454 chk1
John Mansden 3832 jpm1
Darren Munday 3821 dam6
Nicola Normandale 4695 ncn1
Colin Rea 3817 cr9
Chris Reece 3807 car7
John Robinson 3833 jsr1
Sam Scott 3817 ss2
Daniel Shelton 4349 ds23
Sam Vines 3749 sccr1
Nick Walker 3897 njw8
Timothy Willson 2123 ftmw1
Mark Wilson 3826 mw119
Michael Woodhead 3825 mw28