I returned from Ireland, for the second time, in late 1978 to project manage the Provident Management Services Limited (PMSL) account. It did not sound a promising career move, and I was concerned with being used again as a troubleshooter.

David Holroyd had sold PMSL a dual-Sperry 1106 system some 18 months previously. The Sperry system was to have replaced a number of smaller International Computers Limited (ICL) systems, but the project had faltered, only one of the processors had been installed, and PMSL had announced an order for the latest ICL medium range system. I was briefed on the situation by the northern region director, Alan Wightman, and the regional technical support manager, Philip Good. Phil was also very much involved with the system implementation of the 1106 at J. D. Williams in Manchester, a major direct mail operator. My unwritten brief was to establish a presence at PMSL and minimise Sperry’s exposure to the potential loss of this prestigious account.

Pat Cullen was now the Manchester sales manager and a friend of Mike Samuels, the Leeds sales manager. Mike had a more gentle demeanour and casual approach than the average sales manager, although he had the reputation of being a tough nut under pressure. David Holroyd had been the previous ICL salesman to PMSL and had joined Sperry Computers to sell the Sperry solution that had been described to him by Mike Samuels.
David was dark, with slicked-back hair, a deep speaking voice, and was always very well groomed. A salesman's salesman, David earned a lot of commission.

PMSL was based in Colonnade, Bradford, and the new computer centre was nearing completion in the village of Mixenden, near Halifax, West Yorkshire — magnificent in local sandstone. The computer centre was 80 miles from my home in Altrincham — a 60-minute journey using the M56 and M62 motorways to cross the Pennines.

PMSL had been founded in 1880 to provide responsible lending to working class families in industrialised West Yorkshire. Its speciality was home credit, and local agents were lending small, short-term, unsecured loans to people in all walks of life, delivering cash and calling every week to collect the repayments. PMSL admitted this was moneylending, and its aggressive salesmen were known as tallymen. The salesmen sold PMSL cheques against a deferred payment. The cheques were redeemable in most shops and stores in Yorkshire and an area extending towards the UK Midlands. The computer system being developed by PMSL was the overall control system for this operation. We were anticipating a database of 2.5 million customers at any one time. PMSL believed themselves to be the biggest moneylenders in Europe in terms of number of clients.

The PMSL team with whom we had a regular interface included Derek Whitehead, the charismatic managing director; John Walker, the operations director for both the ICL and Sperry systems, with an office in both Bradford and Mixenden; Ian Chippendale, the Mixenden operations director, who was young and thought to be the protégé of Derek Whitehead, the Mixenden operations director, with an office overlooking a huge (and very empty) computer room; Peter Hughes, bearded, diffident and loose-limbed, was operations manager, and had the office next to Ian at the end of the viewing balcony above the computer room; and John Clegg, the PMSL systems manager, an ex-ICL user rapidly coming to terms with Exec 8 (the Sperry 1100 operating system) and DMS 1100 (the hierarchical database system implementation).

When I first arrived at Mixenden, I sat in an open-plan area close to John Clegg and his team, which was a valuable introduction to the problems they were having. I eventually had a separate Sperry office across from the computer suite and overlooking the trout pond, the centrepiece of
the complex. (When the complex was finished, trout were introduced into the lake in anticipation of a future fishing opportunity, but they did not prosper. It was eventually discovered that wild mink were inhabiting the pond, and they were enjoying the trout even as they were being replenished. The mink, obviously escapees from local mink farms, were occasionally seen but never trapped.) The Sperry problems with the installation occurred because only half the proposed equipment had been installed. Every hardware hiccup was a disaster that would have been mitigated if the fail-safe complete hardware complement had been in use. Once the contracted hardware was available, we were able to address the database software issues that imposed almost daily constraints upon what we were doing. The equipment was mostly second-hand, although refurbished, which had somewhat of a negative effect on the morale at Mixenden.

I was happy, as was PMSL, with the on-site Sperry engineering team, which included Duncan Read, the engineer-in-chief, who had a very strong Yorkshire accent and a tall, lean body, and a confidence in his computer system that was always reassuring. However, in repose we recognised our Duncan as lugubrious, and, if I understand the word, ‘gloomy’. Keith Woodhouse was another local boy. Keith had an endearing enthusiasm for every task he undertook. Terry McGee, who I knew as the Glasgow field engineering manager during the Bass project, was the engineering manager in the new Leeds branch and was project friendly when it came to providing specialist support should we need it.

I was not the lone technical support representative for long. Charles Dickinson, an operating systems engineer and software generalist, joined the Leeds branch after having been a support programmer at the Open University. Charles was seeking the opportunity to live and bring his family up in West Yorkshire. He was assigned full-time and the timing of his appointment could not have been better. Always well dressed, Charles presented well, if somewhat formally, but if you looked there was a twinkle of mischief in his eye. He was a good work colleague and a great ally of John Clegg, and he made a positive contribution to the work we were doing. Although not designated a database management system expert, Charles’s advice was invaluable in this area. Database problems were initially taking far too long to resolve, and we initiated a fairly basic, but stringent, set of rules to be followed by a fault-resolution team to
speed up and document resolution. It was a matter of understanding and documenting what we thought we should do, and recognising the fact that something must have changed to introduce a fault in to what was once working. Charles and I were members of that team.

I had very little day-to-day rapport with Mike Samuels or David Holroyd, but an on-site presence obviously helped them off site and they were able to persuade PMSL to install the second-half of the originally contracted equipment. PMSL was always open to a bargain and accepted proposals to replace the now dual Sperry 1106 with the $3 \times 2$ Sperry 1110 that had been installed at Shell-Mex and BP, and the two original Sperry 1108s from Shell Centre London and Shell Wythenshawe. These systems came with complements of peripherals, and suddenly we had a very full computer room. The Sperry 1110, as I had used at Bass, was a faster, bigger and later model in the Sperry 1100 family in a three central processor, two input/output processor configuration.

The pending delivery of different hardware brought another decision. Neither Shell-Mex and BP or Shell Petroleum had been updating the operating system software. It was my responsibility to make sure that we simplified the operations. Charles Dickinson and I talked this through with John Clegg, and we decided to recommend that we run all our hardware on the very latest Sperry 1100 operating system. We had opposition from our own salespeople and the PMSL operations department also had reservations.

I put the arguments into a presentation into which I put a lot of effort. I used Letraset, rub-down lettering, and pictures on A4 cardboard. This artwork was converted into 35 mm slides and black and white set of photocopies that were bound together for distribution. At the time, this created a favourable impression, although it looks primitive compared to today’s Microsoft-assisted artwork.

I had to give the presentation in its various forms quite a few times. Phil Good endorsed our decision to move the software forward and allocated Ivan Roy, an engineer from the Shell account, to assist us with preparation and testing. It all worked perfectly.
I eventually encouraged PMSL to buy something new. PMSL ordered and we delivered a new disk subsystem that was installed over a weekend. What a disappointment to view the equipment on the computer room floor on the Monday to see that the metal exterior of the units was damaged. Easily discernible boot and fist impressions scarred the units. PMSL was not at all amused. We investigated and learnt that these units came off the production line in the US the day that redundancies were announced in the factory and our units bore the brunt and marks of the workers’ frustrations. We had to have new skins specially made. It did not help. Matching the paint was a real concern.

PMSL was most innovative in one aspect of its interface with the computer vendors. John Walker let it be known that he would be in the Crown and Anchor, also known as ‘Ronnie’s pub’, at the gates of the Mixenden Centre for his lunch every Friday, and that if vendors wanted to speak or to socialise with him they were welcome to join us. Pink gins were traditionally the Friday drink, although I do not know why. It was fun to meet the other vendors and swap stories and technical exaggerations with them. At the time Sperry was the winning team, which might have made it easier for us to enjoy our participation.
PMSL was a young and sociable lot. We joined them to play soccer and knock-about cricket. Charles and I were invited to their management badminton evening, which helped cement relationships. I generally stopped over one night a week to participate in PMSL-based activities.

In time, there was less and less for me to do at PMSL. My days became the drive across the Pennines, checking with Charles Dickinson and Duncan Read that we had no major concerns, and confirming this with John Walker and Ian Chippendale. Lunch and a few beers with whoever was in Ronnie’s was next on the schedule, a look into my office after lunch, and a leisurely drive back to Cheshire. There was excitement one Friday evening when a blizzard closed the M62 (Manchester–Leeds motorway) and I was marooned on the road overnight until the snowploughs opened a path for us. I was warm enough in the car, and a yellow-ringed hole in the snow drift that built up against the car marked where I had spent those hours.

I was left on site and on the project too long. It was possibly my fault. During the two years I attended Mixenden I did not have cause to go into either the Leeds or Altrincham Sperry offices. I did attend a sales kick-off meeting. Bill Read had succeeded Des Pitcher as managing director when Des took up a European marketing role with the company. Bill was an ex-National Cash Register employee and, true to form, brought
in other recruits. One such was John Pascoe, who was supposed to have political connections, including with the Isle of Man Government, whose computer system we provided. Bill Read decided that the capital, Douglas, would be a good venue for one of the annual marketing meetings at which the sales and pre-sales engineers expected to be inspired to achieve ever increasing sales targets. It being an island venue, we had to fly into Douglas. There must have been about 200 participants, and arrival times were staggered during the morning as aeroplanes arrived from all over the UK. Somehow the hotel bar was persuaded that an open bar mandate existed and a lot of booze had been consumed before we sat down to a late lunch in the hotel. The guest speaker was the Secretary of the Tynwald, and he gave a perfectly acceptable speech of welcome, extolling the virtues of the island as a holiday resort and saying good things about Sperry and the uses to which its computer system was being put.

When Bill Read got up to speak, the background noise level in the restaurant rose two or three levels. Suddenly the whole ambience changed from one of well-being to open aggression against the boss, who was unable to make himself heard above the general din, despite the use of the microphone. John Pascoe leapt to his feet but was greeted with disdain and verbal abuse. I hope never to experience such a situation again. It was weird. Normality was restored when Bill Read and John Pascoe obviously abandoned trying to be heard during the meal. The group then went about its scheduled business for the rest of the day. Dinner passed without event and the outburst of hostility was forgotten. The general feeling was one of apology and contriteness. We did have one situation. Calvert Douglas, who was sharing a room with another loud Scot, Ken Struthers, fell off the room’s balcony and had to be taken to hospital overnight. They were obviously clowning about. I was quite relieved that Calvert was no longer my immediate responsibility. He had been my salesman in Scotland previously. The next day, the Altrincham and Leeds office personnel enjoyed a tour of the island before heading back home.

Although I had no occasion to go into a Sperry office, I had an excellent rapport with Phil Good to whom I submitted a monthly progress report. I met Phil socially to talk out support or minor personal difficulties, and Phil attended, on request, meetings on site. Phil endorsed my plan to talk with other Sperry locations about finding something else for me to do, with three results: a one month human resources assignment; co-option
into a project management training exercise; and an eventual assignment that took me to Southeast Asia, from which I never returned to the UK to work again.

The human resources assignment was to recruit salesmen for a new product line for Sperry in the UK. Sperry had acquired the BC/7 range of mid-range business computers from the Singer Corporation of the US, and the plan was to have a separate organisation to sell and support them. My task was to find the first 36 salespeople. The assignment was one month in duration and was the only time I worked at the new Stonebridge Park office, 20 minutes by train north of Euston Station. I commuted Monday through Friday and got used to being spoilt on the London Pullman from Wilmslow, Cheshire, to Euston, and return. It was a gracious way to travel, so long as you did not have to drive at the end of the trip. Champagne and kippers was an ideal breakfast to start the week, and a steak dinner would help finish off before the weekend (and a game of rugby or cricket). The company had briefed several recruitment houses of our needs and made shortlists of candidates. In 20 days at Stonebridge Park I must have interviewed 120 people. Surprisingly, I was not given any help by the human resources department, and had to very quickly draw up my own list of things to look for and quiz the candidate about. Perhaps more importantly, I derived a scale of marks for me to score potential and as a way of remembering so many people. I was exhausted at the end of that job. I had to avoid the tendency to talk too much as an interviewer; I understood how important it was to listen.

The second divertissement was to join three other European project managers and for us to work with a US industrial psychologist for one week to prepare an updated project manager’s handbook, which became UNIVAC publication UP4166. The three of us were selected as having installed the highest value of Sperry 1100s outside of the US. Most of the work was done and we were more proofreaders in terms of custom and culture than having to author the manual from scratch. We worked quite well together and were also able to contribute thoughts as to an associated project management course. We determined that the essential value of a course would be in working with a real project. We also put forward the idea of working with the actual documents from a project, as well as the changing requirements during a contract negotiation and challenging the course students to accept (or not) the project and come up with a project plan. This seemed to make sense.
I was pleasantly surprised to be asked by Charles Pigden, the UK training manager, to work with Geoff Munday to see if we could put such a course together and teach it in the UK. The key to the course, from my perspective, would be the case study. The case study we found from Holland regarded a Honeywell H200 batch system replacement of a small Sperry 1106 with online enhancements. We were provided with the prospect’s original request for proposal, and the Sperry sales response, which included an outline project and software development plan in English. We also had access to the meeting notes from two top-level prospect Sperry meetings, in which project requirements were refined. Best of all, the Dutch project manager, who was part way through the actual implementation, was available to us for questions. Geoff and I spoke to him and he was keen to participate. We agreed to run the course over one week. Another tool available to us was a half-day management game in which teams competed against one another to make paper boxes in a simulated real-life situation where facilities were unexpectedly changed and which prejudiced the planning options. We decided to share the front-of-class duties. I would release and detail the project and Geoff would teach and remind our students of specific project tools and techniques. At the end of day one, we would release the prospect request for proposal; day two, the Sperry response; and, at the end of days three and four, the two sets of meeting notes and changes to requirements and schedules agreed to by the company. Each day, the real-life project manager was available for questions from the entire group or individual teams. On day five, four teams of four students would present their decision as to whether they accepted the project, along with their project plans or reasons why they would not accept the project. The presentation was made to Bill Huntley, the UK technical director, who travelled to Birmingham for the end of the class.

At 9.00 am on the Monday morning, I was extremely nervous standing up in front of 16 of my peer project managers, some of whom were friends and were facing greater and more urgent challenges than I was at PMSL. The main thing working in my favour was that I expected to get some sleep on the Wednesday and Thursday nights. I knew that if Geoff and I were successful in leading the class, our students would be working through these nights to complete their documented plans. That is what happened. It worked beautifully.
Bill Huntley raised one issue with me: ‘Did you teach these people to look for a confrontation as a defined point in a project plan?’ I had to admit to Bill that I did. Project implementation marks a change in emphasis for the supplier. You move from pre-sales mode and wanting to say ‘yes’ to every request, to the situation where you have to define what it is the project will achieve. A moving target does not allow for a project finalisation. The project manager chooses the point of confrontation to emphasise that change of perspective. Bill partly accepted the argument, but was at great pains to state to the students that it was not company policy. The feedback from the students, according to Charles Pigden, was the best from any course of which he had had oversight. This was very flattering. I did not get the chance to assist with any other similar classes, but I understand that Geoff Munday ran it again.

My third venture to gain release from PMSL was to announce to past colleagues that I was looking for a new assignment. Al Harvey, who I had met in Glasgow during the Bass project, called me from Hong Kong to ask if I would be interested in a three-month pre-sales assignment in Singapore. As an overseas assignment, there was home leave once a month. Al said that if I was prepared to forgo the home leave, I could use those travel credits to invite my wife and two boys to join me in Singapore for Christmas and the New Year. That sounded like a great deal.

I had one task to finish before leaving the PMSL team. The previous weekend we had attended a parachuting course in Sheffield, but had not been able to jump because of high winds. We attended again and achieved jump status after a quick refresher. Audrey was aghast that I was going to do the jump knowing I was to go to Singapore the next week. But it went well. In fact, we all enjoyed the experience, even the girl whose hands were forcibly removed from the open door frame by the instructor. She had frozen on her egress to the wing of the aeroplane, from which we had been drilled to cast off into space. Once on the ground, she could not have been more pleased with herself. The target, a red cross in the field below, looked very small from the aeroplane. The drill into which we had been disciplined required we shout a count of one to 10, and, should the parachute not open by that time, release the stand-by parachute. Our instructor told us that he would be able to hear us shout from the ground. The next instruction was to enjoy the experience, but not for long. We had been taught how to fly, to direct the descent, and I was delighted to have landed within 25 metres of the marker, the only problem being my decision to land in front of the barbed wire fence rather than risk falling through it.
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