
LOLA: a LEO III Lives On! by Alan Cooper

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LOLA (London On-line Local Authorities) was a consortium of 4 London local authorities, namely Hackney, Hillingdon, Haringey and Tower Hamlets, formed in 1970. It was a development of the North-East London Computer Scheme, a consortium set up by Hackney and Tower Hamlets in 1966. This consortium used a LEO III and programs developed by the London Boroughs Management Services Unit (LBMSU). So LOLA inherited the LEO and migrated the applications.

It all began in January 1969 when the LBMSU published an 118-page book entitled *Report on the initial study: London borough of Haringey long term computer project*. It envisaged a central database of citizens' data providing a 360 degree view of all the services provided to each of them, with no data duplication, all accessible via VDUs and updated in real time.

This was an era when the norm was batch systems with overnight or weekly processing using magnetic tapes, and producing copious amounts of printed paper.

Haringey sought partner authorities to share the costs. The hardware alone was estimated to cost £1m (£14m today) plus 80 man-years for the development work, for what were then identified as the basic 'nucleus' applications.

Eventually the 3 London boroughs mentioned joined Haringey and LOLA was created in 1970. The consortium handled the processing for 900,000 citizens and 300,000 properties.

Hardware & Systems Software

An IBM 360/50 computer with 512K bytes of main store and two 9-drive disk units (each of 236 million bytes) was purchased. A major factor influencing the choice of IBM was its proposal to use IMS. This was an advanced data base and telecommunications package that IBM had recently developed to support Rockwell in building the spacecraft for the Apollo moon program. In fact LOLA and Standard Life in Scotland would be the first in the UK, if not the first outside the USA, to use IMS. The applications were written in the fairly new programming language PL/1.

Migration from the LEO

By 1973 the key application Rates (council property tax) had been developed and transferred from the LEO III. The LEO was ageing at this point and the Payroll, Housing Rents and some other minor programs

remained on the LEO. Given the complexity and criticality of Payroll and Rents, IBM was asked to develop a solution so that the remaining applications could run on the IBM without a rewrite. I believe IBM built an interpreter.

LEO III closed down in April 1974 along with its data centre, and staff transferred to LOLA's base in Enfield. A document from 1978 shows these LEO applications were still running on the IBM and needing frequent changes.

Development

Over the next two decades, 13 suites (systems) were developed with over 317 programs of varying complexity, the majority having on-line real-time access and updating. The vast majority were common systems for all the councils with development directed via joint steering committees. Later 3GL software and micro computers allowed councils to undertake their own data analysis and reporting.

In 1993 LOLA was outsourced to CFM, later part of ICL, and then part of Fujitsu in 2002. LOLA ceased to exist in 2006 after the individual councils decided to pursue mini computers using application packages that had by then become available.

Today

Having retired I was clearing out boxes of documents and found the original Haringey report and that led me to searching the web for anything on LOLA. I found virtually nothing. Feeling that such a pioneering development should be recorded as a landmark IT development, I then used LinkedIn to trace former LOLA employees.

Surprisingly many still had documents from their time at LOLA plus 100s photographs, mainly of LOLA's sports and social events, including the Christmas Parties and their infamous skits!

Lola Website

I began receiving these documents (or scans) along with their personal recollections. Some were rescued just in time from leaking sheds. I then developed a website <https://www.lola.org.uk> to record all these. It includes a catalogue of all the documents.

I also found and joined the LEO society, and after reading about their work with the *Centre for Computing History* I made contact with the museum. I'm hoping that the museum will take the website and associated physical documents.

In the meantime, if any reader of this Newsletter knows of any former LOLA employees then do point them to the website please. You never know, they also may have documents in the loft or shed and they can be rescued and recorded for historians rather than being sent to the tip when they die!

Note: Alan wrote a more technical article: *A Virtual LEO* in LEO Matters volume 5 Spring 2019.

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Total: 780 words excluding side panel and *About the Author*.

About the Author: Alan Cooper was at LOLA from the start in 1970 until 1975. Working in the Applications Support team, he was responsible for database design and integrity, as well as creating middleware to support the application developers.

Alan started his career at Barclays Bank as a programmer and then moved to similar role at IBM. After LOLA he undertook a DBA role at the Danish Bank in Copenhagen. On returning to the UK he joined the embryonic and entrepreneurial TSB Trust Company. Here he undertook a wide range of IT Strategy & Planning and Business Development roles.

After gaining an MBA at Henley, he spent 20+ years as a Management Consultant with a focus on major procurements in central and local government. He is now retired and dabbling with home automation along with presenting to his local U3A.

Side Panel Summary Box (in case it gets lost):

LOLA was a computer consortium formed in 1970 of four London boroughs. Two of them, Hackney and Tower Hamlets, shared a LEO III computer that LOLA then managed.

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