

## “I was there. This is what I remember.”

Dame Stephanie Shirley, entrepreneur, computer scientist and philanthropist, with Tom Lean, Project Interviewer, National Life Stories

Dame Stephanie ‘Steve’ Shirley was born in Germany in 1933 and arrived in Britain as a refugee aboard a Kindertransport in 1939. After working with early computers as a scientific civil servant, she started Freelance Programmers in 1962, to provide programming jobs for women who had been forced out of the computing world on marriage or when they had children, adopting the name ‘Steve’ to help her in the male-dominated world of business. Her late son Giles was autistic, leading Steve to fund projects in education and causal research into the disorder, efforts that eventually saw her appointed as the first Ambassador for Philanthropy.

In 2010, Steve recorded a fifteen-hour life story interview with Tom Lean as part of NLS’s **An Oral History of British Science**. Nearly three years after the recording, Tom was intrigued by an email from Steve with some reflections on the interview and decided to investigate further, particularly as Steve has recently written her memoirs with a ghost writer.



Dame Stephanie Shirley with the premium bond computer ERNIE.

**Tom: How did you feel when the letter inviting you to join the project arrived?**

Steve: I was flattered of course. I was surprised. I think I wrote back along the lines of, “are you sure this is not a mistake as I no longer think of myself as a scientist?”.

**Do you ever miss the scientific work of your career?**

Not really! I find people much more interesting. What I learnt I suppose, is that research can also be something like market research, which I hadn’t realised to begin with, I thought research was something you did with test tubes in a laboratory... I think the scientific process is valuable, I’ve certainly found it so in the last five or ten years when I’ve been involved with funding of medical research and realise that metrics, peer review, accuracy, precision – all those things still come into my daily life.

As a mathematician I knew early on I was never going to be the world’s greatest mathematician. By the time I was about twenty, I knew that I did not have it in me to achieve anything on the research level. So I was lucky to be able to move into the virgin computer field.

**I’d heard you on Desert Island Discs before the interview. How did the life story interview differ from other interviews you’d done before?**

The length allows you to go into some detail. Things came out that I wasn’t so conscious of before. I certainly recognise how holistic everything is. Everything is connected to everything else. And it brought out new insights into the importance of networking. I hadn’t realised how it was a thread through everything I was doing and that some of that stemmed from my own need to be accepted.

We have this classic thing about science as ‘standing on the shoulders of giants’, a bit like a relay race, you pass on the baton. And I was trying to think of a metaphor for what it’s really like. I don’t think it’s just team work. If you watch a cycle race, teams form something called a peloton and it’s quite weird – a group become a unity, they take turns to get in the front and so on. And I think that’s what science is like, we do have to work together and sometimes you are privileged to be the first to know something. And it’s a great joy.

**Was there anything that surprised you on listening back to the recording afterwards?**

What I'd thought of as generalist turned out to be quite specialist and sharp. And conversely what I'd thought of as being specific turned out to be of universal interest.

**The thought that occurred to me over the interview was how many different layers there were to your life and the connections between them. I thought the way we'd discuss the same period from perhaps three different angles with quite different insights was fascinating.**

I've agreed a publisher for my memoirs, *Let IT Go*, as an E-book, as I'd had terrible problems finding a conventional publisher because they don't know how to market it. "It's brilliant, couldn't put it down! But is it a book about refugees? Is it a book about autism? Is it a book about women?" But then most professional managers have one aim at a time and entrepreneurs, we have several.

**I did wonder if the process of having your memoirs written differed from doing a life story interview?**

Much more unstructured, because nothing was going down as a permanent record. The ghost writer would condense a twenty-minute rambling onto tape into a couple of paragraphs. Whereas with you I knew I was going down for ever and ever.

**How do you feel about the prospect of "going down for ever and ever" in this way?**

Oh I like it! Anyone with an interest in their legacy would! It's a small legacy but I'm a great patriot and it's good to support the British Library.

**Were there any key stories you were trying to get across in the interview as a whole?**

Yes I think there were. Something to do with the understanding of innovation, where it comes from. Where do you get the spark of an idea from? I don't have the answer! But it's a question that comes up over and over again.

And also the learning process that meant that you could identify the sort of boss you didn't want to be and that's a valuable thing to learn and tuck away.

And partly because of the chip on my shoulder because I thought I hadn't been what I regarded as 'properly' educated, I realised after a while that because nobody had told me what I couldn't do, I sometimes just went ahead and did it. And that's a very valuable capability. Really I learned to think out of the box!

**I was wondering if you had any questions for me as the person on the other side of the table?**

The big question for me is was it useful for an archive of oral histories of scientists? Was there enough about how I came to be the first women president of the British Computer Society, and how I came to sitting there on government committees about electronics, and things like that? There's much more in the interview about management, and much more about people.



**The earlier parts of your career, when you're actually doing science personally, I thought that was an evocative viewpoint of what it was like being a woman in science in the 1950s. But, as you pointed out, those experiences help to shape your later management style, and have huge effects on how science and technology gets practised. It's partly about mindset and how something like the precision involved in computer programming stays with you.**

I am still one of the best proofreaders I know, and that comes from my computer training and needing to be precise!

**Were there any things you found difficult with doing the interview?**

I really found it difficult to separate hearsay from memory. Certain parts of my life have been well written up, the Kindertransport and so on. But to recall what I remember, what I experienced, I do find that difficult. I saw a documentary on it that didn't look anything like I remember, but who's right? I don't know. I was there. This is what I remember.