

King Charles III visiting IBM Greenock UK - an experience

By Reinhard Klein

I was lucky enough to be sent on three very interesting foreign assignments by IBM. The last was, from 1996, as "EMEA Director for PC support", with place of work in the then main European factory for PC.s in Greenock / Scotland / UK, that was opened in 1951 by T.Watson and Prince Philip. Actually I started the 3 year assignment based in Paris, which was then the HQ for the EMEA PC Division, but I recognized soon that I had to be almost constantly present in Greenock where all technical support functions were located. So I moved with my wife after a year to Greenock, which we've never looked back on. The UK Assignment was extended to 8 years in total and only ended with the sale of the PC Division to Lenovo, which also predicted the end of the Greenock site.

A visit to IBM Greenock by Prince Charles, now the current King, was announced in 2001.



For the 50th anniversary of Greenock Plant, on June 12, 2001, Prince Charles unveiled a plaque in the factory reception area. For six months intensive preparations for this one visit were made. He would arrive in his special train with entourage at the factory station, to be greeted by the then Plant Director, Charlie Morrison, and the PC Business Executive whose name I have forgotten. A commemorative plaque was unveiled and then a visit to the IBM product museum.

A further visit to other parts of the factory had to be cancelled, as the Prince's security did not approve. All people who were to approach the prince within 50m were given a thorough security check weeks in advance. It was not possible to screen everyone, with at that time 5,000 people working in the factory.

Details of the product museum visit were planned. Greenock produced many IBM products over the years. Printers, the famous IBM golf ball typewriters, displays, controllers, the IBM 1130 series of computers, financial system equipment, as well as servers and all IBM PC and ThinkPad models. Everything was on display there.

The weekly Plant Management Meetings became more and more a guessing game as to who should show and explain the products to the prince. Everyone had suggestions, but the plant manager couldn't find any local IBMers who knew the products well and would be able to answer the prince's questions.

As the date of the visit drew near, I pointed out to the meeting that I had learned and repaired all of these machines as a CE since 1967 and I had no problem to show them to the prince and to answer his questions. The first incredulous response was that I was a foreigner, not a local manager, which might also be a security issue. A week later - after a trial run - everything was cleared, I had to go through the UK Police Force security check, and management was satisfied. The plant director then said that the international team would also be able to put Greenock in the spotlight. The PC call center consisted of just over 100 mostly very young foreigners taking calls from Europe and ME.

On the day of the prince's visit, the entire plant was in a state of excitement, no one was allowed to leave the plant buildings after the prince's arrival, and all the corridors in the plant were covered by security personnel; the area was checked with dogs beforehand. Entrances and exits to the factory were blocked by the police. We heard a helicopter overhead circling the site when the special train arrived.



The official representative of the royal family in Scotland, a former officer with his wife, supervised the preparations, greeted the prince at the station and escorted him to the entrance of the administration building, where he was greeted by the management team.



Prince Charles unveiled the 50 year commemorative plaque by opening a small curtain. The management team then reported on the latest PC business results in Europe.



The group then went to the museum, where I was introduced to the prince. When he found out that I was Austrian, he spoke to me in excellent German. We stayed until some of the bystanders complained that they couldn't understand anything. So we

continued the hour-long conversation in English. He also talked enthusiastically about his skiing holidays in Austria.

He had no particular interest in most of the older products. At the end of the tour he was shown some of the newest LCD displays which could also be swivelled into portrait mode, and which were displaying the prince's own homepage with his charitable projects. That particularly interested him.



He clicked through his personal homepage on the screen, with all his travels, and his many initiatives in the areas of social and environmental protection. Then he suddenly became suspicious because the last 5 or 6 of his activities were missing from the list he wanted to show us.

HRH was displeased at the omission of his recent activity. There began some hectic phone calls from his adjutant, who was able to contact those responsible for the Homepage and thus also not explain the cause of the error. I could only assure Charles that the IBM equipment was not to blame, whereupon he then began to point out humorously the human inadequacy in modern technology and his experiences with it.

He said goodbye with a "Thank you very much, it was a pleasure to meet you - all the best for your time in our beautiful Scotland" and after saying goodbye the entourage disappeared on foot to the PC call center, where he was supposed to attend a customer call. He grabbed the headphones, pulled them too far apart, the micro bracket broke off. A replacement was needed quickly. It also broke again. That was the talk of the day, some press photographers who had traveled with us had photographed exactly this moment and exactly the story then appeared in the media and in the BBC, which were very critical of the monarchy at the time.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/1385035.stm> .

Then the entourage went to the plant railway station and the special train left again after saying goodbye.

Only then were employees allowed to leave the buildings and enter and leave the plant.

For me it was an interesting experience and a highlight of my stay in the UK. Just a few years later, the factory was demolished building by building; the PC Business went to Lenovo and with it the production to China. Even the newest call centre building is no longer standing. Call centers in Eastern Europe and India handle customer calls today.

The 50 year memorial plaque, as well as the Thomas Watson plaque unveiled when the plant was officially opened has been saved by the Hursley museum. They also have the 'time capsule' embedded in the wall when the plant opened, containing newspapers, product manuals and souvenirs of the day.

The BBC made a documentary in 2020 about the history of the Greenock Plant. This can be downloaded here - https://www.dropbox.com/s/2mikbgjddczyh6/BBC_GNK_2020.mp4?dl=1



