



# Roger Blakeway

Looking back at a stellar career

By Melissa Cogavin, Managing Editor, SCTE®

**Melissa Cogavin talks to the SCTE's outgoing CEO Dr Roger Blakeway upon his retirement.**

***30 plus years is a long time in the industry, how did you get started?***

By accident! I have always had a little chuckle to myself when asked in interviews 'where do you see yourself in 5 years' time?' I never had any idea!

My early career in the late 60's followed on from my doctorate at Birmingham University, working for Lucas Research on semiconductors, integrated circuits and automotive modules. An opportunity to be involved with a government exchange programme in 1973 saw me move to the Military Vehicles Engineering Establishment at Chobham, Surrey.

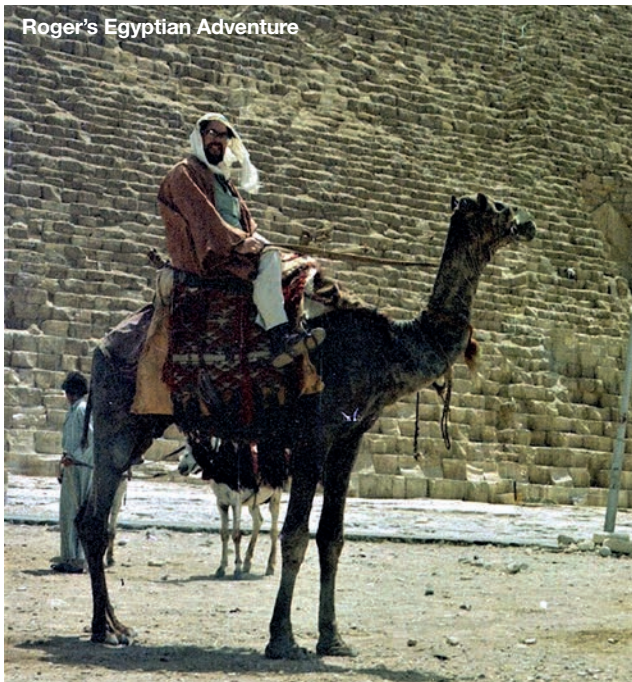
As a Principle Scientific Officer, I ran a research group looking at ballistic fire control systems for tanks. This involved low light TV, thermal imaging and auto-follow systems. The latter used motion prediction, using Walsh transforms, in a similar way to that used by MPEG some 30 years later to reduce bit rates on digital TV signals.

Back with Lucas Defence Systems after 30 months with the MoD, I continued to work in the same field, spending time with Egyptian and other Middle Eastern armies upgrading their aging systems.



Working with Scicon Micronet

The MoD experience attracted the attention of a software systems consultancy, Scicon, which was part of BP. I joined them in 1979 as manager of their Engineering Division. It was there that I worked on standards implementation as well as on a contract for serial data transmission over radio for the MoD; I was also involved in embedded micro systems such as badge reader and control systems for North Sea platforms. At the same time we worked with the BT Prestel service, providing embedded software to enable early home micro computers, such as the Sinclair Spectrum, BBC Micro etc. to act as data terminals.



*I can see some links with the Broadband Industry, but when did you actually get involved in the nitty-gritty of cable and beyond?*

Internal reorganisation within Scicon led me to look at a new role and I was attracted by an advert for a Technical Manager with Racal-Oak, a joint venture company between Racal in the UK and Oak Industries of the USA. Following the UK government's Hunt Report, the aim of the project was a transfer of technology from USA to Europe at the start of the broadband revolution in the 80s.

A lot of what we were doing involved support of existing Oak products (the Oak Multicode) in systems such as Greenwich, Swindon and Coventry. It was during this time that I met Chris Swires who had been providing technical support to Oak. Chris introduced me to the SCTE and has remained a valued friend ever since. Oak industries also had a research facility in Dordrecht in the Netherlands where I met both Rien Baan, our current Society Vice President, and CEO Peter den Toonder, a legend in the industry and who was later one of the founders of Irdeto (Ir. den Toonder).

Together with Racal Thanet, Kent and the Oak factory in Taiwan we set about introducing new technology into the European arena. In the satellite field we developed and provided the encryption equipment for transmission and reception of the first Sky TV channel (from BT uplink in Docklands to headends across Europe). The video used analogue scrambling with the

sync intervals being replaced by secure digital audio. This was also my first contact with IBC, where I presented a paper at the 1984 Brighton Exhibition. A similar technology was used in the newly introduced Sigma set-top decoders with versions for cable and over-the-air systems.

It was during this time that I first met the late Dave Keeley, whom many will know from Jerrold and Motorola. At the time he was working for BT in their Alpertons Labs. Dave was the technical interface for the Aberdeen Cable contract where Racal-Oak supplied the computer control and billing system, as well as the first 20,000 set-top boxes. The contract involved liaison with the Oak Taiwan production plant to define build and test procedures, as well as implementation of QC requirements at plant and provision of QA inspection in the UK. A week spent in Taiwan with Dave was particularly memorable (written evidence is not available).

It was unfortunate that Oak in the USA overstretched themselves by becoming involved in TV production while seeing a decline in leased STBs in major city cable networks. They withdrew from the partnership in 1985, leaving a difficult decision for Racal to make. We had ongoing contracts in Europe in addition to Aberdeen Cable, but still needed cash support for ongoing R&D. Timing was not good since Racal had to decide at the time whether to invest tens of millions into Vodafone; remember this was at the start of the mobile phone era. They chose Vodafone and shut down Racal-Oak – a great shame, since we were at the forefront of set-top box technology and our existing Sky contract moving to a DTH service, could potentially have yielded enormous sales.

*Seems very unfortunate, but it didn't put you off?*

No, I spent a couple of months shutting down Racal-Oak, which gave me chance both to reflect on the industry and what I wanted to do next. A move from supplier to network provider seemed a good idea and in 1985 I joined Westminster Cable, reporting to the MD Peter Alden. Westminster Cable was a joint venture between corporate investors and BT, the latter providing the technology, physical network and installations. BT saw this as an opportunity to showcase their baseband Switched Star technology, using FM multi-fibre to distribute to 300 home street cabinets.

*(editor's note – there are several papers covering the Westminster system available in the SCTE archive including recent 'from the archive' in Broadband)*

With BT as the network provider, Westminster Cable was responsible for marketing, sales, customer services and programming. I was responsible for operations, control room, customer service, sales support and BT liaison.

Now this was at the very start of broadband cable in the UK and selling multichannel TV, videodata and a novel laser-disc based VoD service was a challenge to the existing 4 channel terrestrial marketplace. We solved this by fitting out a Winnebago motor home with a full demonstration, the ubiquitous BBC Micro playing a major role in the simulation system. Sales were sometimes over-exuberant and I remember having to provide several free TV sets to residents of a private block of flats in St Johns Wood who had been told they would get 'noise free, brilliant TV colour pictures' even though they had black and white sets!

Two amusing incidents come to mind: I remember getting a telephone call from an irate hotel owner in Soho and dashing over there with a bundle of pound notes to rescue my engineer who had fallen through the ceiling of the bridal suite whilst surveying the attic space and deposited several eons of dust and debris on the beautiful white bed!

The second involved installation in No 10 Downing Street. We provided six cable channels, on top of their existing MATV system, fed with 1.25" coax from a street cabinet some 700+ metres away in Victoria. A service call found me grabbing a taxi and shouting 'No 10 Downing Street' to the driver! The problem turned out to be in the original MATV aerial feed, a mix of 50 and 75ohm 'N' connectors and I had just finished checking the TV in the office of Margaret Thatcher's Press Secretary (Sir Bernard Ingram), when I got a tap on the shoulder from the PM herself who asked if I could fix the TV set in the upstairs flat. I chased after her up two flights of stairs with a spectrum analyser on



my back (there is a lift but apparently Mrs Thatcher always preferred the stairs) and performed a miracle cure (it was the original 'N' connector problem) before being invited to take a cup of tea with the Prime Minister. For me this was very special since at the time I was chair of the local Conservative Party and of the Ash Parish Council.

All good things come to an end and, by the late 80's, BT had decided not to invest in ongoing development of their baseband switch and roll-out essentially stopped. This coincided with an offer from Racal to help with a new start-up company, Paknet.

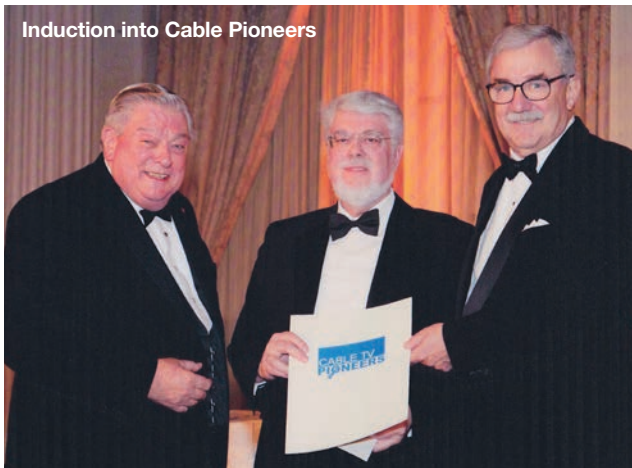
### *So, you left cable?*

Not really and not for long! This was still in the days of dial-up modems and there was a problem with the increasing use of debit and credit cards. Many retailers only had dial-up access to their banks and authorisation took for ever. Paknet provided a RF modem solution, utilising the Vodafone backhaul network – a bit like 4G layered on an analogue phone network!

Development and initial deployment went smoothly and within a couple of years I found myself twiddling my thumbs. Luckily my old boss from Westminster Cable, Peter Alden, had moved to Videotron and in 1991 asked me to join him there at the Lewisham head office.

It's important to reflect on the fact that the late '80s, early '90s saw a huge shift in investment in cable in the UK; the government allowed foreign investment for the first time and attracted North American companies to compete for the new franchises being released. Videotron had a successful





operation in Montreal with a novel set-top box solution, Videoway, and initially applied for the Southampton franchise. They quickly followed this by applying for several London Borough franchises and acquiring existing operations in Greenwich, Fulham, Kensington & Chelsea and Ealing.

My role in the Corporate Office was to integrate the varied technologies from existing franchises and to plan a comprehensive fibre-based system for the whole network, which comprised some 2.4m homes. This was the first deployment of single mode fibre in UK cable networks; by 1995 we had passed half a million homes, providing an interactive, multi-packaged service with the Videoway STB. Still basically an analogue STB, it used digital data in the vertical blanking line interval. It had two tuners and could switch seamlessly between any two channels in the vertical interval, allowing interactive programming such as poker, roulette etc.

By the late '90s we were operationally cash positive and Videotron had decided to take the money and pull out of the UK. Of the many suitors, Cable & Wireless were eventually successful in taking over both Videotron as well as Nynex and Bell Cable Media. There was lots of coordination and integration of networks at a time when we were also trying to launch a digital service!

We eventually launched one in 1998 and I then acted as a consultant looking after standards and, in particular, the introduction of broadband modems. I sat on the board of DVB as the C&W representative and made myself very unpopular by rejecting the DVB Euromodem specification in favour of the US MCNS (later to become DOCSIS) Modem. Together with colleagues from Nortel and Motorola we successfully forced ETSI to adopt the EuroDocsis specification and the rest is history!

### ***But you left Cable and Wireless for yet another start-up company, Diva?***

To be honest, I'm not a large company person. At the start of the Videotron operation, we were in a 'wild west' scenario, making instant decisions and getting things done on a day-to-day basis. Even for a multi-million plan to take fibre down to the 300-home street cabinet I received an overnight go-ahead from the parent company in Montreal. With the many layers of corporate management at C&W I had to submit any capital spend above £1K to two separate boards.

When I was approached by a head-hunter to join Diva UK, a start-up offshoot of a California-based VoD supplier, I jumped at the chance. We initially had great success in bringing the product to market, significant interest from MSOs across Europe and had negotiated a multi tens-of-millions dollar contract with ntl for all their UK franchises. Unfortunately, before we could sign on the dotted line, the dot.com bubble finally burst and ntl went into chapter 11. This left Diva with a failed IPO and investors withdrawing support for further development.

Diva shut up shop in 2001 and I was left with a major career decision. I was suffering acutely at the time from rheumatoid arthritis, which limited my ability to move or stand for any length of time so, at the age of 68, I decided to retire from full time employment and move to Wales to be near my daughter and family.

### ***You retired? But you are still here!***

Yes, I forgot to tell anyone. I had intended to carry on my involvement with the SCTE anyway but in the end stayed on as President and CEO.

### ***So, when and how did your involvement the SCTE start?***

As I mentioned before, Chris Swires first introduced me to the Society and whilst at Westminster Cable I had provided technical papers and hosted several meetings of the Executive Committee. When I joined Videotron my immediate boss, Jean-Charles Dagenais, wanted me to get involved in external relations so, in addition to UK and European standards and the Cable Association technical group, he encouraged me to actively participate in the SCTE.

Joining the SCTE Executive Committee was easy – I was the only member who turned up for the 1990 AGM and so, with



1995 IBC with Bill Riker, President of the US SCTE

the backing of Tom Hall MBE, was subsequently co-opted to the Committee! My first meeting was at the new offices in Wembley together with Beverley Walker who was taking over from Tom Hall as the Society's National Secretary. Following the 1992 AGM, again with the strong backing of Tom Hall, I was elected President of the SCTE.

The early '90s recession was not good for the Society. The Society was technically insolvent and only a positive cash flow prevented us from going under. The Society needed a major shake-up to survive.

### **Sounds difficult; how did you tackle the problem?**

There are two ways of increasing membership; one is to increase penetration in the existing marketplace and the second is to expand into new geographical markets.

We tackled the first in several ways. We introduced a Technician class of membership and, together with Chief Engineers at several MSOs encouraged our employees to become members. Chuck Carroll of Telewest, co-opted onto the Exec Committee, was extremely helpful and together Videotron and Telewest funded the development of the first SCTE Technician Training Courses. They insisted that all our sub-contractors used certified technicians. Technician numbers went from zero to a peak approaching 500. We also

made the Society a more social organisation – lecture days were extended from half to full day events with lunch and an evening cocktail party. Summer lectures included sporting activity afternoons and we crowned the social calendar with our annual Gala Dinner, always at a spectacular venue and including an awards ceremony.

### **How about the new markets?**

This was difficult to start with, owing to the limited funding available. In 1992 I agreed to chair a conference session at the first Amsterdam IBC show and, in 1993, a session in Montreux. Following the IBC event, I received several comments about the lack of cable content at the show and, having passed these critiques to the IBC organisers, was immediately invited to join their conference committee! By 1994 I had been asked to sit on the IBC management committee and in 1995 the Society exhibited at IBC for the first time.

By 1998 the show had grown significantly and it was obvious that it could no-longer be organised and managed by a bunch of volunteers. The result, after many meetings in darkened rooms, was to set up a partnership company of the existing organisations on the management committee (IET, RTS, IABM, SMPTE, IEEE and the SCTE) to run the show and who would share profits.



From small returns in 1998, by 2001 the Society was receiving £140K per year rising to over £650K by 2018. This enabled us to consider other exhibitions abroad as well as setting up regional Society Groups. A chance meeting with Col. Vinod Khare at a show in the US led to a training contract with BECIL, India, exhibiting at Convergence India, support from Prem Biel (Chair of the company organising Convergence India) and the subsequent setting-up of SCTE India. A joint approach to training in Kosovo with Jos Huizer, ex Tratec, led to exhibitions in the Balkans and an ongoing Balkan SCTE led by Besim Latifi, who later introduced our African Ambassador Florentino Jardin.

By far the most successful group has been our Benelux SCTE. With backing from Chuck Carroll, then at Ish, Rien Baan was asked to coordinate a meeting of interested parties. This took place in the Hague in April 2003, at the Vecai offices, hosted by Job Vehrmeijer, Vecai's Technical Director and attended by Aart Verbree of CAI Westland, Herman Grooten of Gouda Cable, Rien and myself. I was impressed by the enthusiasm and the Benelux SCTE was set up as a sub-committee of the Society. The group has grown over the years; it now has nearly 100 members and organises its own lectures and social events.

Altogether, the geographical expansion has resulted in nearly half of our members coming from outside of the UK.

#### ***When did you take on the CEO role?***

In reality, the role of President always encompassed an operational element but, by the turn of the century, with increased Society activities and IBC involvement it became obvious that we needed a more committed resource. This coincided with my 'retirement to Wales' and the Executive

Committee asked me to take on a formal CEO role for both the Society and SCTE Ltd on a paid 3 day/week basis. In reality it turned out to be a 7 day/week, 52 weeks/year commitment!

#### ***So why are you retiring now?***

Well, firstly I'm not getting any younger! Leaving aside the 'under a bus' possibility, the Society needs to have a management continuity plan anyway. The first part of this was to separate out the President and CEO functions and we accomplished this in 2016 with Mike Thornton taking over as President and re-introducing a three-year term as standard. We then set about strengthening the sub-committee structure so that chairs had more control and direct input into operational aspects.

We are now in a position, with Tony Basham as a strong and effective President, to consider doing away with the paid CEO role altogether so I was happy to 'put in my notice' effective at the AGM this year.

#### ***But surely you are not disappearing completely?***

Certainly not, I love the Society too much. I have decided not to stand for re-election to the Executive Committee but I have agreed to continue in a voluntary role as Director, providing some continuity and looking after the archives and constitutional matters. I have also agreed that I will manage the IBC interface for an interim period whilst we recover from COVID-19 and re-structure.

#### ***So, what are you going to do with your spare time?***

I have recently discovered that I like cruising holidays, so whilst the pension lasts... Other than that, I have a collection of scanned photographs dating back to the '50s to organise, clean, re-colour and, of course, my interest in genealogy keeps me busy in spare moments expanding my 50,000 person family tree!

***We wish you all the best for a long, healthy retirement Roger, and thank you again for everything you have done for the SCTE.***

