

Willie List CA Hon FBCS, CITP (1943-2007)



William (Willie) List died on November 5th 2007. He was born 6th December 1943, was educated at Chigwell School in Essex and joined Thomson McLintock & Co, Chartered Accountants in January 1961. He qualified in 1966 and took an interest in computer audit, joining the firm's computer audit team in 1967. He was one of the first computer auditors around and was therefore one of the people who had to invent the rules.

In a 2003 interview he summed up his entry into the computer industry as follows: "I trained as a Scottish accountant. During my training I was assigned to run the editing of the share registers then being put onto the computer for the first time. I found computers fun and decided I would enjoy working with them."

In 1975 he became a partner with Thomson McLintock & Co, which eventually became a part of KPMG.

He left KPMG in 1991 to set up independently and despite a period of illness and recuperation in 1999-2000, was kept busy till the last.

Willie was involved with BCS for many years, and was made an Honorary Fellow of the Society in 1999, a recognition of which he was justly proud.

Willie's involvement with the BCS began in earnest with the Computer Audit Specialist Group which he chaired from 1981-1988. He continued his involvement with this group (now Information Risk Management and Audit Specialist Group) and was scheduled to speak at the IRMA meeting in May 2008. He also became a member of the BCS Security Committee, (later the Security Expert Panel) which he chaired from 1994 – 1999 and again (following recovery from illness) from 2002 until 2004.

Willie was a valued contributor to the work of both CEPIS and IFIP TC11, where he was the BCS representative from 1993 until the present. In 2005 he was presented with the Kristian Beckmann Award in recognition of his valuable contribution to IFIP TC11.

Willie was a recognised expert in Computer security and audit matters, and contributed to many of the security initiatives we now take for granted. He represented BCS on a number of standards committees, and in particular had major input into the then emerging BS7799 standards, and took great interest in ISO/IEC 27001. He was also an influence on the Computer Misuse Act and commented extensively on other legislation. He had an extremely agile mind, and an ability to cut through the detail to grasp the essentials of an issue. In his thinking he was often ahead of the pack, and it could take time for people to realise that he was the one who had really understood the issue.

He will be remembered particularly for his rather unconventional approach to security matters. Whilst not ignoring technical approaches to ICT or Information Security he was unconvinced by much of the technical mumbo-jumbo which is wrapped around what he saw as a simple business process. His oft-repeated question 'but what happens if it doesn't work' when confronted by technical security products or processes could upset the ICT security purists, but was based upon the sound argument that no countermeasure is either absolute or foolproof, and therefore it WILL break down, and that any security solution is ineffective unless there exists a process for detecting its failure within an appropriate timescale. He saw early in the game that information security was a part of corporate governance rather than a technical issue for the IT specialist, a view now accepted by most organisations. He was adamant that ICT and Information security is unable to meet its objective unless the perceived boundaries extend beyond the technology of the IT Department to include all electronic and manual processes from information gathering to final result, again a view now gaining credibility.

The influence which Willie List has upon the Information Security industry is substantial. He may no longer be with us but his ideas live on in those who had the privilege to know him.

Les Fraser for BCS Nov 2007.

