



## Club

The skies darkened as I approached the front of our old house, my view partly obscured by the drizzling rain, a rusting white van, bikes discarded by kids and a couple of overflowing bins. Long-gone was the front lawn I used to mow meticulously as a child. There were no signs of the small rockery or the brightly-coloured pansies that had sat proudly in the centre, either. If it weren't for the number nailed along the top of the front door, I'd have hardly recognised it.

Over the years, I'd talked many times about making a trip back here – a pilgrimage of sorts – but I could never quite pluck up the courage. The house and the estate it sat on held mixed memories for me, very few of them good – except for Club, that is.

Although I would have been too young to remember, everything around me was new once, untouched by the ravages of time and the continual comings and goings of young families. That's how it was in the early 1970s when we moved into number 73, a three-bedroom house at the end of a row of four. Our family had moved a couple of times after my father lost his job as manager of the Bond Hotel. A friend had stolen money while he was covering for my father during a bout of illness – or so the story went. The estate I was now standing on, Five Oaks, was to be our final stop, the estate where my siblings and I were to grow up, finish school, get jobs and finally leave home, and where both my father and then, many years later, my mother, would die.

As I wandered the streets that November afternoon, it was clear that time had not been kind to this place. The houses had never looked great, if I'm honest – all one-hundred-plus of them built to the same, uninspired architect's drawing – but the wooden cladding, once white and vibrant, was now weathered, drawn, peeling and breaking at the edges. It's hard to put my finger on it, but many of the things that were once good about the place seemed to have long gone, while much of what was bad remained. It's not difficult to imagine why, after living there for over 20 years, I ended up in such a hurry to leave.

The well-sized gardens – now entirely blocked off from one another courtesy of eight-foot-high, plain wooden fencing – used to be open and inviting, a place for neighbours to glance, smile, nod and chat to one another over low garden walls. I wondered whether people weren't interested in getting to know their neighbours anymore, or whether someone else had decided it was probably better that they didn't. Small trees that used to be strategically dotted around many of the open spaces had now been reduced to tiny patches of barren earth, and the grassy areas that broke up the endless brick and concrete – places where, as kids, we regularly played football, cricket and rounders – were now people's homes, squeezed into every conceivable gap to help meet the insatiable demand for ever more social housing.

Not even the alleyways running between the houses were spared; iron gates now blocked the way, no doubt a desperate measure designed to curb antisocial behaviour. The garages in the centre of the estate, for many years a favoured spot for congregating and playing music, had been removed, leaving an area once short of character now devoid of pretty much any. I imagined us all sitting there, perched up against the aluminium garage doors, playing *Madness* out of my cheap tape recorder. Over time, everything seemed to have turned a shade of grey, from the faded tarmac and blocks of concrete to the choice of graphite-coloured bricks. It was a colour that accurately reflected the mood.

The one exception to all this was the Five Oaks pub. Once a typical working-class drinking establishment (and a place where my father spent way too much time and money in the last years of his life), the Five Oaks was now an ‘inn’ and had transformed into an up-market gastropub. Gentrification was alive and well, even here, with the burger and chips and cheap lager long replaced by sweet potato chips, chicken Caesar salad and craft beer. We’d never have been allowed within a mile of this place if it had been anything like this in our day.

Our surroundings may have been far from inspiring, but opportunities for exploration were never far away. If nothing else, we were a very resourceful bunch. In those days, if you headed towards the far back corner of the estate you’d find an area fondly known as ‘The Dump’, a large patch of rough grass peppered with bushes and mounds of earth with big, highly climbable trees hugging its edges. Beyond one hedgerow you’d find a large farmers field – a hide-and-seek paradise in the summer when it morphed into a meadow of six-foot-tall wild grass – and behind another was a narrow lane which ran alongside another large field, this one owned by a Mr Cooper (more on him later). After this was ‘The Forest’, a small stretch of densely packed trees with a small stream running to the side, which led into open countryside. In an era before cable television, games consoles and mobile phones, children spent most of their days outdoors in places like these, and my friends and I were no exception. Fortunately for us, outside the concrete boundaries of the estate there were plenty of ways to pass the time.

For the slightly older children – at least those lucky enough to work their way through a rather lengthy waiting list – there was Club. For an estate crawling with two or three hundred children there were surprisingly few organised social events or activities, and certainly no indoor spaces for us to hang out. Club was a saviour – for about forty of us, at least. But that wasn’t the only reason it was so popular.

Frederick Richard Vivian Howard Cooper owned, ran, managed and self-funded Club, making him something of a hero among the children and parents on the

estate. More fondly known as Freddie Cooper (or simply Freddie), his six-foot, bespectacled, well-rounded frame stood out all the more thanks to his insistence on wearing the same blue jumper, brown trousers and sensible walking shoes every day – his ‘Club uniform’, as he used to fondly describe it. He was a bear of a man and, wherever he went, feelings of comfort, safety and warmth were never far behind. He was the stable father figure many of the children never had – me included.

Despite his outgoing nature, Freddie was an intensely private man, and very little was known about him despite the consistently probing questions of young, curious minds. He was Club, and Club was him, and that’s pretty much all you needed to know. It’s all he ever wanted you to know, too. By the time most of us left, we’d figured out a few things, mind you – that he was single, was an only child, loved Leicester City Football Club, loved being around children, was incredibly humble, kind and patient and had a wonderful sense of humour. Casting my mind back, I will never forget his Tuck Shop ‘specials’, things like ‘Dog-in-a-Mug’ (a hot dog sausage in a plastic cup), or the way he would politely announce it was ‘megazaparoonery time’ when Club was about to close and it was time to switch everything off. It was clear that Club meant as much to him as it did to us, and that’s probably the reason it felt so special to everyone fortunate enough to come into any kind of contact with it.

If you took a ten-minute walk up the tree-lined lane which ran parallel to The Dump, you’d find yourself outside the imposing gates of St Michael’s School, the largest private preparatory school on the island. We never quite figured out how Mr Cooper ended up owning the building he used for Club, which sat attached to the side of this impressive granite-built boarding school, but we were more than grateful that fate had decided he should. When Club closed, years later, the school finally managed to buy it from him, but for many years children from a council estate played metres away from kids from some of the richest families on the island, many of whom were destined to end up at private schools in the UK. We felt

incredibly fortunate that no amount of money seemed to tempt Mr Cooper into a sale, and we'd heard there were plenty of offers. Club really meant that much to him, and most likely gave him a strong sense of purpose that he knew money could never buy. He knew how special it was to us, too.

Club was predominantly a place of physical activity and play, and a welcome escape from our reality, with table tennis tables, skateboarding ramps, Atari video games consoles, puzzles, crafts, a set of football goals on the top field, video cassette players for watching films, cricket equipment and even full-size snooker tables. Even when Club was full, which it rarely wasn't, there was plenty for everyone to do, all supervised with a very light touch by Freddie himself. No one dared misbehave out of fear of being kicked out. It was a fun, safe, welcoming space as a result. As a former Club-goer put it at Freddie's funeral many years later, the way Freddie ran Club taught us all how to collaborate, work together and be patient and tolerant with one another, all skills Freddie knew would be useful to us in later life.

Once the lights went out over the snooker table, and the corridors and video game machines fell silent, Club transformed into something quite different – The Learning Centre. Mr Cooper not only ran a club but was also a qualified teacher, one who specialised in helping children with learning difficulties. Most afternoons and evenings during the week he would privately tutor children who were finding it hard to keep up at school, or who needed extra help here and there. From what we could tell, this was Mr Cooper's main job and his only source of income. Fortunately for him, along with Club, it was something he not only loved but clearly excelled at.

One of Mr Cooper's secret weapons sat on a solid, official-looking desk in a room with huge windows adjacent to his main office, and this was probably one of the reasons so many parents were happy to pay for their children to be taught there. That secret weapon was a Commodore PET computer, one of the earliest personal computers (often known as 'home computers' back then). Time on the PET was very popular among his students. Unlikely as it may have been, Mr Cooper was an early

proponent, and something of a visionary, in the field of computer-aided learning at a time when information technology wasn't even a subject in schools. As he reminded me many times later, he may not have understood how his computer worked, but he certainly knew how to put it to good use. To be fair, few people knew how computers worked back then, or how useful and popular they would become.

Commodore released their first machine, the PET 2001, in 1977 – a year after Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak had cobbled together, by hand, Apple's first computer, the Apple I. Back then, computing was more for hobbyists, with machines coming in kit form. The Apple II followed a year later, and its release – along with that of the PET 2001 – opened up a new era of personal computing. Machines now came fully built, taking them out of the exclusive realm of geeks and hobbyists and into the everyday home, albeit at a price and assuming, of course, that you had some idea of what you were going to do with one.

Around the same time, Bill Gates and Paul Allen founded Microsoft. Believing the real opportunity lay in software (hence the 'soft' in its name), they went about developing programs designed to help people do things with the hardware they were beginning to buy. Interestingly IBM, who were to become the leading manufacturer of personal computers, believed the opposite, and their decision to focus on selling hardware, which they had been doing in the mainframe world for decades, gave Gates and Allen their big break. In 1981, IBM decided against developing their own software and licensed MS-DOS (Microsoft's Disk Operating System) to run on their brand new range of IBM personal computers. Within the space of a few months, Microsoft had licensed MS-DOS to dozens of other companies, too, and their dominance in the operating system market later led to the development of Microsoft Windows, a platform that was to power a staggering 90% of personal computers at its peak.

In the early days, Microsoft had also been making a name developing and licensing its own version of a programming language called BASIC (Beginners All-Purpose Symbolic Instruction Code). BASIC originally emerged in the 1960s to help non-scientists and non-mathematicians program computers, a task which, up until then, required specialist knowledge. Its simplicity was key to its growth in popularity, making BASIC one of the languages of choice for many computer manufacturers who bundled it with their machines in increasing numbers. Commodore was one of these companies, choosing to license Microsoft BASIC in 1977. The PET computer sitting on Mr Cooper's desk at Club was one of them.

Commodore PETs were large, solid, heavy machines with a built-in (or more precisely, built-on) screen. The keyboard was typical of the time – large, chunky keys with a reassuring click and plenty of travel, designed to take all the punishment they were likely to get. A cable from the back led to a small, black tape player on which you could load and save your code using regular music cassettes or, if you were fortunate, a large dual floppy disk unit where you could, instead, make use of 5.25" floppy disks. You could buy a PET in any colour – as long as it was white – and any screen colour, as long as it was green.

Switching one on was a fairly uninspiring event. Within a few seconds the 40-column display would light up, and the green text would tell you how much memory was available (by today's standards, virtually nothing) and that it was 'OK' and ready to go. A square cursor blinked patiently while the computer waited to be told what to do. No mouse, no clicking, no user interface, no Windows, nothing. To make this lump of metal do something you needed to type in a command, and the ones that were most commonly used were printed on a piece of paper that hung on the wall. Typing on the keyboard the command PRINT "Hello World!" followed by a strike of the Enter key would, unsurprisingly, display a line of text saying "Hello World!" followed by 'OK' and a flashing cursor below. It might seem dull now, but this was the first computer any of us had ever seen, let alone touched or used, and

despite not really knowing anything about it or what to even do with it, we found it captivating.

Some of the older, more responsible children at Club were allowed to play on the PET, an incredibly brave and trusting move by Mr Cooper, given how expensive it was and how crucial it was to his teaching. That said, it was built like a tank so he probably realised it would take something special to break it. There were a few games available, if you can call them that, but none which might resemble any you'd see today. There were no graphics or sound (other than a flat beep), either. Aliens were made out of curly brackets and dollar signs, and lasers were simple colons that moved up the screen one line at a time. Things were incredibly simple and uncomplicated, making anything seem possible.

Games could be played in one of two ways. By far the easiest was to grab the cassette tape for the game you wanted, insert it in the cassette player attached to the PET, and use the LOAD command, via the keyboard, to load it. Once loading was complete (which could take anything up to five minutes) and you got the OK and flashing cursor back, typing in RUN started the game. This was the method that the vast majority of kids at Club used to do things.

Not surprisingly, I wasn't like the other kids. My brother and I had already been dabbling in electronics for some time, buying old TVs and radios from jumble sales and taking them apart, repurposing speakers and whatever else we could salvage. Anything left was turned into Star Trek-style control panels which we'd play with for hours as we flew through space, battling enemy ships or landing on distant planets. I was naturally curious, and the PET gave me yet another avenue to explore.

Very early on I wondered what other commands could be typed in after a game had loaded. After randomly coming across the LIST command in a computer magazine, and trying it for the first time after I'd loaded a game, a whole new world suddenly



opened up right in front of my eyes. Laying bare were the commands that told the computer how to set up the screen and run the game and, over time, I figured out what each line of code did and how the program branched off, based on keys pressed or events that were triggered (such as dying or achieving a high score). I broke plenty of programs dabbling with the code, but it helped me learn a lot about error messages and bug fixing as I went. Eventually I was able to change things around effortlessly, make some things easier and some things harder, run the game, see where I went wrong (if I had) and try again. Mr Cooper had a simple dot matrix printer attached to the PET, and he allowed me to print off my code and take it home where I studied it enthusiastically. While the other children used their 'PET time' to play games, I was using mine to figure out how everything worked. It wasn't long before I started writing my own programs, and Mr Cooper's teaching turned out to be the perfect outlet for my emerging programming talents.

Most of his students required help with their reading and comprehension, and Mr Cooper supplemented more traditional paper and workbook-based activities with sessions on the PET. Here he made use of a number of fledgling education games which he bought on tape from the UK, but the students very quickly worked through them and, on top of that, they weren't always that well tailored to the specific needs of each pupil. It was around this time that I began experimenting with similar educational game ideas, putting together simple programs and sharing them with Mr Cooper. When we were confident we had something useful, he would try it out with his students who, without exception, responded positively to the new challenges we put in front of them.

After a while, Mr Cooper was providing me with passages of text from which we'd remove specific words for the student to find, and sets of words which we'd break down into individual letters for the students to spell out in their minds – activities which, today, are commonplace but back then were far from it. The programs were written in a way that made it easy for me to create new ones quickly on demand and, for the first time, Mr Cooper began supporting his students with genuine,

individually-tailored computer-aided learning. Because of the work I was putting in, he soon started paying me a couple of pounds per program. I was 14 years old and this turned out to be my second taste of entrepreneurship. My first had been a newspaper round, delivering to an eye-watering 350 houses six days per week which netted me £10, a huge amount of money in those days. At one point, Mr Cooper took a few samples of my work to researchers at Reading University who had shown interest in what we were doing. Unfortunately they did not take up the opportunity to work with us and I wonder, to this day, how things might have turned out if they had. These were, after all, the pioneering days of personal computing and there was a lot up for grabs.

As my programming skills developed, we expanded our suite of teaching programs at Club. At home I wrote a recordkeeping system for my mother's plants (she was a keen amateur naturalist) on an Amstrad computer I bought for her, and started dabbling in games and databases. My interest grew and, a year or so later, my skills came to the attention of the IT teacher at school who, in his other job, worked for a local computer company. I'd just turned 16, and they offered me a full-time job as a COBOL (Common Business Oriented Language) programmer. Unlike Bill Gates (who famously dropped out of Harvard after just two years to pursue his ambitions with Microsoft), I decided to turn it down and finish school. Not for the first time, looking back, I wonder if I'd made the right decision.

By the time Club and I parted ways, Mr Cooper had written me a reference extolling the virtues (and potential) of my programming skills. He ended by saying, 'While he is still relatively young, my view would be that he could go far in having a successful and rewarding career in computer programming.'

Although I never became a professional computer programmer, computers and IT did become the cornerstone of much of my later work. My exposure to computers at Club was significant and would lead to a career operating mainframe computer systems at local banks, and the development of full-blown systems for the likes of

Jersey Zoo, various legal firms and accountants and, much later, a messaging system that would impact millions of people around the world.

I did get the chance to thank Freddie, over coffee, one chilly Saturday morning in 2006 during one of my rare trips back to the island. Despite leaving Jersey ten years earlier, I had somehow managed to keep in touch. He was in good spirits but was reluctant to acknowledge his part in my unlikely journey from Five Oaks estate all the way to Stanford University, where I was headed on a Fellowship. Shrugging off any influence was Freddie all over. Whether he realised it or not, he gave me the kind of life-changing opportunity that children from Five Oaks simply didn't get. Without him, and the encouragement he gave me, my life would have been so very different.

We stepped out of the café and fondly said our goodbyes in the cold, autumn air. I stood there for a moment, watching him as he shuffled off down the street, my mind filled with memories of the cheerful way he had always mentored, supported and encouraged me at Club all those years ago. I could still see him in his blue jumper, brown trousers, and sensible shoes.

That was the last time I saw Freddie. He died four years later, aged 70.