

Recording of the week: Britain's first supercomputer

This week's selection comes from Tom Lean, Project Interviewer for An Oral History of British Science.

It has been 55 years since the commissioning of Atlas at the University of Manchester in 1962, one of the world's very first supercomputers. Developed largely by the University of Manchester and Ferranti, the enormous machine was probably the second most powerful computer at the time and pioneered a number of innovations in hardware and software. Capable of processing about a million instructions a second and with over 670 kilobytes of memory, Atlas had as much computing power as several smaller machines, albeit far less than the simplest desktop machine today. It was said that when Atlas went offline, Britain lost half its computing power. Yet despite this awesome potential, only three Atlas computers were ever built. As Atlas's lead hardware designer [Professor David Edwards](#) recalled for [An Oral History Of British Science](#), it was rather difficult convincing the sceptics that Britain even needed a machine that was so powerful:

[We only need one computer for the country_Dai Edwards \(C1379/11\)](#)



The Atlas computer at the University of Manchester, 1963 (Iain MacCallum)

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