

## 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)**

Visit the library's [Voices of Science](#) web resource to explore 100 life stories about environmental science, British technology and engineering from 1940 to the present.

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## Recording of the week: pond life

*This week's selection comes from Cheryl Tipp, Curator of Wildlife & Environmental Sounds.*

Have you ever wondered what a pond sounds like? Most of us will have spent some time dipping for tadpoles, watching insects glide across the surface or looking out for flashes of colour as fish move beneath the water, but our interactions with ponds are usually visual. For some people though, the promise of what's going on sonically is just too hard to resist.

Most wildlife sound recordists will have a hydrophone somewhere in their arsenal and are only too happy to investigate this otherwise silent world.

While visiting a smallholding in north Wales, Peter Toll's curiosity was piqued by a little pond that had been carefully created to give life to as many creatures as possible. In his accompanying notes, Peter remarked:

*"It looked so still and tranquil above the surface, until I lowered my hydrophones and was truly amazed by what sounds I could hear below the surface."*

What Peter heard was an ecosystem brimming with life. The sounds of newts, invertebrates and oxygenating plants came together to create a vibrant aquatic soundscape, as can be heard in the following excerpt. As the old adage goes, looks can definitely be deceiving.

[Pond atmosphere recorded by Peter Toll in Llandrindod Wells, Wales on 30 Sept 2011 \(BL ref 212534\)](#)



A selection of underwater sounds from the archive was put together for a special programme broadcast by NTS Radio in October 2017. To find out more and listen again please click [here](#).

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## [Recording of the week: whistling Wigeon](#)

*This week's selection comes from Cheryl Tipp, Curator of Wildlife and Environmental Sounds.*

Right about now, hundreds of thousands of birds will be en route to the UK, returning to wintering grounds that have provided their populations with food and shelter for millennia. The Wigeon is just one of the birds that will be making this journey. This medium-sized duck usually congregates around the British coastline but, despite the large numbers, you're more likely to hear Wigeon before you see them. Males announce their presence with an excitable, high-pitched whistle which, teamed with their pretty plumage, helps bring some cheer to the most desolate winter landscape.

[Wigeon whistles recorded in Northumberland, England in Jan 2012 by Simon Elliott \(BL ref 199321\)](#)



Male and female Wigeon taken from *British Gamebirds and Wildfowl*, 1855 (courtesy of the Biodiversity Heritage Library)

Many more wildlife recordings can be found in the [Environment and Nature](#) section of British Library Sounds.

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## [Recording of the week: Ancient Evenings](#)

*This week's selection comes from Stephen Cleary, Lead Curator of Literary & Creative Recordings.*

It is now 10 years since the death of Norman Mailer, one of the best-known and most widely read US authors of the post-war period. This week's recording features Mailer in discussion with Melvyn Bragg at the ICA, London, in 1983. Mailer's epic novel of ancient Egypt, *Ancient Evenings*, had been published just a few days previously. Mailer discourses on the 'class system' of Ancient Egypt, among related subjects. It didn't pay to be poor in those days either, apparently.

[Norman Mailer and Melvyn Bragg in conversation \(C95/55\)](#)



This recording comes from a [substantial collection](#) of talks and discussions held at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London between 1982-1993.

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## [Recording of the week: watching Britain's nuclear bomb tests](#)

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

On 8th November 1957, hundreds of British military and scientific personnel gathered at Christmas Island, a remote speck of land in the Pacific Ocean. They were there for Operation Grapple X, the first successful test of a British hydrogen bomb. At 1.8 megatons, the blast was about a hundred and forty times more powerful than the atomic bomb that destroyed Hiroshima, and signified Britain's mastery of the secrets of thermonuclear power. Amongst

the witnesses to the mushroom cloud rising above Christmas Island was a 35 year old technician named Frank Raynor. As he recalls, in perhaps something of an understatement, it was “quite impressive” to watch:

[Frank Raynor\\_C1379/76](#)



The tests were also witnessed by Laurance Reed, a naval officer on HMS Warrior. He describes a shipboard atmosphere of excitement, anxiety and awe when the first bomb was dropped.

[Laurence Reed\\_C1503/37](#)

The full interview with Frank Raynor can be found in the [Oral History of British Science](#) collection on [British Library Sounds](#).

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