RT: Jon Honeyball has been the contributing editor at PCPro Magazine since 1994. His monthly real-world computing column is a must-read for anyone who works in the IT industry, as he covers what's right and what's wrong with the latest small business technology solutions.

John is also the CEO of Woodleyside IT, a privately-held consulting company based in Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire, in England, and Woodleyside specialise in IT consultancy, future-proofing, strategic direction, product evaluation and hiring and firing.

JH: Oh, heavens above. This is all very embarrassing.

RT: There's going to be plenty more moments where I make you blush during this podcast, but thank you upfront for all the fantastic content that you've put out over the years. I really appreciate it.

JH: Well, that's very kind. Writing this stuff for many years, you tend not to get nice emails. You tend to get the: "Well, I read your column and you are absolutely God awful wrong. And how dare you. And I think product x is the greatest thing since sliced bread and you're an idiot for thinking otherwise." I know you can reply politely and say, "Thank you so much for your feedback" …

RT: Let's start with PC Pro - let's start with the writing. I've been a reader of PCPro Magazine since its early days. I remember you being a contributor to a publication before that - Windows Magazine?

JH: I actually started my writing in 1990 with a fortnightly magazine that's no longer around called PC User. It was a great thing, because it was more frequent than monthly, but it wasn't a daily news-oriented like the daily news titles at the time, so I had time for real articles and so forth.

It was great fun. It was edited by Chris Long, who's still around and a good mate. It had a really sort of fun, slightly pirate kind of feel to it, in a sense. The back-page column was the latest gossip and scandal - what they'd heard and what had gone wrong on press events, who had said what about whom and all this sort of stuff.

It had a real good community feel to it and I loved it. It was a really good read and I really looked forward to it. So being the nerd that I was, I started writing in and saying: “This article is rubbish, because you haven't taken this into account,’ or, “You really can't believe that that's going to happen” and so on.

I quite frequently got the Letter of the Fortnight prize, which was supposed to be a book token, but for some strange reason they never turned up in the post - I got the prize but nothing ever happened.

And then, completely out of the blue, I had a phone call and it was Chris Long on the phone, the editor of PC User. He said: “Would you like to come down and have lunch?” So, I trundled down to Farringdon area where the editorial offices were.

We went and had lunch and I met the editorial team, which looked complete chaos, as all editorial offices do. Halfway through the dessert, Chris said: “By the way, I need the first one by the end of next week.”

I said, somewhat perplexed: “The first what?” He said: “You know all about this Windows stuff so I want you to write a three-page column for us, every issue.” I thought he was completely kidding, as I'd never written anything. I was dreadful at English at school - I got a C at O level and kind of scraped my way through.

It was like: “Holy crap, I've got to write three pages of publication stuff about Windows, how on earth am I going to do that?” And Chris's advice was: “Just write the sort of stuff you’ve been writing in these very interesting emails to me and it will be fine.”

I wrote the first one, and sent in by fax, which went down like a lead balloon in the PC User editorial office. I had a note from Chris saying, ‘You really need to get a modem and get on Kicks’, which those who've been around a long time will remember was a computer information exchange before the Internet really happened. It was a dial-up bulletin board thing here in the UK, akin to the Well in San Francisco, with a similar cosy software behind it.

So, I got onto that and for the next column I actually emailed him my copy, and that's how I got into it, which was about 1990. PC User did a redesign at the time to a glossier format. I got the first-ever PC User gold award issued to a wonderful piece of software for a company down in West London called Threads, who did a programme called Organiser.

Threads' Organiser looked like a Filofax on screen. The really clever bit was you could cross link things between pages. You could join up and then walk up and down the link. I got to know the guys there - Gary Lavelle was the chief programmer and one of the first employees of Microsoft UK. They got themselves sold off to Lotus and it became Lotus Organiser.

That was the early days. Then I got tempted to go over and write for Computer Buyer at Dennis Publishing and I met some people there. Bear in mind, this was not my full-time job, it was something I did kind at evenings and weekends.

At Dennis I met Felix, who was quite a character and is much missed. Computer Buyer was doing very well – it was a licence of the American Computer Buyer title. This is back in the days when paper adverts actually meant something, rather than today where everything's on the web.

We came up with this idea to do a Windows magazine, so we called it Windows Magazine and it was great. We did it for about two years, and I ended up being the first ever Windows NT columnist in the world, which was really scary and spooky. It gave me a real feel for having a sandpit in which I could rant and rave.

Then we took the very hard but ultimately correct decision to relaunch Windows Magazine as PCPro. We took the idea of the opinion columns and turned that into the real-world columns of PCPro. I helped identify some keen argumentative mates on Kicks who I thought had a good opinion.

People like Steve Cassidy, and Davey Winder for security. We launched this ship called PCPro. We had a lot of competition, because ZDNet brought their titles into the UK in the mid-90s and spent a huge amount of money on them to do PC Magazine.

That failed and we've ended up as the last ship standing, as it were, in the serious IT, SME space journal area. I've written RWC columns for every 280 months ever since. Since about issue 60 I've done the back-page column, which is area where I can rant and rave. I do it every month, and whatever has tickled my fancy or annoyed me gets thrown into my column.

RT: I would say, two observations. Firstly, PCPro is the only magazine that I know that I pick up and flick straight to the back page, so that's a testament to your writing. The feedback I get from people who listen to this podcast is that they enjoy feeling as though they're almost eavesdropping on a conversation between a couple of friends, in a very polite way.

I get the feeling with the Real World Computing columns that it is a conversation. It feels as though you, Steven and the others are speaking to the reader and you're just going over what's in your mind at the moment. I think that's the key to longevity of it.

JH: Yeah. If you're too stuffy then people get bored, switch off and don't come back again. If you're too stupid and irreverent people won't take you seriously. It's a very fine balance.

I'm in no way suggesting I'm getting it right, it's just they haven't fired me yet, after 280 months of doing this. Either that, or everyone's got used to me being stuck in a groove and put up with my foibles and quirks.

RT: I think I know which one it is!

JH: I certainly would never consider myself to be a professional journalist or talented writer. I did end up being shortlisted for the PPA Columnist of the Year and I lost against Jeremy Clarkson. I just take the view that I can't start writing the column until I know what the stories are that I'm going to say.

It really is a train of thought brain dump. I start with a list of topics and ideas and I just keep writing until I hit the magic 2,700 words. Things that got in, got in, and things that didn't might come back next month or not. These things move on, and issues I might have this month may be resolved next month. You can't keep on harping on about something.

It's just a case of trying to have a conversation, trying to explain it and put across a position. The other thing that's also worked very well for RWC is that we don't have to agree with each other. In fact, it's actually a good thing if we don't, we don't even have to agree with ourselves!

What I mean by that is, sometimes you take a position and argue from that point of view. There's a meme from the Kicks days that says you know a subject when you can argue it from one position for 15 minutes, and then authoritatively argue it from the opposite position for another 15 minutes.

Rarely is anything completely black and white. There are always pros and cons and reasons why stuff was done, even if they turn out to be bad reasons or bad outcomes. Sometimes I'll argue something, from a position that I might not necessarily agree with myself, but it's a point of view.

I take the view that my job is to make a contention or position, or talk about something and for the reader to come away thinking, 'Yeah, I understood something, and I learned something from that. I might not agree, but I understand why he said what he did. If I can do that, then I think I have fulfilled my remit.

RT: I absolutely agree. I'm a huge fan of your writing as I am of most of the Real World columnists. I want to throw a quote out there. Another tech writer, and another PCPro contributor, Paul Ockenden, said of you: "I wish I could write as well, as knowledgeably and as engagingly as John does". That's quite a compliment. I think.

I know you say you're not a trained writer or anything like that, but I think it connects with the audience.

JH: That's what you've got to try and do and it seems to work. I don't know why but I just kind of do more of the same.

RT: Having my heroes on the podcast means I get a bit of free consultancy. I'll share with you, as a long-time PCPro reader, one of my professional bucket list goals is to have an article published in PCPro. My buddy Ian Thornton-Trump managed it a few months ago and I was really pleased for him, but also wildly jealous. Any tips for me on achieving that goal?

JH: Well, firstly, it's not up to me! You can start throwing the £5 notes in my direction but it won't help. The person who decides all that is Tim Downton, the editor, so get in contact with him. He's always looking for content and interesting stuff.

We do have a guest columnist column in RWC, so if you've got something that would fit into that, not just waffling, because you've got to have a story to say. If it will fit into the remit, send it to Tim and I know he will take it seriously.

RT: The other reason that I mentioned that upfront is when I've shared that bucket list goal of mine (and it's a vanity goal, nothing more), there's a lot of people that listen to this podcast who are bloggers, who are aspiring writers in their own right. What's to stop anybody getting in touch with the editor of any magazine?

JH: Absolutely, you're right. Write to me and I'll forward it on. It takes me all of 10 seconds to forward an email and I'm more than happy to do so. I feel it's part of my job to do so as one of the faces of the magazine. One of my email addresses has been on every column, so I'm not exactly difficult to get a hold of. If you've got something important, it will either end up as a letter in the next issue or there's potential for a column space or something.

RT: Thank you for that. Now, let's start talking business. As well as a PCPro contributor you're also the CEO of Woodleyside, the business you founded in 1985.

JH: Not quite. 1990.

RT: Let's rewind to 1990. How did you get started working for yourself?

JH: Well, you have to go back into my teenage years, unfortunately. I was a pretty talented musician and I studied as a classical pianist to a very high level. I was in the National Youth Orchestra for five or six years. I studied with people like Pierre Boulez and Kirill Kondrashin. My piano tutor in London was Maria Curcio, who was the only pupil of Artur Schnabel.

If you know classical piano world, you'll know those names. I decided that the age of 16, 17, I didn't want to be a concert pianist. I still have my Steinway in the next room, but I decided I didn't want to do that. I was much more interested in how things worked. I helped my dad's service the cars every weekend because they were old wrecks and we needed the service to get them through the next week.

I was really fascinated by broadcast engineering and recording. The choice at 18 was, do I go to the BBC and become a trainee engineer - back then the BBC still had a very strong internal training.

I had an exceptionally good a careers advisor at school who came up with information about a very small course at the University of Guilford attached to the music department called the Tonmeister course, which at the time was the only broadcast engineering, sound recording and music course in the UK.

Nowadays you can go and do music technology almost anywhere, and there's been an absolutely incredible democratisation of that space as the prices of the technology has collapsed. But back then there was one degree course and I think there were five of us in my year.

As part of the degree we had hooks with various organisations for which we were effectively very cheap expert listeners. We knew what we were listening to, and we were students. So for £4.50 and a packet of Smarties you go somewhere for the day and tell them what you thought of stuff.

I started doing a lot of listening tests, which involved a lot of the consumer organisations around Europe. My industrial year I worked for a guy in North London called Angus McKenzie, who had a lab at his house. He was a legend in radio and broadcast, and actually had a column in HiFi News and Record Review about radio.

He was taken very seriously by the BBC and he was an amateur radio expert. We did a whole technical book for the Radio Society of Great Britain called ‘The Buyer's Guide to Amateur Radio.’

This is 33 years ago or something! That got me heavily into computer control of technical instrumentation – Hewlett Packard, Marconi and so on. We had a fantastic new prototype Marconi RF Spectrum analyser at the time, which I spent most of my year debugging before it came on sale.

I went back to university for my final year and I had an offer to go and join a consumers association – Which? - to help set up their audio-video telecoms lab in Harpenden, which I did. After three years of doing that, I had got involved in international computer testing for them, and I was getting a bit tired of it.

Windows 2 was very big. I’d spent £450 on its software development kit and then the £400 on the C-Compiler because back then that's how much it cost. When you opened the package you realised it was complete gobbledygook.

Then you had to buy a copy of Charles Petzold’s Programming Windows book, which was the Bible. He taught you how to write a makefile in a text editor, and it was very much roll it yourself.

I absorbed his book and found it completely fascinating is how a non-preemptive, multitasking, graphical operating system worked and how all the message passing worked

between it all. I bought the software development kit and one of the very first 386 20 megahertz computers that came on the market which was called the ‘Samsung S800.’

It had slots on the motherboard for eight megabytes of RAM, and it had a proprietary expansion slot into which you could slot the same again. I contacted Samsung and said, ‘Well, I’ve filled it with 8 meg, so where do I buy the expansion card from?’ They came back and rather sheepishly told me that they hadn't actually made any. They didn't think anyone was actually going to be able to afford the nine to 16 megabytes of RAM, so I got quite upset with them.

I went and bought the 387 mass coprocessor for it because I was doing a lot of stuff with vectors, and that didn't work either. I got onto Samsung and I said, ‘Why can't I see my £700 387 processor in this box?’

They said, ‘It needs a firmware update’. I drove down to South West London and they gave me some EPROMs on some antistatic foam. I plugged them in and my 387 came alive.

I was absolutely fascinated by it and I thought I OS2 was on a hiding to nothing and wasn’t going to work - it was the wrong thing at the wrong time. At the time I thought OS2/286 and OS2/386I wasn't going to provide what the industry needed at the time, but Windows 3 (which was coming) was. I was fascinated by Windows 2/386, if you remember that.

RT: I don’t my first exposure was Windows 3 Windows 3/11 for workgroups.

JH: This was Windows 2, but running on a 32-bit 386 quasi-virtualised environment, so you could actually run DOS programmes, preemptive multitasking.

I thought this was where things are going to go, and I was bored with what I was doing at the lab because I’d been there, done that for a number of years. I was very good at it, even though I say it myself.

I decided I wanted to spread my wings and do other stuff. My parents had a consultancy company strangely enough called Woodleyside Consultants Limited, and my dad was a top international management consultant working for people like Guinness and Irish distillers. He was on the Clegg Commission and looked after the ambulance side of it. H was the only person who ran the armed forces pay review.

I joined the family firm at 25, because mum did the accounts. I came to do a deal with my parents, which was I would work for four months and cover my costs for the year, and then I could go off and do all my research bits for the other eight months of the year.

And you can imagine what happened – I got to month five and the work was still coming in and I didn't stop. after about six months, I realised I was learning a lot more and having far more fun doing the work out there than I was sitting at home programming C and Windows.

To cut a long story short, I launched myself out as a Windows expert, which at the same time got me into PC User writing about Windows every two weeks, and all the inner guts of

what was going on and what people needed to know. I made a lot of money in the city of London getting fonts to work.

RT: It was important back then!

JH: I know this sounds completely pathetic these days, but before we had true type and Adobe Type Manager, laser jets had bitmap fonts. The LaserJet2 was the workhorse of business – it had bitmap fonts and you could get font cartridges you plugged in the front. They were awful, because they only had a certain number of sizes and only a small number of typefaces.

If you had one of those, everything went completely pants on screen because you didn't have screen fonts! I discovered how to generate and install soft fonts for Windows 3 and into the LaserJet 2 printer driver. You wouldn't believe it today, but there was a hidden menu in the LaserJet 2 printer drive, which if you knew where to click, opened up a whole bit where you could join up the soft fonts you generated.

If you took splined soft fonts and then generated the bitmaps, that's where the mass coprocessor came in handy, because you were doing bitmap handling. I made a shedload of money for a few years in London, just getting things to appear on screen as they would print out. And people thought this was a miracle - they thought I walked on water! It was hilarious.

This was really important, because Excel was out at the time (about 1987) on Windows 2, and Word for Windows shipped in December 1989, and it was £449 pounds per seat at the time. It came a lot of floppy disks with a hardbound manual. That ran on windows too, and then Windows 3 came out in April 1990. From there the whole thing rolled forward and I was really busy.

Then Windows NT happened in 1992, which was Windows but with a proper microkernel and proper filing system - NTFS. This was amazing and I was right inside it. I was living and breathing it and I was really busy at the time, helping businesses make sense of this and deploy and design it.

How are they going to change their networks? And what was this TCP IP thing? Laughable though it may seem today, there was an awful lot of NetWare 2.2 running on IPX SPX, which didn't scale it. It was fine at the time, but it was a real mess. And here we now had a server with a graphical user interface. Wow!

It was multicore, multi CPU supporting and cross platform. I'm still trying to find a video of the original, Monday morning keynote at the 1992 keynote at the first ever Professional Developers Conference, which was held at the Moscone Center in San Francisco.

I went to it as press, and there was some waffle from Bill Gates to start off with, and then Dave Cutler comes on stage. There were 5,000 developers there who had paid a lot of money to go and see Cutler and see an operating system they'd never seen before. There had been no screenshots, no information other than this was 'Cutler does Windows'. I remember he came on stage and the clapping and hollering stopped.

He stood there, looked at the audience and he said, ‘this is a *proper* operating system’, and the whole place erupted.

I was spending the 90s doing an awful lot of Windows stuff in London and that got me into network consultancy and advising people what they should do. And then more things arrived. SQL Server came in off OS2.

I’d done a prototype HR system for Guinness in Dublin which used Access 1 as the front end, against SQL Server on the back end, and I was very proud. There was only about 12 pages of code in the whole thing because I use the whole object model for click through.

It was time independent – you could move time around and see what would happen to all different departments, how the workload will be and how many staff you had. I learned a huge amount from a guy who was working there who ended up the CTO of Diageo.

I was doing all this stuff and it was great fun. I was writing for PC User, then into Windows Magazine on press trips. I was meeting Bill (Gates), meeting Steve Jobs - really rock and roll and fun. More things came in, so we had Exchange Server arrive. Exchange Server 4 was the first version, but quite how they got to four, I'm not sure.

I remember having lunch with Brad Silverberg, who was then the Senior Vice President in charge of windows 95, 98. He told me they’d just delayed the release of Exchange Server by nine months. I asked why, and he said, ‘We deployed it onsite yesterday and it’s gone very badly!’ This was Microsoft dogfooding in the best traditions.

I had these wonderful contacts with really interesting people, a lot of whom are lifelong friends to this day. We had Exchange Server, then we had more stuff coming into what became called ‘Back Office’.

My next career move was in addition to what I did. We set up something called the ‘Back Office User Group’, which was an independent thing, but we hosted it at Microsoft in Reading every six to eight weeks for a whole day.

We had both of the main projection rooms together - you took the wall down in the middle and the place was filled. I gave the keynote, found the speakers and topics and persuaded people inside Microsoft to come along. That was great fun.

I was chair of the Back Office User Group for about five years and learned a huge amount from that. At this point we'd gone into Windows 2000 Active Directory and I was very busy helping people decide how they were going to deploy Active Directory on a SME through to global basis.

It was all new for everybody, unless you'd had Banyan VINES, of course, because they did that sort of directory. Let's not suggest for a moment that there is much similarity between Active Directory and Banyan VINES, despite the fact it was the same guy who was the programmer for both of them. Microsoft brought the head of Banyan VINES in - he ran the Windows 2000 Active Directory and the Cairo work was all his.

That takes us into the 2000 Active Directory and so forth. I'm getting busier and busier because I'm still doing product testing stuff for the various clients and finding… this is turning into a long, boring rant!

RT: It's not! I could listen to this all day! Carry on.

JH: We got into the 2000 big networks and I felt I was not able to understand all of it anymore. There was this wonderful technological summer in the late 1990s. The NT 4 Server, the starting of Back Office and Office Directory. You really could have a very strong grasp of all of the components that went into that platform.

But, as the platform grew and got more and more complicated and more and more stuff coming out, I felt I was losing grip on what was going on at a code level. I didn't feel I could sit down and actually have an argument with somebody about bugs inside Active directory anymore or the systems management stuff.

I did actually go over to Redmond for three weeks or so and help them design the small business version of Systems Management Server, which had existed as an on-premise, single site, corporate thing. I said there's a huge market out there for people who want to spend all day in bed but manage multiple small businesses.

RT: There absolutely is and I was one of them. I deployed RATS.

JH: Kirill was the head of that group who then went off to become CTO of VMWare, and I persuaded him that what we needed was some way of rolling up multiple sites into some sort of managed overview, such that you could then provide a service provision out.

It's quite early days of the cloud in a way - you could do a service provision and actually fix things on the site of your customers before they even realise that a problem had happened.

RT: There's a precursor. My niche is the managed service industry, so nowadays, MSPs, who are predominantly listening to this, are going to be very familiar with RMM (remote monitoring and maintenance) tools such as SolarWinds, Kaseya and others. This was a predecessor almost, but from Microsoft.

JH: Yep. They took it, ran it, it was successful and they sold quite a lot of it. I persuaded some mates to go off and set up little service businesses around that and they made good money and stayed in bed all day. You could stay in bed with your laptop and actually do all of this.

The more grown-up ones did actually put some clothes on, but it was a new style of model and it was a precursor to sort of cloud based and rolled up management console stuff, which is obviously hugely important today.

I felt I was kind of losing, not my touch, but my ability. There wasn't enough time in the day to learn all of these things, so my consultancy went kind of upstairs. I became very well known as the person who would sit there and say, 'Why?' or 'No,' or, 'Show me, prove it.'

I ended up doing a lot of what we would call today C level consultancy, where I'd get brought in to shout at people and point out the weaknesses of what they were doing, give them ideas as to what they could do better and so forth.

There was slightly more direction, but I had the track record of chairing the Back Office User Group, the press angle and I could genuinely turn up and add value. That was great fun, and I still do that. Last week, I spent all morning with a start-up company who's working on a very interesting technical problem, which I think is going to make them for a lot of money. In a two and a half hour meeting. I highlighted a whole bunch of stuff they hadn't even started thinking about.

They've now gone, 'Ooh, gosh, right.' I'm very good at challenging these preconceptions that people have in their assumptions they've made in their design. Fundamentally, if you go all the way back, what I've been really interested in is understanding how things worked.

The reason I wanted to get into broadcast engineering was not because I wanted to go off and record things. I was fascinated by how these huge mixing desks worked, and what all those knobs did. What happened on the video mixing desk? What was the plumbing?

It was that kind of visualisation, and that kind of deconstruction analysis and reconstruction is kind of what I do, what I've always done, which underlies everything. I can look at a phone, and I need in my head to come with a view about how good it is.

You can't just say, 'I like it, it's quite nice, it's by Apple and it's purple.' You have to be able to say, 'The screen is this good for these reasons, the battery life is good for those reasons, the performance is good for these reasons, the onscreen keyboard has got these problems.' You deconstruct the whole thing right down to the component pieces and then build up a model of what makes a great smartphone and then determine whether this is any good or not.

That's kind of what the lab does. In Huntingdon, we have our lab and staff and we probably handle about 400 or 500 pieces of stuff a year. We've handled just about every laptop that goes on sale, every tablet that goes on sale worldwide, smartphone stuff, 4K TV. Down into tricky areas like antivirus or security software, audio products.

We have an IEC listening room and IEC viewing room space, known calibrating acoustics. We are now ISO17025 accredited, which is an externally audited, quality control process for laboratories. We had our annual shakeout last week - two days of them turning up.

They can go through anything down to the smallest cell in Excel or methodology and whatever, and ask us to explain, justify, show the calibration routines methodology, who is trained to do this and why and what their expertise is. It's really comprehensive.

We have a whole set of methodologies, but essentially what the lab does is - you can give us something and we can deconstruct it down, work out how good all of it is and put it all back together again.

Quite a lot of the consultancy that I'm doing these days is almost at a product level, which is - what makes a good widget? A manufacturer may be working on one or doing some R&D into an area or writing some software for one. They just really desperately need an out of the box, independent view.

So many times over the last 30 years I've seen software developments that have gone off the rails because the team is so inward looking. They never think of it from the outside. They never think, 'How the hell is the user going to use this? What's the end point here?' And everyone gets lost in the micro detail and even worse, especially in a larger corporation.

I will single out Microsoft as an example here, where they get lost in the politics.
'Is this the end product at the moment?' 'Is this the cute thing to do?' and I think the good products have failed to come to market, or even worse, bad products have come to market, simply for all the wrong reasons.

I'm not singling Microsoft out as being particularly bad here. You could find exactly the same for Cisco, exactly the same for HP, Lotus and IBM, because it is a trait of a large organisation.

If you were to take something like data or file storage, your day to day unstructured stuff, obviously structure stuff goes really nicely in to the SQL servers, so we'll put that to one side, but it's the unstructured stuff that the organisations live on.

Let's go all the way back to 1990. We had track 16 file system, then we had FAT32, and going down that spread, we now have XFAT. Then, along comes Windows NT, and we have NTFS, which is a great filing system.

In fact, if you can ever find a copy of it, there was an excellent, super nerdy book by a lady called Helen Custer called "Inside the Windows NTFS File System," which you really ought to read.

It's quite a thick paperback book, all about the internal structures of NTFS, written in 1992.

RT: We'll have to track that down and make sure that's in the show notes.

JH: I'm pretty sure it's not available, or it's certainly not in print. It was for Microsoft press it. It won't be in print. You might find it on eBay or something and it's a great little read as to the thinking process that went into what they wanted to do, and the problems they were trying to solve. NTFS has been hugely successful all the way for years, and if you think of the trillions of bytes of data that's held with NTFS around the world…

After that we had structured storage. Service side was going to come out to an NT, 3.51 that got canned. Then we had the Cairo object file system – that got canned and never came to market. Then we had a complete horror of something that you will remember from exchange server Forum Five, called Drive M.

You could actually mount a drive letter into your exchange server store. I don't know what these guys and girls were smoking, but my God, it was some strong stuff, because if you ever went and did a check disk against it, you wiped out your exchange service.

What comes after that? Well, we then have variations of Drive M and then we have SharePoint server storage. As in, as in one drive for business. There's one drive for business client for Mac that doesn't support the Mac file system or character set.

We then had the whole WinFS debacle, which you know was a huge amount of energy and work and never came to anything. You do wonder in these sorts of organisations whether they're pet projects that run amok and some of them escape and some of them don't.

You wonder where the real sort of long-term strategic flow is, is what I'm going back to. Software companies get completely locked into their own little visions of reality. And, very often, it's refreshing to have an idiot like me come along, sit there and basically say, 'Why? What? Sorry, run that by me? What are you doing?!'

Either they have light bulb moments and get it and suddenly realise that they've been doing really, stupid assumptions or they get very angry, and that can be quite amusing too.

Sometimes you just have to walk from it, because they are so far up their own bottom that they're never going to see the light of day. There's one particular project I've been involved in over the last year or so that frankly drove me nuts, and in the end, I had to walk away from it because they just didn't get it. But those that do, it's fabulous.

RT: Let's talk about that for a minute. We were talking about your favourite tech and we've talked about tech that's just bloody awful. We've got a mutual friend, Jane Lee, who works here. Jane told me that you're a really well respected, a light within the PR and the media community and obviously can see that.

How do you approach telling a company that their product, essentially their baby, is ugly? How do you do that?

JH: It depends upon how the conversation started. Sometimes you can have the CEO contact me and say, 'Can you come in and come along and have a look?' You go along and then it's kind of like open warfare from day one, because the CEO doesn't believe that the CT knows what his team is doing, or the CFO is really worried about how much money they're spending and it's not working. Or the CEO is really worried about your support costs.

At the end of the day, you just have to tell it to them straight - 'This is pig ugly, it doesn't work' or 'It's completely unintuitive and what are you doing?' Either they will listen and take note or they'll throw you out the door. Well, OK, shit happens.

There is absolutely no point in saying, 'Well, it's really quite nice, but…', or 'Just a little suggestion, maybe you could think of trying something new.' No, you just have to give them two barrels of the shotgun because there is never enough time to be polite about this.

You've just got to give it to them straight, back it up with reasons why and examples of what it's not doing right, try to get them to see the light. If you can, great, if you can't, walk away and send the invoice in. My job is not there to be nice to people, my job is there to tell them what I think.

There are John's famous two rules of consultancy, which is you charge like a wounded rhino, and the other one is that if you're not embarrassed by the invoice it's not enough. So, on that basis…

RT: That's gold right there. We'll make sure that's a quotable for this episode!

JH: From that point of view, you're in for a day, so you're going to charge as much as possible, because they might not invite you back - they might decide you're way too hot to handle. If you're going to put intellectual and emotional energy into doing this and driving halfway across Europe or flying somewhere, even a large bill doesn't actually turn out to be an awful lot once you've taken the flight out of it and two hotels. If you're lucky you get them to pay for those as well.

It is incumbent upon me to go full gale force 10, rip distinct pieces, work out with the component parts are, what it's doing, how it's supposed to work, what their intention is, what they were trying to achieve.

Then work out what the customer is probably going to want. And then try and build a model in my head and on sheets of A3 paper as to whether this actually lines up or not.

It's like a sanity check audit. Those people that get it come out of it saying, 'Wow, that was really, a high bandwidth, intense and painful experience.' Because if that product was lovely, you just sit there and say, 'This is great. This is fab. What are you doing? This is fine methodology,' and massage their ego.

Then you walk out and they're all going to say, 'Well, why do we bother with that? We could have been doing some work that day'. The problem ones are people who believe it's fabulous but actually it's a crock of shit. It's unusable, it's unstable, it doesn't do what the customer needs.

RT: Let's pick up on something you said earlier on. I know you pride yourself in understanding how the customer thinks and you've just referred to that. One of the quotes that I've heard you say before is: "We will find it", (and this is about Woodleyside and yourself), "We will find the things that your team overlooks, assumes or misunderstands."

For me, this is an area that lots of IT companies, especially IT professionals who are listening could learn from. How would you say you learned that skill? To think how a customer thinks.

JH: I wish there was a prescriptive list I could give you of, 'Start here and go there', or a book to go off and read. Honestly, I've made it up as I go along. What I mean by that is, you have to have the personal integrity to say, 'I want to take this apart.'

It's like watchmaking. You take apart the pieces, look at them and put them back together again. Something that drives me completely nuts, for example, is you check into a hotel and you're there at the desk and they ask you for your name.

They found your record and 65 mouse clicks later they can give you your room key. What are they clicking on that? What are they doing? Are they doing a personal profile of me? Don't like his shirts, bit scruffy. What the hell are they doing, and why isn't it, 'Yes, Mr. Honeyball, boom, here's your room key'?

So, there's a number of metrics, obvious things like just how often the people having to interact with something, windows opening or closing or going repetitively around the same thing drives me nuts.

I love little bits of automation. The problem is automation these days, inside a business context is very much frowned upon, because all the debacle that we've had with for example, Office and unsigned macros. I think there's been a huge swell of good thinking that was happening inside businesses there that's being snuffed out. For good reasons, but with an unintended consequence.

How do you work this out? The answer is, do you want to sit there and do this all day? If it really does take 55 mouse clicks to check somebody into a hotel room, how many people are they checking in a day? How frequently are we giving these people new mice? They're going to be wearing them out.

Haven't we got better things for them to do, even if it's them sitting there reading the newspaper, I'd rather them do that than repetitively do the same crap over and over again. That's just one small example.

RT: I think you're right. I actually see the future, again, going back to the managed service industry, I think tech is becoming, so… I'm not going to say easy, that's not the right word, but consumers and businesses can deploy tech a lot easier than they used to be able to.

The days of crawling under desks, unplugging cables and things is pretty much all but gone. But I see the future of the industry for managed service providers being looking at the processes within client's businesses and saying, 'That bloody stupid, that can be done more efficiently. You can save money doing that, that really irritates customer'

You've been doing this for a while and I think actually…

JH: The problem here is that if you're not careful, you'll start stepping on toes who weren't expecting it. You've got to be very careful with IT, so that if you start stepping out of the IT role into the business process, then who the hell are you?

That can be very difficult. People can get very rightly get very upset because they'll turn around and say, 'You're mandating I should do this, but actually there's a whole bunch of complexity here you don't understand. So, who the hell are you to tell me?' That is always a problem.

There is a difference here between internal process within an organisation versus delivering something to a customer. If you're delivering something to a customer, then you basically put yourself in the shoes of that customer and say, ‘What am I getting?’

> ‘Am I happy with this? Is this going to make my business better or worse? Is this going to tie

up my staff in knots? Is it so complex I'm going to have to retrain my staff to do it? Am I going to have to turn my business processes around to fit within your assumptions of my business processes?’

I think delivering product to end customers is quite different from working on internal processes, because there isn't then an external customer per se. But I think those are quite different spaces, and you're absolutely right that things are getting much, easier now.

I haven't run exchange server in years because I run it as part of Office 365. I don’t worry about Office 365 backing up my exchange server because a little miracle occurs in the cloud and it all happens. Of course, I make sure I've got local copies of it and it's all on tape as well.
Things are very easy. The problem in that space is that it becomes very tempting to stop asking ‘why, where, how, what the impact of this is going to be’. Whole global populations can get sucked into this.

I gave a speech recently to the British computer society up in Manchester on Facebook, why you are the product and why it's all too late. Even if we get Facebook to start acting like something other than global sociopath, they've still got so much data. It's going to take two generations, even if we cut them off at the knees today, before that data is actually flushed out.

RT: The horse has already bolted, hasn't it?

JH: It’s bolted and gone over the hill. People will accept stuff, and that's also true in IT. People will sign up to stuff and for all the wrong reasons. I have a huge fear for the future of NHS IT, for example. As money gets more and more constrained within the NHS’ budget, and there are very good reasons, such as aging populations, IT will get increasingly squeezed and someone like Google or Microsoft will come along with an artificially cheap solution.

And the minister will say, ‘Well, that looks like a bargain and sign on the bottom line, without realising that now all of a sudden the NHS data is residing in Arizona. And these sorts of things should matter.

I do worry about the democratisation and the ease of doing stuff. Whilst I love the move to the cloud, I also have got some very deep-seated concerns about a lot of it. If the NSA or GCHQ really wanted to know what I had on my network in my lab, they'll turn up at 5:00 in the morning with some transit vans and some police and they'll take everything out of the building with the plug on it, if they really were genuine interested.

That's not the worry I've got. It's the worries that stuff leaks stuff, gets concatenated together, gets munged and filtered and quasi-anonymised, but isn't really anonymised. You'll end up in some great data silo somewhere and you have no idea how that happened, and no means whatsoever of unwinding it, and that is really quite scary.

RT: It is a concern, and I think we could probably record a whole podcast about that. I want to rewind a little bit. Let's not talk about the labs, but I love you, if you can, so we include them in the show notes for the listeners, to get across some photographs of what the labs look like over there at Woodleyside.

JH: I'll see what I can do.

RT: Fabulous.

JH: I've got some nice, pretty ones from when we moved in, which show it in its best light. It doesn't look like that now, but the problem with it now is we've got all sorts of stuff there, but I couldn't put it in the photograph. I can't clear the building out!
RT: What's the favourite bit of tech that's come through the labs for you recently? The technology you can talk about?

JH: Give me a timeframe when you say recently.

RT: Within the last 12 months. What's a piece of tech that's excited you, you've not looked at and instinctively seen the faults or the flaws, but you've looked at it and gone, 'Fantastic.'

JH: It would be very blasé to say, 'Oh, the new Surface Pro4 four is really lovely and it's got a really nice keyboard.' That stuff to me is basically repetitive plumbing and it's derivative and it's not particularly interesting. The stuff that I think has been interesting, but it's horribly underdeveloped - things like the voice control of things like Amazon. Alexa. Oh, mine's just lit up!

RT: I just mentioned that I do another podcast with a friend of mine, Karl Palachuk, for a company called Auvik over in Canada, and we mention Alexa quite a lot. I always whisper her name so she doesn't hear me.

We've actually had complaints from listeners saying what, why are you whispering Alexa? That's the reason!

JH: That kind of stuff has impacted an enormous number of people in a very positive way. It's fantastically immature, it's badly thought through, there's a whole heap of questions that aren't being answered like that issue a few weeks ago where a recording ended up in someone's inbox because the system recorded it and decided that actually you had said, 'Email it to Fred.'

I have yet to see a truly credible answer from Amazon as to why that happened. I think they're probably not prepared to open the kimono and explain why it thought what it was doing was the right thing, because that would be either very embarrassing or a competitive advantage to other people in that space.

Nevertheless, that kind of tech, I think it's really interesting. But is it really that cute? I can sit here and tell a friend to turn off the kitchen lights and they'll switch off and that's great. That just saves me going over there and pressing and pressing a light switch.

Where I think we will get really transformative and really scary is technology like that.

RT: You're showing me a little white button that's attached to your arm.

JH: That's measuring my blood sugar level. I'm Type 2 diabetic and it's measuring my blood sugar level. In fact, I can hear with my iPhone (because the latest iPhones have actually got NFC readers in them), I can go, 'Boom' and it's just given me a graph of my blood sugar level this morning.

This type of tech and stuff that's coming down those similar paths is truly life changing. If you consider that a third of the population of the world will end up Type 2 diabetic, and managing that is arguably the number one health issue affecting the NHS and health solutions worldwide.

This is where tech gets really, really interesting and exciting, and where massive change and improvements are happening almost on a daily basis. And that's really interesting stuff.

I can tie it into my phone and I can look after the data. In this particular case, the data is going off to a cloud provision from the manufacturer of this device. And do I trust them? No. But I try and keep the minimum amount of data in there. You have to be careful of this stuff.

I think the whole healthcare stuff… but the monumental downside of this is the whole health data security issue. As wonderful as the solutions will be, they're a whole different level of terrifying on top.

A data leak of your last 15 years of your health profile in real time could seriously screw your life. If we're talking here about an NHS that managed to have WannaCry run across its entire internal network and stomp on things, I really do worry as to who is actually competent to look after this stuff, but we have a huge need for it.

RT: I actually used to work for the NHS Information Authority, as it was called back then, going back sort of 20 years, and it terrified me even, then shall we say. My gut feeling is some things have changed for the better, but some things not so much.

JH: There's all this sort of stuff that's being plumbed together. I can shout at my A (Alexa) box and get it to play me something from Spotify. Music is no longer something where you have to go find an LP or a CD. You can stream it from Spotify or Tidal or whatever. The whole IP connectedness of stuff – Sky, for example, moving over almost wholly onto IP transfer, so I believe shortly you won't even need to have a dish.

This is all really interesting stuff. And it also throws into question the whole pile of previous decisions like was DAB a good idea or not. This is all really fun, funky stuff. I'm on the hunt

at the moment for what I would consider to be credible home security firewalling, hardware and software. I think there's nothing out there that is even vaguely competent.

The same applies to the SME market. If you're a big boy, you're running Cisco and you've got staff and they're monitoring it in real time. My entire network here across four physical sites is Cisco Meraki, which I love dearly, but it's expensive. We need something with that kind of capability pushed down to the SME level and then pushed down into the home level.

We need a complete rethink about how we deal with home security and how we deal with little Johnny and his bedroom having got some malware on his Windows laptop and how do we even find out and manage this.

We need to be deeply scared about IoT. The home is your castle, and that this box thing service should be the drawbridge into your house. No one's looking at that seriously. There is an almost limitless untapped market there. And a huge SME market.

I saw a figure recently that 80% or so of people in the UK work for businesses of 10 people or less. The SME market is huge and being incredibly badly served by the tel-cos who just don't want to go there. The ISPs who just don't want to go there and mentioned the word liability and they run away. You look at the Netgear router or your this or you're that and they're basically junk - they really are quite poor.

Even those like Linksys, that sometimes make a bit of an effort, it's pretty cursory and thin. That is a whole explorational space of how are we going to work with Joe Public to make that work? How are we going to work with Joe SME to make this work? Who doesn't want to know how this stuff works and doesn't want to learn?

I think the trust word is not spoken enough at all levels of IT. Why should I trust you to do what you're claiming to do? Why should I trust you to have a workable solution? Why should I trust you with my data? Why should I trust you with my business processes?

And there's far too much arm waging and far too much presumption and not enough deliverables and hard data and consequences. The trust word for me is the big deal between here and 2040. Everything will be determined in… in the determination of trust in that timeframe, not price or QOS. It'll be simply be one of, 'Why should I be having a relationship with you in whatever way, level or form?'

Having looked at so much stuff over the years, suddenly thousands upon tens and tens of thousands of products over the years, I think it's perfectly reasonable that the vast majority of the consumers of this stuff shouldn't have to give a damn about it.

It should just work, it should work reliably and it should work with their interests at heart. The reality is, it was fun back in the 90s. We were all like cowboys, going west across the great uncharted planes of IT North America.

We were having a riot and it was great fun, it was nerdy, geeky and fab. And today, that just doesn't wash anymore. In a sense, coming back to your question about how do you

recognise whether something is it's going to work or not, you have to ask yourself the question, ‘If I don't give a damn about this thing, will it still work for me?’ Most stuff doesn't. Companies are very good at putting a veneer on things. Let's take a good example - Office 365. They’ve taken what was a horrendous mess and turned it into something else. There’s an awful lot of sticking plaster and Blu Tack and glue and bubble gum involved in it, but it does kind of hang together as a platform now, and if I want to go and change the filtering of incoming messaging on exchange server, you suddenly get exposed to quite a nasty reality.

Recently I got mail spammed by a PR company who did the cardinal sin of putting 300 email addresses in the cc list. It was even more embarrassing because it was for a London college where the email was about the appointment of the new professor of computer security.

His long-winded rant in the email was all about how computer security is hugely important, and the PR person had managed to spam most of tech press worldwide on a cc list. I thought surely inside Office 365, there's going to be a setting which says, ‘If there's more than five people on the named address list, don't send it’.

RT: It's obvious. You would have thought so.

JH: I went digging and I can't find it at all.

RH: I know Google apps does this. If I send an email and say, ‘Please find the attachments’, it's smart enough to go, ‘By the way you've not attached to anything. Did you really want to send that?’

JH: That's a lot of this sort of smart stuff, and I do understand the problem in this particular case that Microsoft has got. It's trying to build this cloud ecosystem thing and it's the old Irish saying, ‘If you wanted to get there, you wouldn't start from here’.

But that's what they've got and they've done an incredible job of bolting it all together. I'm not knocking it, but is that really what I wanted? Is that really how I want to work? Sometimes you get the temptation that would be really nice just to have a Chromebook and a browser.

RT: Of which I do – I have a Chromebook. But that's a conversation for another time.

JH: This whole thing about, there are far more customers, both real and potential, who don't want to learn about this stuff than those that do. If you consider it as a classic, normal distribution curve, looking at it from your direction, you’ve got the uber nerds down here at the top end, then you've got the people from the 50% mark downwards, who are at some level of disinterest through to abject hostility.

IT has gone somewhere up that curve. I really don't think, apart from some of the smartphone work, and I would certainly put iOS into this space, and some elements of android to get near to the middle.

There's a huge untapped space out there of people who just don't want to know about this stuff, but need it, for example an IP fortress for their home. Every household in this country that's got an ADSL line needs that.

What proportion of the public do you think actually gives a damn or should give a damn? It's no good sitting here saying, ‘Well, you've got to learn what a routing table is and you've got to know what inbound routes mean, and what filtering is, and what was it? Was it, TCP or UDP?’

All of this stuff, they just don't care, but what they want to know is that, the smart TV in little Gemma's bedroom aged eight for some reason the camera is active and it streaming video to Moscow. If you can't do that, if there's no concept of time, and this is different to how it was, something has changed. If we can't even get that bit right at the most simplistic level, where the hell are we going to go?

RT: I think this is a topic we could talk at length about. I'm very conscious of your time and mine. I can't let you go without talking about something that's not IT related, but it’s fascinating.

I know you're a married man. Your husband Andre is incredibly successful in his own right. Including the range of pickles?

JH: We have a pickles and condiments company called Man Food.

RT: I’ve got to know more about that. And what's it like having two successful entrepreneurs in the same household?

JH: We’ve been doing Man Food for about five years now. And it all came about because I couldn't buy decent piccalilli. I couldn't buy a decent piccalilli worth putting on a plate it was all mushy, horrible nuclear yellow and had a horrible, bitter aftertaste.

I said to Andre one day, ‘How hard can this be?’ Which is a really stupid thing to say. We eBayed some and we had far too much, so we gave it to friends and family and they came back and said, ‘Can we have some more please?’

Then I started doing Saturday morning farmers’ markets at St Ives here and Ely, and we kind of launched a brand and thought this is fun and funky. Now we have staff and warehousing and kitchens and outsource manufacture. We sell to people like I'm Liberty’s in London and I'd have to check where else we are. I think Fortnum and Mason and Selfridges, Ocado and all the top farm shop and deli places.

We're exporting to Germany to Switzerland and Moscow - we’ve just signed a deal with a company in Moscow, and we sent stuff to New Zealand and Canada and we have 28 products of pickles.

We've done mad things like take real ale and reduced it onto a spoon into a jelly form, and all this sort of madness and it's great fun. It's just about stopped consuming money now. And we've invested a very healthy six figure sum into it, but that's what you need to do if you want to bring a product or a range to market.
Hopefully someone's going to come along and say, “Oh my God, this is fabulous. I need to buy this’, and write us an enormous check. It's been a huge learning experience, obviously,

doing the whole thing. Things that we've done right, things we've done wrong, but you don't know til you try.

It's very easy to sit on the sidelines and say, 'Well, you know, we could have done that, but we didn't' but we have actually gone out and tried to do this. www.manfood.com or www.welovemanfood.com is where you can buy from us and we will ship to you directly by glorious courier.

RT: I love it. And I don't think anybody saw that coming at the end of this part!

JH: So, in answer to your question, what's it like? Truthfully, Andre is a director of my company and I'm a director of his company. Dinner and stuff, there is always an element 'dinner and a boardroom discussion on what we have to do, because during the working day we're both busy doing our own stuff.

It's good fun. I would certainly recommend it, if you're brave enough or man enough to want to try and do it. It's a completely different space for me and it's great fun and interesting. You'll sometimes finally in places like, top food places or international food exhibitions in Cologne on our stand, so come along and have a taste.

RT: Lovely. I'll look forward to it. John, it's been an incredible pleasure for me to spend time with you today. I know this will make you blush and we've made you blush a lot of times, but you've genuinely been a tech hero to me, all of my career in IT.

As a young man, I followed your writing and I aspired to be a consultant like yourself. Now, I'm not so young a man, but I am a consultant and I still aspire to be half as cool.

JH: I wouldn't go that far, please. Thank you very much for the kind words. It really is appreciated. As I said, I just try and trundle along, doing what I do with integrity and when people asked me an opinion on something, I tell them how it is.

That doesn't mean to say I'm right - there is very rarely right and wrong in this world, but you give an opinion and you have to give it from your heart, and you have to give it with clarity and if that improves the directions that people are taking, then it's worth doing.

RT: If anybody listening wants to reach out to you to continue this conversation, (we've covered a lot of ground here), how can they find you online?

JH: I'm on LinkedIn, so you will find me there. Jon@jonhoneywell.com I think is on every PCPro column I've ever done. lab@woodleyside.com will get me. It's not hard to find an email address for me, so drop me a mail.