

# Computer Control Extends From Farm To Shop



Some 25 000 cases of eggs can be graded and packed each week using three Moba 4000 machines.

At one of Europe's most modern and technologically advanced egg packing stations, computers play a leading role in most of the operations, from forecasting egg supplies from farms, through to ensuring that the correct deliveries are made to retail customers.

Owned by Thames Valley Eggs, Europe's largest egg producers' co-operative, the Lambourn Woodlands packing station at Membury, Berkshire, England was opened in the autumn of 1983. At this egg grading and packing plant, which is capable of coping with 25 000 cases (360 eggs/case) a week with double-shift working, visual display units, have become as much an integral part of the operation as the filing cabinet used to be.

Even before the eggs arrive at the plant, the computer has already been hard at work, as TVE has successfully developed a computerised production forecasting system. Having been given details of the daily flock consignments to be graded, the computer is programmed to forecast daily output by size.

Eggs arrive at the plant in 12-case containers, to be passed over three Moba 4 000 graders, each capable of handling 42 000 eggs/hour, these being automatically packed into the cartons/packs or Keyes trays. Here, the computer has the important role of

ensuring that the 1500 retail outlets served by this station receive their eggs in the correct packs. That most retail customers stock at least five of the seven possible EEC sizes of eggs and that many specify their own personalised packaging which can include sell-by dating and price preprinting on each individual carton, gives an indication of the problems involved.

Regarding the output side of the business, TVE has developed a telephone system linked to its computer. Telephone sales operators obtain customers' orders and feed the information directly into the computer, which then compiles the detailed packing schedule required by the grading and packing department. Simultaneously, the computer produces each driver's individual journey sheet, the loading instruction document for each store supervisor and a packaging indent form for the packaging materials order clerk. On the visual display unit, the tele-sales operator is able to continuously monitor the egg stock situation which is automatically adjusted as each order is received. This information minimises overselling of any particular size. If any of the co-operative's seven packing stations finds it has a serious deficit on any specific size, the minicomputers based at each station are linked to communicate with each other and thus track down an alterna-

tive source of supply.

Transportation also plays a key role in the success of the whole operation. It is essential that vehicles run to a carefully-planned timetable which ensures regular collections from the farms and meets the precise delivery times of the co-operative's supermarket customers. In total, TVE's transport fleet exceeds 150 vehicles.

Technological advancement has also had an immense-impact on accounting procedures at the co-operative. When TVE was formed in 1934, all accounting was done by pen and paper.

The mid-forties saw the introduction of ready-reckoners and a few hand-operated calculators, while in the next decade NCR accounting machines, which made calculations easy, were purchased. However, as business expanded these machines were unable to cope with the volume of work and so the sixties saw the introduction of the first desk-top computer, an Olivetti 101, which dealt with all payment calculations. In a short space of time, this was no longer adequate and a larger computer had to be contemplated. But, for a while, egg payments were made using an outside computer bureau. In the early seventies a reconditioned NCR500 computer was purchased, this being superseded by an ICL 2903 machine in 1977, which enabled TVE to extend computerisation beyond just the producer members' payments. Computer printouts covered every facet of business including wages and salaries, sales information and cash flow forecasting.

Last year, saw the 2903 at head office, replaced by an ICL ME 29 which could continue with the normal accountancy functions and additionally be the hub of a data communication system permanently linked to the packing station's DRS computer system.

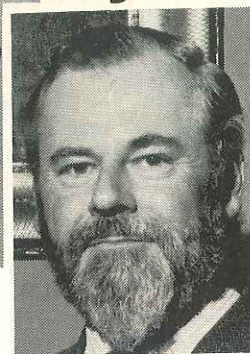
The first application developed for the DRS system was a telephone sales ordering system. Details of each sales customer is held on file together with their data classification, their previous 12 orders and deliveries. The order clerk is presented with a screen format for each customer to be telephoned. Also on this screen are the 'expected' stock levels of each size of egg. These stock levels are continually adjusted to allow for customers' orders and the sizes of eggs coming off the grading machines.

Each customer's order requirements are entered and on completion of an

# John Lamotte joins our team



CP Tint



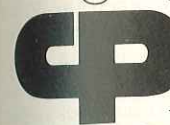
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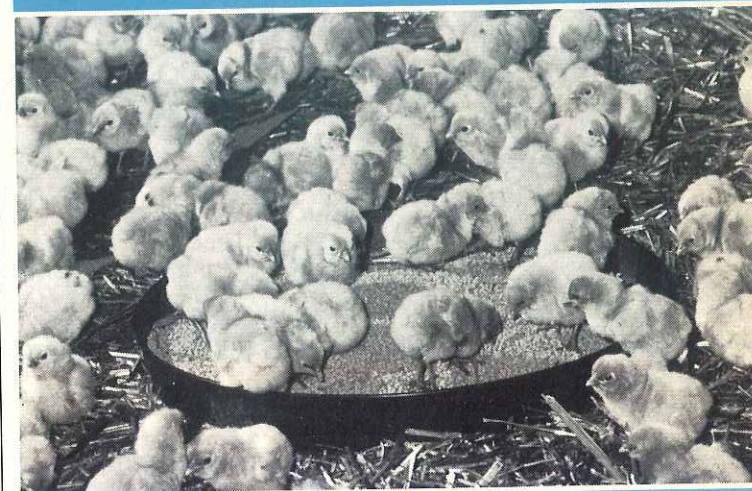


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All the information needed by the telephone sales girl is presented on a visual display unit.

order, the next customer's data is presented on the video terminal screen.

When all the sales orders are completed the DRS produces the following reports:-

1. A production-packed sheet for the grading room.
2. Vehicle load sheets for the store room.
3. Salesround sheets for the drivers,

4. An analysis of total sales by area, pack, egg size and or customers.

All of this information is transmitted to the ME29 computer at TVE's head office, sited at the Lambourn Woodlands packing station, as it is entered at each of the packing stations. This gives up-to-date information for the day-to-day running of the society.

This year, TVE will have been in

business for 50 years, during which time its total throughput has grown from a mere 1500 cases in 1934 to today's 2.6 million valued at around £42 million (\$63 million).

Like other co-operatives, TVE is financed entirely by its members as outsiders cannot be shareholders. However, it is different from most other co-operatives in the way it provides working capital.

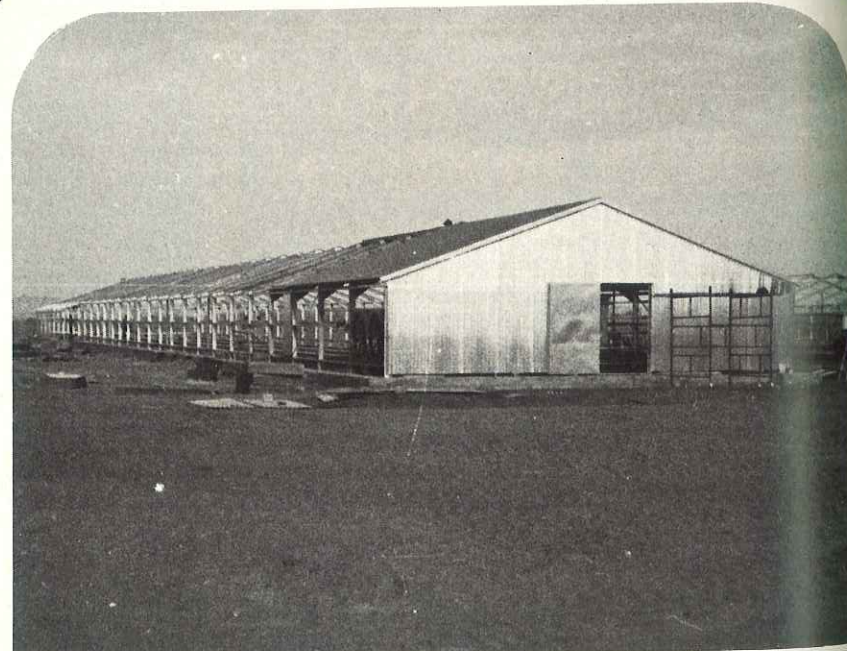
Working capital is obtained by deferring payment of a small part of the bonus for a five year period. Bonus allocations based on the value of eggs sent to the society are credited to each producer quarterly and repaid 5 years later. Interest is paid on these 'deferred bonuses'. This system, pioneered by the Society 12 years ago, has created a deeper interest among producers into the running of the society.

The impact of technological developments on the running of TVE during its first 50 years has been mind-boggling leading one to wonder whether a time might arrive when the sales computer at the packing station will be linked directly with the buying computer at the head office of a chain of retail stores leaving the machines to see which can strike the better bargain!

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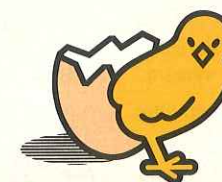
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