

Memories of a Conference Organiser

by Sally Scarlett, Conference Manager and former Director of PTRC

I joined PTRC in 1979 so my first conference was officially the 7th. However, what few people realise is that, in 1974, when the 2nd conference was being held at the University of Warwick, I, as a recent graduate of that august establishment, was working a nightshift in the catering department. My final act at the end of my shift was to serve breakfast to delegates or “conferees” as the university staff preferred to call them!

I have so many fond memories of the conference under whatever name it has been known over the years - SAM, ETF, ETC. Some memories are best not committed to paper and will not be repeated here; others may remind you of notable or amusing events.

I remember Ted Heath (former UK Prime Minister and international statesman) arriving hot and bothered having been stuck in traffic and berating the delegates for their failures as a profession. There was also the sniffer dog who discovered the Hague Consulting Group cheese under their exhibition table before the guest lecture by Princess Anne.

I can happily tell stories at my own expense, such as the occasion when I was smuggling six bottles of wine from the conference dinner to a kitchen party at Warwick, got my toe stuck in my trousers and fell flat on my face, thus alerting other revellers returning from dinner. Four of the bottles survived, as did I with only a minimal amount of bruising!

There was also the notable occasion in Manchester when the box of badge holders was thrown away in error and had to be retrieved from the rubbish crusher. There was also, in Manchester, the famous delivery of all the conference proceedings in good time for the conference but locked away by a university security guard in the catering department cold store and not discovered for some days.

Talk of Manchester reminds me of the worst conference dinner on record – not the food, I think, but I can barely remember that. The disaster was a speech by our host from the City Council on the bid which they had made for the 2000 Olympics – I imagine London learnt from their experience. The after-dinner speech managed to insult delegates from all the other bidding cities and even incited an Australian delegate to get to her feet and challenge him. It was truly awful. Sydney then proved to be a worthy host of the Games.

The Conference was often ahead of the curve. In terms of environmental issues and carbon reduction, this was certainly true. In 1995, we were offered the opportunity to use an electric bus from Italy to provide the shuttle-bus from Coventry Station to the University of Warwick – an excellent idea, we thought. Imagine my shock, when the bus arrived at the University in a cloud of black smoke, on a low-loader having been driven all the way from Naples across Europe! Finding a fork-lift truck to off-load the spare battery and a power supply to charge it was quite a challenge late on a Friday afternoon, but we did! The bus was admired. Unfortunately, it could not manage, fully laden, the hilly direct route from the station and had to take a wide sweep around Coventry to get to the campus. Not so environmentally friendly....

Transport has often caused us difficulty, particularly at Leiden Station, which was in the throes of upgrading. We provided a shuttle bus but each driver chose a spot to park which he

believed would be most obvious to delegates which resulted in the majority of delegates never finding the bus and having to take an expensive taxi.

There was always a fear of impending disaster in the world hanging over the conference – very often, something of national or international note occurred when the conference was to be held: a UK national rail strike, an Alsace public transport strike, a UK fuel tanker drivers strike, a financial crisis in the UK with interest rates rocketing on an hourly basis, the death of Princess Diana. However, the most shocking was the attack on the World Trade Centre and other US locations while we were in Cambridge. We had many US delegates present whose lives were thrown into concern and confusion, and a group from Saudi Arabia who knew that their presence in the UK would be difficult. The conference dinner that evening was a sombre affair.

An old friend of the Conference caused chaos one night at Homerton College by lighting a cigarette in his room and set off the fire alarm in the early part of the night. The sight of groups of delegates in their nightclothes must have been amusing. Many missed the fun and games as they were still in the bar. The culprit hadn't realised he set off the alarm until everybody was allowed back in and he found the caretaker waiting by his door. Obviously this made an even greater story the next night in the bar.

Each year offers challenges – will papers arrive in time, will speakers remember to attend, will the technology work, how many delegates will register? But, the constant factor for me is that each year, through the committee meetings and the conference itself, I get to meet some wonderful people who give their time willingly for the good of the transport profession and for the development of transport planning. What is there not to like?

Forty Years on – an insider view

by Andy Costain, Managing Director of PTRC 1974-2008

In the immortal words of Arnold Bennett “we are 40 years on”. So what has changed?

Others have written about their fond memories of SAM, as it was known those 40 years ago, and how the transport agenda has changed in this time span. A quick comparison of the papers in 1973 compared with 2012 shows a remarkable shift in policy issues. Had the word Sustainability entered our vocabulary in 1973? Did we think we would be debating the merits of high-speed rail or Smarter Choices? The conference dropped the streams on Town Planning and Corporate Planning to concentrate on transport and bravely took the bold step in 2003 to hold the Conference on the Continent. It has embraced change.

Some topics like Value of Time are reassuringly still topical and indeed some of this year's speakers and experts cut their teeth at those early Conferences as fresh young researchers. But for one on the inside of the organisation of the event from my first conference in 1974 at Warwick until my retirement from PTRC in 2009 the most profound change has been in how the organisation of the event has evolved, thanks to new technology.

Back in 1973, committee members were invited by means of a personal letter; meetings were convened by sending an agenda out by post, hopefully 2-3 weeks beforehand with whatever agenda and papers were to be discussed. Minutes were taken by one of four programme secretaries and typed by the PTRC typing pool (using an IBM self correcting Goofball

typewriter) whose wrath knew no bounds if they were sent back for further correction or amendment. Those were the days of “get it down right first time” or be very unpopular.

The Call for Papers drawn up by each of the TWENTY SIX Programme committees were typed on single sheets of paper and then we Programme Secretaries set to work with our Letraset Stencilling Kits to add in the headings as typewriters only had point 10 or 12 fonts. They were sent to a printer to duplicate by off-set litho taking several days, or transferred to a stencil and run off using a Gestetner machine. They were then collated into sets and sent to people on the mailing list housed by a specialist company, who held the records on a mainframe computer in Liverpool and who supplied the labels. No in-house databases then!

Abstracts came in by their hundreds and were sent to the committees in huge piles for discussion at meetings held in the attic of 40 Grosvenor Gardens in London. There were only TWO female committee members on any of the transport or highways committees and at one famous meeting, the Chair proposed to accept a paper, not on its merits as they thought it was rather weak, but because of the novelty value of a female presenter! Political correctness had yet not been discovered! Half the Committee Members smoked in that badly ventilated room without anyone blinking an eyelid. That was normal.

Authors were confirmed by post with a great wodge of instructions, together with 20 sheets of paper, overprinted with a guideline template in which they had to type their paper to try to get a degree of conformity for the bound proceedings.

In those early days delegates indicated which streams of papers they wanted to order and for reasons which now escape me, they were sent in two batches – a set of loose preprints of separate papers for each stream and then the bound proceedings one or two months after the event.

Inevitably speakers missed the deadlines, were constantly chased by phone or letter – Oh to have had email! - so that two weeks or so before the conference all the PTRC staff could dance round the board room table collating these sets of papers to send out in advance. Twenty six streams of seminars averaging 4 days each and eight papers per day resulted in 800 papers of which between 200-400 copies were printed. That was a lot of running round the table.

All the key staff involved in the conference decamped from London to Warwick or wherever the conference was held about a week beforehand for the set up. More collating and endless stuffing of conference wallets and bags (no posh briefcases in those days). Signs were again handmade using Letraset and those outside the campus buildings generally disintegrated in the first shower of rain. The Conference had a homespun amateurish air to it – but would probably now be labelled “shabby chic”.

Few universities in those days had ensuite bathrooms – after all they were for students weren't they? Hotels were deemed to be far too ritzy for a professional gathering of this kind and very few if any had the right facilities, so the choice always centred on campus universities – Sussex, Warwick, Bath, Brunel (Uxbridge) and Loughborough. Delegates took it in their stride to stay in student rooms and share communal bathroom facilities.

This was a conference where the presentations came first, generating hot discussion in the seminar rooms and over coffee afterwards. The bar came a close second. Remember that in

those days, pubs and bars had to close at 1030pm and each year we had to compose a special request for a late extension to midnight to the local magistrates dreaming up all sorts of reasons why this was of fundamental importance. After midnight, many Dutch delegates, not used to such timings, collected their tax free bottles of whiskey from their rooms and continued drinking in the dorm kitchens and other areas, using their empty beer mugs. The kitchens were used by many groups after midnight and in due course they became important social events. Food came third with rules that baffled the foreigners – a main dish OR salad and a pudding OR cheese, never both. Accommodation came very low on the list. The bedroom allocation was an annual nightmare as the universities could never quite get the hang of people coming for individual nights rather than for the entire event and bemused delegates often arrived to find their room already occupied.

After the conference each Programme Secretary then compiled a volume of proceedings for each stream, carefully sticking page numbers at the foot of the page and compiling the index. This was a huge printing exercise and one where printing companies vied with each other to get the contract which even in those days was worth about £20,000-£30,000. Recycled paper had not yet been invented and none of us considered the environmental consequences of so many trees being felled in the name of transport research

For many years the staff of PTRC was all female and dubbed that “Monstrous Regiment of Women” by Sir Colin Buchanan. The reality was that all this hard work was done by a team of 10 who were outnumbered by male delegates 80 to 1. They were the lynchpin of the Committee Structure and many still remember the charm of Louise, Jean, Helen, Kath, Elizabeth, Penny, Jacky, Francesca, Polly, Sherry, Sonia, Susan, and Zofia.

The conference inspired by the late Bill Oxburgh was intended as a forum for young, up and coming researchers and mid career practitioners. It was thought that once they became more senior in the profession they would pass the conference baton to the next generation but somehow a lot of people got hooked and came back year after year and some are still the loyal followers after all these years. They come for the papers undoubtedly but also to get the warm welcome that ETC has always guaranteed them and to meet up with friends they have made in previous years. New technology may help in the organisation of the event but there will never be a substitute for face-to-face contact. People have made lifelong friends, stay with each other in different countries, a few have fallen in love, some have married and for me a chance encounter with a speaker dashing to his session across the Warwick Campus in 1974 has led to a new life in Sri Lanka for 6 months of the year. What a 40-year legacy. Congratulations to AET and everyone involved!