

I spent this Easter at Illumination the 1992 British National SF Convention, this is an edited version of a report I produced on the convention (with explanations of some of the more obscure jargon).

Thursday

Arrive at the Norbreck Castle hotel in Blackpool. It's a curious building with odd towers and battlements stuck onto it which only succeed in making it look like a giant sandcastle. The bedrooms are small but the convention space is more than adequate, though spread over a very large area. I register for the convention, picking up my envelope with membership badge, programme, publishers' freebies etc. Then I start hunting for the committee to find out what I'm supposed to be doing. Before the convention I had agreed to work on Security and then been asked if I would be an Operations Manager instead, by now I'm just confused. However, it looks as if Security won so I collect my Steward's badge and go for a wander round the hotel, trying to memorise the layout. Look into the Ops Room, it's a cold hole of a room (thank goodness I ended up on Security!). Find the Security Room, it's a dark hole of a room. Go and have a drink.

Six of us decide to go out to dinner in Blackpool, so we take the tram into town and find a reasonably good Greek restaurant. We gorge ourselves on meze, it's likely to be the last good food we have for three days. Then back to the hotel where we sit around and talk before going to bed.

Friday

The convention doesn't actually start until 3pm, so 4 of us organise a field trip to a local beer shop. We take the tram and wander around Blackpool but there's nothing to see, a low-level nuclear explosion could only improve the scenery. We find the beer shop and acquire a selection of obscure Belgian beers (Delerium Tremens is a good one) and Islay malt whisky which we then smuggle back into the hotel in order to relieve the tedium of its uniformly dire keg bitter. I sign up for the 4 to 6 security shift in the bar (there are about a dozen security stewards doing 2 hour shifts in likely trouble-spots around the hotel - our function, by the way, is not mainly to keep order among the convention attendees, but to eject members of the public who may have wandered in from outside and to ensure that partying doesn't get too out of hand).

Three o'clock and the convention starts while I'm not looking. I'm asked if I'll help out with an electronic mail/conferencing demonstration (specifically of Telepathy, an off-line reader for various computer conferencing systems). My security shift is very boring (there's hardly anybody in the bar yet), though I do come across a pile of sound equipment in one of the rooms which really ought to have been returned to the secure store. A quick call to Ops via walkie-talkie (or wallyphone as they're usually known) produces a gopher (someone who's volunteered to generally help out around the con) who takes it away. Listening to the radio traffic does suggest that not everyone is having such an easy time. Tomorrow's fireworks have had to be rescheduled by order of Blackpool Town Council and this has caused a major problem with re-organising the programme at the last minute. Afterwards, I go and take a friend's pictures down to the Art Show, just in time to register them for one of the art awards being made at the convention. Hear a

rumour that June Tabor (the folksinger) is turning up to the con tomorrow, she's definitely on the membership list. Spend the evening talking, filking (singing Science Fiction/Computer/whatever folksongs) and drinking. The con seems to be off to a reasonable start.

Saturday

Up early (-ish) and down to breakfast, which is poor even by hotel standards. This has got to be the killer day, with both masquerade and fireworks display tonight. Come on-shift at 10 a.m., there's no real problems but the radio system is misbehaving and producing nothing but static. At first we think it's jamming from a local taxi firm, but it's eventually traced to a malfunctioning wallyphone. Afterwards I go and take a quick look round the Dealers' Room (which is in a huge hall and no more than half-fills it, causing security problems with checking that only convention members come in) then go and appear on a quiz team. We come second out of 3. We're now meant to be setting up our presentation for next year's convention (which I am on the committee for) to be held on Jersey. Unfortunately, our hour of setup time has had Japanese animé rescheduled into it. This leaves us with about ten minutes to set up our home-made system of computer-controlled slide projectors and synchronised soundtrack. It works, but by the time it's almost set up we're losing half our audience so we start without mikes (technical gopher is still rushing around miking us up in the middle of the first section). The sound gets messed up and one of the projectors isn't quite synchronised, still it isn't too bad.

Wander around convention, have a swim, buy too many books from the Dealers Room. Gollancz are having a launch party with free booze, unfortunately it's regular hotel beer. I go back on shift between 6 and 8. This had been carefully timed to miss the Masquerade, unfortunately that's now starting at 7.30 in order to finish before the fireworks so I'll miss the first half hour. Go to hand my radio back in at 8pm (hotel almost dead with everyone in the masquerade), Kevin says they desperately need security on the beach to watch over the fireworks for an hour or so. I wrap up (it's **cold** out there!) and walk out to the front. Stand around asking members of the public to please keep their dogs away from our taped-off area. This doesn't help with one of the local loonies who's standing around pretending to be a policeman and getting worryingly close to the firing area. Then two real police arrive and he disappears (hooray!) but they are asking where are the ten stewards they were promised would be there (gloom!) Somehow we rustle up 10 stewards by shouting very loud over the radio at Ops.

At long last it's nine o'clock and there's a terrific bang, a couple of car alarms in the hotel car-park go off. Then another bang and a few more car alarms. Then an extremely loud bang as the marron the fireworks crew nicknamed "The Emasculator" is fired and every single car alarm for half a mile around is goes off. The fireworks are stunning, members of the public appear from all directions and have to be restrained from imolating themselves, fire engines go whizzing up and down the front to the accompaniment of loud cheers and a tram is hit by several bits of rocket. All in all, a good display.