

## Running the Eastercon

# SECRETS OF THE SMOFS

## Secrets of the Smofs

A short guide to running your own convention,  
and other dubious pleasures

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## Contents

1.	Introduction.....	5
2.	<b>Defining the problem.....</b>	<b>6</b>
3.	<b>So you want to bid?.....</b>	<b>7</b>
3.1	Forming a concomm.....	7
3.2	Defining the philosophy.....	7
3.3	Guests.....	7
3.4	Publicity.....	8
3.5	Membership rates.....	8
3.6	Finding a site.....	8
3.7	Gaining support.....	9
3.8	Presenting your bid.....	10
4.	<b>So now what are you going to do with it?.....</b>	<b>11</b>
4.1	Taking money off people.....	11
4.2	Expanding the committee.....	11
4.3	Organising yourselves.....	12
4.4	Who does what?.....	12
4.5	Defining the programme.....	13
4.6	More publicity.....	13
4.7	Nailing Down the Hotel.....	13
4.8	Keeping in touch.....	13
4.9	Party! party! party!.....	14
5.	<b>Making the most of your site.....</b>	<b>16</b>
5.1	Function space allocation.....	16
5.2	Public spaces.....	16
5.3	Smoking and other foul habits.....	16
5.4	Handicapped access.....	16
5.5	Food and drink.....	17
5.6	The party problem.....	18
5.7	Traffic and crush areas.....	18
5.8	Bedroom allocation.....	18
5.9	Fannish bad habits.....	18
6.	<b>Work Less, Achieve More.....</b>	<b>19</b>
6.1	Don't Do It Yourself.....	19
6.2	The Low-Hassle Approach.....	19
6.3	Areas Which Can Be Delegated.....	20
6.4	Rules For The Con.....	20
7.	<b>Things To Think About.....</b>	<b>21</b>
7.1	Registration.....	21
7.2	Freebies.....	22
7.3	Programme.....	22
7.4	Ops.....	22
7.5	Security.....	22
7.6	Tech.....	22
7.7	Art Show.....	22
8.	<b>Pre-con preparations.....</b>	<b>23</b>
8.1	Treasury.....	23
8.2	Site.....	23
8.3	Registration.....	23
8.4	Publications.....	23
8.5	Guests.....	23
8.6	Dealers' Room.....	23
8.7	Everything you haven't thought of, but should have done weeks ago.....	23
9.	<b>Setup.....</b>	<b>24</b>
9.1	Getting There.....	24
9.2	Things To Do.....	24
10.	<b>Lighten up kid, it's only a con!.....</b>	<b>25</b>
10.1	Opening Ceremony.....	25
10.2	Panels.....	25
10.3	Games.....	25

## SECRETS OF THE SMOFS

10.4	Auctions.....	25
10.5	Masquerade.....	25
10.6	Gripe Session.....	25
10.7	Closing Ceremony.....	26
10.8	Other.....	26
<b>11.</b>	<b>Making the con run well.....</b>	<b>27</b>
11.1	Information.....	27
11.2	Green Room.....	28
11.3	Art Show.....	28
11.4	Ops.....	28
11.5	Oops.....	28
11.6	Security.....	28
<b>12.</b>	<b>Making the con fun.....</b>	<b>30</b>
12.1	Micro-programming.....	30
12.2	Parties.....	30
12.3	Hug squad.....	30
12.4	Audience participation.....	30
<b>13.</b>	<b>Crises and how to fix them.....</b>	<b>31</b>
13.1	Five important points.....	31
13.2	Programme.....	31
13.3	Staff.....	32
13.4	Members.....	32
13.5	Site.....	32
13.6	Other.....	32
<b>14.</b>	<b>Striking the Show.....</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>15.</b>	<b>It's not over yet.....</b>	<b>34</b>
15.1	Doing the accounts.....	34
15.2	Dealing with the site.....	34
15.3	Tidying up.....	34
15.4	Read all about it.....	34
<b>16.</b>	<b>Hotel contracts.....</b>	<b>35</b>
16.1	Why Do You Need A Contract?.....	35
16.2	What Goes In The Contract.....	35
16.3	What to do with it now you've got it?.....	35
16.4	An Example Contract.....	35
<b>17.</b>	<b>Flyers and PRs.....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>18.</b>	<b>Sources of information.....</b>	<b>37</b>
18.1	Voice of the Lobster.....	37
18.2	Voice of the Shrimp.....	37
18.3	If I ran the Zee Worldcon.....	37
18.4	Conrunner.....	37
18.5	Another Fine Nessie.....	37
18.6	The Conbook.....	37
18.7	The Internet.....	37
18.8	Fanzines.....	37
18.9	Other.....	37
<b>19.</b>	<b>A Short History of Recent Eastercons.....</b>	<b>38</b>

## 1. Introduction

Why, you wonder, am I sitting down and writing a book about running the Eastercon, the UK National Science Fiction Convention? Well, it's very simple really.

Firstly, Intervention (the 1997 Eastercon) showed that some of the oral history of running Eastercons had been lost, or at least temporarily mislaid. We kept saying "but I thought this was a solved problem..." obviously we were wrong.

Secondly, some of this oral history is really quite fun. Since conrunners are not, as a rule, given to writing fanzines it makes sense to try and capture this history before it disappears.

Please note that I'm going to give lots of examples and anecdotes drawn from other conventions, including Worldcons. Honestly, it's not a plot. Worldcons can be fun too, but more importantly they stress test your organisational structures to a degree that smaller cons cannot.

I must also stress that this is not intended to be in any way the only way of doing things. There are many, many ways of doing things, and quite a lot of them are right. This is just meant to help point you in the right direction and hopefully stop you from making some of the silly mistakes that other committees have made over the years.

Steve Davies

## 2. Defining the problem

It was at Sou' Wester in 1996 that I was asked to be take part in a debate entitled "Is Fandom A Two-Tier System?" I was speaking against the motion and it seemed to me that there was no real scope for argument. From my point of view, Fandom is divided up into so many groups and tiers and movements and clubs and cabals and so on that it might as well be one homogenous mass. This was not, however, the opinion of the majority of the audience. From their perspective, Fandom was indeed a two-tier society and one in which they felt they had drawn the short straw. In particular, many of them suggested quite vociferously that there was indeed a "Smoffia" who ran all the conventions and who never invited these good folks to take part.

This was something of a blow to my world-view. It has been an article of faith for many years that all you have to do is volunteer and you will instantaneously find yourself lumbered with lots more than you bargained for. I investigated further and found that some of these people had written offering to help and, most committees being dens of incompetence, their offers had been mislaid or ignored. Quite a few, on the other hand, felt that "the SMOFs" should have known that they were good fellows and should have asked them to join. Some of them, unfortunately, had a reputation for being completely incompetent and would never be asked to be on a committee in a million years. The rest just didn't know what to do and, when I suggested that they should start their own bid committees, replied that they didn't know how. It is for them that this manual is intended.

Firstly, though, very few people get on committees through just being asked. Most people get on because they have shown themselves to be competent in various areas of convention organising. The rest were there when a new committee was being put together and just got roped in. The only way to ensure that you are there when a new committee is formed is to do it yourself and to make sure that you rope in a few competent people with experience. Putting together a committee and bidding for the Eastercon isn't a great deal of work. Of course, if you win then *running* the Eastercon is a lot of work, but then you should be able to get plenty of help.

Of course, as a new committee, you should really start a little lower. Run a 100-person convention first, and if you're still talking to each other then bid for the Eastercon. However, I'm going assume you're too impatient for doing things sensibly and you're going straight for the jugular.

### 3. So you want to bid?

#### 3.1 Forming a concom

This is the thing that many people seem to have trouble with. They sit around complaining that they never get a chance to be on a con committee, when in fact that's probably why they aren't being asked. There may well be a conrunning mafia, but the only condition for entry is a show of interest.

There are two main ways of getting on a committee and they are:

1. Volunteer as a gopher or as staff in some area of the con. Do the job well and efficiently but don't make yourself indispensable to that area (people will just say "Oh, we'll get X to do Art Show, they did such a good job last time"). Sooner or later, con committees will be looking for new members and your name will come up as someone who is reliable. This is the slow, but sensible way. It has the risk that if you don't get on with the people already on the con committee, you won't get chosen and you'll never even know that you were considered. It has the advantage that you'll get to observe committee members running around looking totally frazzled; and you can decide whether or not you really want to go through with this.
2. Gather a small group of trustworthy friends and launch your own bid or your own convention. You don't have to win, you don't even have to be launching a serious bid. Even running a spoof bid is enough to raise your profile and start committees saying "Hey! These guys are interested in being on a committee, let's ask them to join us". Helicon in 1993 picked up 3 committee members from the spoof bid, Sarkcon. It used to be that Unicons were an excellent starting place for would-be committee members, at least until Unicons collapsed through a lack of people willing to put a 200-person convention in student accommodation.

Follycon in 1988 was composed of two such groups who got together and organised a joint bid.

There are also other ways, the SOs of committee members may find themselves being dragged onto committees. Some people have tried to bluster their way on, and occasionally it works. If it doesn't work,

though, you may find yourself permanently out in the cold so I don't recommend it.

I can't emphasise too much that there is no magic password that will let you on to a committee. It's all based on trust. Either you work hard so that other people will trust you with a chunk of their convention, or else you have to go out and track down those trustworthy people and get them to join you.

#### 3.2 Defining the philosophy

OK, so now you're on a con committee. We'll assume for the sake of argument that you joined the committee very early on, maybe you started it yourself. What most people do at this point is look for a site. What you *should* do is sit down and decide what sort of con you want to run.

When you know what sort of con you want to run, you can start doing things like deciding where it's going to be, who you want as guests, what sort of programme you want to have and so on. Some people go even further than this and say that you should start with the programme and base everything else, even the site, around that. I suspect this may be a little difficult in practice, but it's certainly a good objective to strive for.

#### 3.3 Guests

Picking good guests is an art. You may have started your bid with some guests in mind, if so then good. If you don't have anyone in mind, start thinking about who you would like to see, who everyone else is going to want to come and see, and who hasn't been asked before. When you have a list of names, it's probably a good idea to find some SMOF who knows how to keep their mouth shut and run a few of the names past them. It's useful to know in advance if your preferred guest has a penchant for running up massive bar bills at the con's expense, or has a habit of crying off at the last minute or has small children or is just very boring in person. I won't name names.

Make sure that all your committee agree about who you are asking. Having now been involved in two Worldcon bids, I am amazed at the amount of animosity and argument generated by the process of deciding who the guests should be. Fortunately, Eastercons don't have all the baggage associated with Worldcons, where there really is a smof culture who disapprove of guests without at

least a 20 year track record. Still, your guests should all be people whom all your committee are united in agreeing are worthy of being honoured by your convention.

Other things to think about when picking guests are:

- How much is their travel likely to cost you? You'd normally expect to pay for 2 return tickets per guest since most will want to bring their husband/wife/etc. with them.
- Have they been to conventions before? If they haven't, then they may be a bigger draw, but they may need a more detailed explanation of what is expected of them.
- If they are professionals who are not acquainted with the habits of SF Fandom, they may expect an appearance fee, allowance etc. Are you prepared to pay this? Are you going to tell your members (who may feel that this is A Bad Thing)?
- What sort of things are they interested in? Can you tie this in to other program items, other guests and so on? For instance, are they into filk? Comics? Films?
- Are they going to get on with the other guests? Don't pick people who are known to despise each other.

Once you've picked a small number of possible guests, feel them out. Write to them and say that you are bidding to hold a convention on such and such a date, would they be willing to be a GoH in the event of you winning? Make it clear that this is not a firm commitment until after you have won the bid.

Warning. Most people are very honoured to be asked to be guest of honour at a convention, especially the Eastercon, and will usually accept unless there is some very good reason why they can't make it. Don't do what Uniconze (Unicon 11) did and ask several people, expecting some of them to decline. They ended up with 4 guests of honour, which is quite a lot for a small convention (though Eastercons often have 4 guests, and sometimes a sprinkling of special guests who get a free membership but don't generally get all their bills paid like the guests of honour).

After the bid, you should write to the guests, saying that you won/lost the bid and that you confirm/regretfully withdraw the invitation. At this point, you might want to go into greater detail about what you are expecting them to do for you. This might be: appear on two

panels a day, give a GoH speech, help judge the masquerade and be visible around the convention. Nowadays, many authors dislike giving speeches, and you should offer the option of an interview or other event.

If you have access to a run of Ian Sorensen's fanzine *Conrunner*, look up the article by John Brunner called *On the Care and Feeding of Guests* which gives the guest's viewpoint of what they expect from the convention.

### 3.4 **Publicity**

In order to attract attention to your bid, you need to indulge in some publicity.

As in real life, a "corporate identity" of some sort can be useful.

Flyers

Gimmicks

### 3.5 **Membership rates**

Setting membership rates is something that tends to cause a lot of divisiveness in a committee. Some people will want to push discount rates for groups that they are interested in. Hence, we have had cheap rates in the past for unemployed fans, fans from soft currency countries, children, older fans and so on. The problem with these is usually in confirming that people are really deserving of the discounts they are claiming. Unemployed fans waving UB40s may be between highly paid jobs, fans with E. European passports may be permanently resident in the UK and earning more than you care to imagine.... It's simpler just to set a flat rate and have done with it.

The one thing that it is sensible to do is to slowly increase the membership rate. Why? Because you want people to join the con early on while you need the money. The later the money comes in, the more likely it is that you will have already signed contracts, hire agreements etc. You will have already cut back on the size of the con since the budget didn't seem to cover everything, leaving you with an embarrassing surfeit of money and a shortage of equipment, chairs, fun etc.

Most cons will be aiming to break even by the start of the con, money that comes in after that is effectively wasted since you can't spend it on anything (except, perhaps, booze for the gopher party).

A number of conventions raise the price of membership dramatically just before the convention. Sometimes they just threaten to raise the price, but don't actually do it. In any case, the aim of this is to again to get people registering before the con. This is a decision which needs to be taken by the committee as a whole, since it is somewhat unfair to the small handful of people who genuinely don't know they are coming until the last minute. The people it's aimed at are those who know they are going to come, but just can't be bothered to sign up before because they know the committee will go to great lengths to try and find them a room.

### 3.6 Finding a site

Unless you have started your bid with the express intention of using a certain hotel, then you are going to have to spend some time looking for a site. Like Eastcon and Sou'Wester (both of which lost their original hotels) you may end up looking for a site anyway. It can be fun, it can also be extremely frustrating unless you know what you are looking for and know how to interest the hotels in having your business.

First, identify some likely hotels. You could go to the local tourist centre and ask if they have any information on conference venues. Large cities like London and Birmingham produce annual publications listing all large hotels and conference centres. If you're looking elsewhere, try the British Association of Conference Towns in Tunbridge Wells. One of the things they will do for you is send you their book of venues, they will also circulate your requirements to all the places on their list. This is less useful than it could be though. No matter how carefully you specify "must be able to accommodate 1000 people" you still get deluged with brochures from loads of hotels with a 20-person conference room and not much else. Oh, and you'll get heaps of menus, I advise you to bin them before they take over your house.

In 1986, Tim Illingworth and myself spent a great deal of time searching for a site for Contrivance in 1989 before eventually settling on Jersey. We discovered the BACT and made a long list of hotels in London and SE England. We drove around looking at hotels, talked to the conference managers, acquired heaps of brochures which told us about more hotels, came up with complex schemes for squeezing an Eastercon into 4 small hotels and a conference centre (Eastbourne).... Eventually

we had pretty much settled on a couple of central London hotels. They would be expensive, but since it was London people could commute. At this point, we went to yet another exhibition at which we talked to some people from the Jersey Tourist Board. They offered to fly both of us out to Jersey to look at the hotels there (at their expense). So we went. We had a good weekend, we didn't accept the offer from the Isle of Man to go and look there, we did end up running a number of very successful conventions there.

So, it's worth looking a bit further afield than you might expect. And you might get away without it costing either you or the convention a fortune.

So, what are your requirements? SF conventions are not the typical sort of gathering that a hotel is used to dealing with. If you say "1000 people", they instantly assume that you will want a single room for 1000, plus tea, coffee and a posh banquet in the evening (more menus). Some of them will sorrowfully turn you away on the grounds that their largest room only holds 800 or less... Squash this idea at the outset. The best attended item at a 1000-person convention is unlikely to attract more than 650 people if that. What you want is:

- A main programme room which can hold 650-800 people theatre style (i.e. in rows of seats), don't forget that you have to allow room for tech etc. which the hotel will not have taken into account
- A room for 2-300 (Dealers Room)
- A room for 1-200 (Secondary programme stream)
- An assortment of other rooms, at least 4-5 and preferably more (Art Show, Games Room, Workshops, Minority interest programme etc.)
- Some office/storage space (Ops and Secure Store)
- Lots of space for lounging around, bars etc.

Anything more than this is a bonus, it's a common complaint that every hotel could use at least one more 100-person room. If you haven't got one, think of it as a challenge, try and slant your programme towards using the facilities you've actually got rather than what you wish you'd got. Be very careful when looking at hotel brochures, though. If a hotel claims a 1000-person room and four 200-

person rooms, it's almost certain that those four smaller rooms are produced by dividing up the large one and you can't have both at once.

When you talk to conference managers, be realistic. You're already dangling a very tempting opportunity in front of them. The chance of filling the hotel, on a weekend when it would probably otherwise be empty, is not one that they're going to turn down lightly so don't exaggerate too much.

We do tend to try and squeeze every last drop out of a hotel, don't let them think we're going to be spending vast amounts in the restaurants when we probably aren't.

The common mistake, when

At some point, you'll need to get together a draft contract—obviously this can't be signed until you have won the bid. See Section 16 for suggestions on what should be in the contract.

### 3.6.1 Split sites

Split sites (where the convention is spread over two hotels, or a hotel and a conference centre, or whatever) have a reputation of being problematic. Personally, I would run away from a split site as fast as I possibly could, your mileage may vary.

Yorcon 3 was spread across two hotels separated by a main railway line and connected by a dark and unsavoury tunnel. I believe the dealers and the artists both suffered a lot from this, I know I only ventured over to the other hotel once during the whole con.

Contrivance was not really split. It took place in the Hotel de France and in the hotel's conference centre which was just across the car-park. Despite this, program items in the conference centre were distinctly under-attended. Let's face it, fans just don't like going out in the open air.

Intuition was in the city centre of Manchester in two hotels on opposite of a busy main road. In addition, one of the hotels had appallingly bad lifts (and the hotel started on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor). This seemed to lead to people sticking in just one hotel, and made Operations difficult to say the least.

## 3.7 *Gaining support*

Pre-Supports, Friends and Helpers

## 3.8 *Presenting your bid*

### 3.8.1 What sort of bid presentation?

The great Helicon bid presentation used three slide-projectors synchronised by a laptop computer running some custom software and a little bit of home-made custom electronics to interface between them. We spent a fair amount of time on the slides (including some very early computer graphics) and a lot of time on the script. We rehearsed the presentation over and over, polishing it until it flowed smoothly and we knew where all the jokes went. It came off so well that we did it again a year later. It wasn't difficult, it was great fun and it made for an enjoyable bidding session for all concerned.

### 3.8.2 Preparation

Do run through your presentation in advance. Don't try and do the whole thing off the cuff. Although there are a few people who can do this, most people can't and a bad speaker gives a bad impression of the whole bid. Unfair, but there it is, that's life. The committee member who gives the presentation should be the best speaker, not necessarily the chairman, though they should be available to be pointed at.

You should have at least a couple of run-throughs before the convention, just to get the wording correct. You should also try and arrange with the tech crew for a run-through at the convention so you can organise things like microphones, slide-projectors and so on.

### 3.8.3 Answering stupid questions

People always ask stupid questions. Be patient. Don't offend them with a snappy put-down unless you are sure that it's not going to lose you votes. Remember, that person is probably (by recent figures) 1% of the vote. If you annoy their friends too, you've just lost 10% of your votes.

### 3.8.4 Spoof bids—friend or foe?

Originally, there was often competition for the Eastercon and so the competitive bidding situation developed. Nowadays, running the Eastercon is seen as more work and so there is rarely more than one genuine bid. However, no fan would leave a situation like this alone and so a tradition of spoof bids has developed. These often parody features of the genuine bid(s) and make the bidding a more enjoyable occasion for all involved. The genuine bid usually has priority and gets to decide whether they go first, what the format is to be and so on. Moreover, if there *is* more than one real bid the person running the bidding may ask the spoof to withdraw. Although there have been occasions with more than one spoof bid in the past, this is now frowned on.

So, what do you do if you're bidding and there's a spoof up against you? Obviously they have a great advantage in that they don't have to be credible, they can promise anything... but they don't actually want to win, so you should have an out there.

At Seacon in 1984??, Yorcon 3 were bidding Leeds against Falkon, a Falkland Islands spoof bid. The Yorcon bid came across as very arrogant and unfriendly, and there was a strong groundswell in favour of the spoof. The committee of Falkon were only saved from having to run the con by the intervention of Martin Hoare. Martin invented the concept of the registered abstention which allowed the voters to register their dislike for both bids (this in the days of one-year bidding, when 'hold over to next year' was not an option). The vote therefore gave the con to Yorcon, even though they had received fewer votes than 'Abstain'. This is the reason why abstentions are still called for in the voting process.

Basically, you can't do very much about the spoof bid, so try and treat it as a resource. Talk to them, find out what they're going to do. If you can, you may be able to arrange with them that they will defuse embarrassing questions by giving a silly answer before you have to take it, giving you that essential extra 30 seconds in which to think of an answer. Remember, this is your chance to look sober, knowledgeable and the sort of people who can be trusted with over £50,000 of fandom's money.

In 1989, at Contrivance, Speculation were bidding for Glasgow against a spoof bid,

Inconceivable, run by Alison Scott and Chris O'Shea.

The Speculation bid presentation was done by Ian Sorensen who hadn't been expecting to give the presentation and who wasn't sufficiently prepared for hostile audience reaction. The Inconceivable bid, on the other hand, was funny, sharp and had a witty answer to everything the audience could throw at them. Speculation could not do other than look bad under these circumstances, and audience reaction was distinctly negative.

Legend has it that the spoof nearly won. In fact, the first show of hands seems to have produced a small majority in favour of holding the bid over a year. A lobby vote was called and produced a small majority for Speculation.

The other useful thing to do with spoof bids is to sign them up as committee members of your convention. Helicon acquired three people, the whole bid-committee of the Sarkon spoof, in this way.

## 4. So now what are you going to do with it?

OK, so you've won your bid for the Eastercon. Now what are you going to do? Remember, you've just taken on a 2-3 year commitment that could end up costing you thousands of pounds and your reputation among your fellow-fans. Don't go and get plastered and start telling everyone how much your committee hate each other. Do start trying to behave like a bunch of people who are capable of handling an Eastercon. Being nice to the people you want to do your Ops and Tech and Security and everything else is probably a good start. Be prepared to buy a lot of drinks for these folks, you can't afford to alienate them.

<Insert Ian Gunn fillo>

The 1999 Australian Worldcon bid was won by a relatively small group of fans who decided (very probably correctly) that if they waited for a consensus among the fractured groups of fans then they would be waiting for ever. They went ahead, won the bid and presented it to their local fandom as a *fait accompli*. This led to a spate of bickering and back-biting but as of time of writing (mid-1997) it's beginning to look as if they might actually start pulling together and running the con.

However, this is a somewhat dangerous strategy and isn't to be recommended, except in really desperate straits.

### 4.1 Taking money off people

Be prepared to start taking money off people as soon as the bidding session empties out. In fact, you should have pre-arranged with your helpers that they will sneak out of the bidding session as soon as the result is announced. Normally, your chairman will announce membership rates, guests of honour and other essential information at this point. Spin it out a bit so that there's plenty of time to prepare for the hordes of people who are about to descend on you waving their money.

You should have prepared a victory flyer in advance. This can be very cheap since if you lose you will have to destroy it somewhere where it won't be found. You also need a cash-box, float, receipt books and so on.

If you've set your membership to an odd quantity, like £23.75, then you are going to need a lot of change. Go to the bank beforehand and get the money. You can

always take it back or sell it to the winning bid if you lose. Of course, a sensible bid will have set membership rates such that making change is made as simple as possible (see *section 3.5*).

### 4.2 Expanding the committee

Unless you started out with masses of people, you're going to have to expand a bit. You should select people who:

- Are generally competent
- Have some experience in the areas that you are lacking in
- Are people you think you can all get along with
- Are not being asked just because they are friends of yours and want to be involved
- Are not people who have squeezed their way onto the committee without ever actually being asked. This has happened to me on 2 different committees and both times we eventually asked that person to leave after a lot of heart-searching

I feel that it is generally a bad idea to bring husbands, wives, lovers and so on onto a committee. The fact you get on with someone does not necessarily mean that you can work with them in a committee. Moreover, to have a couple split up can be terribly damaging to the committee, either you lose one of them totally, or they spend meetings sniping at each other and trying to show the other up. This does not help in the least when what you are trying to do is run a convention. There is a corollary to this which is:

- No affairs with other committee members. Try and keep your emotions under control until after the convention is over. I know it's not easy, but it will make life ever so much simpler for everybody else on the committee.

You should be aiming at a total of around 8 or so committee members. I was on Confabulation, which only had 5 committee members and which worked very well, but then we got on well with each other. If we had run into problems we would have had very little spare resource. On the other hand, committees of 12 or more tend to waste masses of time in arguing.

So what is a committee member? For the purposes of this document, committee members are the people who come to

committee meeting and have a say in the running of the convention. If the convention ends up out of pocket, these are the people who have to make up the shortfall.

Sometimes, there may be people who are officially committee members but who do not come to meetings and do not have financial responsibility. Generally these are people who are going to run a major area at the convention, and who may need to be called committee so that they are perceived to have sufficient authority. I don't count these people in my figure of 8 committee members, only those who attend meetings, though you may want to send them minutes of meetings and generally treat them as if they really were on the committee.

**4.3 Organising yourselves**

With very few exceptions, a concom should by now have set up strict demarcation lines. The head of Programme handles Programme matters, the Treasurer handles finance and so on. If you want to be involved in something outside your area, go and ask the person who has responsibility for it or bring it up at a committee meeting. This is common courtesy but it also stops the convention from over-committing itself or from alienating people who may be asked to work on the convention only to be told two years later "go away, X is doing it and always has been".

(Evolution masquerade?)

**4.4 Who does what?**

You need to think about filling the following areas of responsibility. These don't all have to be committee posts, or one committee member can do several things, but someone ought to be thinking about these areas.

Chairman	You don't need a chairman, several cons have run very successfully with no chairman or with a figurehead (WinCon had a teddy bear). However, the chairman's role is to keep order, direct the group in committee meetings, act as arbiter between groups competing for resources and generally hold the con together long enough for it to actually happen. At the con, the chairman generally seems to wander around getting
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	moaned at and trying to find someone to fix problems. If anything goes wrong, it is the chairman who ultimately accepts responsibility. If there are critical decisions to be made, this is where they end up.
Secretary	The secretary keeps minutes and chases up the various people on the committee to make sure they are all doing their actions.
Treasurer	The treasurer looks after the money side. They bank all the money coming in and they prepare regular budgets to show how much money is available to spend on each area. At the con, they control the money being spent on areas such as parties and they are responsible for paying the con's bills with the hotel.
Programme	Programme organise the events at the con, they think up items, put together a timetable, write to participants and allocate people to items. At the con, they try and keep the programme running smoothly, changing things around as necessary.
Publications	Publications produce the flyers, progress reports, Read me, programme book and any other con publications (signs, possibly badges etc.). At the con they may have responsibility for the newsletter. They may handle publicity (e.g. getting adverts to go in con publications) or this may be done by a separate person.
Ops	Ops ensure that the con runs smoothly. They arrange for non-technical equipment, they handle crises and ensure that the right people are dealing with problems. They manage the gophers, radios and access to function rooms. They also do logistics—making sure that equipment gets to the convention, is set up correctly

## SECRETS OF THE SMOFS

	and then goes back to where it came from after the con.
Tech	Tech arrange for, set up and run all technical equipment used by the convention.
Security	Security ensure that only convention members get into the convention. They check that equipment and valuable items belonging to the convention are safely stored when not in use. They also enforce the weapons policy and stop things/people from getting broken.
Hotel Liaison	Hotel liaison keeps in touch with the hotel during the run up to the con. They arrange for the contract and they may have responsibility for allocating bedrooms. At the con, they act as a buffer between the con and the hotel, sorting out the 1001 problems that the members may have and trying to get them solved in the most efficient way without upsetting either the members or the hotel staff.
Guest Liaison	Guest Liaison keeps in touch with the guests of honour, checks that they know when they are coming, arranges travel and ensures that they are met on arrival. At the con they make sure that the guests are kept entertained, well-fed and generally happy. This is often best done by someone who is not on the committee since it requires more time than a committee member should be able to spare.
Memberships	Memberships keep track of memberships coming in, they supply mailing lists to Publications for sending out PRs, they route volunteer information to Ops and room bookings to Hotel. At the con, this function is largely subsumed by Registration.
Registration	Registration organise the Registration Desk (naturally enough). Before the con, they

	prepare badges for all members and they stuff programme packs. At the con, they register members, take money for new memberships and direct people where they need to go next.
Office	Acts as a central point for mail and for circulating pre-con information. Is often combined with Memberships.
Dealers Room	Organises the Dealers Room, liases with dealers, lays out tables in the room and generally makes sure that the dealers have a successful convention
Art Show	Organises the Art Show and the Art Auction. Contacts artists before the convention and persuades them to bring their work along. May be involved in organising art-related programming.
Games Room	Organises the Games Room

And then of course, there's everyone else. Make sure that they know what they are doing for you. If someone agrees verbally to do something for you, follow it up with a written confirmation setting out the exact limits of their responsibilities. Too often, I've seen arguments develop over whether someone was asked to run the Masquerade, or to MC it; to be Deputy Head of Ops, or just Ops Manager, and so on. Be explicit.

What is a gopher?

What is a steward?

What is everybody else?

### **4.5 Defining the programme**

Ian Sorensen says...

### **4.6 More publicity**

Don't do fancy fliers that need folds, special print facilities, colour etc. You want to be able to dash round the corner and get another 1000 run off at a minute's notice. Guillotining to A5 is about the most you should be thinking of doing. Get these fliers out to every convention, SF bookshop, ...

Other points on flyer design, please feel free to disregard these:

- Use both sides of the flyer. Don't waste the back by putting a pretty picture on it. Put the name of the convention in **BIG** letters.
- Put a membership slip on the flyer but make sure your address is on the bit that they keep.
- Use different flyers for fans and for people who don't know what a convention is.

**4.7 Nailing Down the Hotel**

Get the hotel to sign the contract. It's a cute idea to try and get the contract signed as part of the bidding session, but this is rarely possible as it usually isn't finalised at this point..

**4.8 Keeping in touch**

During the two-year run-up to the convention, you need to reassure your members that you're still there. If nobody hears anything from you they might assume that you've folded and start hunting around for an emergency committee to put the con on. So you produce Progress Reports which you send to people to try and whet their appetites for the con. Also, it means that you have a way of communicating with your members in case of something they really have to know—like changing hotels, for instance.

The normal contents of these PRs are things like biographies of the guests, descriptions of the town/city where con is going to be held and lists of members.

Speculation, the 1991 Eastercon, took an unusual tack with its Progress Reports. They produced them in a very mannered, pseudo-Victorian style (one of them was called *?Lady Bicyclist and Aviatrix?*) and tried to be fanzines rather than traditional PRs. Unfortunately, they were a little too successful in that some of the readers were not aware that these actually contained essential information about the con, buried in among the articles. This led to people arriving at the con, denying that they had ever received any progress reports and getting quite irate about it.

Obviously, mailing out up to 1000 envelopes, every time you issue a PR is going to be neither easy nor cheap. The usual solution is to do the enveloping at a committee meeting

just before a major convention. You then take the PRs to the con and hand out as many as you can—keeping careful track of who you have given them to. This way you can save on postage to maybe half of your members, and you can use the PR as publicity material to encourage new members to join up. The usual schedule followed by Eastercons is roughly:

PR 0	Eastercon N-2	You have this flyer ready at the con where you are bidding and hand it out if you win. It gives little more than your guests' names, your hotel and your membership rates. However, it is a reminder to everyone that you won.
PR 1	Novacon N-2	It's 6 months since your members heard from you. Probably not much has happened, but remind them you're here. Traditionally, this PR also goes to members of the previous Eastercon since they are the people most likely to join your con.
PR 2	Eastercon N-1	There's 1 year to the con. A lot of people will join at this Eastercon since you are the next one.
PR 3	Novacon N-1	Issue hotel booking forms. You can do so earlier, but it's not really worth it—in the mean time a lot of your members will be sleeping with different people, may have acquired kids, pets, allergies etc. and will need to change their arrangements.
PR 4	Easter - 6-8 weeks	Last minute information. Include travel details and maps of how to get to the hotel, the hotel's phone number, the convention's phone number (usually the

		hotel liaison person or registration) and anything else that they need to know at this point.
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Some cons have issued a post-con report as a sort of PR 5. This is a nice touch and can help to use up unwanted surpluses of money.

There are some things which should go in every progress report and they are:

- The name of the convention
- The date of the convention (the thing that gets left out most often)
- The current membership rates, the date that these rates are valid to and (if known) what the rate will be going up to on that date
- The correspondence address of the convention (also email and phone if possible)
- Where the convention is going to be held (town and name of hotel)
- The names of the guests

If anyone is running a con, and plans to take this advice, can I advise them to print the mailing address on both the coupon and the bit the coupon is cut off from. This is after numerous experiences of 'fill in the form, put the form in the envelope, stick down the envelope, now, what address was it?... rip open the envelope...'

—Alison Scott

Other things that it's useful to include at one time or other are:

- A list of members with their membership numbers and current status
- Weapons policy and other restrictions
- A warning against crashing in other people's rooms, together with a plea for members to please keep their sleeping bags out of sight of hotel staff.
- Reminders about awards etc. which require people to bring things to the convention (e.g. the Ken MacIntyre award for fanzine art requires that the original artwork be on display at the con).

- Hotel rules on corkage and any waivers that the con may have squeezed out of the management.
- Unusual hotel restrictions e.g. Evolution in 1996 was held at the Heathrow Radisson Edwardian, a hotel with a policy of not supplying tea and coffee-making equipment in the hotel rooms. This wasn't discovered until quite late on, and caused a certain amount of last minute panic.

#### 4.9 Party! party! party!

One of the things that conventions often do for publicity and to increase goodwill, is to hold parties. This is something that happens a lot more in the US than in England, but it's fairly traditional over here too.

Firstly, there is no obligation to hold parties at any stage in the process. It's up to you. However, remember that the point of holding the party is to gain members for the bid/convention (depending on what stage in the process we're at). If your committee is full of party animals and you think you can produce an atmosphere of fun and wallet-loosening, great, go ahead and do it. If you don't want to do it, don't. There is nothing more deadly than a contractual obligation room party which is being run by a bunch of people gritting their teeth and trying not to think about how much all this is costing. Spend your money doing what you're best at.

Let's assume that you are holding a party. UK conventions are not as bad as US ones, where in many cases the parties have taken over as the main reason for the convention, still there's likely to be some competition. Make the party interesting. Remember the operative word is *party*. You're not there just to offer free booze as a bribe for buying a membership. You're doing this so that people will have fun and will think "these guys have done a really good job organising this party, if they run a con then that should be good too, I'll buy a membership".

Party holders' checklist:

- ◆ Are you on a party/noisy floor? If not, then stop now. There's nothing puts a damper on a party quite like being closed down early by the hotel because the mundane next door is trying to get to sleep. Talk to the committee and see about an alternative location if you have to.
- ◆ Alcoholic drinks. Should be varied and clearly labelled. Don't rely on people

bringing booze to the party. If the hotel has a corkage policy, you should be paying corkage on at least some of the drinks.

- ◆ Soft drinks. Should be varied and clearly labelled. Remember that some people are actually allergic to alcohol. Confusing e.g. alcoholic and non-alcoholic punch can be more serious than you might imagine.
- ◆ Food—try and provide something more interesting than crisps/chips. Vegetables and sour cream dip are a good (if common) idea, small sweets are another. I've seen chilli, sushi, pancakes... use your imagination.
- ◆ Disposable cups, plates etc.
- ◆ Rolls of paper towels for mopping up spillages
- ◆ Disinfectant
- ◆ Black rubbish bags for clearing up afterwards
- ◆ Carrier bags for removing empty bottles, cans etc.
- ◆ If you want to follow the American tradition of putting ice in the bath with cans of beer or soft drinks, remember to put a towel on the bottom before putting the ice in. Aluminium cans can mark bathtubs badly and it's very difficult to explain away. Don't forget to organise a supply of ice—those rare hotels which provide ice machines generally didn't expect them to be used for filling bathtubs and there won't be enough.
- ◆ Receipt book for taking memberships—remember why you're holding this party!
- ◆ Publicity. Don't forget to tell people well in advance that you're holding the party, what room it's in and what it's for. Make sure you don't just invite your friends. Remember, you're holding the party to sell memberships.
- ◆ Where are you holding the party? If you're using a function room, then you've got a different set of things to worry about. If you're going to use a bedroom, then you need to decide whose room. Is it a large room? Not in a quiet area? Near the lifts/stairs?
- ◆ Decide *in advance* what your policy is on smoking, under-age drinkers, abusive drunks etc. Get the phone number of Ops/Security so you can organise some

damage limitation without involving the hotel.

- ◆ Make sure that the Ops Room/Gopher Hole etc. know about the party and know that they're invited. Why? Because these are people that you need a good relationship with for your convention, and they're more likely than the average con attendee to be buying a membership. What's more, if there are complaints about the party, it's less likely to be suddenly closed down if the DCM/whoever is drinking there. Also, they're a hard-working bunch of people and they need some consideration.
- ◆ Clear up afterwards. Leaving a good tip, in a prominent place, for the maid is the best way of avoiding unwelcome attention from the hotel about the appalling state of your room.
- ◆ Why are you holding this party? Good.

## 5. Making the most of your site

This is the great smoffish black art. Give two committees the same hotel and they may come up with a completely different room usage. Which one is likely to be more successful? Unfortunately, the only real thing to do is to try them out.

### 5.1 Function space allocation

When you're putting your programme together, you should have some idea of whether or not you expect an item to be popular. Have the speakers drawn large crowds at other conventions? Is the topic confusing and therefore less of a draw than might be expected? I've seen every variation, from items which had people 5 deep around the doors of a small room trying to get in, to guest of honour talks in huge halls where the audience had to be quietly padded out with gophers in order to provide an audience at all.

Remember, what appeals to you may not be what appeals to the bulk of your membership. Ask around, has anyone heard of this Strazcynski chap and his obscure cult TV series? Be prepared to try and drum up publicity for a new item which you've scheduled in a large room. Don't be afraid to shove old standbys in a small room if you think their audience is dropping, but don't do something stupid like putting a major draw in a small room just because you personally don't like them. Intuition, in 1998 put Dr Jack Cohen in a 60-person room when he regularly draws 400-person audiences. This sort of mistake annoys everyone and can usually be avoided with a bit of care.

One thing Peter Wareham and Gwen Funnell have done for several years is to try and get the Green Room to estimate sizes of audiences in each item. Hopefully, one day they'll publish their results. In the meantime, you could do worse than look in at program items at other cons and count heads yourself. And if the items are popular, well you can always steal them for your own programme.

### 5.2 Public spaces

A good public space really makes a convention. The best example is the Adelphi Hotel in Liverpool which has a wonderful lounge, centrally located so that everyone has to pass through it whenever they go anywhere. This gives a con a feeling of having a centre. If your main socialising space is off

down a corridor, fewer people will find it and the corridors will get a lot more crowded as people will stop and talk there instead of in the lounge area.

Obviously, a lot of this is down to the hotel design, but if you have a lot of function space consider turning a central room into a bar. However, it must have good sound insulation from any other function rooms. Correct use of space can make the difference between a con where everyone has a great time because they feel in the middle of what's happening, and one where they always feel out of it.

### 5.3 Smoking and other foul habits

Some of your convention members will smoke like chimneys, others will dissolve into life-threatening fits of coughing at the slightest smell of smoke. It's your job to try and resolve matters so that both types can share the same hotel.

- Small function areas generally need to be non-smoking since they will become unbearable very quickly, otherwise.
- Large function areas may be divided into smoking and non-smoking sections *if* you have a good idea of the prevailing air currents and ensure that the smoke doesn't just drift into the non-smoking areas.
- High-ceilinged rooms (e.g. the Adelphi main lounge) may be able to cope with both smokers and non-smokers since smoke tends to rise. For some reason, this didn't seem to work at Reconvene, possibly because the Adelphi's ventilation has got too old.
- The Dealers Room should be non-smoking except for dealers themselves.
- The Art Show should be non-smoking (to prevent the risk of damage).
- Food service areas should be non-smoking if possible. Try and provide both smoking and non-smoking bars.

It should be made clear to everybody in the con publications which is the default option. Remember to clearly mark smoking areas as well as non-smoking.

Remove ash-trays from non-smoking areas. Most smokers will note the absence of ash-trays, realise this is a non-smoking area and either not light up or move elsewhere. The presence of ash-trays is taken as implicit

permission to smoke, even if there are large signs asking them not to.

#### **5.4 Handicapped access**

You can't ignore this. Even where it's really the hotel's responsibility, you'll get the blame for picking that hotel. Try and forestall this by taking all the precautions you can. There's a US-based fan organisation called Electrical Eggs, which exists purely to help and advise on handicapped access. Use them. Try and identify ways of getting to awkward rooms, take a wheelchair with you on a site visit and see just how hard it is to get around.

Even if you don't think you have any handicapped members, all it takes is for someone to break their ankle during the masquerade and you have an instant access problem. Be prepared. Quite apart from anything else, you have an obligation to provide access and it's not a good idea to fall down on this.

Incidentally, you should note that disability isn't just about people in chairs. You also need to think about people who are deaf, blind, have dietary disorders, allergies, epilepsy and so on. If you want to know more, you can get chapter and verse from any of the people who have arranged disabled access at recent Eastercons.

#### **5.5 Food and drink**

Hotels are in the business of supplying food and drink at prices and locations which are advantageous to them. One of the things you need to arrange with the hotel (see the various sections about the contract) is for them to supply cheap food, real ale and soft drinks.

##### **5.5.1 Food**

What I usually do is to point out to the hotel that we have a very mixed set of members. As well as rich authors etc. we also have a sizeable contingent of students, unemployed and the like. We have to look after them and therefore we need to provide cheap meals. Reassure them that people will still eat in the expensive hotel restaurant (they will). Try and persuade them to offer a spread of alternative options at any one meal, not just a single vat of chilli. Chocolate cakes and so on also tend to sell well. They will probably want to restrict the times these are on sale to recognised meal times. If you can get some sort of food

(e.g. sandwiches available behind the bar) at all times, this is always much appreciated by those people who are working Ops shifts say from 11 to 2 and can't get away until after the food has stopped serving.

Ensure that they know we must have at least one vegetarian alternative generally available. This isn't the problem that it used to be in the old days. At Beccon in 1987, the vegetarian option at every meal was stuffed peppers. This was embarrassing since one of the guests was a vegetarian. Worse still, when the banquet came around, the vegetarian option was... stuffed peppers again.

On the subject of banquets, my advice is to forget it. Hotels love organising banquets, and most of them are phenomenally bad at it. Moreover, fans being essentially contrary creatures will cause havoc, fail to turn up, whatever. It's hassle that you don't need. That said, I have been on committees of cons that have run very successful banquets, but this was at the Hotel de France in Jersey, a competent and trustworthy hotel with excellent food. I wouldn't do it anywhere else.

##### **5.5.2 Real Ale and cider**

Most hotels do not normally stock real ale as it's a finicky drink and they can't be bothered to keep it. It's worth bringing along someone who knows what they are talking about so they can go off with the cellarman and convince him to make the effort. However, this is only the first hurdle. Many hotel chains insist on doing all their buying through a central organisation and may claim they are unable to supply real ale. If you lean on them a bit, they normally give in, but you will not be able to have any say on what they get (it'll be whatever beer their usual supplier is able to provide).

Hotels invariably underestimate how much we drink, a good idea is to try and point them at a previous hotel. Failing that, we normally figure on a total of about ??? pints. Try to get both a strong beer (strength 5 or higher) and a weaker session beer (3.5 - 4 or so).

There is also a minority interest in real cider. This tends to be more difficult to get hold of, but is always well-received if you can manage it.

##### **5.5.3 Soft drinks**

It is a poorly-concealed fact that hotels and bars make much of their profits from the

appallingly high markups on soft drinks. Prices of several hundred percent above cost are the rule. It is a good idea to get the hotel to provide at least cheap orange juice (e.g. from a carton instead of from a mixer-sized bottle) in order to prevent your members from being charged twice as much for orange and soda as they are for beer. You can also persuade them to supply cold cans of minerals (coke, orange etc.) since people know what they cost in the shops and it's hard for them to sell a 30p can of coke for £2 (when they would happily sell you the same quantity out of a pump at that price).

Making coffee available at a reasonable price is also something that goes down well, but if the price is too high then people will just go and make it in their rooms.

A word of warning. Lots of groups of convention workers, especially Ops, Tech and Green Room, need to have supplies of coffee to keep them awake through the long boring bits. You must decide how this will be supplied. At Helicon, the hotel supplied an urn of hot water and a lot of packets of instant coffee to Ops. They kept it topped up throughout the convention. When the time came to pay the bill, there was a charge for £1200 for coffee. Mind you, even the hotel realised this was a bit excessive and were agreeable to negotiating it down. However, you need to decide *before the con* just who is allowed to order coffee on the convention account unless you too want an amazing bill from Room Service.

### 5.6 *The party problem*

Recent years seem to have shown a decrease in the number of room parties, or maybe I'm just not being invited to them any more. Anyway, here are some points:

- Early on, decide on where you want to parties to be restricted to. Consult with the hotel and make sure they understand the problem.
- Include the choice of noisy/quiet room in the booking form. Pass this information on to the hotel (but retain a copy yourself).
- When you get to the hotel, refresh their memory about noisy and quiet areas. Consider putting up signs saying "Quiet Floor"/"Noisy Floor" so that people realise which they are on before the first night.
- Corkage

- Closing down parties
- 

### 5.7 *Traffic and crush areas*

One thing that often gets forgotten is the problem of getting from one programme item to another. A corridor will only hold a certain number of people, with added complications if hundreds of people are trying to get into an item at the same time that hundreds of people are leaving. Consider scheduling items to prevent this, possibly staggering start times so that items in adjacent rooms don't all finish at the same time.

#### 5.7.1 *Passageways and Halls*

Identify areas and times of high traffic. Do you need to establish a one-way system anywhere?

#### 5.7.2 *Stairs and Lifts*

Lifts/elevators are never designed to cope with the sort of stress that they get at SF cons. Worldcons may even include a clause in the hotel contract requiring all the lifts to be serviced in the week before the con.

### 5.8 *Bedroom allocation*

If you can, persuade the hotel to allow you to allocate all the rooms. This way you have control over who's on the noisy floors and so on.

What you may not be able to control is that bane of conventions, permanent bookings. These generally fall into two categories, permanent residents of the hotel and airline flightcrew. The airline staff are an especial pain because they probably want to sleep and are from a different timezone, so you can't assume that being quiet at night is good enough. Try and convince the hotel to offload their airline rooms to another hotel for the weekend. Tell them that it's in their interest as they'll get fewer complaints that way. You can't usually do this with permanent residents, but you can find out where their rooms are and ensure that these are quiet floors.

Suites

### 5.9 *Fannish bad habits*

Paper planes

## SECRETS OF THE SMOFS

Fans are appallingly bad at tipping, and so it is standard for committees to allocate a gratuity out of the convention's funds. Make sure this actually goes to the staff, we once made the mistake of putting this sum in the hands of the hotel manager who said he would keep it in reserve for the staff Christmas party, not what we had intended at all. I have taken to tipping the hotel porter well when I get to the con. Since there's a good

Bare feet

Filking

Being rude to staff

## 6. Work Less, Achieve More, Have Fun

### 6.1 Don't Do It Yourself

As someone who has been on the receiving end of this problem, I cannot emphasise too much the need to do as little work as possible. Look at all the things that need doing. Consider that you've probably missed half of them. You are not going to have enough time to do it all yourself. Do not make additional work for yourself by creating work out of nowhere.

- Get other people to take responsibility for running particular areas of the convention. Try and pick people who have a track record of delivering in this area.
- Once someone has agreed to do something for you... LEAVE THEM ALONE! By which I mean, keep in touch, make sure they are actually doing something, but do *not* try and interfere with them by offering detailed instructions on how to do it. At best you'll annoy them and at worst they'll tell you to sod off and then you'll have to do it yourself after all. If you are delegating responsibility, you have to give up control, live with it.
- A short anecdote. At a recent convention I was asked to do signs. This is something I've done many times and it's pretty much second nature by now. I went up to the hotel with the committee, looked around, made detailed notes on where and what signs were required, developed a template that seemed to fit and prepared a list of rooms that particularly needed identifying. Some weeks later I received an email from the committee giving precise details of exactly where they wanted the signs placed, paper sizes, fonts, wording and so on. I was... extremely annoyed. Didn't they trust me? A simple list of room names and locations would have been fine, even a few suggestions for unusual signs that I might have missed, but they had obviously wasted hours trying to do my job for me and largely duplicating the work I had done while on the site visit. From being an independent contractor, working with them on making the con run well, I had suddenly been converted into no more than a handy source of laser printing and blutack.

- So, don't meddle, even if you do think you know better than the person you've got to do the work.
- Don't try and increase the scope of your job unnecessarily. To my mind, one of the chief failings of both convention security and Ops is the way in which people try and take more and more responsibility for things which they have no earthly excuse for. Security in particular needs to be continuously reminded that their function is to do things like checking that everyone has a badge and to politely escort members of the public away from the convention. Not to run around the corridors, chasing non-existent petty criminals while shouting "Possible armed hostiles on floor 3" into their wallyphones and generally behaving as if they are playing *Killer* at the con's expense. Especially not to treat members of the convention as an inferior form of life as one occasionally hears rumours of.
- The Chairman should only be chairman. It is madness trying to combine this with running any area of the convention, especially Programme and/or Ops. This appears to be a common failing of convention chairmen many of whom seem to have something of a deathwish, or at least a congenital disability to give up control of the convention. The chair needs to balance the needs of all the different areas, they can't afford to get too involved with one of them.

### 6.2 The Low-Hassle Approach

This is a philosophy that we developed when I was on the committee of Confabulation, the 1995 Eastercon held at the Britannia International in London's Docklands. We had an unusually small committee for an Eastercon, only 5 people, and it was a Worldcon year so quite a lot of the usual people were working on that and couldn't spare time for us. We got into the habit, when someone suggested a new idea or boondoggle of deciding whether or not to do it based on how much effort it was going to be. Every committee gets offered ideas, some of them good, some bad, some dubious. What they all have in common is that someone needs to put some effort into making them work. Our selection process went something like this:

- Is this a good idea?

- Is this going to be a lot of work to get right or is it trivial (not many of those)?
- If it's a lot of work, can we get someone else to do it for us? Even if it's not, can we get someone else to do it?
- Can we be bothered? Is it going to result in hassle for the committee? Remember, we are a low-hassle Eastercon.
- Can we afford it?
- And lastly, should we do it anyway, just because it's a really cool idea?

This may seem like a fairly cynical procedure, but it does have some very convincing benefits. Firstly, you can say to the person who originated the idea, "Yes, this is a good idea but we do not have the resources to implement it properly" which tends to go down a lot better than "No, we aren't doing it". Secondly, it keeps the committee's minds focused on what they personally are going to be doing at the convention. And lastly, you're a lot more likely to have fun running your convention if you don't have to run madly about the place trying to do a dozen different things and failing at all of them.

Once you decide you are a low-hassle convention, suddenly you start to look on even standard events with a different eye. Remember, an item may go down well, but someone burned themselves out doing it, then it was a failure to some degree.

### **6.3 Areas Which Can Be Delegated**

The following areas can almost invariably be delegated to people not on your committee. Find someone who will turn up on the day and run it for you, agree a budget and then leave it to them:

- Dealers Room
- Games Room
- Green Room
- Film Programme
- Video Programme
- Art Show
- Masquerade
- Newsletter
- Gopher Hole

This next list is of areas which can be delegated with a bit of care:

- Registration
- Tech
- Security
- Ops/Logistics

### **6.4 Do You Need It?**

Be innovative. Look at these hoary old ways of doing things and decide whether or not you can do without something. Almost every committee I've been on has sat down at some point and said "do we really need the masquerade? It eats money and people, and it makes a mess of the room allocation." Of course, every time we've agreed that we'd get lynched if we tried to drop it, but it's always worth asking the question.

### **6.5 Rules For The Con**

One rule that should not be broken is this:

No committee member gets to be on more than one programme item (not counting the Opening and Closing Ceremonies and the Gripe Session).

This means that you don't get to appear on all of those panels you always wanted to be on. Tough, you're going to be too busy and you have to be able to go deal with a problem at any time. This is not compatible with appearing on the programme which in any case counts as unnecessary work as far as you're concerned. Quite apart from anything else, it looks bad, give someone else a chance to make a fool of themselves in public. If you're short of a panellist, pick a random passer-by before putting a committee member on it. It's just too easy to get trapped on a panel.

There is a second rule, which can be bent but which should still be adhered to as much as you can since it follows pretty much from the first rule:

At no time should all the committee be in the same programme item (except the Opening and Closing ceremonies). Ditto all of Security or all of Tech.

Somebody should always be out dealing with problems and running the con. Wallyphones and pagers make it easier to drag committee members out of the programme, but you can't rely on them being switched on (or

being audible if, for instance, the programme item in question is a rock concert or a disco).

Oh, and don't forget Yalow's Rule which is:

Everybody should get a minimum of two meals and five hours sleep every 24 hours.

Seems sensible enough, but you'd be amazed at how many people work through mealtimes and then stay up all night fixing problems or partying. Set up a system whereby each of you keeps track on whether or not the others have eaten and don't be afraid to send someone off to bed if they need it. Remember that lack of sleep inevitably results in poor judgement.

The famous example here is Gytha North at Follycon in 1988, who somehow managed to stay awake for the best part of three days and ended up completely wrecked. Don't do it.

## 7. Things To Think About

### 7.1 Registration

What are you going to put in your members' registration packs? A common list would be:

- Souvenir/programme Book
- Pocket programme/Read Me
- Badge
- Program participant letter (if they are on the program) telling them which items they are on and when they are scheduled for
- Flyers, free books etc. supplied by sponsors and advertisers

#### 7.1.1 Membership Badges

Badges actually come under a number of areas, but I'm going to cover them under Registration because I think that's where they belong.

- **Readable names** Far and away the most important feature of a badge. Use at least 16-point type and preferably larger on a white background. Forget cute, forget pretty pictures, large type is essential.
- **Easily identifiable** If Security have a gopher on the door checking badges, it makes their life much easier if they can spot the badge among the profusion of chest decoration.
- **Can easily distinguish full membership from day membership** And also, distinguish the individual days from each other. Normally, day badges look the same as full badges but are on pastel-coloured paper instead of white.
- **Easy to make up new badges** Registration will need to make new badges for people joining on the door. Badges should be simple enough that the process of registering a new member is not

unacceptably slow.

- Hard to counterfeit

Not a common problem in the UK (as yet) but US conventions have frequently suffered from this. If you suspect you're going to have this problem, ask around for ideas and don't tell anyone what you've decided on

#### 7.1.2 Other Badges and ribbons

You need something to distinguish your members from people who haven't paid, and this is why you ask everyone to wear a membership badge as a condition of entry. If you're selling day memberships, then you need to be able to tell whether someone has paid their membership for the current day. And that's it, really. You don't actually need the proliferation of staff badges, ribbons and so on that are so common now. You could get away with one badge, for volunteers.

However, if you are determined to add to the confusion and do badges for everyone, the following areas could have distinct badges:

- ◆ Gophers
- ◆ Stewards (not "Security")
- ◆ Committee (so that people with problems know who to hassle)
- ◆ Dealers (so that Security know who is allowed in the Dealers Room out of hours)
- ◆ Artists (so that Security know who is allowed in the art show out of hours)

If you've got a lot of spare badges, you could have different badges for workers in various areas such as Ops, Registration, Art Show, Green Room, Tech, Newsletter etc. Remember though, this is icing on the cake, you don't have to do it. Ops do not need badges to show who they are.

#### 7.1.3 Envelopes v bags

The perennial question of Registration is "Should the program packs be envelopes or bags?"

##### Bags

Can often be obtained for free from

##### Envelopes

Need to buy 1000 A4 envelopes

Bags

bookshops or publishers

Hold more than envelopes

Are easier to fill with lots of stuff e.g. books

People can carry them away easily

People can use them for putting other things in

Personally, I favour envelopes after having struggled one too many times with bags slipping all over the place. If you get offered free bags, you might consider just having a pile on the Registration Desk for people to take as required.

Envelopes

Pack down better than bags and take up less space

Can be arranged in alphabetical order in boxes

Can be picked up in larger quantities (bags slip all over the place)

More uniform

Less likely that the contents will fall out

Can be easily labelled

**7.5 Security**

Why "Stewards" not Security?

Shifts

Volunteer policy

Limits

Weapons policy

Badge checking, fights, mundanes, attitude to con attendees

**7.6 Tech**

Give them a chance and Tech will eat your whole budget and then some. Be ruthless. Do you really need that third mixing desk? The follow spots? The lighting towers? The extra ten radios so Security can play cops and robbers?

Borrow whatever you can, if you have to hire stuff then go for a reliable source over a cheap one (but ask around so you don't get taken for a ride). Remember that when your reflux thingamajon breaks down it's going to be Easter weekend and nobody is going to have another available before Tuesday. And you only get one chance at this, discounts and apologies aren't any use at all.

**7.2 Freebies**

Comping memberships/rooms/tables

When, why, how much?

**7.3 Programme**

Programme grids

Define rescheduling policy

**7.4 Ops**

Radios/mobile phones/room phones/pagers

Shifts

Lost & Found

Stationary

Keys

How many people? Structure? Large/Small Ops

Need short, simple rules if any

Who does what?

**7.7 Art Show**

Art boards,

Auction (moving art)

Pick-up

Paying artists

Cash facilities

Print shop

Labelling/forms/bid sheets etc.

**7.8 Guests**

Try and find out a bit about your guests. Are they easy to get along with? Difficult? The first committee I was on invited a famous female fantasy writer who (we later discovered) had a reputation for complaining. We took careful precautions to pamper her as much as we could, provided her with a couple of handsome young men to drive her around, top up her drinks and so on. It seemed to work.

Beccon used to have a person whose role was to shadow their guest unobtrusively, turning up if the guest was standing around looking

lonely or if they had been captured by a deadly bore. This had the additional bonus that it became a lot harder to lose them.

So, prepare for anything your guest might want, a favourite brand of drink, a chance to meet an old friend, a guitar, a pair of young ladies/men wearing not very much...

## **8. Pre-con preparations**

### **8.1 Treasury**

GRTs

How will Green Room buy drinks?

Can you take credit cards?

Cash float?

### **8.2 Site**

Badges for hotel staff?

Real Ale

### **8.3 Registration**

Here is a piece of good advice. Do not listen to anyone who offers to computerise Registration. Speaking as a computer consultant who has considered the problem, there is currently no way of doing this that does not involve either (1) unacceptably large amounts of money or (2) unacceptably lengthy delays at the Registration desk, or both.

Doing registration manually is usually simple, cheap and one can throw additional untrained people at it with some expectation of improving the throughput. As soon as you try and automate the process, you lose all this. Do not be misled by professional events which use computerised registration. These usually have spent a lot of money on the problem, have trained staff on Registration who use the system every working day of the year and the whole process is much simplified. Even then, it often takes longer to register someone than is possible with a manual system. Don't do it.

#### **8.3.1 Stuffing**

At some point you have to stuff the envelopes/bags that we discussed in section 7.1.3. Try not to leave this to the day before the convention since this is exactly the time at which you can't afford to have everybody putting flyers into envelopes. Reserve the two weekends before the con for committee business and try to do as much as you can of the badge-making and stuffing then.

Don't forget to make up additional programme packs for people joining on the

door. These should have everything except the badge in them.

### **8.4 Publications**

Last PR

Programme Book

Read Me

Signs

### **8.5 Guests**

Do they get a per diem in cash? Or do you let them charge to their rooms?

Who picks them up from the airport/station and when?

Who looks after them?

### **8.6 Dealers' Room**

How many tables can you fit in the room?

How much do you charge?

Signing sessions - tell dealers

### **8.7 Everything you haven't thought of, but should have done weeks ago**

If you've

## **9. Setup**

### **9.1 *Getting There***

Aim on getting to the con at least a couple of days before it starts. The days when you could get to the con on Friday morning and be ready by Friday evening are long gone (unless you are running a very small relaxed convention). For Reconvene, most of the committee arrived on the Wednesday before Easter and left on the Wednesday after. This way, if you've ordered something (films, radios, stationery, whatever) and it hasn't arrived, you have some very slight chance of arranging a replacement on Thursday.

### **9.2 *Things To Do***

For Reconvene, I had a checklist of things that needed to be done and on which days. As usual, reality didn't bear much relationship to the plan, but it did mean that I had some idea of what needed in place by the start of the con.

Set up radios

Put up signs

Allocate rooms

## 10. Lighten up kid, it's only a con!

### 10.1 Opening Ceremony

This is the point at which the chairman stands up, introduces the guests so that everyone recognises them, and informs everybody of any late-breaking developments. Make all of these announcements now, so that when people come and complain you can say "it was all explained at the Opening Ceremony."

Things that the chairman should say include:

- A plea for people to come and volunteer as gophers.
- Remind everybody what the policy is on smoking, mobile phones and other areas of contention.
- Remind everyone that they should wear their badge as they won't be allowed back in without it.
- Anything that got omitted from the 'Read Me' by mistake, like times for the Dealers Room and Art Show.
- Request that everybody be polite to hotel staff and non-convention people staying in the hotel. Some people do need reminding.
- Remind them to lock hotel doors, not leave wallets in the bar and so on, especially if you are in a hotel where this is going to be a problem.

### 10.2 Panels

Who goes on?

Notes for moderators

Mikes, sound-proofing, external noise

### 10.3 Games

Not to be confused with the games room

Silly games

Quizzes

### 10.4 Auctions

Book

Art

TAFF

## 10.5 Masquerade

### 10.6 Gripe Session

Sooner or later you'll have to bite the bullet and go to the Business Meeting, also known as the Gripe Session. Do not be tempted to put this in a small room, only allow half an hour or cancel it altogether. These are sure fire ways of ensuring that lots of people suddenly turn up with serious problems, and you take a lot of flack for not letting them sound off at you.

- ◆ The one essential thing is to arrange for there to be a neutral chairman who is prepared to tell people when to shut up. Do not under any circumstances have this item chaired by a committee member.
- ◆ Use a room that's too big, quite apart from anything else, it makes it look as if there are fewer people present.
- ◆ Use a 2-hour slot if you can, but plan to only run for 1 hour.
- ◆ If you have the meeting miked, ask Tech to arrange for a single floor-standing mike in front of the audience. This will give better sound quality and people are less likely to stand up in front of everyone unless they have a real problem. Failing that, go for a couple of radio mikes and gophers who know names and faces.
- ◆ Have a selection of people up on the panel, but try and avoid having anyone you know to be aggressive or long-winded. The next year's chairman should be on the panel (possibly chairing it).
- ◆ Be firm about dividing the session up into topics (e.g. Hotel, Programme, General) and disallow questions outside of the time for them.
- ◆ Let different people talk, don't let a few loudmouths hog the microphones.
- ◆ Be prepared to admit where you've screwed up. Trying to deny it just prolongs the agony.

Recently, a new alternative to this was tried out (at Intuition in 1998). In this variant, the people on the platform are all from the committees of the following two Eastercons and there are no committee members of the current convention visible. The emphasis is all on things to be learned for the next year, and less on complaining. We tried this again at

Reconvene in 1999 and so far this seems to be a successful strategy. It does remove some of the overpowering sense of looking for someone to blame that hangs about the traditional gripe session. However, if you do this then you must:

- Have a visible means of expressing gripes at other times during the convention – a box of written complaints or regular early-morning feedback sessions at the very least. It's very dangerous (and very easy) to be seen as uncaring and uninterested in people's problems. In fact, this applies no matter what sort of session you have.
- Announce (e.g. in the newsletter) what is being done to fix problems that are affecting everybody. Get back to people with personal problems and make sure that they are now happy and have not just given up trying to get a response.
- Don't be tempted to get up and start apologising for your con, if you want this item to be directed towards the next year's con then stay out of it.
- Warn the people you plan to put up on the panel. At Intuition we (Reconvene) learned maybe 20 minutes beforehand that we would be fronting what could very easily have turned into a nasty gripe session.

### **10.7 Closing Ceremony**

This is where the Chairman stands up and tells everybody it's all over. It's nice to go out with a bang, it gives everyone a feeling that the convention has really finished—even if you've got more items on afterwards. In 1993 at Helicon, we closed with a 3-screen slide-show of the whole convention (a gimmick we ripped off from Noreascon 3, the 1989 Worldcon). It was an awful lot of work, but it went down extremely well.

Things to say include:

- Thank the guests for coming and for being wonderful. It's customary to present them with a memento, like a plaque or a glass or something.
- Present any prizes that haven't been presented previously.
- Tell people when and where the dead dog party is being held.
- Thank everybody who worked on the con. This is fraught with peril. If you miss people out, they will be upset. In 1992,

Sou' Wester's chairman omitted to thank the Newsletter and was promptly roasted in a special edition. In 1999 we asked everybody who had worked on the con to stand up and then gave them a round of applause. I still don't know if this was felt to be acceptable, but at least we tried.

- Ask for volunteers to help tidy up the hall after the ceremony, especially the technical equipment.
- It's common for the chairman to hand over responsibility for the con to next year's chairman at this point. Give them the DCM badge or something.

### **10.8 Other**

## 11. Making the con run well

### 11.1 Information

There are any number of things that help to make a convention run well. However, a lot of them have to do with circulating information to the average convention attendee. If you don't tell people what's going on, rumours will begin to fly and all of a sudden you are wasting time denying them.

#### 11.1.1 Noticeboards

A couple of large noticeboards is always a good idea. Consider sticking up a large copy of the programme grid (A3 per day or bigger).

#### 11.1.2 Newsletter

If you don't have one, you'll regret it. Intervention in '97 tried to do without one, and ended up needing to inform people about security problems and with no way to do so except word of mouth. The problem with newsletters is that they require a room, some equipment and a number of people. The good news is that the sort of people who do newsletters often aren't people who would be working in any other area. Find someone who is sounding off about convention newsletters and thank them for volunteering.

There's always conflict between the "Newsletters should contain news and nothing else" school of thinking and the "Newsletters are for salacious gossip, occasionally sprinkled with news when unavoidable" school. I'm afraid I'm firmly of the latter persuasion. People should *want* to read your newsletter. However, try and avoid too many in-jokes. After a while they just become boring.

If you get someone else to produce the newsletter, let them do it their own way. However as an ex-editor of con newsletters I would suggest:

- If you don't plan to incorporate photographs, consider using Gestetners (stencil duplicators) for reproduction. It's fast, cheap and reliable, but the quality is pretty basic
- If you do plan to use photos, consider using a couple of laser printers. High quality, high price, slow output
- Photocopiers are the technology of last resort. They always go wrong and you

can't get an engineer out over Easter. Also, the image quality is generally poor

- Use a word processor instead of DTP. It's much easier for people to pick up quickly. Remember that you'll have people wanting to come into the newsroom and type in stories. Don't make it more difficult than it needs to be
- Don't forget distribution. Make sure there are copies generally available instead of only in a few places
- Don't print too many copies. As a rule no more than two thirds of the membership and possibly less. Remember, you can always reprint.

#### 11.1.3 Signs

Even if you're using a hotel that has been used many times in the past, remember that at least 20% of the convention members have probably not been there before. You should arrange for someone to put up signs on the Wednesday before the con if you can. This is because up to 40% of the membership now arrives on the Thursday.

Signs should be clear and readable rather than cute, though a certain degree of whimsy is not a bad idea. Laser printing is infinitely preferable to hand-written signs since the latter will not stand out against the posters and flyers that they will be competing with.

Arrange beforehand with the hotel as to what surfaces you can stick your signs to. If there are no appropriate surfaces in vital spots like Hotel Reception, use flipchart easels. When I did the signs for Intuition in 1998, I got through about 300 sheets of paper and 6 sheets of laser labels (with arrows on, for directional signs).

#### 11.1.4 Voodoo Board

Invented by Irwin 'Filthy Pierre' Strauss, the voodoo board is an American innovation that has been adopted over here with varying success. The aim of the voodoo board is to allow convention members to leave messages for each other. It is not intended to be a place for advertising, though if there is spare space on the board, this is not uncommon.

- ◆ The board needs to be a large display board. It must be soft enough to easily press pins into, there is no point at all in using hardboard (though it has been

suggested that one could use cork tiles on a hardboard backing).

- ◆ On the board goes a full membership list ordered by real name. Do not, as a number of conventions (whose blushes I will spare) have done, use a membership list in order of membership number or something else equally useless.
- ◆ Pins. You want about 400 coloured map pins (the ones with a blob of coloured plastic at the end).
- ◆ Filecards. You need a box of filecards and about 400 blank cards next to the board. The box should have a set of alphabetic tabs in it.
- ◆ Instructions. On the board should be a set of instructions on how to use the system.

When someone wants to leave a message for a person, they write out the message on a file card, putting the person's name on the top of the card, and put it in the box under the correct letter. They then put a pin against the name of the person on the membership list.

If someone sees a pin against their name, they remove the pin and look for a file card with their name on it.

#### 11.1.5 Information Desk

The information desk is a place for distributing useful information to fans at the con. Useful things to have on the desk are:

- Programme Notes
- Yellow Pages
- Guide to local restaurants
- Maps of the area
- Informative fliers and so on
- Back copies of newsletters

The commonest question asked at the Info Desk seems to be "Where do I register?" so it usually makes sense to put the desk right next to Registration.

#### 11.1.6 Information Gopher

The information gopher is one of those optional extras which works if you've got a surplus of gophers and not much to do with them. They go around the con, from committee member to committee member, finding out what's going on and circulating the word. Personally, I prefer radios.

## 11.2 Green Room

## 11.3 Art Show

## 11.4 Ops

Ops is an idea that, in the UK at least, has rather run away from itself. Conventions in the Eighties were often somewhat disorganised, especially Conspiracy, the 1987 Worldcon in Brighton. Out of this came a desire to make sure that everything was dealt with efficiently, problems solved and so on. Hence, Ops. Unfortunately, most of the problems have gone away, conventions run largely efficiently and to time, but Ops still hangs around trying to find something to do and desperately looking important. Gradually, the monster is dying under the weight of managers, deputies, assistants and so on; many of whom never actually get to solve or even touch any problems.

### 11.4.1 Big Ops

This is the form of Ops as practised in the UK at the moment. Ops tries to control everything, often down to a stupendously low level of niggling detail. There is no opportunity for creative solutions to problems. On the other hand, it mostly runs pretty well, every one knows what they can do and where they fit, and there is a consistency of organisation to the con. If there are problems in one area, Ops can throw resources at it until it's fixed.

### 11.4.2 Small Ops

Ops as handled in most places in the US is reduced purely to a communications function, with responsibility being chiefly with the individual areas to solve their own problems. Since the competent problem solvers are in the areas instead of in Ops, they're pretty successful at it. The downside is that areas without competent people may stumble along without anyone realising that there's a problem. To my mind, Small Ops is the thing that we should be aiming for.

## 11.5 Oops

Oops was an idea that was tried out a few years ago but hasn't been evidence much recently. They were effectively a mobile hit

squad of trouble-shooters who tried to fix problems (originally programme problems) as they arose (much like the Ops Rover of the small Ops model). They seem to have been squeezed out by the increasing lack of trust in individuals and the tendency to try and concentrate all power in the hands of Ops.

### 11.6 Security

This is a big, BIG bugbear. There are many people who feel that the very word “security” is going to act as an irresistible magnet, drawing all the power-hungry loons who want to tell people what to do. What’s worse, if one of the aforementioned loons goes and upsets your members, *you* are going to carry the can for it. In many conventions, particularly Worldcons, there is no “Security Division”. Instead, what few security functions actually need to be carried out are actually done by Ops. The history of Security appears to be derived from early *Star Trek* conventions which needed people to protect their star guests from groupies and other hangers-on. Using the word “Security” was an amusing reference to the red-shirts of the TV series and their propensity for taking all the flak meant for the stars. Since Worldcons and Eastercons don’t go in for TV stars, there is no need for bodyguards.

(Development of security role, local differences)

The flip side of this is that where a security function *is* required, it’s easier to be able to tell the police “this is John, he’s in charge of Security” than to explain in detail just what the role of the “Pink Fluffy Bunny Division” is.

Case history: The Adelphi Hotel, Liverpool.

The Adelphi is an excellent hotel for holding conventions. Unfortunately, it is also a prime target for the local thieves which has meant it needs an unusual degree of security awareness. The first Eastercon in the Adelphi was Follycon in 1988 and was marked by a number of pick-pocketing incidents and minor thefts from the main lounge. A clamp-down on on-the-door registration at Eastcon and Sou’Wester meant that the problem was improved. In addition, security gophers patrolled the main places where public areas (such as the hotel’s disco) gave onto the convention space and turned away non-members who tried to enter the convention by these means.

Intervention in 1997 raised the level of security by attempting to patrol the whole hotel, checking doors, chasing intruders and generally trying to prevent anyone from entering the hotel space by any means possible. A small number of thefts from rooms still took place, and the security team ran themselves completely ragged chasing reports of intruders. On at least one occasion they spent 15 minutes chasing an intruder who turned out to be one of the security gophers doing the chasing. They also offended a hotel guest (whose room they had entered while checking the door) and do not appear to have deterred anybody. In fact, it was pointed out that during the gopher party, when all the security gophers were off-duty, there was less trouble than at any other time. The implication is that the thieves may have been attracted by the level of security, taking it to imply that there was something valuable to steal. It is noteworthy that the Dealers’ Room was broken into but that the thieves couldn’t find anything they were prepared to take (they disturbed over a dozen tables and the only thing missing was about £10 of jewellery from the last table—at a guess they just gave it up as a bad job at this point).

This suggests that a high level of active security is, if anything, counter-productive. Badge checkers at the main entrance and a few other areas should be enough to keep out the pick-pockets. Room theft and other major problems are for the hotel to solve and should not be the convention’s responsibility.

## **12. Making the con fun**

One of the things that makes a convention enjoyable is people having fun, spontaneous games, conversations with people you've never seen before, things to play with and so on. Here's a secret, a lot of this isn't spontaneous. It's your job to construct the con so that people will have a good time and not realise that you're responsible.

Look for well-constructed bars and conversation areas, or even well-placed function rooms which can be turned into social space. Work out where the main social of your convention is likely to be. Is it going to be noisy? Smoky? Unpleasant? Can you do anything about it?

At Confabulation in 1995 we had a large lounge (the Royal Lounge) that we wanted to use as the main mixing space so that we could draw the crowds away from the passages. We salted the room with conversation cards, we put the con desks in there so people would be attracted in to them, we arranged the chairs so that there were natural focii in the room. The reaction we got was "Had a great time, wonderful, of course with a room like the Royal Lounge you could hardly fail..."

So don't expect any praise for your efforts, if things go wrong it's your fault, if things go right then it's the site/the people/the guests. But don't be discouraged, it's worth it.

### **12.1 *Micro-programming***

### **12.2 *Parties***

### **12.3 *Hug squad***

### **12.4 *Audience participation***

### 13. Crises and how to fix them

Remember, things will go wrong, it's inevitable. No matter how hard you've worked, no matter how much effort you've put in, something will screw up. Be prepared to hack things about if you have to. Don't ignore problems just because it's your convention and everything should be perfect. It won't be.

If you look for trouble and don't find it, you'll be happy. If you assume everything's fine, the problems will get worse until they can't be ignored and possibly can't be fixed.

#### 13.1 Six important points

- **Say "Sorry"**  
Don't be stiff-necked about apologising to people. If you aren't prepared to admit that you, or someone else on the committee, screwed up then you should probably give up right now. The chairman's mantra is "it may not be my fault, but it *is* my responsibility." If having you grovel is going to defuse a delicate situation, get right down there and start eating humble pie without even considering who was originally to blame.
- **Keep calm**  
It's very easy to get flustered, especially when you haven't had enough sleep and someone is acting like a bloody idiot. Don't let it get on top of you, go and get some sleep if you have to. The con won't fall apart without you and you'll be fresh and rested for when the real crises come along.
- **People want to enjoy themselves**  
These guys didn't come to the con just to make a nuisance of themselves, they came to have fun. Try and look for a solution where you can both win.
- **It's not the end of the world**  
When you get down to it, there are lots of things more important than fandom and running conventions. Whatever you do, however badly you screw up, isn't really going to matter even in a couple of weeks' time. More to the point, a single programme item falling over is not anything to worry about.
- **Money solves many things**  
Keep a cash reserve and use it wisely. A £50 backhander to a strategic member of the hotel staff (but never, ever to a member of management, though you could try offering to top up the staff Christmas

fund) can fix a lot of trouble. A bottle of champagne costing, say £20, will mollify an irate honeymoon couple who have had a drunken fan blunder into their room (Confabulation, 1995). A £10 box of chocolates in the right place can calm a lot of ruffled feathers. Remember, you're not in this to make money. If you've got it, spend it where it'll make the con run happier.

- **Keep control of rumours**  
Don't let the rumour mill get hold of what's happening and distort it. This will only cause people to overreact. I don't mean keeping everything secret, either. If something goes wrong, admit it, don't conceal it. At one con, a couple of minor thefts rapidly became inflated into rumours that the hotel was full of thieves and that dozens of things had gone missing. A year later, people were claiming that rooms had had their doors smashed down and been stripped of everything inside them including the beds.

#### 13.2 Programme

It's very easy to get into the trap of fiddling with the programme. Someone can't make their programme item and they ask if you can reschedule it to another slot. You do this, publicise the change and suddenly half a dozen other people jump on you demanding that it be changed back for equally valid reasons. If you do this, half the audience won't realise that it's back in the original timeslot and when they miss it, your name will be mud.

Remember that you've spent months massaging your programme into shape so that there aren't any clashes and so on. What's the chance that making a snap decision while you're tired and being hassled by people is going to be better than months of careful planning? Pretty slim, huh?

In most cases, it's easier to scare up a replacement panellist than it is to reschedule just so one person can make it. People are far more replaceable than time slots and the audience will usually accept a change of panellist without griping. On the other hand, you can usually assume that every time you reschedule an item you lose anything up to half the audience. Just moving to another location loses maybe 10%, so if you've got the option of changing the room take it like a shot.

If you have to reschedule, you can only do so once. After that, cancel the item. If you have left empty slots in the programme, you can consider moving to one of those, but in general it's much safer just to pull the plug than to increase the general chaos by hunting for a slot you can swap with. Cancelling a couple of items is always acceptable, though try not to make a habit of it. Don't get into a situation where nobody knows what's on when or where.

Assuming you do make a change, you have to do a number of things:

- ◆ Notify all the members of all affected items. This means actively hunting them down, not just leaving a note on the voodoo board.
- ◆ Notify Programme Ops of the exact change
- ◆ Notify Green Room, especially if there are changes in the people appearing on the item
- ◆ Ask the Newsletter to print the change in the next issue if that will be out before the new time
- ◆ Post a notice about the change on the notice board
- ◆ Post a notice about the change on the door of the function room that the item should have been in
- ◆ Announce the change in the function room at the time the item was supposed to happen—it's amazing how many people don't read notices—or remind Green Room to do this.

### **13.3 Staff**

The high-pressure, crisis-rich environment of running a convention rapidly brings out personality clashes. Any con usually ends up with a couple of people who aren't talking to each other any more. If you're lucky, they aren't in critical positions. If you're unlucky, you're in deep shit.

- Try not to put known incompatible people together. Seems obvious? Sometimes this is harder than it looks. On one convention we went through unbelievable contortions to keep one person away from a particular programme item.
- Make sure that people under stress get hugs, backrubs, regular meals, drinks etc. Anything to stop them saying something

they can't take back. The chairman should be able to provide a comforting shoulder for anybody to cry on.

- Get both sides of the argument before you actually take any action. Sometimes both sides are in the right, or the wrong, or whatever.
- Don't let people interfere in other areas unless you absolutely have to. Many people take their assigned responsibilities very seriously and will be terribly upset if they get the impression that they aren't trusted to do their job.
- Be tactful. Don't make things worse by being deliberately abrasive. There's a reason for habits like diplomacy and verbal pleasantries, they stop people fighting and dissuade them from storming off in high dudgeon. Fans tend to be bad at the social graces. Learn.

### **13.4 Members**

Don't be too quick to pull badges

### **13.5 Guests**

Remember your brilliant guest of honour and how you couldn't understand why they had never been GoH before? This is where you discover that everyone has been steering clear of them because they have a lousy reputation. Unfortunately, a lot of creative people have appalling manners.

- They are the Guest of Honour, you can't chuck them out.
- 

### **13.6 Site**

### **13.7 Other**

## 14. Striking the Show

## **15. It's not over yet...**

### **15.1 *Doing the accounts***

In general, there are two situations that you are liable to find yourself in after the con. Too much money or too little money. There aren't many treasurers who can hit break-even dead-on, and mostly you'll aim to break even around the first day of the con and end up with a small profit to cover emergencies.

#### **15.1.1 An embarrassment of riches**

Sou' Wester in ?? had put up their on-the-door rate in an attempt to persuade people to register early and dissuade walk-ins (since they were using the Adelphi, a hotel with security problems). Unfortunately, they were unsuccessful and got about 100 walk-ins at £60 each. Since they had already broken even, this left them with vastly more money than they knew what to do with

#### **15.1.2 Total f\*\*\*ing disaster**

### **15.2 *Dealing with the site***

### **15.3 *Tidying up***

### **15.4 *Read all about it***

## 16. Hotel contracts

### 16.1 Why Do You Need A Contract?

You need a contract because:

1. The friendly banqueting manager who agreed to everything you asked for is going to go and work for another hotel. You'll probably go through 3 or 4 different contacts and it's essential to have a continuing document.
2. Even if they don't leave, they won't be at the convention and the staff who are there on the day won't know (or believe) what's been agreed.
3. Because hotels will try and squeeze more revenue out of anything they can, as a matter of principal.
4. Because contracts written by the hotel are completely useless and because we have vastly more experience at knowing what we actually want.
5. Because even if you agree something with the management, they then have to inform their deputies, who inform their juniors, who pass the information to the appropriate department who.... Anyway, by the time it gets to the end of the chain it's often a bit distorted. At Reconvene, it took us at least three separate attempts (that I know of) before we could get the bar staff to serve fresh orange juice at the agreed price. Not because the hotel were unwilling, but because they just weren't used to what we wanted and the message had got garbled.

### 16.2 What Goes In The Contract

Everything.

No, honestly. If you want the hotel to provide something then include it in the contract.

Typically this will include:

- Function rooms to be used by the convention and the exact dates on which they are to be made available. Remember to have a couple of rooms available for storage both before and after the con.
- Prices of function space. If you are getting it free, the contract must say so or else you will wind up paying some exorbitant amount entirely unexpectedly.
- Bar prices. If they won't commit to a set price, try "no more than 75% of the price

of a pint of beer in the hotel's bar during the week before the convention."

- Provision of food and drink, prices, times and special variants (vegetarian, vegan etc.) It's worth trying to get across to the hotel that these should be varied, but the contract is probably not the best place for that.
- Room rates and the dates on which these apply. Useful clauses like "the hotel must inform the convention before it releases any rooms due to the people who have booked them not showing up."
- Free rooms, suites etc. If you take the whole hotel, it's common for them to throw in a couple of free suites for use by the organisers. Either give these to your guests or use them for programme.
- Restrictions on access by non-members.
- Special events (e.g. banquet, public parties) where the hotel is providing a service of some sort.
- Corkage rates.
- Mushrooms at breakfast. Or any other strange requirements that you really want to provide.

### 16.3 What to do with it now you've got it?

Well, first of all you have to get the hotel to agree to it. Usually they're so shell-shocked by having someone care about this that they'll go ahead and sign it without too much protest. Don't try and push your luck, though. Be flexible. Remember that we can't actually afford to enforce this contract, so it's really an agreement rather than a proper contract.

Hotel liaison should have a copy so that they can wave it at recalcitrant members of the hotel staff (don't try this on management—you'll quickly learn that if the hotel wants to break the contract they will and there's not much anyone can do about it).

Sections dealing with things like bar hours and prices can be posted on public noticeboards, though you probably don't want to make the whole thing public.

### 16.4 An Example Contract

## 17. Flyers and PRs

## **18. Sources of information**

### **18.1 *Voice of the Lobster***

### **18.2 *Voice of the Shrimp***

### **18.3 *If I ran the Zœ Worldcon***

This is a multiple choice game based around organising Worldcons. All the scenarios are based on actual events, or things which could very nearly have happened. It's an excellent introduction to the problems of conrunning, though a number of the scenarios are particularly US-oriented. Well worth it.

### **18.4 *Conrunner***

Ian Sorensen used to edit this fanzine devoted to running conventions. Copies may still be found in fanzine auctions (or try Memory Hole, for instance) or many older conrunners will have copies that they can lend out. The quality is variable, but they're well worth getting if you can find them.

### **18.5 *Another Fine Nessie***

This was the pre-convention newsletter of Intersection, the 1995 Worldcon in Glasgow, and is also the name of the website containing a vast amount of information

gathered during the running of the con. Although much of it is mainly aimed at Worldcons, a lot of it is of general interest.

### **18.6 *The Conbook***

Edited by Andy Croft, this goes into exhaustive detail about a few specialised areas of conrunning, especially tech and the legalities of running public events. There is useful information in here, but it is buried in pages of unreadable detail (for instance, the section on electricity takes up half the first page telling you all about atoms and how electricity is produced by electrons, before eventually getting on to things like how to change a fuse).

### **18.7 *The Internet***

At time of writing, the main online resources for conrunning are the newsgroups alt.fandom.cons, rec.arts.sf.fandom and the Smofs mailing list. All of these have their uses, but the noise level is often high and there may be more emphasis on running Worldcons than you are actually after.

### **18.8 *Fanzines***

### **18.9 *Other***

The Eagle Book of Conrunning

## 19. A Short History of Recent Eastercons

1987—Beccon	<p>Guests: Keith Roberts</p> <p>Hotel: Birmingham Metropole</p>
1988—Follycon	<p>Guests: ? ?, Greg Pickersgill</p> <p>Hotel: Adelphi Hotel, Liverpool</p> <p>Follycon was notable for a number of things. It was the first Eastercon in the Adelphi, which had previously only hosted Trek cons.</p>
1989—Contrivance	<p>Guests: Anne McCaffrey, M. John Harrison, Don Lawrence</p> <p>Hotel: Hotel de France, Jersey</p> <p>Contrivance was the first convention to be held in Jersey.</p>
1990—Eastcon	<p>Guests:</p> <p>Hotel: Adelphi Hotel, Liverpool</p>
1991—Speculation	<p>Guests:</p> <p>Hotel: Holiday Inn, Glasgow</p>
1992— Sou' Wester	<p>Guests:</p> <p>Hotel: Adelphi Hotel, Liverpool</p>
1993—Helicon	<p>Guests: George R.R.Martin, ?, Karel Thole</p> <p>Hotel: Hotel de France, Jersey</p>
1994—Illumination	<p>Guests:</p> <p>Hotel: Norbreck Castle Hotel, Blackpool</p>
1995—Confabulation	<p>Guests: Lois McMaster Bujold, Bob Shaw, Roger Robinson</p> <p>Hotel: Britannia International, Docklands</p>
1996—Evolution	<p>Guests: Vernor Vinge, Bryan Talbot</p> <p>Hotel: Radisson Edwardian, Heathrow</p>
1997—Intervention	<p>Guests: Octavia Butler, Jack Cohen, Dave Langford</p> <p>Hotel: Adelphi Hotel, Liverpool</p>
1998—Intuition	<p>Guests: Connie Willis, Ian McDonald, Martin Tudor</p>

Hotel: Jarvis Piccadilly & Britannia Hotel (split site), Manchester

1999—Reconvene

Guests: Peter Beagle, Jeff Noon, John Clute (also Tom Holt, Ron Tiner and Vijay Bowen)

Hotel: Adelphi Hotel, Liverpool

## 20. State of the Rat

*John Richards was the Chairman of Intervention, the 1997 Eastercon. In this article, he describes what happened, what went right, what went wrong and the feeling of sheer despair that goes through any chairman's heart, far better than I could ever do. Remember, however bad it gets, someone has always had a rougher time of it than you...*

## Tuesday 25th March

Before I left the office on Tuesday I went through the mail boxes of my e-mail account and deleted the lot. It was amazingly satisfying to point the mouse at the top of the list, jam the left hand button down hard and drag the whole incoherent mess into electronic limbo. After spending ten minutes or so blasting away I discovered the command on the mail box menu that allowed the user to destroy all the messages at once when they deleted the box. I decided to ignore it and instead went back to deleting messages individually. This was now personal.

Over the previous three weeks the e-mail traffic on my account had been rising sharply. Since this was a work account I had been getting increasingly worried about the time it was taking even to check out the new messages. I get into the office at 08:30 and it was reaching the point that simply reading my e-mail was taking until 09:15. As I get very little e-mail professionally this was beginning to get noticed. If nothing else the disk space being taken up was alarming.

At 16:30 on Tuesday I reached the deadline. I would be leaving the office in half an hour and it was too late for anymore e-mail. At home I had already unplugged the Telephone Answering Machine as I was not planning to be back home until 23:00 and had no intention of being sober at that stage. The

following day I would be up betimes (well at 05:00) and away to the fair land of Liverpool.



## Wednesday 26th March

The train to London had just rattled through Woking when I heard the first report of the bombs at Wilmslow. Radio 4 switched directly into full panic mode and started 'phoning up anyone who had even heard of the place. By the time I got to Euston the BBC were warning of the imminent collapse of the railway system all over the country. On the concourse nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

It had been decided more or less at the beginning that the committee would have to be in Liverpool from the Wednesday before the convention until the Wednesday after. (This had been the largest single cost taken into account when I had warned the others that it would cost about £2,000 to join the committee.) My decision to take the train had come after hearing the planned route for the Mini-bus. I had defended my choice by citing a desire to ensure that we did not get stuck with all of us standing by a wreck on the side of the M6 but my real reason was a passionate desire to avoid 10 hours of petty squabbling and desperate camaraderie. Running the risk of being blown to bits by the IRA seemed a small price to pay. However being stuck outside Crewe station for a couple of hours was a fate to be treated with rather less equanimity.

Despite the frantic wailings of radio journalists the trip up was uneventful. I got excited at the sight of all the familiar places in the same way as usual and arrived at The Adelphi buoyed up and ready to do business. The revelation by the Desk Clerk that the people from the BBC were busy for the moment, that Barbara Pemberton was off until tomorrow and that given that my room was not yet ready they would be obliged if I could go away again for a couple of hours dented my mood slightly but I was still fairly bubbling when, expelled from the local equivalent of paradise by a chamber maid with an eternally burning duster, I sloped off down to the city centre for lunch. It is to this excitement that I attribute the fact that when I returned I was clutching a 12 CD set of Aerosmith's earlier works which my collector's instinct had ordered me to buy a Virgin on the simple grounds that it was 27% cheaper than

at HMV. I hoped that I would like early Aerosmith.

By 15:00 I had got my room, discovered that cider was £1.20 a pint in the hotel's public bar (Friday's) and found both the people from the BBC and John Bark. The BBC people could have been hired from Stereotypes 'R' Us. Jenny the Assistant Producer who I never saw with an actual clipboard but seemed to have a permanent idealised one clutched to her chest, Neil the Director bespectacled slightly fey and a man I would have sworn wore a grey Levi's tank top although I doubt I ever saw him in one. Having failed to score lunch from these people I settled for a pot of coffee and John and I set out to explain why our initial reaction to a 'phone call from them had been sufficient to send the Producer's Assistant (not the same as the Assistant Producer) off back to cry on Chris Bell's shoulder - and led to a question from my work mates as to why I had yelled "Fuck, Fuck, Fuck" at my 'phone and then vanished for half an hour to the smoking lounge. Since these people were definitely going to be in the hotel for the duration, and for the following six months, it was essential that we reach an accommodation. This was aided by the fact that we knew precisely what they were up to and they had to guess what we were about. In the end we reached a *modus vivendi* by which they would follow members of staff around for the weekend but would not go near the Masquerade without further discussion. We would give them a chance to explain what they were up to to the membership. They would give the membership the chance to communicate with them by telling them to "Fuck off" if they didn't want to be filmed. They would go away and lay plans to film Chris Bell arriving. We would stay and finish the coffee. On the whole it seemed equitable.

The rest of the afternoon passed smoothly. John and I retired to Friday's public bar picking up Wilf James, the first of the actual membership to cross our path, whom we found standing in the foyer watching the BBC film a man on a platform cleaning the ceiling. In the course of a micturation hiatus I found the mini-bus unloading committee and luggage into the hotel foyer. Within half an hour the equipment truck materialised and immediately decisions to both to unload it and to leave it loaded were made and acted upon variously by travel weary convention runners. Those who chose to unload the truck proved more active than their opponents and

eventually prevailed as the contents of the truck were decanted off to the Derby Room.

Chris Bell arrived at about 19:00. She did it again at 19:10 and once more at 19:15. Just a little off to the side of the revolving door Diane Wynne Jones and Chris's two daughters, Rachel and Rowan, watched. Eventually the BBC were satisfied and Chris was released just in time for me to hit her with our first hotel problem. This was to do with one of our Russian members who had been summoned from his room to join in what festivities we could muster and who was concerned about room rates as his sharer was not due to arrive until Thursday. Within minutes Chris had sorted it and the new party swelled the ranks of the old.



## Thursday 27th March

Thursday Morning saw me up with the lark and downstairs bathed and shaved, and trying to find out why the 'phone in my room had rung while I was in the bath, by 06:30. At dinner the night before I had finally got details regarding the planned pick-up of Octavia Butler and had promptly invited myself along. It wasn't that I didn't trust Geoff and Janet (well, yes it was - Geoff has long been noted in the SHSFG for his ability to make a first impression and Janet was wound up tighter than I was) but three struck me as the minimum for airport pick-ups. Besides of all our guests Octavia was the one that worried me most. We had no experience to call on with Octavia. Brian Aldiss had met her once and been in awe of her. Diane Duane (while she was still speaking to us) had said that she was a lovely person but tended to be reclusive. Getting her as a guest had been terrifically exciting - being told about it by Paul Dormer who had read the announcement from the 'net before I had been informed that we were even approaching her was rather less delightful. Getting her to talk to us had been an effort. The last thing I needed was for her to arrive at Manchester Airport terminally jet lagged, immediately take offence at something and spend the rest of her first visit to Britain shut in her room waiting for the return portion of her ticket to become valid.

Picking up the mini-bus from the hotel garage we made excellent time out of the city and on to the M62. Indeed our time was so good that when Geoff asked me to look out for the

junction for the optimum route for the airport we had already passed it. Rather than turn about we decided to press ahead to the Manchester Ring Road and approach from the other direction. Our timing was perfect, unfortunately the airline was not quite so on the ball. Leaving Geoff with the bus Janet and I found ourselves at Terminal 2 with 25 minutes to wait until touch down.

Janet had been astounded that somewhere as far away from civilisation as Manchester should have an airport with more than one terminal and so we had come across Terminal 2, the correct one for our flight, more by luck than judgement. On the whole I would have to mark it more impressive than Southampton or Bournemouth but that would have to be it. We entered by the information desk and strolled casually to the cafeteria at the far end of the hall. We stopped, turned around and strolled back. This took up nearly four and three quarter minutes so we did it again. On our third trek we noticed that Geoff had not shown up to tell us where he had left the bus. Janet's nerves were getting worse. Every so often she would catch a glimpse of someone in the crowd who she was sure, for a second, that she knew although, on second glance, it became clear that they didn't even vaguely resemble the person she had taken them for. For a moment I thought that I knew what she meant but then it turned out that the figure I had glimpsed was Mike Scott after all.

We need not have worried about recognising Octavia. I don't know how many 6' 2" black women there were on the flight (Octavia was fairly prompt in clearing customs) but the first one who came wandering through the gates in the daze of the truly jet lagged turned out to be the one we were waiting for. Geoff had materialised briefly less than five minutes before Octavia appeared and told us where to find him and the bus. So pausing only to pick up a bottle of mineral water we bade farewell to Mike and wended our way back to Liverpool making the desperate small talk of the tired and the terrified.

The hotel took away Octavia and gave her a bedroom. The travellers found themselves with a quarter of an hour left before the end of breakfast. On arrival in The Compton Room (the location chosen by the Hotel for the feeding of the early arrivals for the weekend) there was little food left and what there was was cold. There was however a splendid waitress who vanished briefly and returned with a tray of freshly cooked bacon - the

staple of the one true apostolic breakfast. She wanted to know how many of us there were as they were anxious to reset for lunch before too long. I told her that as far as I was aware there was Janet, Geoff and myself. Then Mark Ireland staggered in. That, we said, would be it. As soon as we said it Martin Hoare appeared. Anxious not to commit myself to any more prophecies I finished my coffee and left in search of "set up".

In The Derby Room the great circling dance of pack stuffing was under way. The participants shuffling round a long table picking up pieces of brightly coloured advertising bumf, a programme book, a "Read Me" and a hand full of ballots and slips thrusting them into one of the plastic bags printed with the convention name and jamming the lot into a cardboard box. We had 1,100 programme books and when these ran out we would stop. The dance was accompanied by the strains of Miles Davies from my Ghetto Blaster in the corner. It had a three CD auto changer and could play for hours. It would need to. In another part of the room stuffed envelopes were having name tags attached. In a third badges were being sorted out and dropped into the packs. Something about it struck me as shambolic but I was damned if I could see any way of improving the situation.

Elsewhere in the hotel Keith was locked in his room with a laser printer churning out copies of the programme, tech were in the banqueting hall building lighting towers and a small party led by Andy Croft were driving electric buggies down corridors looking for places that they couldn't get to. Andy's eventual report was grudging and included a recommendation that the majority of doors in the building be re-hung to open the other way.

By midday the packs had been stuffed, Keith had come up with the printing I had asked for and the city centre was sealed off in response to a bomb warning at Marks and Spencers. Plans for skipping out for lunch were put on hold and we worked on waiting for the all clear. For the next hour and a half I marked up programme sheets for participants and passed them to a couple of volunteers who put them into the relevant programme packs or, as I found out later, left them in a heap on a table to the side without telling anyone. By now the stream of arrivals was steady as were the demands to put equipment into rooms that would not officially become available until Friday. One major area of concern was

the Art Show as it became clear that no one on the committee had a clear idea of what the Art Show sub-committee had agreed with anyone really. Information coming in from various sources indicated that people had been told a number of stories and that opening times were either from that minute or not until Saturday Morning. More in the interests of getting people to go away than anything else I told the small cabal of Art Show exhibitors that was growing in the corner to go off to the Art Show room and, if the Masonic regalia had been cleared away, to see what they could do.

Janet came in to announce that Liverpool was now open and that she and some others were off on a shopping expedition for provisions for staff. Fortunately she did not get to the last bit until after the Hotel general manager had wandered off. Ken Slater requested aid in getting his truck unloaded. We had just piled the last box into the corner of the Derby Room when Pat came round to tell us that the Dealer's Room was now available. Looking at the heap we had just built and which would now have to be shifted through the hypostyle and across the main lounge. I decided that since it was now 16:30 it was time that I took a break.

There were now several groups of Fans in Friday's Bar. In the corner we had inhabited the night before Martin Hoare was talking to a party of Swedes. At the bar I ran into a pair from The Wirral SF Group whom I had met on a couple of occasions when we had made site visits and just coming through the door was Iain Banks. Time to come back on duty and sort out programme participation. Iain was one of the people whom I had asked someone else to contact, someone who already had their own job to do and not enough time left to do it. Consequently this was the first he had heard of the item. However the purchase of a pint and a conversational inquiry as to the state of his Porsche worked upon Banksie's normal good humour. He would do the item. We walked back to Martin and company where I met Joanna Hilken - a young lady from Oxford too inexperienced to know that when a moderator is talking about the form that an item is to take the last thing that you do is join in. By the time that I left the bar two hours later I had her hooked. She might be protesting now but by the time that the item was due she would be there.

By the time that I returned Langford had arrived giving us two out of our four guests.



## Friday 28th March

We were expecting Jon Bing in another hour or so and Brian Aldiss was due to drive up on Friday morning. Phil Plumbly and Pat McMurray were transforming themselves into the Airfix kit Borg equivalents that seem to be required by all properly organised conventions of the modern era. (Phil's foot had forced him to requisition the most heavily armoured of the electric wheel chairs we had acquired from Shop Mobility and he was trundling round the main hall festooned with radio equipment with a single minded determination that would have forced all but the most determined Dalek to give up all plans of planetary conquest and settle down to study at the castors of a master.)

Plans for the Evolution party were well in hand. However Bug was missing presumed broken down. Still there seemed to be nothing I could usefully do and so, having informed Ops of my intentions, I decided to set off in search of dinner.

In the foyer I ran into Chris Bell and her daughters about to venture forth on a similar mission. I suggested that we join forces and so we wandered out into the night together. Turning left we crossed the road and headed toward Duke Street. The up market Hamburger joint was crowded out and none of us felt much like Indian food so the first place to catch our eye was Zorba's, the Greek Restaurant on the corner opposite the bombed out Church. Chris and the girls had not eaten Greek before but seemed keen to try. Perhaps I should have made more enquiries about fads and allergies but I didn't.

We returned to the Hotel after about an hour and a half. I was feeling rather guilty for not knowing about Chris's allergy to chick peas and their ilk and not taking proper account of the natural conservatism of the young. I was also feeling rather full having eaten the majority of a set meal for three in an effort to avoid the wrath of the kitchen staff. Back at the ranch Bug had arrived and the Evolution party was off and running. However hotel reception still had no sign of Jon Bing. An hour later Janet 'phoned his number in Norway to find him at home and in bed. He had got his dates wrong and was not planning to arrive until Friday. This meant that he would not be here for either the Opening Ceremony or for his first panel. Over one last drink, interrupted only by our first bomb scare, I worked out the alternatives and then retired to bed.

Friday morning and our first committee breakfast meeting. An interesting idea made somewhat less effective by everyone holding their own conversations and turning up at various times and at various tables. As is the case with the majority of convention hotels the loss of guests from the rest of the world had resulted in the loss of some of the more exotic items from the breakfast bar but the ability to grab huge amounts of bacon, eggs and toast made up for everything.

Unfortunately for us the hotel had been busy every weekend since mid-December and so about half the committee had not had a chance to see the place before this week. There was also some confusion about the numbers of the rooms on the first and second floor where the video programme, the costuming workshop and the other workshop and seminar programming were going to be held. With this in mind I took the gang on a tour of these sights of special interest.

On returning to the Derby Room via the back stair case which some late night reveller had decided to re-carpet using only the contents of his stomach I received word of our first real disaster. With the absence of the Bar Manager, on leave, and the General Manager, visiting her seriously ill father in hospital, responsibility for ordering beer supplies for the weekend had fallen to the Assistant Bar Manager who had looked at our carefully worked out estimates, decided that we were either exaggerating or, more likely, lying through our teeth and reduced the order to a third of what we had suggested. The man was now being disciplined by his superiors who would then be scouring the city for additional stocks. There being little I could do to ease the situation I bought myself a pint of the "real" cider (which had survived the purge) and started to bring up my adrenaline levels for the start of the show.

By 12:00 the Video programme was set up with a printed out schedule on the door and the first film on the screen. The Writer's Workshop Introductory Meeting was starting up. BoSH's, the fan room, was in good order, the convention infra-structure (Green Room, Ops, Tech etc.) was set and my pint had been renewed. There was still no sign of Brian but Octavia and Langford are in the hands of

Heidi and Janet. A brief discussion of running order, a piece of paper giving the names of helpful publishers thrust into my hand by Dave Power is thrust into my breast pocket and promptly forgotten. An arrangement of Guests and Committee on the front rows. A muttered run through of my introduction to myself. The membership shuffles in, I take up position, the music starts (not quite loud enough for my taste but let it pass) and we are off. I take a breath and start. "We are grey..."

In the middle of my introduction there is the vague warbling sound common to the devil's spawn which has replaced the Walkman as the scourge of the irritable commuter. Anne Green pulls the offending article from an inside pocket and starts chattering to it until interrupted by the arrival of Gary Stratman. "May I see that?" he asks in a tone that makes it clear that the only realistic answer possible is in the affirmative. He takes the object between thumb and fore finger and returns to the mixing desk and Richard The Rampant. The item is laid upon the ground. Richard jumps. There is a cracking sound. All around the hall people are fidgeting nervously. One or two hands are reaching discretely into pockets to check off switches. "Working perfectly", Richard announces with satisfaction and Gary returns the ruined item, its circuit boards clearly on view to the perplexed owner.

I had entirely forgotten that we were going to do that although I had worked it out with Andy Croft about six months previously. I was impressed; none of our panels were disrupted by cell phones.

In the maelstrom that now filled the main hall Brian Aldiss had showed up. I checked that he was clear for his first item at 15:00. Dragged up to Ops by an insistent Gopher I received a 'phone call from Pamela Buckmaster. She told me that Ken Bulmer was in Hospital recovering after a stroke. I sent my sympathies and passed the matter over to Steve Green, master of the Chinese Wall. Joanna had decided to do the item with Brian, Iain and myself. I sent her up to Green Room and, pausing only to acknowledge Ali and Chris up from Oxford, wandered up to join her.

By the time that I lead the panel into the Board Room all the chairs were occupied and more had been sent for. Just inside the door a man from "The South Bank Show", here to chart a day in the life of wunderkind Iain (M)

Banks, had taken up station perfectly placed for any late entrant to obscure his view—an opportunity seized by John Dowd who stood with his head less than three inches from the lens until asked, politely, to move.

From the point of view of a moderator the panel worked excellently. As long as they are kept amused Iain and Brian are very easy to work with and both are possessed of the type of courtesy that made it simple to keep the conversation moving. Despite her earlier reservations Joanna fell right in to the pattern of the thing. Halfway through the TV crew wandered out as quietly as possible, which, given the relative sizes of the room and the crowd within it, wasn't very quietly but they did try.

Outside in the maelstrom again I caught up with Ali and Chris in Friday's Bar. Chris had not been to a convention before and Ali had been absent for several years. For my part I had been too busy to get up to Oxford for months. I had time for one pint before the forces of chaos kicked off big time.

Despite the name the members of the Science Fiction Theatre of Liverpool were now living in London. I had found this out when I had received an e-mail message a month before asking if the convention could find them crash space on the Friday night. I had written back saying that we might have difficulty finding rooms for just one night and that they might be better off going through Merseyside Tourism. Of course the convention would pay etc. If they did have any problems with this then they could get back to me and we would see what we could do. They had not got back to me, neither had they gone through Merseyside Tourism. They were at Reception now and they wanted somewhere to stay. Chris Bell was on it but she wasn't very happy. As I attempted to remove myself from the accommodation problem I was caught up by the backwash of the crisis emanating from the art room and dragged in to a new horror.

The idea of a publisher holding a private party in the Art Show had not been popular. Our publisher liaison had assured us that it was common practise in America and Pat had swung the vote by adding the proviso that the exhibiting Artists be invited. Getting drunks with money together with artists, he explained, was the major function of a gallery. This one party had continued to cause more problems than all the others for no apparent return for the membership. At

first they didn't want to invite all the artists (we were firm on this point). Then they didn't want to invite the committee. Here we were somewhat less firm as the majority of us didn't actually want to go but still this rankled. The last thing I needed was to have to sort out the fact that the artists did not seem to have been told about any of this. Therefore that was precisely what I was being asked to do.

As it happened the cast of characters assembled for this act of the drama were all prepared to deal with the situation and normal service was resumed after plans were made to rope off certain of the more fragile exhibits. There was some slight tension when Pat came hurrying in, his hair still dripping from the shower whence he had been called, and I, anxious that past plans did not disrupt present accord, cut him off before he could explain to everyone once more precisely what had been decided. However ten minutes later the party was back in business and I had to get back to the Green Room for the next item.

The Board Room was much the same as it had been earlier with the same faces in the crowd. The item went well with lively contributions from stage and floor. We wrapped up on time and for once everything seemed to be going well.

After I returned from dinner with Ali and Chris at the JD Wetherspoon's pub in Charlotte Row I was greeted with the news that Paul Barnett had collapsed with what is believed to be a stroke and has been rushed off, with his daughter in attendance, to hospital. Just as I take this in a runner came hurtling across the lounge to tell me that I was needed in The Board Room where all Hell was breaking loose.

It was my fault that Mark Ireland was in that position. He had told me that he liked to work with a script. I had told several people how the item was supposed to shape up but no one had got back to Mark. Now he was stuck behind a desk, accompanied by a less than sober Geoff Hill, facing a hostile crowd. I was lost. Caroline Mullan and Hans Loose were upset about something. Mark was too miserable to do anything and Geoff refused to supply any helpful information. This was too much. I lost my temper. After some shouting we came to the root of the problem. The "Read Me" was, it was being suggested, no bloody good. As the problems with the document were enumerated I felt a degree of sympathy, I also felt a reluctance to condemn

the work of a member of my committee without them being present. In the end after a little more shouting a compromise was reached. The next three quarters of an hour were spent going through the programme for the following day with brief descriptions for items, mentions of names and time changes. By the time that I left I felt very tired and in no mood for partying. A quarter of an hour later I was in bed.



## Saturday 29th March

Saturday Morning did not find me refreshed. The symptoms were reminiscent of a heavy cold however a stray glance during the course of the morning's ablutions revealed that I was passing blood. Over breakfast I learned the extent of the night's disasters. Someone's room had been broken into and the video-recorder in the video programme had broken down. On the plus side Paul was out of hospital and not in need of repatriation to the West Country. Outside breakfast a huge queue was growing due to half the breakfast room being taken up by sleeping actors in the best crash space the hotel could provide.

Breakfast being finished Geoff Hill was dispatched with a guy who lived near by (he said) to pick up a replacement video-recorder. Keith vanished off to his cell with a list of printing requirements, including sets of programme listings—something which, for no fault of Keith's, had been conspicuously absent the day before. The morning was spent recovering ground. Chatting to people, ensuring that it was known that the Real Ale Bar was back in business. Gerry Tyrell had thoroughly enjoyed being a pundit and was recovering from a less than welcoming view of mainstream fandom gained in the past. Ric Cooper was intent on making contact with the women of negotiable affections whose presence in The American Lounge of the Hotel he swore that he had been promised. I even got to meet Jon Bing.

The general impression I got was of an over stuffed muppet. A pleasant man with a truly extraordinary CV and enough career achievements for an entire apartment block but slightly bemused and detached. It wasn't until after I had talked to him that Janet came and told me that in addition to arriving late he was planning to leave at sometime in the middle of the afternoon on Monday and

consequently I would have to reset the whole of Monday's programme.

After my first programme item of the afternoon I was Happiness Patrolled. Anne Wright bought me a drink, sat me down and then sent me up to my room to lie down for an hour. I read a few of the comic books that I had bought on Thursday and listened to one of the many Aerosmith albums that now occupied my room. I didn't get much rest but some of the knots that had been gathering in my stomach loosened and slipped away. At the expiry of my sentence of exile I descended the staircase towards the hall. On the way down I stopped to exchange nods with Donald Tait a former member of the SHSFG held in a kind of tolerant contempt by most of the "inner circle" of that august band. He was now living in Basingstoke with his French wife. He seemed settled and content. At the bottom of the staircase Peter Weston, accompanied by Brian Aldiss and Harry Harrison, asked if he could move the time of his talk on James Blish for a second time. It was half an hour after I had agreed to the new slot that I realised that I had put Harrison on stage for two items running. When I found him later and confessed the fault he did not mind but the clumsiness of the matter made me cross with myself.

That evening ill-temper soured the atmosphere of the main hall. Contenders in a shouting match turned to blows and were followed around by clutches of security. The Real Ale bar ran out again. The hotel were on to it, and indeed by Sunday Lunch time new supplies were on line, but that didn't help the situation right then and mutters of discontent were growing amongst the line stretching out of the non-smoking Bar, the only one left open. Phil Plumbly having misread the programme grid had advertised that the bid session for 1999 would be at 11:30 rather than 12:00 causing distress on the Reconvene committee which we had to calm down. When we had finished our tour of the information points marking up corrections John Bark explained how we could have done it so much better.

Before heading up to my room I ran into the committee of Nexus, a media convention from Bristol. They were having a good time and had particularly enjoyed the opening ceremony. I retired in somewhat better temper. That night the Dealer's Room was broken into.

## Sunday 30th March

On Sunday morning the Police came to examine the crime scene tagged by the BBC camera crew who were obviously having a lot of fun with this. The Dealer's room had had an overnight occupant they had not been disturbed nor had much been taken. In fact only one item could not be accounted for. Before the bid session I had a word with Gary Stratman our head of security to get the facts of our situation. The impression I got was of a cross between *Zulu* and *Assault on Precinct 13*. One particular fellow had been found in the hotel every day on just about every floor. Originally he had been showing up in a business suit, apparently misled by the title convention. Latterly he was showing up in jeans and a T-shirt. Despite the best efforts of this man and several others who had been observed wandering around the corridors we had had only five actual "incidents". An undesirable figure but not too high for a city centre hotel over four days. During the bid session the question of security came up. I gave Gary's story. The bid won with only one vote against.

Around midday, just after I had been called over to assist in the Happiness Patrolling of Phil Plumbly, the BBC came to ask if had reconsidered allowing them to shoot the Masquerade. All they wanted to do, they insisted, was to follow staff around and being blocked out of the main hall would be a real problem. Since they had been good chaps so far I decided to trust them on this. Beside by this time I had reset Monday afternoon with only a slight kerfuffle raised by rescheduling. Reconvene had won and the convention was nearly over.

For the first time I decided to attend the staff meeting that was held in the main hall during the preparations to raise the wall and reset the room for the GoH speeches and evening "Spectaculars". I had been deliberately keeping away from Ops and the like feeling that the people we had in place were more than capable of handling most situations and the last thing they needed was a Chairman to over ride any decision they might care to make. However it was time for a "thank you for all the hard work" speech and that was definitely my job. In the middle of this the wall started its ascent and I became aware that the other part of the hall contained an

audience. About two dozen people had come to watch the wall rise.

I came out of the staff meeting to fall into the war that had broken out between Green Room and the Art Show. The Art Auction had over run. We knew that they would over run. We had scheduled the event with an hour at either end to allow it to over run. What we hadn't anticipated was that the auctioneer would decide to close the auction in order to attend Octavia's GoH speech, in which he showed excellent sense, and announce that it would be opening up in the same location immediately after, in which he showed a fine disregard for the demands of programme.

It was absolutely clear that the Art Auction could not continue to occupy the Board Room. With preparations for the Masquerade taking up the main halls for the afternoon the Board Room was all I had to keep the rest of the membership entertained. A two hour slot could be opened up later in the evening but that was judged to be too late. This meant that we had to find a new location, not too far away from the Art Show. There was also the need to calm everybody down. Kari, who had already been handling flak from the previously mentioned kerfuffle had not reacted well to the news and had travelled down to the Art Room to explain in detail and with a little too much personal emphasis what she thought about the matter. Mary Burns, who had had absolutely no idea about what the auctioneer would propose, was not terribly pleased about the manner in which Kari had chosen to express her position. On top of all this was the Art Room Steward who had the gift for explaining what was going on in such a manner as to stir up a passionate desire to let the whole thing go to Hell then and there. Feelings were soothed and alternatives discussed. In the end it was decided to set up the continuation of the Art Auction on the balcony outside the Dealer's Room. The committee dispensed drinks to every one involved and having won the Board Room back for programming I ascended there to run the next panel.

In the Operations Room there was a note addressed to me stuck to the wall. I took it down read it and then took it to show to the rest of the committee. It was from Ali and Chris who had had to return to Oxford. It said "Thank you".

It was Steve Green who suggested that we eat in the carvery. It was Anne Green who explained to the receptionist that there

certainly were tables available and we would be using that one there. Anne had explained things to the receptionist the night before when she, Steve and Anne Wright had met with a similar situation so this time round less emphasis was required. About half way through the meal we were joined by Anne Wright who had got through without trouble on the strength of the earlier explanation.

The meal was unexceptional. The food was plentiful and satisfying without being particularly adventurous. Most importantly it was there. No effort of mind or triumph of will necessary to secure it. Furthermore I was in one of those rare moods where my intellectual insight into the situation could override my social conditioning and I knew that if I didn't want any damned potatoes I didn't have to have any.

I might have been able to transform dinner into a philosophical triumph by an existentially transcendent denial of the necessity of potatoes but the absence of the trained diplomat, called back to London early - whether by his publisher or his embassy I wasn't too sure) from that evening's panel item did leave it rather too flat for my taste. Still, aside from the total clusterfuck that had been Friday's Shipping Forecast, this was the first time that I felt that the audience hadn't really been engaged. We had conversed around the subject but the item had simply not developed a shape that could be given momentum.

Elsewhere in the convention the Masquerade was rolling along while in BoSH's everyone in the whole wide world was squeezing into Thog's Masterclass to hear the dulcet tones of Mike Cule (an actor only two steps away from Kevin Bacon through Fred Ward—*Tremors* and *Saigon* and Amanda Pays—*Saigon* and *Max Headroom*—where, in the first episode, Mike was observed to explode through overexposure to advertising) filling the scented air with the words chosen by the Mighty one himself.

For once the evening did not conspire to rob me of my temper. I wandered the convention indulging in casual conversation without the sky falling and it was only in the morning that I remembered that with the early departure of Brian and Jon and several others whom I had been counting on that the current cast list of our finale debate would be Octavia Butler alone.



## Monday 31st March

I have a tendency to run conventions on simple adrenaline. When you do this there is a tremendous difference between a Wincon running from Friday evening until Sunday evening and an Eastercon. By Monday lunch time I had reached my limit and had to get out of the hotel for an hour. I had my Walkman in my pocket and was mainlining on Doctor Feelgood whenever I could get away from the crowd for a couple of minutes. Stepping around the corner into an empty corridor I turned the volume up full and hit play to send *Sneaking Suspicion* directly into my cortex without the need for my ears to get in the way. Hit the rewind and step back into the world with a shaky grin. It was keeping me sane but I still needed to get out.

During the morning the trickle of people heading back to the mundane world had started. I retreated up to the Green Room and discussed the re-shaped Programme with the crew up there. Every so often someone would turn up outside BoSH's dressed in their travelling clothes. Stick their heads through the door and wave bye-bye before turning round and moving back towards the entrance to reality. We were not too surprised therefore when Gerry Webb and family arrived below us ready to go and dragging a suitcase on a lead. We got rather more surprised when instead of stopping they headed straight for the door to the loading bay. The door which had the alarm which had been going off regularly in the wind throughout the convention. I wandered halfway down the stairs and called after the party. "Gerry, that door's alarmed." He heard me. I saw him hesitate. I heard him mutter to himself although I could not make out the words. Then I saw him start up again. I had reached the bottom of the staircase when he reached the door and hit the locking bar. As the alarm went off I moved into a better position in the middle of the corridor to watch the three of them walk out into the spring daylight. When Gary arrived at a run I was just able to splutter a brief explanation of what had happened. I was completely unable to believe it. It had been a deliberate act of sheer bloody mindedness just to make everyone's life that little bit more awkward. Someone (I think it was Steve Green) bought me a beer and I tried once more to calm down.

By 13:00 I had a gap and took it. I needed a new watch since the one I had been wearing for the last 8 years had got itself stuck on GMT and would not reset to summer time. I also had to get something to give to the Convention workers for the Closing Ceremony. I had no idea if the convention could afford it although I suspected that it could and had every intention of claiming the money back if it could. I didn't mention it to the others on the committee because I could not hack any debate as to what was the best thing to get. I also particularly didn't want to have anyone else come along on the trip. Off I went to Argos to pick up a watch and thence to Tesco's Metro where I knew that they were wont to keep an interesting selection of cardboard tubes which, on receipt of certain electronic writing on a plastic strip they would swap for heavier cardboard tubes which made ominous clanking noises when slipped into a canvas bag.

The Business Meeting had been going on forever when I checked my watch and realised that I had to leave. Various members of the committee and several of the staff had been keeping an eye on me throughout this ordeal ready to pull me out if I started to lose it. Indeed when we had started on the programme after an all but interminable series of comments and suggestions as to how to run the bar - all of which we had already adopted and all of which had been sabotaged by one, now thoroughly chastened Assistant Bar Manager - Steve Davies had come up and taken control of the item. Curiously enough the usual suspects from Business Meetings of the past had been on our side. However there were a couple of people who seemed determined to add an extra kick to each comment. I genuine did misread my watch and leave the meeting an hour before I had to but even after I had realised my mistake nothing could have got me back in there.

For about half an hour I was in no condition to do anything. If anyone had been nice to me at that point I would have collapsed completely and that would have completely ruined me. It may have been a failure but I had to finish it.

While I was desperately trying to get my shit together for the last stretch Anne Wright took over the task of finding panel members. She found Diana Wynne Jones. We didn't need anyone else.

Diana and Octavia were excellent and with the end in sight I was getting ready for the

rush. Clearing the stage I was intercepted on the way to the bathroom by Pat who told me that due to John Harrold's imminent departure we had to get the presentation of the Doc Weir award done fast. Several other items had to be done with some urgency as well so the item could go as fast as I could push it. This was just what I wanted to hear.

Due to the departure of Jon Bing we had not raised the wall that afternoon and despite the steady haemorrhaging of membership numbers the room was full. I put the committee on the stage and took up position on the floor to the right. We tore into items and announcements. The audience took up the flow and amplified it. For once everything ran perfectly. I cued the music and the drum beat started as the committee hit the stage. As I shouted "Good Night" the rest of the band kicked in. I vanished into the crowd as the song started. Doctor Feelgood and *Milk and Alcohol* let me out on a total high.

Dinner with Octavia and Langford was a complete delight. The convention was gone, it couldn't hurt us any more and all we had to do was pick up the pieces. Octavia was excellent company and I regretted not having had more time to talk with her over the weekend. It is one of the standing problems of the con runner that you never have time to attend the items that you aren't actually taking part in. Over the weekend we had shown three premiers of films and TV programmes. I hadn't managed to get to any of them.

We had delayed the Dead Dog Party, or The Hour of Scampering as Phil and I had christened it, to give everyone a chance to complete the strike before serious partying. However by the time that we cleared the restaurant it was in full sway. There were still enough of us to fill the Derby Room and the hotel had contributed the two remaining barrels of cider to the common weal. Despite the problems of the weekend the Staff had worked well together and now were saying goodbye to the cares of the convention. We had lived through another one, time to celebrate.

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## Tuesday 1st April

Breakfast on Tuesday saw the return of the items that had vanished on Friday. The convention was over. In The Derby Room a

huge pile of crisp packets and tins of pop formed the remnants of The Hour of Scampering.

By 11:30 the trucks had cleared the site, the electric wheel chairs had been taken back to Shop Mobility before the ramps we had fought for were removed, Keith had paid off bills and the committee, who were not riding shotgun on the transport, were left alone. The Wright's car had disintegrated on the way up so Anne hitched a lift back with the Greens to Birmingham. Geoff headed off in the direction of the Albert Dock. John Bark and Val wandered across the road to the cinema. Phil, Pete and I wandered off on a desultory pub crawl between the Hotel and Lime Street exhaustion making mock of our attempts at debauchery.

That evening we three headed up to Hope Street with Geoff to eat at a Mexican Restaurant that Phil and I had been attempting to patronise for the best part of 8 years. It had never been open while we were in the city before. This time it was and the food turned out to be rather good. Several Margaritas later (by this stage I was too tired to feel the effects of the alcohol) we took a stroll around the outside of Anglican Cathedral possibly the only building in the city sufficiently impressive to strike through the befuddled minds of the seriously Easterconned.

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## Epilogue

It took me about a month to get over Intervention. The worst part was learning to stop being responsible for everyone else without giving up responsibility for my own actions. For most of that period I was subject to fits of depression and bad temper. I did manage to give up smoking and only threatened to quit my job once, after a massive row with the Managing Director. No permanent damage was done. On several occasions I said that I would never run an Eastercon again. I meant it. I still mean it. However next year there's the 18th birthday party of the SHSFG and after that it will be time to get another Wincon moving. Con running isn't a problem. I can give it up anytime...

JFW Richards 10 July 1997

This article was originally written for Mark Plummer and Claire Briarly's *Waxen Wings and Banana Skins* some slight changes have been incorporated in the present version.