



Questions for ICCC chairs

1. How did your country get to bid to host the conference?

As far as I understand it several people were particularly involved in this – Don Bradley initiated a bid (he was one of the attendees at the first meeting at the Frith in Welwyn in 1950) and then John McCleverty (he was then at Birmingham University) and also Brian Johnson (at Edinburgh at the time) went through the normal channels to make the bid. One of the reasons the UK could present a strong case to host the meeting was that 2000 was fifty years on from the first meeting in Welwyn.

2. How did you get to be conference chair?

This arose from a combination of circumstances. I moved from Zeneca (previously part of ICI which was the UK's largest chemical company) to the University of Edinburgh in 1996 just after Brian Johnson had left to go to Cambridge. As Brian had previously been the person who had volunteered to be the chair for the ICCC meeting, he handed that onto me.

Peter Sadler also joined the department in 1996 so he was an obvious person to get involved, and in practice really Peter and I shared the main responsibilities. Peter spent a lot of time working on the scientific program, while I dealt with all the other aspects of the organisation of the meeting.

3. What is your recollection of the plenary speakers?

It is a bit difficult to know where to start on this one. There were quite a lot of them – ten in all – without exception they impressed me by being so extraordinarily approachable and cooperative and, of course, inspirational in terms of the science they presented. Let me just highlight a few special circumstances. One of the plenary lectures was given by Geoff Leigh. This was particularly appropriate because Geoff spent his time setting Joe Chatt's chemistry into perspective and, of course, this was one of the key themes of the meeting as 50 years had passed since the original ICCC meeting which was organised by Joe.

Another special feature of the meeting was that Jan Reedijk gave a plenary lecture (the Olivier Khan Memorial Lecture) for the first time to the ICCC. This was particularly appropriate because of Jan's long service as Executive Secretary, supporting these meetings over the years. The lecture was well received and it was very good to also record Olivier Khan's important contributions to coordination

chemistry and to the ICCC over the years which were brought to a halt by his untimely death.

The other 8 plenary speakers all gave excellent talks. I was struck that, despite their status, they were all so friendly and approachable. This is not always the case for plenary speakers at many other meetings! We were very lucky in this respect and I've managed to keep in touch with all of them in one way or another over the intervening years.

I wasn't able to stay to hear all of these plenary talks. On several occasions I had to sneak out after the talk had started and do some organisational work but I was always there back in there before the end!

4. What was the most outstanding scientific event of the conference?

I'm a bit reluctant really to identify any one person's contribution. We were clearly delighted that Harry Kroto managed to come and give one of our plenaries and as a Nobel Prize-winner he attracted a huge audience. Otherwise I think what impressed me most was the breadth of science that was being carried out under the banner of coordination chemistry and, as I had only relatively recently returned to the academic world from industry, it was a great joy to see such an extraordinary range of science being presented in one event.

5. What was the most memorable non-scientific event?

There were a lot of social occasions which went down very well and for me were very memorable. The reception that we held in the castle on the second evening of the conference was spectacular because of the setting. Also, for security reasons the entire car park had been cleared and everyone was held back on the far side until the castle was checked to make sure that no daytime visitors had left any explosive devices to greet us! The welcoming committee stood on the drawbridge and when they were given clearance to enter all the delegates rushed across the car park towards us. It was a bit like facing an invasion. The evening went very well. It was fairly chilly but not quite as bad as the first night and the views from the Castle were spectacular.

The conference dinner was also rather unusual in the sense that there was no venue in Edinburgh which could seat all the delegates, we had two events. One was quite formal and it was in the Museum of Scotland in their wonderful atrium area. Before the meal guests were able to browse around the museum with their drinks. The alternative venue was aimed at students and the more energetic – a Céilidh in a brewery. Even though I was not there I gathered that this very successful from Ken Raymond, one of the plenary speakers. He and his family had a great time there.

Any other comments or observations?

Some statistics relating to running an event on this scale...

We had not predicted the volume of paper that would be involved. When the delivery from the printers arrived we discovered that it weighed 6½ tonnes. It appeared on the Friday evening just as all the portering staff from the university site downtown were

about to go home. They were not amused at the prospect of staying on and shifting all this so we had to get a whole team of graduate students down from the Chemistry Department at very short notice who obligingly, and very much to our relief, managed to shift all 6½ tonnes off the car park into the building.

Delegate's conference badges were suspended on tartan ribbons around their neck. In order to ensure that we had enough of this ribbon we ordered 1.5 km in total and I still have about ½ km left somewhere at home.

Much of the 6½ tonnes of paper was made up by the abstract books which had to be the size of telephone directories in order to cover the 900+ posters and other papers. This proved to be a sad waste of paper. The majority were left behind after the meeting, partly because this was the first ICCG which provided the entire proceedings on a CD in welcome packs. The cost of producing these CDs was about 3% of the cost of printing the abstracts!

Another first for the Edinburgh ICCG was to use mobile phones to keep in contact with all the stewards and people running projection facilities etc. It is hard to believe now, but in 2000 very few students had mobiles, so we had to hire enough to keep in contact with all the red shirted stewards. One of my enduring memories is of Rio Watt who was our school administrator at the time, pacing around the balcony in Appleton Towers where she could see all of the goings-on in the main reception and exhibition area with her mobile in her hand or to her ear. Rio was one of the stars in the team running the meeting. She had been involved in running other major chemistry conferences in Edinburgh and helped to set up the organisational structure of the meeting. Rio's great organisational skills ensured that we had remarkably few mishaps throughout.

Another person who ought to be mentioned with great gratitude is John Gibson who was in charge of the Royal Society of Chemistry's conferencing facilities and support team. John was an absolute brick throughout the whole of this meeting. His experience of running meetings ranging from very small to very large was absolutely invaluable. The reassurance and confidence that we all gained from John's presence was palpable at all stages and very much appreciated. As a result of the various trials and tribulations that we went through together John, Rio and I became great friends and manage to meet up whenever we can.

As the Edinburgh meeting was the 50th anniversary of the first ICCG, we made a special effort to assemble material covering the history of the meetings. Paul O'Brien instigated and ran this and has now taken on the role of archivist. In Edinburgh he set up a proper exhibit for the first time covering the whole history of the meetings and established a network for archiving material. I guess these notes that I'm recording will ultimately go into these archives. Paul has been a great supporter of the meetings over the years and it is fun to browse through the material that he has collected.

In terms of the actual day-to-day running of the meeting itself, there weren't any real crises. We had a few odd difficulties but nothing too serious. The rule-of-thumb in running events of this kind is that something like 90% of the work is created by 5% of the delegates who have not got themselves organised or are just awkward customers by nature.

We had the two ends of the age scale in substantial numbers at this meeting. With the RSC's support we made an effort to encourage as many students as possible to register, and, because it was the 50th anniversary, we identified people who had attended the first meetings and offered them special support to join us in Edinburgh. As a consequence of the latter our meticulous planner, Rio, covered eventualities in terms of ill health (heart attacks and whatever). Fortunately none of these were needed, although it is worth recording that one delegate who came to Scotland with prior knowledge of Edinburgh's great reputation in medicine managed to feign a heart attack in order to ensure that he got checked over thoroughly by the local hospital. When he emerged saying that had he fixed appointments with a consultant we had to inform him that he would be paying the bill.

Well what are the final points to mention?

I am delighted to have chaired the meeting. It took a substantial portion of my life, particularly over the 6 months immediately before the conference, but I would not have missed it for the world. The contacts that I made and the friendships that have endured from that time are clearly worth the time invested. The extraordinary collegiate spirit that my colleagues and the students showed around the event also made my chairmanship a treasured experience. They didn't need to be asked, everybody threw themselves into providing support to make sure that we put on a good show. I was extraordinarily touched about this at the time and as a result I know whom I can rely on to perform in tight corners in future!