

BALLOONS

Over BRISTOL 3



Rereading the last *Balloons Over Bristol* (as one does) I was struck by the similarities between the summer of 1988 and the one we've just 'enjoyed'. In both instances we had rain, the Olympics, preliminaries to the US presidential elections, and my twin Lillian Edwards went to America (but with her boyfriend Tommy this time instead of me. How could she!). And, of course, after a four year break, I'm putting together another issue of *Balloons Over Bristol*. Maybe we could make this a fixture - the Bath SF Discussion Group do four fanzines a year - the Bristol group does one fanzine every four years. It sounds perfectly reasonable to me, but will the Bath group be willing to trade one fanzine of ours for every sixteen of theirs?

What, you may be wondering, has happened to the Bristol SF group over the last four years? Actually, I don't suppose you could care less, but unfortunately, since I've just read through the entirety of the log-book in which we record the minutiae of every meeting (why? Don't ask!), I'm going to tell you anyway!

Way back in 1988 when we produced the last fanzine we were a small friendly group consisting of myself, Peter-Fred Thompson, Richard Hewison, Tim Goodrick, Nathan Sidwell, Alan Gilbert and a few assorted people that turned up occasionally. But, things were about to change...

1989 : We moved to a new pub, which proved to have one major flaw which our extensive research in the run-up to Christmas had failed to reveal - it closed at 8.30 p.m. So we had to go across the road to the rather insalubrious pub by the bus station which through inertia (and the influence of a rather fabulous mural), became our home for the next two years. The usual passive approach to finding new members resulted rather incredibly in a spate of recruits, notably Nienna Tromlin, Bristol answer to Charles Stross; Ray Blake, enthusiastic Matrix letter writer; ex Zookeeper Andy Meadowcroft; former initiates of the Exeter University SF group Sara Hewitt and Brian Hooper; (piss) artist Mike Parsons (who followed me back from an evening class on writing for comics one night) and Ian Barrington, Geordie chef and fanzine enthusiast. Nienna soon made herself less than popular with her Darth Vader impressions, Ray left in search of true love, Andy admitted to sharing Nienna's admiration for the works Robert A. Heinlein, Sara discovered she hated her job, and moved to a better one in London with a free cigarette allowance, Brian didn't realise how much he was going to hate his job so stayed on to buy us drinks, Andy and Nienna started reading each others novels, Ian found fame but not fortune at *Novacon* by snoring through a Geoff Ryman play and buying a round of drinks for the entirety of the Leeds group, Andy and Nienna moved in with each other, Ian fell on a baby at our Christmas party, Mike ingested silly string. Things could only get worse...

1990 : Mike brought along a friend called Lewis, Richard introduced his work placement student Adrian. Conversation descended to new levels of crudity. Meetings were too noisy to hear Nienna's Darth Vader impressions any more. Peter and I took the more disruptive elements to a convention in Derby but unfortunately they came back. Famous old time fan Tony Walsh turned up and held the ultimate party, featuring Terry Pratchett as guest of honour and drinking till the sun came up. This proved too much for most members : Mike found a job in London; Adrian left to be a medical student; Lewis was taken on as a journalist. Suddenly the meetings were very quiet and Brian was forced to drink for six.

1991 : Tim decided to demand pro-rata meetings in his local pub in Thornbury. Richard, seeing the drinking fraternity in decline demanded pro-rata meetings in restaurants. The group went international, doing an overnight trip to Arras, then a full-scale excursion to the canals of the South of France. New members mysteriously didn't join. Long-time member Alan made an excuse to leave Bristol for Middlesborough. Nathan pretended he couldn't remember the meeting night. Brian finally declared the beer undrinkable and we moved on to the Cat & Wheel, our current home. Andy and Nienna continued to fail to buy their first round.

1992 : Nothing happened that hadn't happened in previous years.

Now that you've caught up on the history, here's an article that I prepared earlier - two years earlier in fact, but whose counting? Chronoclasm, for that was the name of the event, is one of those timeless convention which will never age because no-one was there and will never be stale news because it was never fresh, and oh my god, remind me not to give the organisers a copy, that's all. But just to be on the safe side, I shall call my report (without the slightest hint of sarcasm) :

A small convention is a thing of beauty and a joy forever

"And now let's talk to some of the committee : Kev, Christina and Neil!"

Thus spoke the Radio Derby reporter in the bookshop where Colin Greenland and Mary Gentle were doing a pre-convention signing session. It was to be my first inkling that I was in any way involved in the organisation of Chronoclasm.

But not necessarily my last.

My next official duty was to help Kev McVeigh take the guests out for lunch. Kev had no qualms about bearings (pay attention please, bearings will become very important at a later stage), and simply plunged across a few busy roads until more by luck than judgement we ended up in the local Pizza Hut. There he broke the news to me that muscling in on one radio interview did not entitle me to be fed at the committee's expense. In fact, as Kev reminisced on the length of wait he'd had the last two times he'd tried to have pizza with me, I could see a starving Colin and Mary visibly wishing they'd left me behind at the hotel. Luckily the Lake/McVeigh pizza jinx must have been asleep as they served us almost straight away.

The first item of the convention proper was one of those embarrassing games where someone slaps a piece of sticky paper on your back containing a science fiction author's name, and you have to guess who you are. The embarrassment factor begins when you find you can't guess who you are, and all sorts of smartasses tell you it's easy, and exasperated friends keep peering at your back and saying "Haven't you guessed yet?" I was someone over fifty, American, male, with a strong scientific bias. This let me neatly off the hook. "I don't know anything about hard sf," I explained, as I chomped and slurped my way through free punch, cake and tangerine and whisky jelly. Finally, when all the names had been given out I judged it safe to discover my true identity by a process of translation from German and guessing Christian names beginning with R. to get Robert L. Forward, author of Dragon's Egg. "I thought he was a fantasy writer," I say, disingenuously. Surely anything with dragon in its title has to be fantasy, doesn't it? No, everyone informed me.

I resumed official duties to take arrival of the first car load of the massed hordes from Bristol, one and a half hours behind schedule. Under the circumstances, Tim the driver was only mildly scathing about his navigators inability to navigate. Emma had fallen asleep, Adrian thought Richard knew what he was doing, and Richard was just plain incompetent. This settled, we all went to the bar to get a drink and speculate on when the next load would arrive.

Since it was Tim, Adrian and Emma's first convention I took them to the opening ceremony. Adrian, with youthful enthusiasm, insisted we sit in the front row. The opening ceremony, like most opening ceremonies these days, seemed to consist entirely of a numbling chairman making inane remarks about his guests, while the mass ranks of the committee displayed their convention T-shirts and waited to be applauded. "Mary Gentle's much younger than I thought," murmured Tim, gazing at her in latent adulation.

We intercepted the second car-load from Bristol in reception trying to check in. "Don't do it!" I almost warned the hotel staff as they tried to give Lewis a room. "But," said the receptionist's face, "this gentleman looks perfectly respectable to me." One double-take later, and I realised he was wearing shirt and tie, and did.

Ten minutes on and we were all assembled outside the hotel, ready to rampage through Derby in search of the cheap food the hotel didn't supply. The chips were lousy. Tim who had been on a course in Derby a few months previously insisted on taking us for a walk round the streets to get his bearings on the Indian restaurant he'd eaten at on the previous visit. Even at this early stage it was obvious that

Tim's bearings were not going to be easy to find, so I gave my chips away, and hurried back to the hotel to be on the semi-literate quiz.

By the time Kev had sorted out the teams, the Bristol group were back and sitting in the front row ready to put me off. Luckily the teams were allowed to confer and since Colin Greenland knew absolutely everything, my team (well, Mary Gentle's really) looked all set to win. Then came the charades rounds. "How do you play charades?" wondered Colin dubiously. Moves to enlist Geoff Ryman as our special acting recruit were over-ruled by the chairman, so Colin had to find out the hard way. Needless to say, we lost.

"You wouldn't let it lie!" said Mike, who had buggered off to the bar with Lewis long before the quiz was over. He contorted his face and tried again: "You just wouldn't let it lie." Looking at my watch, I realised it could only mean one thing - it was time to go off and watch Vic Reeves Big Night Out. This programme had become something of a fetish in the Bristol group, mainly due to Mike's total addiction to its catch-phrases, so we all piled into Mike and Tim's room, to chant ritualistically in unison: "What's on the end of the stick, Vic!", shrink from the chives with Ed, and wait for those magic words "You just wouldn't let it lie"

After Vic Reeves came Godzilla, the monster movie. I went down to find the fun and excitement of the convention. In the main hall, David V. Barrett's new band called 'Rats and Gargoyles' after Mary Gentle's forthcoming novel, were playing their first gig. Up front, three or four nubile women were dancing, while several people stood at the bar, pretending not to be interested. In the lounge bar, there were about four or five people talking. Not convinced by the fun and excitement on offer, I went back to watch the monster movie, glad to discover that I'd MISSED the moment when Mike pissed out the window. An hour or so later I tried again. This time there was a group of people clustered round the lift, listening, it seemed to me, to a story. I tiptoed past, through to the main programme, where 'Rats and Gargoyles' were still playing. The groupies were now dancing in formation, and as I watched one of them broke away and went to rub herself up against Dave Barrett. Much bemused by the whole performance (are they part of the band? Are they local prostitutes after business?) I decided to retire to the lounge bar again and have my feet rubbed by Kev McVeigh. Earlier on, Kev had promised that if I let him rub my feet, he would lend me his prepublication copy of 'Rats & Gargoyles' (the book - not the band) - which seemed like a good enough deal to me. After all, I don't actively dislike having my feet rubbed - not even by Kev.

By the time this was over, the Bristol group had come out of hibernation in Mike and Tim's room, only to plunge into a new hibernation in the video room, accidentally discovered on an expedition to the second floor. Geoff Ryman, the next victim of Kev's insatiable penchant for body oil and feet, revealed some hideous disfigurement which he claimed was his turkish toe. Meanwhile Mike, well into a bottle of whisky, began to confront Geoff belligerently on the finer details of The Warrior Who Carried Life. "It's the author meets his reader," said an amused Maureen Speller.

Sheer tropism eventually led the small group of wide-awake convention survivors to the video room at three in the morning - just to check that something exciting wasn't about to happen. It wasn't. So why did I stay and watch an hour of BBC bloopers, which I'd certainly seen before?

Breakfast. Now, if I had organised Chronoclasm, I'd happily have taken credit for breakfast. For a start there were mushrooms, which are always the first item to leave the menu when a science fiction convention comes into town. Then there was kedgeree, which I don't think I've ever had at a convention breakfast before, fried eggs that looked as if they might have come from a hen and not an industrial waste disposal unit, a choice of bacon, some of it crispy, and even I saw, a croissant.

Breakfast ended at 10.30 and the staff drew a curtain in front of the self-service food area. At 10.31, Lewis came bounding down in a pair of extremely brief black shorts, looking for breakfast. To their credit, the staff drew back their curtain a crack and served him. "What IS Lewis doing behind that curtain?" Richard asked as the curtain swayed and billowed. Nobody liked to go and see, but it must

have involved something to do with breakfast, as he returned with a plate of eggs, sausages and kedgeree.

After breakfast we met up with Tim and Mike who'd already been out in search of Tim's bearings. "We didn't find them," said Tim philosophically. "But we did find a toy shop," he added, displaying the game he'd brought. "Tim and his bloody bearings," muttered Mike.

Fortunately time has drawn a veil over the remaining events of that weekend, obscuring such highlights as being carried piggy back to an Indian restaurant by Geoff Ryman, the Bristol SF group room party which proved that the whole convention really could fit in to two hotel rooms, an all night farting competition between Lewis and Adrian, being run over by teams of eager laser tag participants and even some programme items. Tim never did find his bearings; I never did become an accredited member of the committee. (I never did finish this convention report either).

So to get more up to date, I shall round off this 1989 convention report with a few words on what was billed as Bristol's First Science Fiction and Fantasy convention, which was organised by the Bristol University Science Fiction Group and took place yesterday (October 24th 1992).

I turned up more out of duty, and because Chris Bell had arranged a BLOT (writer's workshop), than from any expectation of - well - fun. On arrival Peter-Fred and I were greeted by a big sign saying 'Canoe Club' and a load of people in Viking gear. I suspected I was not going to be disappointed. We were directed to a desk where we could pay for the privilege of a stick-on badge with our name on it, and a ticket we were told not to lose (and which I promptly did). In the adjoining room, filk was already in progress, so I knew that I must be at a REAL convention. But not wishing to test that reality too closely, I hurried upstairs to the bar, which doubled (or should that be trebled) as dealers room and programme area. Surprisingly enough, there were a fair number of tables well stocked with comics, books, jewellery and other items. Less surprisingly, there seemed to be roughly as many dealers as potential customers - but then it was lunchtime. At one of the stalls I found Paul Barnett who was looking after it on behalf of his 14 year old daughter Jane, who was expecting riches from selling badges, necklaces, and some of her father's books (written under the pen-name John Grant, which Paul was willing to sign, even the luridly titled "Sex Secrets of Atlantis"). Paul told us that business had been slack, but his daughter was doing better than most of the book dealers. I was later to understand why when, like everyone else in the room with hair approaching shoulder length, I was pressganged into having a braid put in for £1.00. a go.

Paul helpfully pointed out a table serving free drinks, so already feeling more friendly towards the convention, I took a glass of red wine and went to say hello to Simon Bissom from the Bath Group, who seems to get everywhere (only a week before I had run into him down the pub in Leeds). The Bristol SF group was meant to be out in force too (if that can apply to six of us), but the only one to make the rendez-vous was Tim, who happened to be between baseball matches (a victim of live satellite broadcasting of the World Series).

A quick glance at the programme book reassured me that we hadn't missed much by turning up at lunchtime - not even the free wine from the mini-launches. The scheduled panels (all two and a half of them) were still to come, though I had to read the small print to find out what they might be about. At the first one, a panel on collaborations, the full awesomeness of Dracon's guest list began to become evident. There were six authors, no less, around a small table, viz two collaborative duos, some unfortunate student stuck in the middle as chairman, and Rob Holdstock and Fox falling off at either end. One team was Jonathan Wylie which turned out to be a nice husband-wife combo who wrote under the one name, but were virtually inaudible under either. By contrast, the other team, Peter Morwood and Diane Duane could clearly have had their own panel and just done a double-act for the hour. No-

one stuck to the subject of collaboration, but people kept talking, the chairman looked relieved, and Rob Holdstock refrained from asking the nice Jonathan Wylie couple what would happen if their relationship fell apart.

Next up was the Blot which had hardly begun before Diane Duane and Peter Morwood were dragged out for another panel, then with only two out of the three stories discussed was interrupted again by a committee member rushing in to ask us if we'd finished as they needed the room for some more filk. So much for the Blot! I went out and had a look at the panel on dark fantasy which by the time I reached it had exhausted the subject and was sustaining itself on Diana and Peter's inexhaustible fund of stories, with occasional interventions from Kim Newman to explain the rationale for his latest alternative American history blockbuster. Mike Jeffries and Freda Warrington on the far end of the panel, sat there looking as if they wished it were all over. Eventually, even Simon Bissom couldn't think of any more questions to ask and it was. We all retired to the bar to restock on drinks and contemplate the fact that there probably wasn't any more day-time programming left, all the author's having been used so profligately on the first two panels. In fact there was a short freeform panel to close with, but since everyone had been as free and formless as possible already, it didn't last long. Time was running out - and so were some of the authors - no-one seemed inclined to reconvene the Blot, the bar closed, the tables were dismantled and anyone who could face it was told to come back later for the evening's fun.

The evening event was billed as a science fiction and fantasy-oriented fancy-dress party, and we were warned to arrive early as they might have to limit entry due to fire restrictions. Ha! When we arrived three quarters of an hour into the event, there was a knot of students around the door, and no-one else in sight. The DJ, we were assured, was on his way. Still, things did pick up after a while as more people arrived, and we got talking to Mad Max and Servalan who were at their first convention. Susan, the woman dressed as Servalan also had a couple of papier mache masks with her, both of them excellently painted. One of them was of Worf from Star Trek which she took over to the two people in Star Trek costume at the table designated as Ten Forward, and instantaneously transformed the guy in the yellow security jersey into a perfect replica of Worf. The only drawback was there were no eyeholes in the mask so he was a blind Worf who went around firing his phaser at random, or had to be led by his companion.

Most people seemed to be in costume. There were three characters from Dune, an Arthur Dent, a slave boy and even a nurse (though somehow this seemed to be cheating as the only point to her costume was that most of the top buttons were undone). The DJ never did arrive, so someone lent their CD player for the occasion. The atmosphere became animated and friendly; suddenly I felt part of something as you do when small conventions get together and it stops mattering if you know people already or not.

Then we all lined up for the judging - the security guard borrowed the Worf mask again, and Jane Barnett decided to enter as interpreter for me and Peter-Fred (we weren't precisely in costume, but Peter was wearing his Gothic gear and I was wearing black, which seemed good enough). There were prizes for almost everybody - Jane won us one for the most inaudible presentation (she said something and I thumped her on the back as she had already vetoed my first suggestion, which was to speak German). Her prize was a huge book of Dragonlance tales, so we generously let her keep it. Susan, wearing her other mask, a character from Legend, won a huge fantasy trilogy, which she claimed was the first prize she had ever won. (But then she also claimed to like fantasy trilogies!) The couple from Dune won the top prize of a signed piece of Fox art-work. Mike Jeffries passed round a wine box with free drinks for all, most of the reenactment team began rowing boats to a KLF tune and committee members wandered around looking pleased, and saying rash things like that they might do it all again next year. Since some of them, apparently, are dental students who are going to be here at least another three years, maybe they will. Who knows, next time I might turn up with higher expectations, or - more usefully for them - with friends.

Well, that's done con reports for the issue, so on to that other staple of fanzine articles, the travel story. (See, I can still remember how to do them!) Last year Peter-Fred's role in his company changed and he kept being sent off, the lucky sod, to various destinations in America and Europe. This is his favourite story.

A Dream of Flying by Peter-Fred Thompson

Back in May I was sent to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania for an American National Standards Institute sub-committee meeting, which isn't quite as dull as it sounds, but comes pretty close at times. Being in Harrisburg didn't help (or rather not even in it, but on the outskirts), since its sole claim to fame is the proximity of the Three Mile Island nuc-clear facility...terrific. The better known Gettysburg isn't far away, but I didn't get there. The plan was to fly in to Washington airport, get a smaller plane to Harrisburg, spend a few days cooped up in the hotel, surrounded by wonderful wonderful computer people, and then reverse the procedure via New York JFK.

Everything went well - even the meeting - until I got back to Harrisburg airport for the return journey. A colleague gave me a lift from the hotel so that I could get there in time for my 7am check-in (oh joy). For some unaccountable reason I wasn't feeling all that alert, so when the check-in assistant at the TWA desk told me that the early flight was cancelled I accepted it with amazing stoicism. Actually I have a theory that getting anxious about airport cock-ups must be one of the main causes of executive stress, so I don't bother (perhaps because I'm not an executive anyway). I take the attitude that if the worst comes to the worst and I end up stranded in the middle of nowhere I'll just check in to some plush hotel and claim it all on expenses. And flying on a Thursday meant that it was mostly on company time anyway. If it had been the weekend I might have been upset, but as it wasn't, I just sighed a little as she cheerfully explained that I would have to be rebooked onto a different flight.

Then came what turned out to be the \$64,000 question: did I have any connections to make? Actually I did, after a fashion, since the awesome power of the international air travel system was winding itself up for the heroic task of delivering me to Heathrow; unfortunately I live and work in Bristol. (On the other hand I'd probably hate to live at Heathrow, so perhaps it's just as well.) At INMOS, where I work, a lot of people use hire-cars to get to and from the airport, but I prefer to avoid driving when jet-lagged, so I take the coach or train. INMOS has a policy of only paying for second-class travel of any kind, and second-class rail travel is marginally preferable to a second-class car (for which read very small and tinny). So I had a train to catch to get me home (of which the last one was about 11pm British time), and TWA had a problem, or so it seemed, since after a while there were three of them fiddling with the computer trying to rebook me. I just gazed into space, trying to work out why I had got out of bed so early.

After various whispered consultations - including the mysterious comment "No, that is the flight number!" - and a lot of messing about with the computer they seemed to find some satisfactory compromise, and issued me with a modified ticket and instructions to take their next flight to JFK at 9.45. I had my suspicions that there must have been an earlier flight via some other airline, but they had apparently come up with some solution that enabled them to keep my business, so I went in search of breakfast, and afterwards cooled my heels for a couple of hours in the less-than-palatial confines of Harrisburg airport. When the time for the next flight approached I made my way to the designated departure gate (in this case a door from a corridor out onto the tarmac) and waited. And waited. 9.45 went by and still I waited, in the company of a slowly-growing group of Americans, including one retired couple who got quite agitated since it seemed they had some connection to make. I had a connection of my own, but when I checked my ticket I found that it wasn't until 1.45pm, so I went back to reading my book, resolutely refusing to worry. Eventually someone came in to explain that the aircraft's radar wasn't working, and the elderly couple were hurried away to catch some other plane. By about 10.15 the radar was fixed, so the remaining passengers boarded for the short hop to New York.

Getting to New York was easy - all I had to do was keep my seat belt fastened and let the aircrew do all the hard work. Getting to the BA terminal was a bit harder; even getting out of the TWA building was a challenge. After asking several sets of directions, I eventually found myself under the blazing sun, slightly regretting the elasticity of the rules that allowed my bag to be "hand luggage". In the hands of someone rather bigger and stronger it might have been, but my heart - and shoulders - sank as I considered the distance to the distinctive British Airways building. However there was nothing for it but to engage in the very un-American activity of walking. So that's how they get any exercise...

Wearily I arrived at the large glass cube with the BA logo at the top, only to find it deserted. Well, almost. Right at the far end, one entrance door was actually open. Inside were just two staff who put my bag through an X-ray scanner; only one check-in desk was manned, and that said First Class. Hesitantly I went to it and handed my modified ticket to the clerk, who gave me a strange look, but after a few moments he asked the usual questions about preferences and gave me a boarding card, with directions to go to Gate One. I crossed the empty concourse and headed into the depths of the terminal.

It was about midday, so according to the schedule TWA had given me, I had nearly two hours to kill before the flight. What I really wanted was a cup of tea - or, more realistically, given where I was, coffee - and the chance to buy some duty-free. What I found was corridors devoid of any life apart from the occasional cleaner and a lot of closed shops. It was a long walk to anywhere else, and besides, having had my bag security-checked I could hardly go back out again, so my only option was to cross the line into that strange, inter-continental territory that each airport has a piece of, the no-man's land between countries, where only those with passports and boarding cards may go.

The world beyond the passport check was, if anything, even emptier than the rest of the terminal. The gift-shops and coffee-shops were shut up as tight as if the recession had hit them. There were lights and a couple of people in the duty-free section, but when I tried to go in they said they weren't open until two o'clock. My plane would have left by then! I checked my boarding card and it confirmed that my flight was at 1.45. What on earth was going on? I sighed, and resigned myself to reading my book at the boarding gate once more. Then came the next mystery - just where was Gate One? Around me I found signs for gates 2-12 and 13-20, but no Gate One. I retraced my steps towards the entrance, and finally, there it was. A sign pointing to Gate One. I gazed at it, stupefied, unable to believe my eyes. It said "Gate One - Concorde Lounge".

Suddenly it all became clear to me. TWA's cancellation had made me miss the 10.00am Jumbo I was supposed to take, but I had a train to catch; presumably their computer had just told them that there was another flight which got me home on time - so the mad fools had changed my booking to Concorde! Checking my boarding card again, I found the section for special instructions - usually filled with "World Traveller Class" (i.e. cheap scum) - imprinted with the one word "Concorde". The flight number which had confused the TWA staff was 0004 - obviously BA reserve the low flight numbers for the supersonic service. So it was true. Obviously there had been some mistake, since I couldn't believe that I could really fly on Concorde without someone paying a lot more money, but there was nothing for it but to march in where even first class passengers fear to tread, and let BA sort it all out.

A woman in BA livery looked at me severely and asked to see my boarding card. "Here we go." I thought "She'll tell me I have to wait for the night-flight Jumbo." But she just smiled and handed it back, saying "Good afternoon, sir. Shall I take your coat?", so I went with the flow and sat down on a sumptuous sofa. A few minutes later I dared to pick up one of the fresh newspapers and began to read it, trying to look inconspicuous in case she had a change of heart and decided to check up on me properly.

After half an hour or so, a few immaculately dressed people began to drift in, and sat around looking elegant while making business deals on their cell-phones. At this point I suddenly realised that ten yards further up the lounge was a table laden with food and drink. So I finally got my cup of tea (in a Wedgewood china cup) and - deciding to make the most of it before someone spotted the error and threw me out - helped myself to whisky and canapés of smoked salmon and caviar.

As time passed and I still wasn't revealed as an imposter, and the obscure software bug which allowed a mere World Traveller to be re-booked onto the world's most exclusive scheduled service remained undiscovered, I began to relax and contemplate the possibility that I might actually fly on Concorde. Concorde: the world's only supersonic airliner; the greatest symbol of Britain's lost technological leadership. And, it must be said, probably the most beautiful aircraft ever built. Occasionally I had seen it taxiing ahead of some dull airbus taking me to some dull meeting, and never had it failed to thrill me, frail and slender beside the Boeings, but elegant and powerful, a vision of flight incarnate. I walked to windows at the end of the lounge, and there it was, waiting for me at the end of a boarding tube.

Then, without any fuss, the boarding began. I picked up my coat and bag, and stood in line. One last barrier to pass and then - yes! - I was aboard.

Of course, the real point of Concorde - ignoring all this rubbish about elegance and symbolism - is that it crosses the Atlantic *really fast*. So it would be stupid to pay the enormous fare and then turn up at the airport hours early. No wonder the check-in clerk had given me a strange look! I had been the first to check in by an hour or more. But the benefit was that I had the window seat in the very front row. Somewhere I had heard a rumour that Concorde is rather cramped and uncomfortable inside, so I was relieved to discover that my seat was practically a leather armchair, with so much legroom that it was difficult to reach the pocket with the in-flight magazine. This pocket also contained the Wine List, and a certificate to the effect that <blank> had travelled on Concorde on <blank>, signed by the chairman of BA. Obviously I wasn't the only passenger who would look on it as an experience worth remembering.

As the plane taxied out, the cabin crew came around asking if we would like Champagne? and the pilot assured us that the nearest and most favourable runway had been allocated and there were no obstacles to an immediate departure. Sure enough in no time at all we were poised at the end of the tarmac; then came the takeoff.

Used to hi-tech Airbuses and so forth, which spread their wings like a bird for low-speed, low-noise ascents, I had almost forgotten the thrill of acceleration, the tension of: will it lift before the runway runs out? Since Concorde's wings are designed for supersonic operation, and give lift only grudgingly, the afterburners came on straight away and I was pressed back into my seat as we roared down the runway. Even on the ground it was the fastest I've ever travelled; then, finally, it took to the air.

The angle of ascent was pretty steep, but not so steep that the cabin crew couldn't bring round the champagne. It seemed appropriate; after all, I was achieving one of my life-long ambitions. The advantage of the front-row seat was that right before me, across the front of the cabin, was a display of the flight statistics; speed, height, external temperature, flight-time and Mach number (the multiple of the speed of sound). My eyes were glued to that display as the plane flew ever higher and ever faster. As the Mach number reached 1.0, and the sky overhead turned from blue to black, with the highest of clouds way below, I sighed with contentment, and resolved to miss my connecting flights more often! But I knew, somehow, that it would never happen again...

Bristol has a very thriving Star Trek group, which I naively believed would be full of people interested in science fiction who only needed telling that there was a local Sf group to come flocking down to join us. In fact it's full of people who like watching Star Trek videos and swapping Star Trek picture cards, or else people who are too busy being part of the inner circle of the frighteningly active Star Fleet Registry to even consider it. Still, we have our own home-grown Star Trek enthusiast, Tim Goodrick to compensate for the massed ranks of trekkedom that failed to join (and, more importantly, to show us fourth and fifth series Next Gen videos), so perhaps it's not surprising that his contribution to the fanzine that began as an anecdote about his holiday in Greece has turned into:

THE AWAY TEAM GO SHOPPING

by Tim Goodrick

Last Officer's log: Stardate 92245

We have landed on an island on a blue-green planet which very much resembles Earth in the late Twentieth Century. Most of the crew have fallen under the influence of a drug known locally as O'ZOO. Its main effects seem to be to produce a feeling of immense well-being whilst at the same time severely restricting the powers of locomotion. I, and my fellow crewman, Acting Ensign Adrian Miles, do not seem to have been as badly effected as the rest, perhaps due to a tolerance built up through serious over-indulgence in the drug on an earlier shore-leave. We have decided to complete the mission ourselves.

We were warned that although the natives of this island, which they call "Rodos" or "Rhodes", appear to be very friendly they can be upset over even the most innocent breach of their social customs so we set out wearing our best "We come in peace" smiles. We felt that this was even more important as the day was hot enough to produce tempers as short as some of the skirts we used to see on the bridge.

Our mission was to bring back a selection of garments known as T-shirts for a forthcoming undercover operation involving our captain and other senior officers. These shirts are very similar to our own uniform tops but are usually more decorative. Luckily, Adrian was identical in build to the captain, so he could buy for him, and we would just have to guess the size for the rest of the officers. To accomplish our task we were disguised as English tourists who are well known all over the planet as charming, suave and genteel.

To play the part of tourists properly we would have to pretend to search for presents to take back to friends and relatives, preferably having no luck in finding anything suitable. The hunt for gifts should be mixed with a survey of all the shops selling alcoholic liquors to see which has the cheapest of the particular one that the tourists want to take back home. For a genuine English tourist this can lead not only to savings of 30p or even more but also an increasing thirst which can only be quenched by spending far more than is saved. For the sake of verisimilitude, we followed this ritual to the letter.

Eventually we were ready to approach the first of the vendors in a row of stalls in the older part of the city. We were cheerfully expecting a quick transaction to take place and then beam back to the ship.

The shirts were folded and laid overlapping in neat rows on a long table. Acting Ensign Miles seemed to be under the impression that he was Entropy Embodied. He pulled out and unfolded several identical shirts, suitably attracting the stallholder's attention. She approached us, asking "English?"

We nodded. "Very nice, this one," she said, spreading out one of the the shirts that the Acting Ensign had made a botched attempt at re-folding. "You want this? Only

1600 Drachma." This was about five pounds in English currency - very cheap for a genuine tourists.

Ensign Miles said nothing, but as quickly as the woman could re-fold and re-position the shirts he was pulling more and more out. "What are you looking for, Adrian?" It was clear to me that there were only four or five different designs and so far he had looked at about twenty shirts and did not seem inclined to stop. The last six had all been identically emblazoned "REEBOK". It was a word in no language I had encountered, although it seemed to have a vague Vulcan, or perhaps even Klingon, sound about it. I only hoped that it was not rude.

"I'm trying to find a medium." I blinked, not having previously suspected my colleague of spiritual tendencies. Then I saw that he was pointing to the label of the shirt, and realised that he must be referring to the size.

The stall-holder spread out the four different designs. "You like this?" She indicated a grey coloured one with bold splashes of black and the word "NIKE" written with a flourish across the chest. Perhaps that word had Vulcan origins as well.

Acting Ensign Miles ignored her and continued to pull out more and more shirts. "Have you got any medium?"

"Medium?" Her look of agitation was replaced by a smile. "You want large." She held up a shirt against Adrian. "Large. See."

"Have you got it in medium?" he insisted.

"Medium for children. You want large." She was no longer smiling.

"Won't that one do, Adrian?" I was now anxious to get away. We were attracting attention and the woman was getting upset.

"I want medium. I always have medium."

"But she says you need a large one." It was clear to me that the local size bands might be different to what we were used to.

"It'll be too big for the captain."

"I do it for 1400 Drachma. Very good price." The woman obviously thought that the Ensign's objections were just to try to get the price down.

"Haven't you got any medium?" He was still pulling shirts out here and there.

"Medium for children! You want large! Large! See!" Almost frantically, she held up another shirt. "He not child!" she shouted to another stall-holder. "He asks for medium! He not child!"

The situation had become so comic, that regrettably I could not hold back my laughter. "What you laugh at? Ho. Ho. Ho. Laugh at me? Very funny. Ho. Ho. Ho. English tourist laugh. Ho. Ho. Ho." The woman was angry now, like a cat pushed off its favourite chair.

I tried to explain that I was laughing at my companion and not her. She didn't believe me, hissing as she turned away.

"Why don't you try one on, Adrian?" I suggested.

Sullenly, he obliged. It was a good fit. "It's a good fit," I told him. He wasn't convinced.

"It's too long. I want to try a medium on. I always have medium."

The woman tried to explain about different manufacturers having different sizes but Acting Ensign Miles refused to listen. She brought a shirt out from the back of the stall. "This medium. For children! For CHILD!" She put it away and pointed to a few shirts. "You take one of these. 1200 Drachma.

I moved off to a discrete distance before the inevitable end. Adrian left the stall, and the irate woman, without buying anything. At the other end of the row of stalls he managed to find some shirts marked medium and tried one on. It looked very tight. He bought several. I bought a few large ones.

Some time later, in another part of town, as we prepared to beam back up, the whirr and click inside Acting Ensign Miles's brain was almost audible.

"They'll shrink when they get laundered, won't they?"

"Yes, but don't worry, I'm sure they'll get back into shape with a few tugs at the bottom while they're being worn."

And somewhere a woman laughs. Ho. Ho. Ho.

Oddly enough, I found more real science fiction fans at the local writer's group that I joined purely in the hope of some moral support for my feeble attempts at completing a novel. I was amazed to meet there, first, someone - Paul Hinder - who knew all about Interzone and the other magazines and anthologies that I've been failing to get my stories published in (not to mention all the semi-prozines that I'm so hazy on), and later, Jim Mortimore, who is collaborating on a Dr Who novel with one of the people I had met at a recent Milford. At one stage it seemed like the science fiction gang of three was about to take over, as no-one else but us ever brought along anything to read, and although there would be impassioned pleas from the remaining assembled for anything but SF, there wasn't much we could do if they hadn't brought in any work of their own. In fact the moral support became so good that I am now making a feeble attempt to complete two novels, but never mind. Meanwhile Paul, veteran of many such writers group (but unrepentant), has distilled his vast experience into the following guide:

HOW TO DO NUMBER 546789045 : WRITERS CIRCLES

by Paul Hinder

MATERIALS NEEDED: Mugs, Answering Machine, Pen, Paper, Word Processor, Whip, Tea, Coffee, Milk, Sugar.

1 GET MUGS.

No, not potential members. Mugs. To drink out of. You have to think of these things. Also chairs. On my first attempt, I managed the chairs, humping some spare ones in from the landing in to my mangy bedsit. And I'd polished the computer and hoovered the floor. But I had six mugs. And seven members...

Fortunately Brenda next door had a spare one.

2 MAKE SURE YOU HAVE AN ANSWERING MACHINE.

About five minutes into the proceedings, the phone usually rings. About ten minutes into the proceedings, the phone usually rings again. About fifteen minutes into the

proceedings, the phone usually rings. And so on. If you have an answering machine, then all the idiots who got lost on the way over won't bother the rest of you. The machine just clicks and squawks a few times - 'sorry, I'm hosting a writer's circle, please go away' - and then there's a distressed burp when they hang up. Good riddance. Anyone who can't read a map shouldn't be writing anything anyway. You sent them the address, didn't you? YOU DID SEND THEM THE NEW ADDRESS? - oh, well, never mind. Too late now.

Answering machines are also useful for handling queries out of hours, such as three o'clock in the morning, which is when potential writers often decide it's time they got involved in something sociable which will give them the company of their peers.

3 ORGANISE.

For this you need a piece of paper, a pen (or a word processor), and a whip. The piece of paper is for the order of business. The pen/wp is for writing it down with. The whip is for making sure the members keep to it, and don't ramble off on endless stories about their Auntie Ethel, who knows how to de-widgit G-works, where can you get cheap crockery, and other things not very relevant to the production of works of literary genius. YOU CAN'T LET THEM GET AWAY WITH IT - or the whole thing very quickly becomes no different from an evening in the pub, and anyone seriously interested in writing gets pissed off and goes to form their own writer's circle somewhere else (they won't invite you to it).

4 CATEGORISE

For this a wp is pretty well essential. You will end up with something like this:
MEMBERS.TYP:

Common Writer's circle types

001. 'I'm writing a Jackie Collins/Jeffery Archer/Stephen King type novel'. Usually this type turns up for one session, reads the precious first three pages that they've spent the last three years writing, and when it's not met with universal praise, acclaim and offers of publication, looks politely disappointed and never comes again.

002. 'I don't do a lot of writing but I've led such an interesting life..' Never does do any writing, and talks endlessly about the interesting life. Not interested in anybody else's writing. Unfortunately, keeps on coming, again and again and again and again...

003. 'I'm really seriously into the future of the world/serious political issues/the greening of the planet...' But not into writing, usually.

004. 'I'd like to learn how to write' No, you wouldn't. This is the type that thinks the writers circle is a cheap alternative to evening classes. If they're expected to spend more than half an hour a week on 'homework', they won't come again. Tell them you've spent 30 hours a week on it for three years, and so far earned twenty-five pounds, and they'll die of shock.

After some weeks of stages 1 to 4, you can AT LAST begin on the REALLY IMPORTANT bit...

5 CANNIBALIZE

This is what it's all about. You've met all these really odd people who think they're going to be writers. You've noted and categorised their mannerisms, you've been tactful about their dreadful prose, you've let them criticise your work, drink your tea, play with your word processor...

Now you can write about them.

This article was written in an unusual fit of enthusiasm in July after being nagged by the Bath SF group for my impressions on their fanzine and grew into something of a review of the state of fanzines as evidenced by those I was still receiving. Since then there have been later issues of a couple of the fanzines discussed (Slubberdegullion and BOB) and a number of new or revived titles, so my apologies for not covering them, but I don't think they invalidate anything I'm saying, just provide a pleasing sign that it is actually worth talking about fanzines again.

REINVENTING THE FANZINE?

by Christina Lake

The most enthusiastic fanzine producers that I know of at present are the Bath SF Discussion Group. They've only been meeting for just over a year, and already they are on to their second fanzine - or journal, as they call it, and appear to have every intention of keeping up a quarterly schedule.

Their productions, in keeping with the designation journal, have a smoothly professional look, obtained by the use of a good desktop publishing package, and a bit of cutting and pasting featuring book covers and photographs. A far cry from the neo's traditional first fanzine featuring wonky typewriter, bad spelling and illegible photocopying. Though with today's technology (excluding the photocopier in my library which resolutely favours shades of grey), this picture must be well out of date. People are more likely to have access to a computer, and with it, a word-processing package, than a typewriter, and are definitely going to find reasonable photocopiers more accessible than such arcane implements as duplicators.

So, there I am with my nice new shiny (for it is so) copy of *Aquae Sulis - No Parking* in my hands, and turn to a contents page that suggests both a modicum of humour (in the biographical details of the perpetrators, and in the contents listings, which gave alternative, and generally more funny titles to the articles complete with a slightly flippant summary of their matter) and a great deal of seriousness as the accompanying editorial proclaims its agenda of provoking proper discussion of SF.

Sadly, the group's humour was not to be much in evidence throughout the rest of the fanzine. The first article is a discourse on SF book covers from Simon Bisson, editor for this issue. Simon seems to be writing a fairly straight-forward history of the subject. A useful run-through, no doubt, but hardly the provocative stuff we were promised by Simon himself in his editorial. Rather than demonstrating how book cover design manipulates the market, we get to find out, at most, how trends manipulate the cover artists, and I'm left wondering, unworthily, if there was any more point to the article than as a showcase for intercutting SF covers into the text. With a bit more space, Simon might have taken this overview somewhere, but after two sides it's over, and we are jettisoned into a new article, featuring more photocopied book covers, this time to illustrate a new reader's foray into the world of advanced SF reading, using a selection of books recommended by members of the group. A good concept, I thought, but unfortunately since the reviews consist largely of plot summaries, it won't do much for the reader who, unlike Nicki Trasler, has read these books already. I would have liked to see more on how the books effected her and where they might take her future reading. As it is, there's little to discuss, unless you want to say why *Ender's Game* made you want to puke! Again, the article turns in at two sides, and over the page we find... yes, yet more intercut copies of book covers. This time the subject under discussion is the works of Philip José Farmer, and Stuart Pike uses his allotted two sides to do a whistle-stop tour of the less familiar works of PJF. To be fair, this article did actually make me consider reading some more Farmer, which is not a thought that has occurred to me in over a decade, but like the previous article, I really felt it spent too much of its space summarising the stories and too little telling us what it is about Farmer that makes Stuart possess and treasure almost sixty of his books.

The next double page spread also features book-covers, but this time they're arranged in a nice circle, and in fact we've arrived at something a bit more to my taste. Ben Staveley-Taylor is telling the tale of something that happened to him, that is to say the saga of his involvement in the setting up and running of the

Kerosina publishing company. As someone who saw Kerosina, and its T-shirts, around in its heyday, but never knew what it was all about, except that they published Keith Roberts hardbacks, I found this extremely interesting. Also Ben seems to have pulled off the difficult trick of being candid about the personalities and problems involved without being bitchy or bitter, which given the events described, must have taken some doing. This account also broke the pattern of articles ending punctually at the bottom of their second side (though only by running to four sides instead! A bit too regimented, I thought)

Next up, we're safely back in the discussion group's favourite territory - books (and their covers!) Like Simon, Steve Andrews takes us through a history, this time of utopias, but unlike Simon has more of a thesis, specifically that the trendy "atopias" of cyberpunk are ducking out on SF's potential (or does Steve mean duty?) to offer solutions to the problems of organising our society. Steve's writing is stylish and opinionated enough to keep you reading through what is quite a heavy subject, and even to provoke some of that discussion that the editor was so keen to promote.

I'm not sure that the page layout does much service to the next article, as its cut-up first page suggests discontinuity rather than mind-altering effects. This attempt to give some context to *Altered States* (the novel and the film), was of passing interest, if only to make me wonder why on earth I'd never seen it!

Finally, apart from a Kerosina bibliography (a belated illustration to Ben's article?), the answers to the previous issue's quiz (which nobody bothered to enter), we have the letter column, featuring, in what seemed to be their entirety, the three letters the previous fanzine had garnered. Am I misreading Martin Stewart, or does his loc really imply that Pam Wells has gone on to be a filker? Questions must be asked! Investigative journalism may not be the Bath group's forte, but can they pass up a story like this? The previous issue undoubtedly deserved more than three letters, but perhaps the Bath group's distribution policy is as much to blame as apathy - after all with a print run of only 50, and many of those going to authors rather than normal mortals willing to put pen to paper (okay, fingers to keyboard), perhaps the level of response is not surprising.

Interestingly enough, Ian Sorensen, in his introduction to BOB #3 states his intention of producing a 'proper' fanzine. If you were a member of the Bath SF Discussion Group you might be excused for wondering what the hell he was on about. After all, as anyone could tell them, Mr Sorensen has been producing fanzines for a number of years, first in the form of the endless 'Mince' series, designed one is tempted to believe, to keep Ian's pupils productively occupied collating, stapling etc., and then *Conrunner*, the sine qua non of any budding techie. After all, what more proper subject for fanzines than con-running? There is something solidly satisfying about discussing the logistics of conventions, offering as it does, issues with solutions, debates with outcomes and all the excitement of careers made and broken. It's office politics writ large with none of the respect for hierarchies and organised hypocrisy that keeps such stories hidden within the normal company. (At this rate, I'll actually convince myself into reading one of the damn things!)

But, of course, what Ian actually means by a proper fanzine is the type of fanzine that was popular when he first came into fandom, when it was understood that fanzines were there to give you the kind of material you didn't see in professional publications: personal experience, humour, parodies, revelations, theories, confessions, irreverent accounts of your friends love lives. (This was before the days when you could get such writing in *The Weekend Guardian* and the *Independent on Saturday*!) Fanzines were meant to be interactive (what people later came to call incestuous) and talk to each other in the form of reviews and letters, making the whole fanzine scene greater than the sum of its sometimes rather ordinary parts. Also it was about writing to your strengths. Just as everybody is supposed to have one novel in them, if you found the right subject, the thing a person cared about, or had experienced deeply, then even the most mediocre of writers, could turn in something worthwhile.

Ian Sorensen, I suspect, has never been sure if he has anything to say and so covers up his uncertainty with humour, but in this issue of BOB he is on solid

ground. He has experienced something that most of us have not, and with luck won't, an attack of cystitis, plus complications, which being intrinsically lavatorial means that his readers' attention is never in doubt, and he can settle down to making the most of what was obviously a pretty bad experience. Ian maintains fairly insistently throughout what we used to call 'editorial presence' (and criticise the likes of Tony Berry for lacking), but the strain of writing the whole thing in appropriately fannish mode, bar the letters, is beginning to show, one suspects, as Ian hastily declares a theme for the next issue, and prepares to go back to his favourite role of compilation interspersed with humorous comments.

The most fannish moment in BOB, in that it involves the intersection of two fanzines, comes when Ian refers to seeing Judith Hanna in the audience of Question Time "presumably off-duty" he says. In fact, as I already knew from reading the full story in FTT (reprising its original title of Fuck The Tories, and quite right too!), Judith was there in the hope of asking a question on behalf of Women's Transport Charter, as part of her role as a publicity officer for the pressure group Transport 2000. Judith writes an article about what she does at work, and very instructive it is too, as she manages to convey in a non-didactic and readable fashion what Transport 2000 is all about, government thinking on transport, her own views on the matter, and the joys and stresses of working for a pressure group.

FTT (edited by Judith Hanna and Joseph Nicholas) is a fanzine that has long known what it wants to be, which is to say, a forum for politically oriented articles, and makes no apologies for its contents, nor allowances for its readers levels of knowledge. If there is a serious issue to be discussed, it will be discussed without any sugaring of the pill, or suggestion that a page of unbroken text without any jokes in it, might be too much for the butterfly-like attention span of the average fan. And if the letter column is anything to go by (take heart Bath group) it works, as there seem to be plenty who are ready to take up the arguments of the previous issues. In FTT 13, the most serious article consists of Joseph Nicholas telling his none too happy experiences of conveying his political views to fans in the UK and the US, followed by another tilt at the views of Francis Fukuyama (the one who posits the end of history as we know it thanks to the collapse of Communism.)

Then, just to prove that political fanzines need not be humourless we get "Poor old Charles : A modest Proposal" in which Abi Frost, with tempting plausibility, argues exactly why Prince Charles would make the ideal candidate for the post of the next Tsar of Russia. In this excellent article, Abi uses known facts about the royal family to take us beyond absurdity to an (almost) logical conclusion.

Abi Frost is also responsible for a fanzine of her own, or rather an A4 sheet entitled *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* which is blatantly and unashamedly aimed at a select audience of those who know the same people as Abi. It is actually an account of the run-up to the General Election, plus the Bastercon in Blackpool, and is a fluent pastiche of 18th century writing. Unfortunately it is done just a bit too thoroughly. The 18th century style of referring to everyone by initials (e.g. Mr L., Mr I. of Mile End etc) whilst adding authenticity and much amusement in places eventually leads to such obscurity that my comprehension founders, and by the time I've tried to work out who the initial might belong to, the thread of the narrative has been lost. Which just goes to prove that it's not enough to be there; you have to know the right people there as well!

With Nigel Richardson, and his fairly regular fanzine *Slubberdegullion*, there is no question but that you don't want to be there. Even Nigel (especially Nigel) doesn't want to be there. It's his life, the pages state, and he'd rather it wasn't. After issue three, that seemed to insult everyone in sight, no. 4 is back on track to provoke the normal mixture of sympathy and irritation. Me, I still like reading Nigel enough to be alarmed at the threat of exclusion from his mailing list - is it the thrill of finding out what media created image of desirable women Nigel will fall for next? Is it the joy of discovering what Nigel currently hates most about his job, his work colleagues, and his fellow passengers on the morning train from East Garforth? Is it the Glen Warmingier diary (a character surely created to prove that Nigel is quite normal!) No, it must just be Nigel's writing style. I've always enjoyed the way he puts words together and still do.

And for those of you who think a fanzine must be about something, there is a run-down on what Nigel thinks of the current music scene, his theories on smart drugs and reviews of the comics he thinks might be worth reading.

Slubberdegullion, Memoirs and FTI convince because their authors/editors are convinced themselves. They don't want to be anything but what they are. BOB is trying to be something it thinks it wants to be, but could, one feels change its mind at any moment, and ask people, say, to write in and swamp it with their stories of five minutes of fame. As to *Aquae Sulis*, the editorial rotation system which will give it five different editors, will probably mean that it's a long time before it resolves the question of whether it wants to be a serious critical journal, working its way up to being almost as good as *Vector*, say, or takes on the mantle of Simon Bisson's aspirations that it should win a *Nova*, and starts including articles that don't mention books all the time. Given the determination of the members that the discussion of written sf remain the focus of the fanzine (and the meetings), then I would predict the former.

Postscript

Whilst still writing this, I happened to read an article about a new football magazine to replace all the scrappy fanzines that the fans of Bristol City have had to put up with heretofore. You know the type - printed on glossy paper, full colour cover, written by professionals, business cards, the lot. Apparently they've persuaded existing fanzine editors to come in on the act with them, the idea being that the magazine would be so professional that no-one else would be able to compete. To me it's rather sad. People always want to turn fanzines, with their idiosyncracies and personal view-points, into imitations of the professional magazines we already have by the shelf-full in the supermarket. 'Senior consultant' on the project Steve Henderson provides his own justification: "Fanzines covered a particular era. Now that's passed, there's got to be a magazine to cater for the new audience." Steve's theory is that football's audience has changed since the fanzine boom of the late '80s, into responsible executive types looking for a serious publication for the over 30s. The audience for SF fanzines has clearly changed too. Does this mean we have to contemplate a new serious, socially responsible breed of fanzines for the 1990s?

Or how about quality assurance for fanzines? Thankfully, not everyone is enamoured of 90s style professionalism. Computer programmer Brian Hooper thinks it's a load of bollocks and under the pressure of the stupidity around him has written his own version of the truth behind the corporate buzzwords

A Management Lexicon (as compiled by Brian Hooper)

BS 5750 *n.* A form of Total Quality Management [*q.v.*] in which programmers abandon all attempts to write computer programs, contenting themselves with documentation, reviews of documentation, and revisions of procedure.

Career Progression *n.* Increases in pay and number of subordinates earned by strict conformity to standard procedure, sound questioning [*q.v.*] at meetings [*q.v.*], and wearing a suit.

Clarification *n.* A sudden reversal of a previously announced policy, usually performed by management in a desperate attempt to avert an impending riot.

Consultation *n.* A period of time in which management promulgate disinformation prior to announcing a purge or other abrupt reversal of policy.

Contractor (*n.*) Disloyal and evanescent resource [*q.v.*] who is highly paid to be taught elementary programming by the permanent staff.

Director *n.* Senior form of manager [*q.v.*] with no perceptible expertise in any field whatever.

Downsizing n. A form of purge in which a real or imaginary financial crisis [q.v.] is used as misdirection to conceal sackings and demotions.

Environment n. Otiose word attached to other nouns to add grandeur, esp. in such phrases as 'computer environment' (=computer) and 'office environment' (=office)

Estimate n. A tentative guess as to the time required for a piece of work, which, after division by two, will be used to form a schedule [q.v.]

Estimate vb. To reduce below any conceivable requirement the amount of time available to complete some programming project.

Fact n. Any statement of the management's desires.

Leave n. Synonym for holiday, used to give a militaristic air to everyday activities.

Leave vb. To be sacked or pressured into resigning.

Manager n. Highly-paid man in a suit, serving no clearly defined purpose.

Meeting n. An association of managers and (sometimes) resources [q.v.] in which all present endeavour to propagate disinformation.

Pay Freeze n. Method of saving money in which no-one other than management is awarded a pay rise.

Performance Related Pay n. A system of remunerating resources [q.v.] in which that person's blatant self-publicity is taken into account when determining salary, in the rare event of there not being a pay freeze [q.v.]

Presentation n. A form of meeting [q.v.] in which only the senior person present may propagate disinformation, the others remaining silent.

Quality n. or *adj.* Absolute adherence to standards and procedures without regard to the fitness of the finished product.

Question n. A form of sycophancy often used in a meeting [q.v.] or presentation [q.v.] in which a resource [q.v.] introduces or invites a prepared speech by a manager [q.v.]

Reorganisation n. A form of purge in which a change of command structure is used as a misdirection to conceal sackings and demotions.

Resource n. Programmer, used to emphasise the interchangeability and replaceability of these persons.

Review n. A form of meeting [q.v.] in which a resource [q.v.] is shamelessly flattered and buttered up by management as a motivational exercise. Often an alternative to a salary review [q.v.]

Rumour control n. Nebulous organisation based in public houses near the office; the only reliable source of corporate information.

Salary Review n. A form of meeting [q.v.] in which a resource [q.v.] is insulted and slandered while disinformation about a financial crisis is promulgated and a pay freeze [q.v.] announced.

Schedule n. A detailed list of irrevocable commitments to delivery dates which must be fulfilled irrespective of the state of the product at the time.

Support vb. To deny any knowledge of, eschew any responsibility for.

Timesheet n. An association of random numbers between 0 and 7.25 with meaningless and arbitrary codes used by management for a primitive form of numerology.

Total Quality Management n. Oxymoronic phrase which seems to mean the setting of standards and procedures to which standards and procedures must adhere, although this is by no means certain.

Truth n. Any statement or assertion serving the purposes of the management.

Unperson n. Person who has been sacked, and is not mentioned in conversation with management (but who will nevertheless remain on the phone list for about two years) (the logical derivative formation 'unresource' does not appear to be popular).

Brian is currently looking for a new job! Nathan likes his job, but has some interesting hobbies. See what you make of this one-

HIFF
by Nathan Sidwell

Rachel came in terribly excited about a new reserve she had discovered. Everyone wanted to know the quality, and her dissemination of the coordinates kept being interrupted to show the goods. I had been milling about, half-heartedly desiccating the stores, since my earlier run. Having memorized the coordinates and check sum, I felt my way to the launch board. It seemed that a few others had also found the reserve and were on their way up to inform more. After the cursory ID check I went about the pre-flight checks, you know overdriving the engine when clamped to the deck and such. There was a good two hours before dusk, so I would have no trouble making the dash. After a final check I was off.

It's impossible to describe the delight at being airborne, it gives a thrill no matter how often I fly. I always fly around hiff before setting off, to see the activity around and make sure the beacon functions. This is always crowded, there perpetually being a collection milling around all day, just buzzing hiff. After reaching the regulation altitude and required bearing, I set off. The flight path is over some fairly rugged terrain, which makes it more interesting. I hate the straight dashes, they are all take-offs and landings, or monotony in between. Flying a few feet above ground requires a lot of concentration and gets the adrenalin going. Once I got careless and flew too high into enemy air space. Luckily I was unloaded, on the outward leg, and managed to get back to hiff. Every good flier has to have one close shave in order to know her limits, more is just stupid.

The range has decreased and I start a visual ground search. This time I'm not too far out, the radial pattern of tracks shows up a reserve. I use one to land along. After taxiing to the release, I pick up what I can. As always I have not taken my capacity and must buzz round several of them. There are stories of high capacity reserves, but I think they don't exist, merely being another Holy Grail to look for. Though Josh says she spoke to someone who said she's found one, another "friend of a friend" story. This time it took about a dozen visits for a full load. Each taking longer than I had anticipated, as Rachel had neglected to specify the spacing of this cluster.

With full hold I take the flight back at a more sedate pace, hugging terra firma and taking the turns early. I will never know how a bumbler manages with all that extra bulk, but I suppose that is the price you pay for self-sufficiency. Getting to the landing stack I see there has been a raid attempt. A group of carcasses surround the marauder's wreckage. One day I will have to take my turn at security. Landing on the strip I trundle in. Security checks my markings and I'm back to the familiar scent of the hiff.

Now to unload the pollen.

Tony Walsh showed such faith in the existence of the Bristol Group fanzine even after a furlough of three years as it then was, that he gave me this, totally unsolicited, last Christmas. After that, what could I do - except feel guilty? So, here, many months later, is the article that finally made the fanzine happen.

MF AND ME, AND THE MARSH STREET TRANSMITTER

by Tony Walsh

The day I became convinced that fact is indeed stranger than fiction was a Sunday in March some years ago when I was an Instrument Technician with Bristol Waterworks Company. It all began after lunch...

I was relaxing in an armchair by the fire and nursing what felt suspiciously like the beginnings of flu. Not that my suspicions bothered me much; lunch had been tasty, the chair was comfortable and the fire cheerful. Even the possibility of an emergency call-out seemed remote as I settled more comfortably in my chair. I began to doze. That was probably when my subconscious began emitting signals about needing an undisturbed afternoon. No doubt it meant well, but had it seen The Fates duty rota then it would surely have avoided emitting any kind of signal at all.

Duty that afternoon was taken not by Benevolent Fate, who controls the pleasant events of life like love at first sight or coming into a fortune. It was taken by Malevolent Fate, who controls the unpleasant events like Tory governments and greenhouse effects. And MF had become bored with all forms of pollution. She had decided to scale down and to use the potential of her data acquisition and control systems to entertain herself with manipulation of some individual. I was about to be that individual.

The instant that MF's screen displayed my subconscious' signals her fingers began to fly across her keyboard. Within milliseconds a new programme was in control and my fate sealed. She settled back. It was going to be an entertaining afternoon.

My phone rang. Half asleep, I fumbled the handset to my ear, "Hello."

It was Malcolm Mallard, a shift operator in the Waterworks' control room at head office. "Is that you, Tone?"

I winced. I hate being called Tone.

"Yes Mal, it is. What's the problem." I asked the question without too much concern. Despite being the only Instrument Technician on the payroll in those days, my call-outs were few. Many of the plants and systems could be run on manual until the next day. Also, operators often called me only for reassurance that a problem was not critical. But there were exceptions.

"It's the Marsh Street transmitter," Mallard announced.

The Marsh Street transmitter was one of the exceptions. I groaned. MF smiled.

Marsh Street is in Bristol city centre's commercial area beneath which runs a very old trunk water main. Twice in recent times it had burst under pressure and caused expensive flood damage. To avoid a recurrence the pressure was now monitored constantly by a newly tapped transmitter installed in the company's small subsidiary office in an office block on the same street. A dedicated telephone line carried the transmitter's signal to a control room indicator in the head office four miles distant. Thus the operator had warning of pressure problems. The importance of the indicator was reflected in the standing orders: 'Any fault must receive instant attention.' MF had chosen well.

"Tell me more, Mal."

"Well, my pointer's gone top scale and I don't know if it's because of the pressure or if it's a fault in the instrument."

"Are there any mains gangs working in the centre today, on repairs or relaying pipes?"

"No."

"Any other reason for a high pressure?"

"Not that I can think of."

"Then I'd better do some checking. I'm on my way."

I put on some warm clothes and drove into town in my company van.

I parked in front of the office and scanned the street. There was no sign of tell tale springs of water. Key in hand, I stepped up to the office door. Then I remembered that the door was not fitted with a standard company lock. My standard key was useless. I muttered a self-reprimand and headed for the nearest phone box.

I called Mallard and explained my problem.

"Is there a spare key on your keyboard?"

"We don't keep one here Tone."

"So?"

There was no response.

"Mal."

"Yes."

"How am I going to get into the office?" The chilly March air put an edge on my voice.

"I'm not sure."

"Think Mal, who would open up on a normal working day?"

"Oh yeah! The office manager."

"So call him and ask him to come and let me in. And call me back when he's on his way."

I gave him the phone box number and hung up.

The inside of the phone box was only marginally warmer than the outside and the flu was now more than a mere suspicion. My bowels, too, were beginning to suggest something pending. I turned up the collar of my jacket and thrust my hands deep into the pockets. It seemed an age before the phone rang. The news was bad: "The manager's out and he's got the keys on him," Mallard told me, "but his wife says there's a spare in his desk drawer."

"Which desk?" As if I didn't know!

"The one in the office. Oh, I see. That won't help will it." He fell silent. I began to feel irritated.

"Then what will?" I asked. "Who else might have a key?"

"There's a caretaker, lives on the top floor of that block, I think," he answered slowly, "maybe his number's here somewhere."

"Then why not look for it, and call him?"

A minute or two later he spoke again.

"I've got it Tone. I'll call him. Hang on."

"I hang on your every word, Mal." The sarcasm was wasted.

Another minute or two and he was back again.

"It's OK, Tone. He's got a key and he'll meet you at the door in a couple of minutes."

"Good. I'll call you from inside the office. And Mal, one thing more."

"What's that, Tone?"

"For Christ's sake stop calling me Tone!"

"Okay To-"

I hung up before he could do it again.

Marsh Street was still dry as I walked back to the office. I felt encouraged by this. With any luck it would not be a pressure problem; just an easy transmitter fault and I would soon be home in bed.

I waited impatiently on the chilly street, depressed by its Sunday emptiness; by that air of redundancy which shrouds a city's commercial area at the weekends. I thought of how different it would have been in the eighteenth century when Bristol's centre was a busy port and Sunday no exception. Some of the area's old inns still survive: Hole in the Wall, Naval Volunteer, Llandogger Trow. I recalled that it was at the Llandogger that Daniel Defoe reputedly met the famous rescuee Alexandre Selkirk and was inspired by his true account of lonely shipwreck on a desert island. Maybe Robinson Crusoe had been conceived in their talk one Sunday as they strolled where I now stood.

Time passed and I too began to feel like a stranded castaway, forgotten on the lonely pavement. I got into the van for warmth. Yet more time passed without sign of the caretaker. With rising impatience I decided to drive back to the phonebox.

I began speaking the instant I was connected. "Mal, have you been talking to the right man in the right building?"

"What do you mean, Tone - er Tony?"

"I mean I've waited fifteen minutes and he's not shown up! Now will you please find out why."

I heard him using another phone. Then he was back on my line, "He says you weren't there."

"What! He's lying." Annoyance tightened my voice. "Listen mate, if that main burst then you and me'll be in serious trouble. So, if he's not there when I get back I'm going to kick in the bloody door. Right?"

"But T - " I hung up.

Within the minute I was back at the office. Shortly afterwards a man came around the corner from where the office block continued down a small side street. I knew him for a caretaker instantly. His was the type that never stands out from even the smallest crowd. In fact, were he in one, then it would be the crowd that stood out from him. He was monochrome in his dull drabness; the only spark of life came from the malice crouched in his eyes. Here was MF's ace agent.

"Are you Mister Walsh?" he asked.

"I am. Where were you fifteen minutes ago."

"On the corner."

"So why didn't I see you? And why didn't you see this?"

I pointed at the large WATER logo along the side of my van. He did not answer. I became suspicious and asked another question.

"Where do you live?"

"In the flat." He pointed to the top of the building. "Up there."

Insight overcame the effects of flu for a moment as I realised what had happened. To avoid coming down he had scanned the street from a window in his flat. But his view had only been along the side street to the corner into Marsh Street. My annoyance notched up to anger as I spoke again.

"If you'd come down when asked, then I wouldn't have been kept hanging around in the cold, would I?"

"I don't know what you mean."

He was good at barefaced lying, but I could tell he knew exactly what I meant. I gleaned a crumb of satisfaction from this small victory but MF was only playing with me, as I discovered when I spoke again, "Now if you'll unlock this door..."

The malice in his eyes came up on all fours as he replied, "I don't have a key for this door." He had snatched away my crumb.

"You what!" I stared at him in frustrated disbelief, and sweat began to bead my forehead as I pointed at the road. "For your information there is a very old pipe runs under there which can burst any minute now. And if it does, then a lot of water will go swilling around your basement under there," I pointed at the foot of the building, "And when the building owners hear about your bloody unbloody-cooperative attitude, then your flat up there," I pointed to the top of the building, "will have a new bloody tenant! Do I make myself clear?"

"There's no need for that attitude," he said, walking back towards the building's main entrance on the corner, "we might get in through here." I followed.

He unlocked the large doors and we stepped into a foyer. To one side of it I spied a small door whose location seemed right. I pointed to it and he spoke, "Do you happen to have a key for this one?"

He ignored my sarcasm and began trying his ring of keys in the lock. The door opened on the third try and I stepped through. It was the right office.

The transmitter was mounted on a wall diagonally in front of me. Its pointer was indeed indicating top scale but, more importantly, its internal mechanism was not giving out the audible buzz of normal operation. It was silent. Ah, I thought with great relief, it's not a pressure problem, only a blown fuse. I stepped towards it, a distance of five paces. MF's next move came with a timing of awesome precision.

Exactly on my third step the transmitter began to buzz. I stopped dead, staring rigidly as the pointer swept back to normal and a neon ceiling light plinked into life.

"What's happening?" I said faintly.

"That'll be SWEB." It was the caretaker's voice, from the doorway. I turned to query him, "SWEB?"

"South Western Elec -"

"I know what SWEB is," I snapped. "What's it to do with this?"

"The local substation's off for maintenance. It's due back on about now."

"Did you tell the operator when he rang you?"

"He should have known. Everybody was told about it last week."

His face was expressionless during this exchange but his malice was now free footed in the space between us.

I decided to kill him several times. First I'd pull him apart from the feet up, then I'd put him back together and do it again from the head down, then I'd... Then I realised that flu had weakened me too much for such a strenuous activity, so I opted to search for the spare key whilst he waited. I found it in the desk of the manager's private office and tested it in the street door before dismissing him. As he left I followed him into the foyer, leaving the small door on the latch.

"Before you go, is there a toilet?" I asked.

He stepped out onto the street as he answered. "It's downstairs, along the basement corridor."

The briefest flick of a smile crossed his face as he closed the door on me, but I was in too much of a hurry to be alerted. It was a few seconds later that I realised my mistake: the toilet door was locked.

I pushed. I kicked. I rattled the handle furiously. All in vain. The only signs of willingness to open were coming from my lower bowel. I clenched both it and my teeth and shuffled upstairs to use the manager's phone. Very carefully, I eased myself into his chair and dialled the control room.

As I waited for the connection, a thought that had been a small niggle at the back of my mind matured into a full blown suspicion: the caretaker had been correct in suggesting Mallard should have known about the power out. As he came on the line, it clicked and buzzed oddly, another MF special was being signalled.

"Is that you, Mal?" My throat was sore.

"It's working, Tone. Pressure's at normal. I knew you'd soon sort it out. What was it?"

I ignored his witter. "Are you sitting at the control desk?"

"Er, yeah. Why?"

"Then swivel your chair round to face the notice board and look for memoes about Marsh Street."

"What do you mean?"

"Just do what I ask, Mal"

I heard his chair creak, then silence. After a while the chair creaked again. "Er, Tony mate," The hesitation in his voice confirmed my suspicion.

"You've found a memo from SWEB, haven't you?" I was trying to growl but my throat could do no better than a broken croak. "And it says there's a power out here this afternoon, doesn't it?"

"I didn't see it. Honest!"

"You probably didn't look when you came on shift. So you got me here on a fool's errand. And I don't like that, Mal."

"There's the overtime." He tried to mollify me, and failed. "Sod the bloody overtime. I'm ill and should be home in bed. In fact that's where I'm going now. And you can make a note in the log that I'm off work until further notice. Right?"

"Right. And I'm sorry."

"Oh forget it. Goodbye." I croaked as I hung up and prepared to leave. I released the latch to lock the small foyer door, checked the transmitter a last time and then, with some feeling of relief, approached the street door. MF was on the edge of her seat as I took the key from my pocket.

I turned the key a full circle in the lock, withdrew it and pushed. The door did not move. I pulled. Again, no movement. A quick to and fro on the handle convinced me that the door was still locked. Puzzled, I raised the key to eye level for examination. Shiny broken metal winked its horrifying message: the levers had parted from the shaft and now lay somewhere within the lock. I was trapped.

Despair overwhelmed me and I sagged against the door; my hot brow pressed to the cool glass. As I slumped a feverish hallucination began to blot out the awful reality of my predicament. Through glazed eyes I looked down the steps to the pavement which was so close but might as well have been ten thousand miles away. And if it was that far away, I thought, then it could be a beach on an island just like Robinson Crusoe's island and I could be on it. Reality receded further. I could feel hot sand between my toes, feel a bright sun on my face, hear birds calling, waves breaking. I had become Robinson Crusoe, and a ship was coming to rescue me, just like in the book."

"And in the book," a small voice added, "he waited twenty-eight years."

I shuddered in horror and fought to recover my composure, but the small voice would not stop - "...twenty-eight years, twenty-eight years, twenty..."

Then suddenly a louder saner voice broke in, "But he didn't have a telephone, did he?"

Once again I eased very carefully into the manager's chair and rang the control room.

"Hello." It was a woman's voice answering.

"Oh!...Er..." I was taken off-guard. "I must have a wrong number. Sorry."

I disconnected and started to redial. I was selecting the second digit when I became aware that the phone's bell was tinkling in sync with the rotation of the dial. By the fourth digit I recalled that I had met this oddity before and knew what it meant. It was very probable that a fault in my phone was holding the line of the number I had just rung, therefore I could not ring out. With sinking heart I put the phone to my ear and prayed.

"Hello." It was the same woman. My prayer had gone unheeded, and reality began to recede once more. "Oh no!" I sobbed. "Twenty eight years."

"Pardon? Look, who are you? Is this some sort of joke?"

I struggled for composure as I answered. "No, it isn't a joke. Honestly." I tried not to gabble. "It's just that I'm trying to call Bristol Waterworks' head office and keep getting your number instead. There must be a fault on the phone...please don't get the wrong idea."

"A fault? Then we'd better report it," she replied, with a practical tone.

The tone heartened me. MF had made a mistake at last and I was speaking to someone who sounded sensible; but I couldn't wait for the GPO, I was far too ill. I chose my next words with care. "Trouble is," I said, "I have a problem and must get an urgent message to the Waterworks' office. Could you try to get through for me?"

"I can try. What's the number and message?"

"If you ring double six five, double eight one, you'll speak to Malcolm Mallard. Tell him that Tony Walsh, that's me, has a faulty phone and needs him to ring Marsh Street urgently. And please emphasise the urgency. Is that okay?"

"It seems clear," she told me. "And I hope you get your problem sorted out."

"So do I. And thank you."

I relaxed as much as I dared, and settled down to wait for a call from Mallard. Almost immediately, another effect of the phone fault made itself apparent as the irritating tinkle started up again. This meant only one thing: the woman's line was still tied to my phone and she could no more ring out than I. MF was overcoming the mistake.

I snatched the handset to my ear. "Sorry, but it's me again," I said.

"Oh... but I dialled the number you gave me."

"I know, but the fault is more serious than I thought." I was trying to think as I spoke. "I'll have to disconnect this end somehow, or you'll never get a free line." I had spotted the phone's terminal block. "Can you hang up and try again in a couple of minutes?" My voice was getting hoarser by the second and I was beginning to fear she would abandon me as obscene caller, but her reply dispelled my fear. "Very well," she said. "Two minutes it is."

The terminal block was on the wall, close to floor level. Hurriedly, I took a small screwdriver from my jacket pocket and crouched down. My haste was almost fatal. I had forgotten to clench, and only avoided disaster by throwing myself sideways onto the floor. I had to maintain this position, stretched full length,

whilst making the disconnection. What with the uncomfortable position and the sweat in my eyes I found it difficult to concentrate on the wiring's colour code. Eventually, after a couple of minutes of struggle, I reconnected and, very unhurriedly, raised myself to get back into the chair and wait; and hope I had the colours right.

After the longest minute of my life, the phone rang. I grabbed it. "Hello, Tony Walsh speaking."

"What's going on, Tone?"

I was too relieved to react to his repeated abuse of my name. "I've got a problem, Mal," I croaked. "The key's broken and jammed the lock in the street door, and I can't get out."

"What about the caretaker?"

"He's gone, so you'll have to get him down here again."

"Oh. You're sure? Isn't there another way?"

"No. It'll have to be him. And soon, I'm getting more ill by the minute. Oh, and for god's sake keep this line open."

"Okay. Stand by."

I kept the phone to my ear as I waited wondering if I dared hope that nothing else would go against me! But MF had one more trick up her programming sleeve, as I discovered when Mallard spoke again. "His wife says he'll be down when he's finished having a bath."

"Twenty-eight years..." My voice was almost inaudible.

"What did you say, Tone?"

"Nothing, Mal, nothing." I was defeated, empty, all spirit gone. "Okay, I suppose I'll have to wait, but please keep this line open. Just in case."

"Okay. And I'm sorry, again."

I made my way to the foyer with the intention of waiting but my need for the toilet was becoming intolerable and I began to contemplate forcing the locked toilet door; I had a second, larger screwdriver in my pocket. I decided that my need justified trying and descended to the basement.

I was about to force the screwdriver between door and frame when I noticed a Ladies toilet a little further along. With a fervent prayer on my lips I approached it. It was unlocked. A cry of joy carried me in and my bum hit the seat almost before my pants hit the floor. The relief was ecstatic; a spiritual experience that left me exhausted but content, human once more. Flu had become a mere incidental, I would live. Now all I needed was the caretaker and his key. But I almost missed him.

I was fumbling my pants and trousers up when I heard him calling my name from the foyer. I opened my mouth to call back but no sound came forth; my voice had gone completely. A fear of again being trapped triggered a panicky haste and I stumbled along the corridor to the stairs with my trousers tangled around my knees. I was still struggling with them when I emerged into the foyer, silently daring him to risk a murder provoking smile. But MF's programme had processed its last byte and he remained expressionless as I regained control of trousers and dignity, and even his eyes now lacked menace. I let Mallard know I was leaving and, without a word, stepped past the caretaker to the street and freedom. Fifteen minutes later I was in bed.

This extraordinary sequence had a small sequel a few days later when, back at work, I bumped into the Building Services Manager in a head office corridor.

"Ah, Mister Walsh," he said with an enquiring tone, "I was hoping to see you. About Marsh Street. We had quite a problem on Monday. Couldn't open the door. Practically had to take it off its hinges. What happened down there on Sunday. I hear you had some trouble."

I looked at him for a second before replying. Shall I tell him what actually happened down there on Sunday, I thought, tell him about Malcolm Mallard, and the caretaker, and the power cut, and the faulty phone, and the locked toilet, and... No, I thought, he wouldn't believe me. "Sorry about that," I said, "the key just snapped off. Must've weakened with age."

"Ah well," he mused as he continued along the corridor, "Can't be helped, I suppose."

Too true it can't be helped, I thought, especially when Malevolent Fate gets bored on a dull Sunday afternoon in March!

NF has now seen fit to send Tony off to work in Nigeria.

Funnily enough, the services of malevolent fate are not required when you're dealing with a combination of British Rail and London Underground, as I discovered when I was up in London for what was to be the last Wellington meeting.

More than I Bargained For!

by Christina Lake

British Rail's new cut-price day return to London from Bristol throws in an unexpected bonus : a one-day travel card for the central zone that doesn't work in the ticket machines. Guaranteed - ten minute arguments each time you try to enter the underground, accusations of fraud, threats to take more money from you - just the thing to spice up your fun day out in the big city.

I was not initially perturbed to find my travel card triggering a red light on the ticket machines of Paddington tube station and sending me to seek assistance, as I assumed that the London Underground staff would simply glance at my ticket, with that day's date clearly printed on it, and wave me through. Instead, the man I took it to tried the ticket in the machine, and asked me if I had bought it in advance. Since this is one of the conditions of the offer I was using, I said yes, I had. He then told me, perfectly seriously, that my ticket must have been used on a previous day and had now expired. "You mean, you think that I came all the way up to London from Bristol at great expense, just for a free ride round the Central Zone?" Put that way, he didn't look quite so sure, so instead he pointed at his list of codes, saying "Look, there, 11, that means 'ticket expired', as if this proved everything. I in my turn pointed at the date on my ticket, and said "No Way!" The concept that the customer is always right, or could at least be given the benefit of the doubt, when everything else corroborates their story, was apparently not one that had penetrated through to that particular corner of London Underground, so it didn't do me any good to show the guard my booking folder, seat reservation, credit card slip and the leaflet explaining the deal, because as far as the guard was concerned it was a) nothing to do with him as it was a British Rail offer, and b) their machines said my ticket had expired, so nothing I said was relevant.

The guard agreed to take me to his superiors to sort the matter out, but seeing the crush of people in the controller's office, and heeding my plaintive cries that every minute was valuable to me as I had taken a half day off to come up and use the public records office that closes at 4.30 pm (it was, by this time, just after 2 pm), decided that he could, after all, bend the rules and let me through, though I would most likely have problems later, he predicted. I was by this time too shaken to be properly grateful. The guards at the other end, as was to be my experience throughout, were quite happy to use their passes to let me out, no questions asked, presumably on the basis that if someone had seen fit to let me in, I must be in possession of a legitimate ticket.

After the public record office closed, I returned to Chancery Lane underground station determined to sort out my problem with the ticket, as I did not want the same hassles when I returned late to Paddington at the end of the evening and risk missing my train back to Bristol. So I explained to the guard that my ticket didn't work, he confirmed that his machines too believed it had expired, but advanced the novel theory that someone must have used it before it was printed, and that I had been sold an expired ticket. I said that it still wasn't my fault, so could I have a replacement, please, that would work in the machines. After all, even though it was it was a British Rail offer, some payment to London Underground must be involved, and therefore it was up to London Underground to honour their part of the deal and, if they were unhappy, take the matter up with British Rail. The guard was having none of this. He kept insisting that it had nothing to do with London Underground, in no shape, form or colour, and that only British Rail could help me. He also refused to call his manager for me to speak to. In the end, recognising an impasse, and once more upset and confused by the trouble caused by such a simple matter as

a wrongly calibrated ticket, I decided to go back to Paddington and talk to British Rail. At first, the person in Customer's Services for Paddington thought that my only problem was that London Underground were unfamiliar with this new scheme, and that all I need do was show them my copy of the brochure and all would be well. I explained that I had done that. I explained what the ticket machines were saying. I explained that no-one down there would listen to me. Eventually the man from British Rail Customers Services agreed to come down to the Underground with me and sort it out. His presence seemed to make a remarkable difference. The guard on the machines (a different one from the one who had stopped me in the early afternoon) wanted to use his pass to let me straight through. When we walked down to the controller's office again, he admitted to the British Rail official that there had been a lot of problems with tickets coming through from the main-line station, particularly from Reading, he thought. There was no suggestion this time that any of us were cheating the system. The controller listened to the story, and expressed his incredulity that anyone could take the word of the machines against the evidence of their eyes. He then decided that the cause of it all was that British Rail Bristol use a different type of magnetism than London Underground, and agreed kindly to write a note for me to this effect.

I thanked him nicely, and the man from British Rail customer's services, but in the end I didn't feel I had got to the bottom of the matter, or received adequate explanation or apology for my experience. I have bought tickets from Bristol Temple Meads before, many times, which have included a London Underground component, and these have all worked perfectly, with never any question of wrong magnetism. Also, this offer had been in operation for a full month before I took it up. I am not prepared to believe that I could be the first person to alert British Rail and London Underground to the problem. And if London Underground guards have been noticing problems with tickets coming in from British Rail Paddington, why has nothing been done about it? Why was I consistently treated as if I was in the wrong and offered no redress or fair hearing?

I did take up the matter again with British Rail once I got back to Bristol, and after returning them the ticket, they admitted they were at fault and sent me a five pound travel voucher - but I still don't know what was going on!

After all of that, the Wellington seemed an uncharacteristically friendly place, cosy even in its new enshrouded state. It felt like the fans had shrunk too, but I think this was mainly because most of them were sitting at the tables which littered the path from the entrance to the bar. Not quite ready for dwarf status, I decided to cool out with the people standing in the doorway, and collect leaflets as they passed by. I also collected the news that Maureen Speller was going to get married, only to be accused of not reading her TWP contribution adequately, in which it was announced (she alleged). Clearly my grip on such matters was slipping; I could have sworn I'd read the latest mailing cover to cover, in the ever eager quest for such matters. In between talking to Maureen and her intended, and collecting an invitation to Cambridge from Donya White and Allan Baum, a large number of people slipped past me into the bar, so by the time I ventured back into the interior I found myself becoming that shallowest of acquaintances, the one that rushes up to greet you, then turns her back because she's just seen someone else that she must say hello to, and so forth. I did manage to extract a fanzine from Alan Dorey despite the cruelty of his mocking "Real Soon Now" when I told him that I was working on a fanzine; and Michael Ashley up in London to do a bit of sneering for his TAFF campaign, voluntarily handed over his latest Saliromania, then insisted that I should vote for him. I told him I hadn't even seen the field, let alone the campaigns, so it was much too early to commit myself. "Come on," said Linda Krawecka, "don't you want to see America through the eyes of Michael Ashley?" Did I? I wasn't sure. I had a suspicion it would look a lot like Birmingham or Leeds or the inside of Michael's head once he'd finished with it. "You ought to meet Ashley Watkins," I decided, "then we could have a TAFF debate." But unfortunately Ashley Watkins, other putative TAFF candidate, was nowhere to be seen. Instead I was

commandeered by Judith Hanna to meet some Australians. Leigh Edmonds, huge and bearded like some wild bushman, explained that he and Valma Brown were in London for a week. "Only a week?" I wondered, it seeming a long way to come all the way from Australia just for a week. Ah yes, but then they were going on to Sweden for a week, some other European destination for another week, and so forth, doing the tour in true Australian style. "Then we go back home," he concluded sadly. "For a week," I suggested. Then we began to talk about Australian soap operas, which probably made going back home sound like a life sentence, until Nigel Rowe mentioned Eldorado, the soap that makes Neighbours look good, and Valma mentioned the American show (I think) where they not only went topless but showed wobbly bits as well. Joseph Nicholas in sporting shorts and bumbag, thought this all sounded quite exciting. Joseph was carefully trying to stay out of the line of sight of Michael Ashley, just so that he would not have to put up with any more facile comments on his attire. Then more people I hadn't seen in about a year, swung into sight and I started frantically saying meaningless hulloes, and offering unfinished summaries of my life ("Much as usual" and other anodyne, but superficially true statements) until suddenly it was ten o'clock and time to go rushing off in search of my train, armed with my trusty guarantee message from the station controller of Paddington underground. What a disappointment to discover there were no automatic barriers at Waterloo and I could stroll straight through! But at least it meant I made my train with ten minutes to spare.

On the long journey back I read all through Saliromania and then the Alan Dorey zine which was so hot off the press that my copy was dated 8th August, which meant I was reading it two days before its issue date, and would presumably find it expired if I tried to use it again, say, on the Bristol buses. I was struck by one thing in particular, no surprise after an evening at the Wellington, Michael and Alan's attitudes to drink. For Michael it was a necessary, but almost negative thing. A part of the destructive side of himself that has separated his life from the friend with the lovely children, a means of deadening himself to life. For Alan it's still an enthusiasm, something he looks forward to, and views positively. A night out with a few decent drinks and he knows that the old days aren't dead, that football's still where it's at, and that even responsible fathers of three (is it?) can have a bit of fun. We didn't hear much about Alan's family in this issue. Clearly this family life that we are asked to believe that Michael Ashley craves for, very soon gets taken for granted. Michael makes much of the insight that his friend has children while he only has fanzines, and yet there could be worse things in life than having fanzines instead of children. I can still remember exactly how I felt when I got my first paying job, and the comment which I made to my friends, not entirely in jest: "Now I can settle down and have fanzines." (Which I did). I wouldn't be so naive as to pretend that fanzines are any substitute for children. Experience, if not my own then other people's, tells me otherwise. But fanzines did keep me creatively fulfilled for a good five or six years, and happy for another three or four. When they were at the centre of my life, they were worth more than the derisive dismissal Michael offers them. But the difference is I felt positive about doing fanzines, and I'm not sure that Michael does. There is a corner of him putting himself down even as he does them. They're an addiction like the drink, negative like the drink, yet essential, because he's become a victim of his own notoriety. The fanzines have given Michael a small taste of success which he's not getting elsewhere in life, and that's why he needs to do them. And that, I believe, is why he's standing for TAPP, not just because he wants the free trip to America, but also because he wants to win. It's no worse a reason than any other, but in the end, if he wins, will it convince Michael that he's doing something reasonably with his life, or will it just be more proof that we're all worthless fools for voting for him?

On this note, I can pronounce that this fanzine hasn't yet made up its mind who it's supporting for TAPP - but it's not too worried as fanzines don't get a vote anyway. All bribes to the editor, please, at the address overleaf...

Balloons Over Bristol 3

...is available for Sainsbury's till receipts (before 29th November), American dollars, large T-shirts or other tokens of interest from:

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Front cover: Pictured on Alton Towers log flume (top to bottom) Christina Lake, Peter Fred Thompson, Tim Goodrick, Nathan Sidwell, Richard Hewison