

CONFERENCE ORGANISER

Catenian Conferences over 32 years

...anecdotes from Peter Rand (Kenilworth Circle) and Brian Taylor (Preston South Circle)

For 24 years we have both been privileged to serve the Association in supporting the organisation of the Annual Conference. Peter's first conference was in Torquay in 1977 when the late Albert Smallbone was Grand President and Grand Secretary, Keith Pearson, was taking sole charge of his first Conference.

Brighton 1976

Peter's introduction to the Conference was as an observer in Brighton the previous year. "I have three memories of Brighton; firstly of arriving at the VIP pre Banquet reception with the Duke of Norfolk and the Mayor, to find the room locked, no staff and no bar; secondly of a bill after the Civic Reception at the Corn Exchange for "three plastic crabs and lobsters plus three Martini umbrellas" that had apparently "disappeared" at the end of the evening and thirdly chaos at the Grand Hotel on the Sunday morning when brothers were checking out. Why chaos? Well, no special conference rates had been negotiated with the hotel and brothers soon discovered they were all paying different rates for the same facilities!"

Torquay 1977

So lessons were learned as they were to be each year. Torquay 1977 was memorable for all the right reasons. The sun shone, the five star Imperial Hotel was fantastic and still a favourite HQ location. The General Manager, Harry Murray, has this year been awarded a lifetime achievement award by the Hospitality Industry. It is people not facilities that make good hotels. HMS Torquay was paying an official visit to the town. The Captain joined the Banquet and the following day, the Grand President was invited on board.

Eastbourne 1979

Peter's worst memory in 32 years was Eastbourne in 1979. The Conference had never been to Eastbourne. It was his home town and he was determined to support the locals to ensure the best ever Conference. The Carnival was booked at the Kings Country Club, an entertainment complex just out of town. Peter expected to be overseeing events at the Grand Hotel, where the banquet was taking place. By late afternoon, he realised things were not going well at the Kings Country Club. Tables were not laid, there appeared to be insufficient staff and management were not up to the job. Brothers and ladies sat down 45 minutes late but worse was to come. A recommendation from the Club of a band proved disastrous as they reeled off one blue joke after another. Despite protestations from Peter, the damage was done and it was not long before the coaches back to the hotels were filling and the night ended in tears all round. "My very worst moment. I was close to resigning".

Manchester 1983

The 75th Anniversary Conference in Manchester was special but with only around 1000 attendees was under half the size of 2008. How numbers at the Conference have grown over the years.

Dublin 1985

Dublin 1985 was Brian's first year and what a baptism of fire! Mike Carrick masterminded the travel arrangements and much of the hotel programme, so Peter took a rest. But Brian wondered what he had taken on. Brian recalls, "It was Past Grand President Gerald Cassidy who approached me to take over as Ticket Secretary. "It is easy, just a few tickets to send out, nothing to it!" Marie and I were determined to a good job and Dublin presented some interesting challenges. We could not obtain room plans for the Banquet from the HQ hotel. Gerald wanted to prepare an architect's drawing. He had the hotel pacing out the room over the telephone. The plan eventually arrived when we had returned home after the Conference! We soon learned that six foot round tables were too large but Dublin had the solution when they told us all the tables were "round ovals!"

Edinburgh 1987

Edinburgh 1987 brought us into conflict with the local authorities for the first time. 20 years ago, Edinburgh was sitting back on its laurels, knowing it was a popular destination for tourists. The City fathers were not interested in Conferences and certainly not offering any form of welcome by way of a Civic Reception. Peter approached the hoteliers and they agreed to fund Friday evening drinks at the Music Hall in George Street. One memory of that Conference was in the planning stages, when Grand Secretary, the late Terry McGrath, and Peter were attending a January Circle meeting to muster the stewards. The welcome in the bar appeared very protracted, the register was duly signed and then it was straight into a meal, indeed a Burns supper. "When is the meeting?" we asked. "Oh no", came the reply, "when we have a Burns Supper, it is just a signing on meeting". Terry's response is not printable!

Positive and Negative Linking

Only now, says Brian, can I reveal a secret of 24 years! On the booking forms, there are regularly those brothers who state that they do (or do not!) wish to sit next to certain other brothers! It can be a challenge when one person requests to sit next to someone and that person says they do not want to! Sometimes I have selective memory loss! Some brothers always ask to sit anywhere, particularly widowers, and wives of deceased brothers welcome the opportunity to make new friends in the Association. That helped me fill tables with single brothers and ladies.

Solihull (or was it Birmingham?!) 1989

Solihull 1989 was in Peter's home Province. As the first Conference in Province 6 since the first in Birmingham in 1923, they were keen to make it the biggest and the best. Well, the best might be disputed but the biggest it certainly was (until Manchester 2008) with 1500 attending the Sunday Mass. Stewarding arrangements reached new heights that others were to follow.

Brighton 1990

Brighton 1990 is remembered for discounts all round for those staying at the Metropole Hotel. An over enthusiastic Night

Manager had made a decision on Friday night to only open two of the planned three restaurants for breakfast, with the result that the queues were down the hall and almost out onto the seafront! A discount and free drinks at the banquet were negotiated as reasonable compensation.

Blackpool 1991

Blackpool 1991 was a masterpiece of planning with Norcalympia, an aircraft hangar-like building at Norbreck Castle, being transformed overnight from a Carnival Dinner Dance for 850 persons to a Mass for 1200 persons by 8am the following morning. Past GP, Gerald Cassidy, took the lead with his architect drawings, showing the Hotel where every seat for Mass should be placed – and they were! He was up all night to ensure it was achieved!

The memories of the Carnival were of 850 perfectly cooked fillet steaks being served and a band that was so noisy that a brother pulled out all the plugs from their equipment, resulting in Peter having to ply them with tenners to continue playing as they threatened to walk out.

Gatecrashers and the Conference fee

It was about this time Brian recalls, when “a past Grand President informed me that a certain Province had gate crashed the Carnival after dinner and joined the dancing, having donned their DJ’s, made their own dinner arrangements and chosen to stay in their own hotel. That marked the introduction of a Conference Fee.”

Blackpool 1996

Blackpool again five years later proved to be the last visit to the town. The Mayor’s speech at the Banquet focused unduly on the problems of sewage flies in the town and the Norbreck Castle Hotel was closed down soon after by the Health & Safety authorities. There are two memories of the hotel that week. The first was when Peter was called up to a bedroom on the 2nd floor



The two musketeers Brian, left, and Peter

in a hurry, to find his view of the end of the corridor obscured by steam. A brother appeared from a bedroom, saying his wife had had an accident. A rather large lady, she was getting out of the bath when it had tipped up, shearing the hot and cold water taps. “As I entered the room, she was protecting her modesty with towels as the brother screamed at me “what are you going to do, Peter?” That same weekend, another lady went to open her fitted wardrobe, to find it was not fitted. When I arrived she was still trying to disentangle herself from clothes and hangers, as the wardrobe had fallen on top of her and her head was out the other side! Fortunately both ladies were uninjured.

Blackpool and the Pembroke Hotel will always be remembered by Brian because his table plan did not fit the tables he expected. Why not? This was the same room and the same plan as used five years previously. The hotel failed to inform him that a new lift had been installed that took a section out of the room!

Tenerife, here we come!

Whilst on holiday in Tenerife, Peter and Brian hatched a plan to propose it as the location for a future Conference. They knew that

Grand Council had voted against future “off shore” Conference locations, to ensure the Conference was as accessible to as many brothers as possible. However they found a site and were confident that a four night Conference in Tenerife in March could be cheaper than two nights in May in the UK. Sadly plans were shelved! For how long?

Harrogate 1998

This Conference was memorable for the 1am fire alarm on Sunday morning at the HQ hotel. Brian recalls, “A number of us were still in the bar. The alarms went and brothers and ladies made their way down stairs. In the absence of direction from the Hotel, Peter took charge, directing everyone to the assembly points and liaising with the Fire Brigade; and, yes, it was a real fire, in a laundry room and not the usual false alarm. Hot drinks were provided for all and everyone was able to admire each other’s choice of night attire! Breakfast was a little quieter than usual the following morning!”

21st Century

In the last eight years, we have been to three cities for the first time, Nottingham 2001, Liverpool 2004 and Cardiff 2007. Nottingham’s hotels were regrettably not up to the job. Liverpool proved a surprising success for many. By then the regeneration, culminating in their award of the European City of Culture this year, was showing results, but some hotels were still questionable. The Crowne Plaza, as a modern hotel, did an excellent job as HQ, but the local’s enthusiasm for the Adelphi, did not take account of the state of their bedrooms and poor service levels, although their banqueting continues to have a good reputation and local contacts proved most valuable.

“Table for Six not too close to the Band”

Brian recalls a visit from a Director to the Conference Office on Saturday morning requesting six extra tickets for tonight’s Carnival. No problem. “It was only when I asked for the money he revealed that he was testing the system to see my reaction!”

Cardiff 2007

Cardiff had been bidding for over 20 years to host the Conference. On two previous occasions, the Province had had to opt for Bristol as Peter recommended to Grand Council that Cardiff did not have suitable facilities. After bending the rules to allow the Banquet to be held other than in the HQ hotel, Cardiff turned out to be a great success, despite the appalling rain!

For Brian and Marie, Cardiff proved the most traumatic of their 24 conferences. Technology nearly got the better of them when they lost all their data three weeks before the Conference and had to re-key everything, but no one was ever the wiser.

Manchester 2008

The Centenary Conference of the Association was a wonderful finale to our years of supporting the Association to run the Annual Conference.

So, Peter, Brian and Marie have hung up their boots. As Peter says, “Working with 32 Grand Presidents, 31 host Directors (the late Terry McManus was GP in Harrogate in 1988) and 7 Grand Secretaries (including the late Dick Last) has been an immense privilege and provided me with a unique insight into the enormous amount of work undertaken by Grand Council on behalf of the membership, much of which is not recognised. Thank you for the opportunity.” Brian concludes, “Marie and I have been privileged to serve the Association for so many years”.

We wish our successors well and look forward to enjoying our attendance at Conference without the responsibilities of past years!