ICTF News

Welcome

Tony's asked me to introduce this Michaelmas issue of ICTF News – a bundle of dinners, conferences, exhibitions with a smattering of the real world and reminiscences. Tony has also asked me to write a bit about myself for which I'll restrict myself to the last two areas.

I've been around here for a long time – longer than most of you can remember! There are still one or two with longer histories though, even with Harry Fearnley and Kit Bailey now retired. I was only ever an undergraduate user of the KDF9 (ask Geoff Lescott for further details of that machine!)

Having used the ICL 1906A as a student, I joined OUCS as part of the 2980 workforce – I worked on the ICL Algol-68 compiler (specifically, the run-time support library), dabbled on the edge of VME-B systems work and then moved into graphics (remember Ghost, Simpleplot, GKS, UNIRAS). I became an ITS3 techie when Carol Bateman first formalised the central coordination of IT Support Staff issues (back when ICTF's forerunner ITSSG was also formalised). Nowadays, most of you know me as the person who passes on copyright infringement notices. You may also encounter me on the OUCS Help Desk or cherry-picking RT tickets with the 'ITSS:' subject prefix

Malcolm Austen
IT Support Staff Services
OUCS

ITSS Christmas Dinner 2010

My wife and I were very much looking forward to the dinner at Christ Church. From walking in through the gate to the still-snow-topped grass in the Tom Quad the beauty of Christ Church was already presenting itself.

We all met in the Buttery Bar prior to being called for the meal. It was great seeing everyone all smartly dressed for the evening out. The prices here were exceptionally reasonable – so much so that more than one person thought the wine menu prices per bottle must have been per glass! This bar too was beautiful: the stonework and the carefully painted oars of the winning rowers on the wall adding to great start to the evening.

When we were called for the dinner we were led to the dining hall where enormous portraits hung on the walls over a lovely warm grand open fire, both adding to a wonderful atmosphere.

No sooner had the conversation started amongst those seated together than the first course was served. The honey roast parsnip soup with crème fraîche starter was gorgeous, including the lovely bread supplied with it.

By the time the starter was finished the room had a really cheery buzz of conversation, and the sound of laughter was often heard. When the chargrilled chicken supreme main course arrived I could hardly wait and again the flavour was fantastic – this was what I would have expected from a restaurant way out my price range.

I'm not normally partial to desserts, but like the two lovely courses before it, the white chocolate profiteroles were fantastic. I would recommend this event to all ITSS!

Darren Collins
ICT Support Team

Profile: Harry Fearnley

I started working in computing for the Department of Social Medicine, in 1972. I programmed in Algol 60, except when using pre-existing FORTRAN IV code via "glue" procedures. We felt ourselves to be at the leading edge of technology, as we used paper tape, rather than punched cards, for almost everything, though our medics used edge-punched cards to sort some smaller datasets. We also used the odd electronic calculating machine.

With the demise of the KDF9, the Computing Service had only recently moved to Banbury Road from the Keble Road triangle, and had just started using the ICL 1906A. We did most of our data entry, and program editing, on paper tape using either a Flexowriter, or a Westrex terminal, often walking across to Banbury Road to submit our jobs. My memory is that normal jobs were limited to using 32 KB (sic) of "core" memory (128 KB with special permission)!

Much more on the early days of OUCS can be found via http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/internal/history/

In 1974, I became the programmer for the Childhood Cancer Research Group, but also did some other work -- primarily in the analysis of survival rates. After the ICL 2980 came along in 1978, we moved to using Algol 68, and shortly afterwards also made much use of the DEC VAX 11/780 (reputedly paid for by ICL). Our large datasets meant that we used "mainframes", despite our having a couple of BBC micros.

For many years in the 70s-90s, I was active in the "Users' Group". Originally, this was primarily a channel for communication from OUCS to its users, but eventually we helped to morph it into the ITSS/ICTF. This -- coupled with wider transparency in decision making -- has much improved the lot of both computer users, and sysadmins.

Then came a brief spell at the Maths Institute, where I started supporting the use of IBM PCs, and was introduced to the Joys of Tex. In my spare time, I also had my first struggles with Unix (SunOS) – this led to several years of my being Secretary to the Unix sysadmin group, which was able to start doing some of the things now better done by ICTF.

In the mid 80s, I went to work in Engineering Science, where we had several microVAXes, and Unix boxes (mainly Sun and SGI), as well as many PCS. Here I first got interested in networked information services -- everything from Anonymous FTP to WAIS, and Library catalogues. Then came the revolutionary HTTP protocol, and I started our first web service. Since then, the excitement has abated, and I have mainly been involved in the provision of email services, and Unix/Linux sysadmin.

Although I will miss the contact with the users, I am now looking forward to a retirement in which I can not only play more Go, but can also complete a couple of Go-related research projects, probably without much need of a computer except as a word-processor!

Harry worked for many years as part of ECSG, the Engineering Computing Support Group, in the department of Engineering and he has now retired. This article didn't quite make it into the summer edition of this newsletter, largely because that edition was overtaken by the ICTF Conference organization.

ICT Forum Conference 2011 is booked at the Kassam Stadium on Thursday 14th July 2011
Get it in your diary now!

Following a successful first year at Kassam Stadium we've decided to go back. We'll be inviting Cambridge again and hope to build on the successes (and the opportunities for improvement!) from the 2010 conference. If you have ideas for workshops or speakers you'd really like to hear then please do let ICTF know as soon as possible. Speakers get booked up fast after Christmas!

Thoughts from a College IT Manager working on the OUCS Helpdesk

I've been an IT Manager since February 2000 within Colleges at the University. Back then, there was no induction or guidance in the job and hardly any help except that given once one discovered the wonderful ITSS lists. For many years, I really didn't understand the levels of service that I was supposed to be offering to our members. I'd heard what OUCS do for our users second hand, but never seen it happen. My curiosity got the better of me towards the beginning of the summer vacation period this year when the request for evening help at the OUCS Help Centre was sent around ITSS. I wanted to see what OUCS do and how they do it. Well, since doing one evening per week I've gained a fair amount of experience, knowledge and appreciation for the services offered. Apart from some extra technical knowledge learned from fellow support staff there (I'm a bit rusty on the latest and greatest, being a Manager), I've had the chance to meet many OUCS staff as they walk past the desk to learn and chat about wider IT issues in the University that relate to my Colleges. I've also learned more about the services that OUCS provide and how they work, which is very helpful for our users. Since helping to support the more central University IT services, I can now solve more issues for our College users that I was able to before. Even more useful and interesting to me has been the access I get to the Help Centre tools. I can do things like query the RT system to see tickets created by users at my College and even in some cases help to solve them ahead of OUCS staff on duty. Now the only shame is that I have to leave the job due to work/home pressures. I would thoroughly recommend the experience to other IT support staff in the University. Ideally, I'd like to keep my hand in by doing the odd shift each year like pilots have to do for their licence. I'm not too sure how OUCS and my College would view this though."

Ben Bridle
IT Manager
St Hugh's College and Lady Margaret Hall

"I've also learned more about the services that OUCS provide and how they work, which is very helpful for our users"

Annual Oxbridge College ITC Conference: Stamford Bridge

In early December, Chelsea Football Club played host to around eighty Oxford and Cambridge college IT staff, for the fourth college-specific ICT conference. The hardy group from Oxford met in the dark of the morning, on a snow-covered street corner, anticipating a delay-filled journey to London. Around an hour later we arrived much too early, so set about enjoying the coffee and unpacking the conference bags – pens, vacuum flask, paper, mug, video camera…

The conference takes a tried and tested format of sessions and breaks, but with the important difference that all of the discussions, exhibitors and keynotes are specifically relevant to the college environment. Multi-petabyte SANs and HPC clusters we hear about at other conferences are very interesting, but they wouldn't fit inside the average converted-bathroom college 'data-centre'! Sessions included network design, videoconferencing and remote collaboration, conferences, thin client/VDE options, Information management and gaining Bursary buy-in, computing in hard times, college firewalls and IDS plus more. The sessions,

Simon Thomson (Ox), Andrew Cleland (Cam) and Razvan Novacovschi (Ox)

combined with discussions and round-tables with fellow IT Managers from both Universities, mean the day always provides a wealth of ideas and information directly applicable to the college role, making it for me one of the most useful on the IT calendar.

Rounding off the formal activities was a prize draw, where once again I didn't win either of the kindles or the watch, TV, camera, champagne or case of wine. A tour of the stadium was taken, which included the priceless moment where an enthusiastic guide asked us "Who loves football?" to blank looks all round. Still the tour was interesting enough; they were getting ready for a match the next day and we managed to resist hiding a mobile phone under the press-centre table. An evening reception and a splendid three course dinner allowed time to form new friendships and debate out an issue or two more, before climbing back into the coach home, full of ideas for the year ahead.

Simon Mortimore
Computing Systems Manager
Exeter College

ICTF

Oxford University ICT Forum Steering Committee

ICTF Chair:
Jeremy Worth (Archaeology)

ICTF Secretary:
Sarah Lawson (NPEU)

Elected Members:
Jonathan Ashton (OUCS)

Janet McKnight (OUCS)

James Dore (New College)

Jon Lockely (OERC)

Natasha Heaton (Anthropology)

Katherine Ferguson (SERS)

Ex-oficio:
Tony Brett (OUCS)

Co-opted members:
None currently (3 may be co-opted)

… representing all Oxford University's IT Staff in top-level ICT decision-making

ICTF provides a framework that promotes and facilitates excellence incorporating the full involvement of ICT Staff in both the strategic development and day-to-day running of ICT in the Collegiate University. The ICTF Steering Committee (ICTF-SC) oversees the operation of the ICTF. The Steering Committee is led by the ICTF Secretary and meets at least once per term, usually just prior to the ICTF termly meeting.

Got an article or idea for an article?

Email it to its3@oucs.ox.ac.uk

http://www.ictf.ox.ac.uk

IT Suppliers' Exhibition 2010

The IT Suppliers' Exhibition was once again a great success. We live in difficult economic times but the organizers still managed a healthy showing of exhibitors with only about 10 fewer than last year. It was good to see lots of ITSS there nice and early and I think it went a long was to reassuring the exhibitors that it is worth spending their money coming to the exhibition. Thank you for that.

EML, who have previously arranged the exhibition, have re-formed and are now called Mondale Events. This didn't seem to change anything from our perspective and we even still got wine, label printers and a bike raffle! The lucky winner of the bike was Eric Warmington from Wycliffe Hall.

As usual, the organisers had arranged an excellent lunch and we also had a seminar room all day which was used for some supplier updates as well as some internal seminars for IT Support Staff.

It was good to hear Richard Wilderspin, Microsoft's UK HE account manager, talking about challenges facing us in an era of transformational change in IT; and The Business Insight Group talking about some of the systems and data integration work they are doing with Oxford Colleges. I was particularly glad to welcome Heather Skevington and Mark Collins from the HR Information Systems Project and they gave a good update on the E-recruitment aspects of the HR Information Systems Project. Some good discussion was had with IT Officers who will be supporting their colleagues in their use of the new online offerings from HRIS.

Tony Brett
Head of IT Support Staff Services

Eric claims the bike from Mondale's Richard Hastings