

A personal look at the WCIT History

Past Clerk Peta Walmisley

Once upon a time, the idea to form a Livery Company for Computing was born. It was actually 1982 and the dream of Alan Benjamin, that year Chairman of IT82, the year of Information Technology, and Bernard Harty, Chamberlain (Town Clerk) of the City of London. With support from Barney Gibbens and other prominent members of the profession, as well as Alderman Brian Jenkins, and assistance by Derek Harding, Secretary-General of the British Computer Society, by 1985 they had formed a City Company and had it approved by the Court of Aldermen.

Then the hard work started: to attract 100 members, collect a considerable amount of funding (over £70,000 by 1987), and create activities that would be approved by the Court of Aldermen as worthy to become a Company without Livery. This was achieved on 9 June 1987, with me, as Assistant Secretary External Relations at the BCS, helping Derek to compile a list of people who could be invited to join the fledgling Company. The first Court had Barney Gibbens as Master; John Fairclough of IBM as Senior Warden (succeeded by Sir Robert Reid of British Rail in early 1988); and Brian Jenkins as Junior Warden (he was elected Sheriff in September 1987); Mike Alford; Alan Benjamin; Bernard Harty; Clive Holtham; Robin Laidlaw; Alan Rousell; and Steve (now Dame Stephanie) Shirley. The first issue of Monitor was published in June 1987.

By November, Derek was not able to continue as Clerk, partly as he was leaving the BCS to become Secretary-General of the Royal Statistical Society, and Barney, as the first Master, and Alan, invited me to become Clerk. This I undertook, working from home, in addition to my daytime job at the BCS, on an Apple Macintosh, kindly donated by Barney for use by the Company, using Claris Works.

The Company's first Annual Dinner, which was held at Saddlers' Hall in October, was followed, in December, by presentation of an ICL OPD (for the uninitiated: a One Per Desk) as a raffle prize for the Red Cross Christmas Market (the first prize was 2 weeks holiday donated by Singapore Airlines). I remember the first official function to which I was invited, a Masters and Clerks Dinner, was held at Merchant Taylors' Hall, where I learned that they had had great discussions about whether I should be allowed to dine with the Masters and Clerks, or whether I should be relegated to dinner with the ladies - I was allowed in with the gentlemen! (At that time there were only 3 other female Clerks - now it is about 50%!)

The Company held its Court meetings in the Court Room of Tallow Chandlers' Hall, where we were well looked after, although there was a difficulty when one of their chairs was broken and the opportunity to achieve our first piece of history was taken by members signing their initials: a 300 year old chair, of course, had to be repaired and they had individually to pay towards the cost - and the Company didn't get the memento!

Thanks to Sir Bob, who was a past Master Carmen and became the second Master, the Company adopted St Michael Paternoster Royal as its church (this had been Dick Whittington's church) and the Reverend Canon Glynn Jones, then Assistant Secretary to the Missions to Seamen, became Honorary Chaplain. (He continued and services were held there until the Company moved to Bartholomew Close in 2001.) John South, the retiring Beadle of the Merchant Taylors' Company, became our Beadle. On 11 December 1991, the Court sponsored me to become a Freeman of the City of London and presented me with a brooch, after which I was accepted as a Freeman of the Company.

I continued as Clerk, working from home for the first four years, with the volume becoming greater, when the BCS subcontracted my services for two days a week to the Company. At the same time, I had become Secretary to the Council of European Professional Informatics Societies (CEPIS), a role I held until 2000, with them also paying for two days a week of my time (I didn't actually have much time to support David Mann, as BCS Vice President External Relations!).

During this time, the Company built up the membership, as well as developing its aims and objectives, increasing its funds and its projects: socially, in education and charity, and applying to the College of Arms for a Coat of Arms, which was granted in July 1988. Its application to the Court of Aldermen for Livery status was granted on 7 January 1992; the four years being not quite a record, which is held by the Worshipful Company of Engineers (after which the Court of Aldermen became more cautious!), but a nearly run thing. Alan Benjamin, as Master, steered the Company through the complex system.

As the Mercers' Company, number 1 in the pecking order, was keen to support the WCIT, as Company number 100, we were invited to hold our formal functions, such as entertaining the Court of Aldermen, and installing the first Master of the Livery, Steve Shirley, in their Hall and Chapel. The first clothings of Liverymen were held at the Armourers' Company, apart from Sir Brian Jenkins, who by that time was Lord Mayor; he was clothed at the Lord Mayor's residence in Ironmonger Lane. (I was clothed as Liveryman number 19 on 23 March 1992.)

The Mercers also offered Barnards' Inn as the venue for a workshop to introduce the Livery Companies to IT - most at that time had no idea of what it could do for them!

Ric Foot had joined the Court and, in 1991, proposed the formation of a series of Panels to engage all Freemen; by January 1992, 16 Panels had been formed, mirroring the categories listed by the Charity Commissioners, with 65 volunteers. Some have become embedded in the Company's life, such as Arts; Education and Training; Industry Development; Employment; Medicine and Health; and Religion and Spiritual Development, while some were less successful, such as Community Improvement; Housing; International Aid; Animal Welfare; Preservation of Heritage and the Environment; and Youth. However, at this time, an Apprenticeship Scheme was set up, under the Chairmanship of John Pinkerton (this has been succeeded by the Journeyman Scheme). Events were always a priority. At the same time, the Company entered into affiliations with the Royal Corps of Signals and King's School, Grantham, and established a Postgraduate Research Scholarship addressing the 'IT Skills needs in the City' with City University.

With considerable help from David Mann's office, Alan Rousell's secretary, Bobbie Dunbavand and BCS staff, I organised the Banquet at Guildhall for 15 May (because Mansion House was closed, as Bank Underground Station was being rebuilt) when 520 members and guests enjoyed a glittering affair, hosted by the Master, Alan Benjamin. My contract terminated in November 1992, but I did have the pleasure of accompanying Steve Shirley, as Master, to dinner where the Guest of Honour was the Princess Royal, making the fourth lady! I was presented with a silver card case, engraved with my signature, as my leaving present and invited to become a Court Liveryman.

PW - 1 October 2016