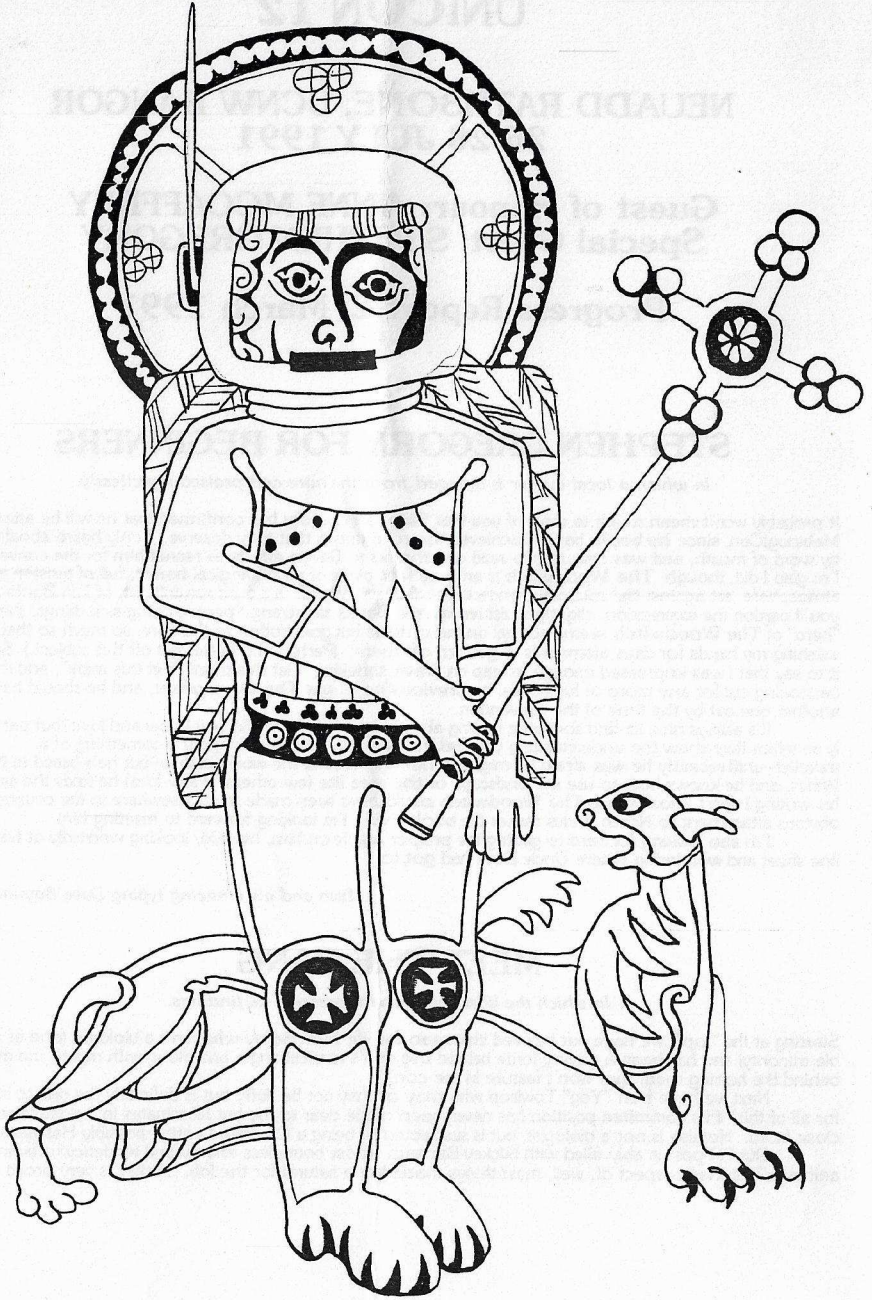


THE SECOND BRANCH

MABINOGICON



MABINOGICON UNICON 12

NEUADD RATHBONE, UCNW BANGOR
26-28 JULY 1991

Guest of Honour: ANNE MCCAFFREY
Special Guest: STEPHEN GREGORY

Progress Report 2: March 1991

STEPHEN GREGORY FOR BEGINNERS

In which a local author is dragged from the mire and praised mercilessly.

It probably won't mean much to most of you that Stephen Gregory has confirmed that he will be attending MabinogiCon, since his books haven't achieved the recognition that they deserve. I only heard about them by word of mouth, and was only able to read one thanks to Dave's efforts to recruit him for the convention. I'm glad I did, though: **The Woodwitch** is an excellent piece of psychological horror, full of tension and atmosphere, set against the mountain landscapes of North Wales. It's a bit reminiscent of Iain Banks but, if you'll pardon the expression, slightly squishier: where Banks has strange people doing sick things, the "hero" of **The Woodwitch** seems normal on the outside but goes rotten to the core, so much so that I kept washing my hands for days afterwards to get him off them. (Perhaps I'd better get off this subject.) Suffice it to say that I was impressed enough to leap on Dave shrieking "Get this man! Get this man!", and that I'll be looking out for any more of his books: his previous novel was **The Cormorant**, and he should have another one out by the time of the convention.

It's always nice to find someone writing about a part of the world you know and love, but particularly so when they show the understanding you feel it deserves. Stephen Gregory is something of a traveller—until recently he was afraid he might be halfway around the world in July—but he's based in North Wales, and he knows how to use the landscape of the area like few others. How focal he finds the area to his writing I don't know: while **The Woodwitch** could have been made to sit elsewhere in the country, his obvious attachment to North Wales makes the book vivid. I'm looking forward to meeting him.

I'm also looking forward to getting the proper article on him, he said, looking worriedly at his deadline sheet and wondering where Uncle Dave had got to...

Ivan and his amazing typing Dave Baynham hat

MEET THE GANG

In which the libel department presents its findings.

Starting at the "top", we have our beloved chairman for life Mark Bailey who isn't a biologist (one of a sizable minority) and has been a driving force behind the con's musical angle and along with myself the mind behind the herring motif that won't feature in the con.

Next we have Ivan "Yog" Towilson who may or may not be fluffy but is definitely the one to blame for all of this! His committee position has never been made clear to me but Illuminatus in residence seems close fnoed. He also is not a biologist, but is suspected of being a Cthulhoid entity, possibly Hastaaaaaargh.

Our PR post is ably filled with Nickey Barnard whose boundless energy and tendency to bounce animatedly at the prospect of, well, most things made her a natural for the job. Nickey is very proud that

her degree is not in biology! (Boo, hiss.)

Dave Baynham fills a valuable position on the committee in that he has lived here longer than any of us and his local knowledge, ready wit and ability to do joined up writing for the minutes means he fills an invaluable niche. (*I can do joined up writing too-look, I just select the script font on the laser printer. -Ivan the technology victim.*) Dave is also not a biologist.

Cath Bircher is the person behind the con artwork and site liaison and a staunch supporter of the "death penalty for calling Cath cute" movement. Heavy casualties have resulted from this movement's nefarious activities. This aside, along with Nickey she forms the more acceptable face of the committee (as you will see should you ever meet us). Cath, strangely enough, is a biologist (such is the fate of all great pioneers).

Nigel Evans and Stewart Johnson both admirably fill their posts as gophers (or guinea pigs depending on your point of view) with Stewart's additional role as root vegetable liaison officer and Nigel's as head of security and "special sanctions and network" we hope to have most angles covered. Nigel is the only non-Saesneg on the team thus far and is not a biologist either, but he insists that he is a techie: with his slightly suspect engineering qualifications (fell off the back of a lorry gunvor) we hope to have him building bridges and mending cars all through the con. Stewis from East Anglia and maintains that he isn't a Saesneg either, but he is a biologist.

This only leaves the treasurer a post manned by yours truly. A cynical Saesneg from darkest Sussex. And a biologist to boot! Why I am writing this is a mystery to me but what the hell, it beats running the matrix on my trusty Macintosh. But get it clear, Ivan, cyberpunk is not dead after all! It's resting! Heaven help me this piece is gonna be edited by Hast-

Jafo and his amazing typing mirrorshades

GAEL BAUDINO AND FIRING LINE

In which Mike and Sue borrow the PR for a while.

Gael Baudino lives in Denver, Colorado. In addition to being an author, she is, according to the potted biographies in her books, a harper, a morris dancer, a minister of Dianic wicca and a heavy-metal guitarist. Her books to date that we have found out about are:

Dragon Sword, published by Lynx in US 1988; in the "modern heroine visits fantasy world and saves it..." sub-genre, but with a couple of unusual twists which raise it above most similar stories, even though it's part one of a trilogy. Rumour has it a sequel was published in late 1989.

Strands of Starlight, published by Signet in US 1989, Orbit in UK 1991: this is a fantasy story of a girl with an uncontrollable healing power, set in something which resembles medieval Europe. It has mingled themes of revenge and religious intolerance (which latter crops up again in **Gossamer Axe**)—an excellent, if slightly unsettling, read.

Gossamer Axe, published by ROC in US 1990: Celtic fantasy and rock music mixed - the same sub-genre as Mercedes Lackey's **Knight of Ghosts and Shadows** or Emma Bull's **War of The Oaks**, but written with an insight into music and magic which leaves the rest standing.

In addition, she has had short stories published in the US by DAW books, and by F&SF magazine: "The Shadow of the Starlight" (F&SF April 1985) and "The Persistence of Memory" (F&SF November 1985), a charming short story exploring what happens to every child's imaginary friends when the child grows up.

"Firing Line" is the fund to bring Gael Baudino over as a special guest at MabinogiCon)

What it isn't is an attempt by the MabinogiCon committee to extort money from fans for a guest the convention cannot afford—the original idea is not theirs, but Mike Whitaker's and Sue Edwards', with support from a number of other like-minded fans. It is not in any way our intention to usurp Anne McCaffrey's position as MabinogiCon's guest of honour—the themes of MabinogiCon simply make it an singularly appropriate convention to which to invite Gael, where, hopefully, she will both feel welcome and add her talents to the convention's programme.

What it is: "Firing Line" is jointly administered by Sue Edwards and Mike Whitaker (mainly because they are fans of Gael Baudino's books, and they work in the same office in Cambridge). They are not connected in any financial way with the committee of MabinogiCon. The invitation to Gael Baudino has been extended by Mike and Sue, on behalf of that subset of British fandom which has enjoyed her books, and will, we hope, be funded by donations from fans in general. Having said that, we reckon that people generally like to see something for their money, so we intend to arrange a few other ways of parting you from your readies. Current ideas include an auction (probably at the con), a tape of original SF/fantasy inspired rock music, "Gossamer Axe" T-shirts... Even so, we don't mind if you just send us money! Donations and correspondence to "**Firing Line**" (which is also the name on the bank account), c/o 26 Scotland Road, Chesterton, Cambridge CB4 1QG.

CELTS FOR BEGINNERS

In which Nigel does a convincing imitation of not being caffeinated to the gills.

The Celts were an Iron Age people who originated in Central-Eastern Europe who moved west to dominate the Atlantic seaboard. They were not a single nation but a collection of tribes who shared a common culture. The people whom the Romans and Greeks called "Keltoi" had migrated to their more western lands due to overpopulation and economic stress.

As a people, the Celts were tribal and agricultural. They were farmers and craftsmen, producing brilliantly decorated items. The Celts did not have writing, instead relying on a bright oral tradition. They were famous among the people of their time for boasting, telling epic stories and enjoying heated arguments. (*Sounds familiar from somewhere.* -Ivan) The bard was a lyric poet who was an entertainer, a satirist and singer of praises. The Celts were also warriors who were fierce and skilful, although typically disorganised.

The Celts were a superstitious people with a strong fear of the supernatural. They worshiped pantheons of nature gods and earth goddesses, not having any single set of deities. Their religious leaders, the druids, had great temporal as well as spiritual power. The druids were advisors and judges as well as priests. Most worship involved services in natural areas such as copses by pools, although such practices as headhunting and human sacrifice were part of the religion.

Celtic art was mainly abstract decoration on mundane objects. Items were decorated with stylised animals and geometric patterns like whorls and concentric circles. Metalworking was prominent and many examples of finely decorated weapons and shields survive to the present day.

Celtic culture arose around 900 BC and fell around the time of the Roman empire. The culture survived longer in Ireland, where the Romans never went. Vestiges of the culture still survive, mainly in the British Isles, but the Celts really fell when the legions of Rome marched into Britain and Gaul.

Nigel "I kept it short and uninformative so no-one could tell if I was wrong" Evans

TOURISM FOR BEGINNERS

In which Eric the English Supremacist does something silly with a mountain.

If we've told you once we've told you a thousand times: Wales is famous for its dragons and for being the land of song. (Also for being the land of exaggeration, but that's a typically Celtic trait.) It is also famous for its leeks and for its sheep, but leeks and sheep can only remain interesting for so long. But Wales—especially North Wales—is a tourist heaven. There's a lot more to this country than *eisteddfodau* and the Milford Haven oil terminal.

The county of Gwynedd has two main tourist features: mountains and castles. This may not sound like much, but they can keep you going for several weeks of constant touring. The Snowdonia *massif* is one of the most beautiful parts of the country (officially confirmed as such by the UCNW maths department), and there are three major castles within brief jaunt distance of Bangor. Add to that a variety of other attractions, both tourist-oriented and otherwise, and you'll begin to see why a lot of people who come to college in Bangor never quite get round to leaving. It's been referred to as "the graveyard of ambition"; more positively, it's such a pleasant environment that people just throw over their ambitions and settle for quality of life instead.

Self-justification aside, what do you want to do while you're in the area? Given that you aren't going to be here for very long, it's hard to say. Mountains are probably out, as a trip up Snowdon will take most of a day even by an easy route (or indeed even by the train). If you do have time, then it's certainly worth the effort. Even on a cloudy day, it's nice to reach the summit; if it's clear, the view is unmatched. You'll see a hundred postcards of views from Snowdon. Forget them all. You can't fit that sort of scale into a photograph. There are a lot of routes to choose from: Llanberis, where the railway starts, is also the bottom of the "motorway", a nice gentle path, while the more ambitious will begin on the other side of the mountain at Snowdon Ranger Youth Hostel. My personal preference, though, is to leave from the top of the Pass of Llanberis, via the Miners' Track or the Pig Track. The lakes beneath the summit are something to behold, and on a nice day the moment of coming over the mountain's top ridge and seeing the panorama of most of North Wales spread out before you can make strong penguins weep. (Also you get the opportunity to drag naive Americans and cynical Saesnegs halfway up the dangerous Crib Goch ridge before they can stop you.)

If you don't want to take time out to kill your legs, settle for a castle instead. The nearest one is Penrhyn, just on the outskirts of Bangor, but this is actually a 19th century folly. Still, it has nice gardens, full of wonderfully random palms, bamboos and other ethnic Welsh flora. Just down the A55—you may well pass it on your way to Bangor—is Conwy Castle, which is apparently terribly impressive and interesting but doesn't do much for me. Much more fun, though less accessible, is Beaumaris. This has lots of those just-

too-small-for-the-parents corridors that you used to run along screaming when you were my age— er, that is, when you were a kid. (Naturally now that I have hit responsible middle age I wouldn't dream of larking around in an authentic mediaeval monument.) It also has a wide selection of walls, a moat (frozen when I went there, but then, that was in the middle of the last Big Freeze) and a rather pleasant reconstructed chapel. Plus enough mysterious beams to drive two other sane and stable tourists completely up the wall with bafflement. What were they for? Why are they there? What are Cadw trying to cover up? Perhaps it's best not to ask. Harlech Castle, by the way is interesting but too distant to justify a special journey: combine it with a visit to Portmeirion or Criccieth.

But the castle that is guaranteed to send mediaevalists, and indeed sane human beings, into full-blown rapture is Caernarfon Castle, and oddly enough it's also the closest of the big three to Bangor. (It's about quarter of an hour's drive or a short bus ride, straight down the main road.) This is like Beaumaris only bigger and better. It has more corridors than you could hope to shake a stick at; it has walls with all sorts of interesting holes in them; it has decadent rocky bits for the archers to sit on; it has ignorable signs forbidding you to climb on the interesting bits; it has even more Cadw information boards about Edward I and his conquest of Wales than the other two; it has, preserved under glass would you believe, the very room where the Prince of Wales sat on some dubious orange chairs before his investiture—still, the mediaeval bits were too good to last; and best of all, it even has famous committee member Dave Baynham sitting in the military museum bit guarding the souvenir bios and doing an incredible impersonation of an authentic mediaeval gnome.

Ah, excuse me, I appear to have dribbled all over the disc drive.

If mediaeval is too recent for you, then take in some of the county's *really* ancient monuments. Anglesey (known as "the island" to most) is the best place for these. Nearest to Bangor is Bryn-Celli-Ddu, a passage grave now decorated with less than authentic Cthulhoid logos; a bit further down the same road is another tumulus, Brynclodiad-y-Gawres, but which involved great cunning in extracting the key from a shop a mile down the road. This one is right on the coast, looking out over the Irish Sea; it's a nice place to spend a warm afternoon, or even a cold one if you're temperature resistant.

These are nice places to visit, but probably not worth a journey of their own. The same can't be said for the Iron Age village of Din Lligwy, some way up the eastern coast of Anglesey. This one is quite well signposted, at least as Welsh ancient monuments go, which means you shouldn't miss the turning more than once. And it deserves it: the approach to the village is past a ruined chapel and through a wood that can only be described as faery (and that's not just my judgment), then over a rise and straight into the village itself. While there's little left standing, the bottom lot or so of the buildings does remain, and it's easy to reconstruct in one's imagination how the village must have looked, and fascinating to wonder how the different buildings were used. It's worth making the trip for. While you're there, take in the other haunted wood and have a quick stare at the white horses coming in further up the coast.

If you're restricted to Bangor itself, pay a quick visit to the cathedral. I'm not an expert on such things myself, but I thought it was interesting, and my escort rushed around taking photographs and exclaiming in delight at assorted carvings and bits of stained glass. There is also some apparently unusual statuary that makes uncharacteristic links between the Virgin Mary and the Celtic moon goddess. (Don't ask me, I just work here.)

Alternatively, go and have a quick peer at the Roman camp above the Menai Straits and see if you can tell it apart from any other slightly bumpy field. Or if you yearn for mountains but can't manage time or transport, slog up the glorified mound that is Bangor Mountain and stare forlornly across the golf course and up the Ogwen Valley.

What about more modern attractions? North Wales isn't so strong on them: it's an area that to a great extent survives on its past, and it certainly hasn't been developed to any great extent in recent times. Down near Porthmadog there is Portmeirion: location for *The Prisoner*, of course, but worth seeing in its own right for the prettily incongruous Italianate architecture and the extensive gardens, full of rhododendrons, monkey puzzle trees, more authentic Welsh bamboo and a Mysterious Tree. It also has a rather intriguing dog cemetery and a couple of suspiciously smug-looking cats.

If rampant tourist death is your thing, then seek out the visitor centres that dot the county—get yourself irradiated at sunny Trawsfynydd, or thrill to the Aztec architecture of Dinorwic power station and museum; while in Beaumaris, drop in on the museum of childhood or the apparently famous gaol; visit the Blaenau Ffestiniog slate mines and get rained on; bathe in the Menai Straits and win a free trip to the local hospital. Finding ways to occupy a spare week or two is not a problem: if none of the above attracts, pop out of the con hall to the tourist information point at the bottom of the hill, and they'll have something for you. In fact, the main problem with North Wales is that trying to "do" it in two days, or even two weeks, only leaves you wishing you'd had more time to do it properly.

Ivan Towlson—another day, another typeface

THE PROGRAMME

In which Ivan goes mad with a hacksaw.

There will be a programme. And now we pass you over to Wincon for their advert—

Oh, all right—something about the programme, then. We'll be running two streams, without any particular main/alternative stranding, and basing many of the items around the theme of Wales. Obviously, as we've mentioned, the particular areas we've chosen are music and all things Celtic, but we expect to drag other local interests in as well. That includes using the university (known to experts as the Department of Biology): for example, we hope to have some of the local scientists saying what is going on in their fields at the moment, and moaning about how their particular interests are horribly misrepresented by those awful sci-fi writers.

Peter Wareham and Gwen Funnell have very kindly offered to run their "Pathfinder" quiz game at the convention—this is a cunning, intricate and fiendishly mind-bending invention, and we need people to play in it. If you're interested, let us know. We also have a few provisional offers of other "outside" items, but are always happy to entertain more. We have a lot of programme items in mind, but don't know how many of them we'll actually be able to put on, so we'd love to have some more!

We are also keen to hear from anyone who is interested in taking part in the programme: let us know what you know about, and we'll see if you fit in somewhere.

For those who don't understand our name and indeed for those who can't pronounce it, there will be a "Mabinogion For Beginners" item to explain what all the fuss is about. (Fuss? What fuss?) The it's-been-a-tradition-for-almost-a-year-now cocktail workshop will make it usual appearance, comatose in a corner if I know it. Another Unicorn tradition, of staring wistfully into the distance and saying "you know, it would be *really nice* if all the student sf groups around the country had some convenient way of getting together..." will get its oar in as the much-talked-about national student sf association takes another small lurch towards possibly coming into existence. Need we even mention the food tasting? We expect to have a microwave available for reheating stuff if required, but if you are thinking of bringing something microwaveable then please check first. (Otherwise you may be faced with the undignified prospect of being bundled into a mini and rushed to 9 Friars Avenue to do so.)

We will also be staging the first part of the Unicorn Comics Quiz Special Crossover Issue—the second part will appear at Wincon II a few weeks later. And in another ideologically suspect collaboration, we'll be picking up where the "Once And Future Myth" panel at Reconnaissance left off by trying to bring in other mythologies (and getting Nigel to sit on anyone who mentions King Arthur again).

And the hacksaw? Come along and find out.

Ivan the deadline-monster and his amazing typing axe-victims

INTO THE RATBIN WITH GUN AND CAMERA

In which Nickey delves into the hidden traumas of her past.

I stayed in Rathbone for a year when I was a student, so I know it well—at least, better than anyone else who didn't run a mile when Ivan said "PR2 articles". Since it's where you'll be staying during the convention, here are some not necessarily rose-tinted memories.

The food, at the time, was legendary. You could use the spicy spare ribs for diving boards, and the well-known healthy dish of pasta with pasta decorated the menu more than once. However, when we took the tutors aside and tapped them a little about the head with the spicy spare ribs, they saw our point, and since then I'd say Rathbone food is as good as any university food I've tested. (Enough said.) Mind you, that's the ordinary stuff: you as visitors will be getting the super-duper deluxe version, meaning they also give you napkins and put cocktail sticks through the sandwiches.

As for the place itself, it's an average hall: the rooms are biggish (well, moderate-sizedish) and have sinks—the good points. On the other hand, the beds are wooden, so they're good for back problems. (I know: my bed gave me one.) The showers are built for smallish people, so if you're six feet or over then prepare to have a well-washed navel. The baths are nice and long, though, and there's always loads of hot water. (You can tell she was writing this in digs, can't you? Next thing you know she'll be reminiscing about not having to put money in the electricity meter... —Ivan who's seen her consumption of electricity and hot water)

The kitchens, of which there is one a floor, are clean but don't contain fridges, which leads to another great tradition: the rows of plastic bag fridges hanging out of the windows in winter.

As far as convention areas go, they've just done up the lounge and bar so much that I didn't recognise them. The programme rooms are good and large; by the way, the room that we've earmarked for dealers is the library, so try not to get the displays and the books confused: if it's published before 1910 it's probably a safe bet for a library book.

WINCON II

SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTION

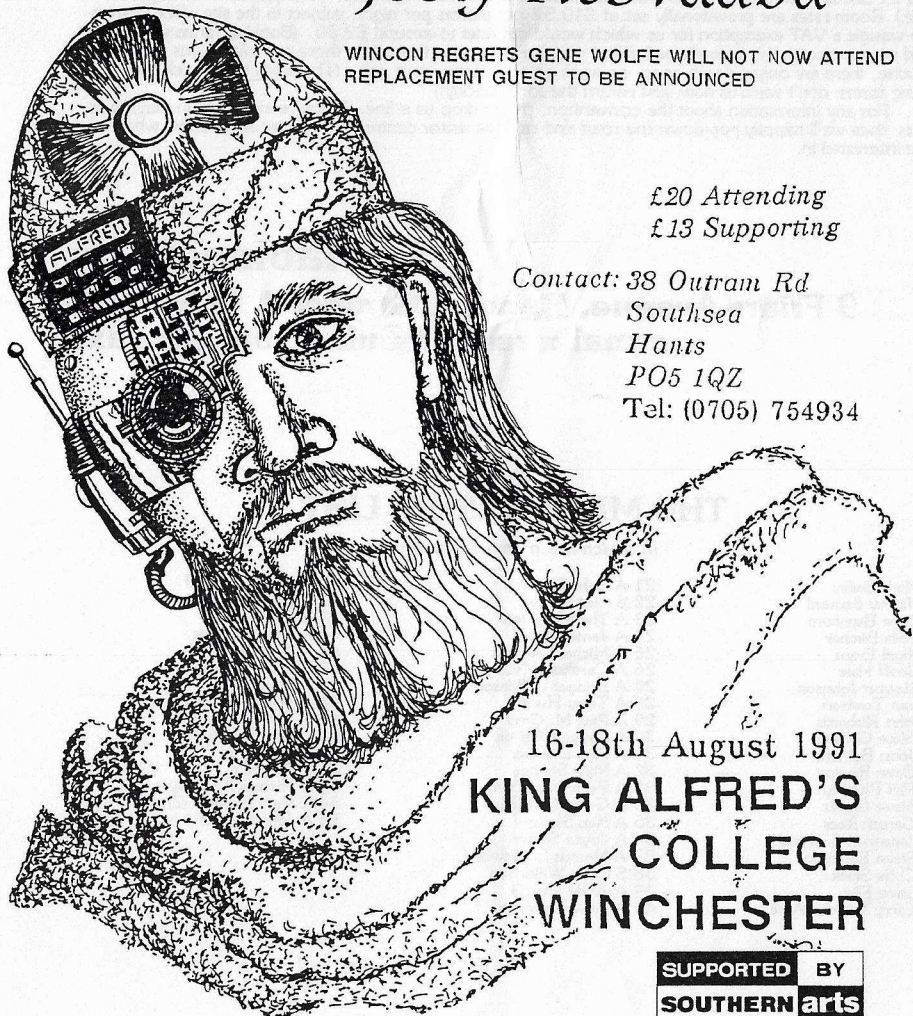
Guests of Honour *Brian Stableford*

Josef Nesvadba

WINCON REGRETS GENE WOLFE WILL NOT NOW ATTEND
REPLACEMENT GUEST TO BE ANNOUNCED

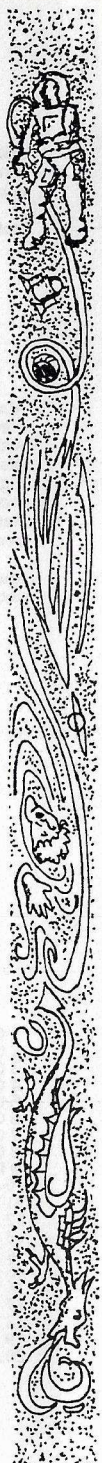
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And—leaving the best till last—we have been told that we can have an all day bar, from 11am until midnight, and probably going on until people stop buying. (And even after that we may be allowed to man a minibar of some sort.) Beer is definitely cheap, and if you ask nicely the people who know about such things may be able to direct you to beer that is even cheaper!

So there you are: Rathbone for beginners. I haven't left much out—just things that I've been told I'm not allowed to mention, like the Mysterious Smell, and the—

Nickey Barnard, in memory yet green

INFORMATION

In which Ivan only restrains himself from a Prisoner quote by Herculean efforts.

MabinogiCon is Unicon 12, part of the series of British university *sf* conventions, and is taking place in Neuadd Rathbone, UCNW Bangor on 26-28 July 1991. Membership costs £11 attending, £6 supporting, with a £1 discount to presupporters either of us or of the previous Icon bid. (Cheques to "MabinogiCon" please.) Room rates are provisionally set at £10.52 per person per night, subject to the site office managing to wangle a VAT exemption for us which would cut rates to around £9.50. (Booking forms will be mailed out as soon as this is confirmed either way.) Please note that while there are twin rooms available in Rathbone, there are only a dozen or so, so warn us early if you want one. (There will be a check box on the booking forms; don't warn us now, just return the form quickly!)

For any information about the convention, please drop us a line. If you're interested in playing at tourists, then we'll happily pop down the road and raid the visitor centre for you—just let us know what you're interested in.

MabinogiCon

9 Friars Avenue, Bangor, Gwynedd, LL57 1BB
e-mail: eeu621@uk.ac.bangor.vaxa

THE MEMBERSHIP LIST

In which the members are listed.

- | | | |
|--------------------------|------------------------|----------------------|
| 1 C Mark Bailey | 21 A Rafe Culpin | 41 A Hazel Langford |
| 2 C Nickey Barnard | 22 S Alex Perry | 42 A Brian Ameringen |
| 3 C Dave Baynham | 23 A The Magician | 43 A Pat Brown |
| 4 C Cath Bircher | 24 A James Steel | 44 A Mary Morman |
| 5 C Nigel Evans | 25 A Michael Abbott | 45 A Kent Bloom |
| 6 C Geoff Hale | 26 A Caroline Mullan | 46 A Susan Francis |
| 7 C Stewart Johnson | 27 A Bridget Wilkinson | 47 A Rhodri James |
| 8 C Ivan Towison | 28 A Terry Hunt | 48 A Marcus Streets |
| 9 P John Richards | 29 A Paul M. Cray | 49 A Tim Illingworth |
| 10 A Mike Cheater | 30 A Richard Crook | 50 A Mike Whitaker |
| 11 P John Botham | 31 A Paul Dommer | 51 A John Bray |
| 12 A Dave Rowley | 32 A Mike Stone | 52 S Resurgam |
| 13 A Phil Plumbly | 33 A Peter Wareham | 53 A Michael Kennedy |
| 14 P Steve Glover | 34 A Gwen Funnell | 54 A Mary Morman (2) |
| 15 A Gareth Rees | 35 A Ken Slater | 55 A John Dallman |
| 16 P Jonathan Coxhead | 36 A Joyce Slater | |
| 17 P Steve Rothman | 37 A Marcus L. Rowland | |
| 18 P Chris Stock | 38 S Colin Wilkinson | |
| 19 P Dave Ellis | 39 A Andy Morris | |
| 20 A Larry Van der Putte | 40 A Dave Langford | |