

Novacon 37

Bentley, near Walsall: 2-4 November 2007

Sidewise Success for Novacon GoH

More good news for our guest of honour, sf author Charlie Stross: the opening three novels in his “Merchant Princes” sequence have won the Sidewise Award for best alternate history science fiction novel or series of 2006.

The winner was announced at the convention TuckerCon, held in St Louis over the weekend of 2-5 August. Also shortlisted in that category were novels by Robert Conroy, Jo Walton, Paul Park and Harry Turtledove.

It’s the first time Charlie has reached the Sidewise shortlist, and follows an amendment opening the award up to multi-volume works.

The next 18 months are “a busy patch”, Charlie tells us. “Because I was mostly published in the USA at first, my British publishers are now playing catch-up. The result is a deluge of books appearing in the UK for the first time.”

September sees Orbit’s release of *The Jennifer Morgue*, sequel to civil service / espionage / horror spoof *The Atrocity Archives*, which came out in June. Two months later, Pan MacMillan begins publishing his award-winning “Merchant Princes” series through its Tor imprint; *The Family Trade* is first out of the gate, with *The Hidden Family* and *The Clan Corporate* to follow at six-monthly intervals.

Orbit opens the 2008 schedule in March, with Charlie’s new sf thriller *Halting State*. No definite date’s been set, but Orbit is likely to add his “comic space opera” *Saturn’s Children* later that year.



“I really only write one or two books a year,” he adds, “so once the backlog is in print, things will calm down. But that’s not going to happen until 2010...”

[For updates on Charlie’s work - and on Novacon in general - check out the news section at our website, www.novacon37.org.uk.]

Hotel Update

Accommodation at the Quality Hotel is fast being taken up, so we strongly urge you to book now if you’ve not already done so. You can check your status on the address label with this progress report.

We’ve negotiated extremely competitive rates this year: £37.75 per person per night for twins and doubles, which includes VAT, full English (or continental style) breakfast and free parking adjacent to the hotel. The management has also agreed that any member missing breakfast - this is Novacon, after all - can exchange their ticket for a baguette at the bar (vegetarian options will be available)

A limited number of rooms were designated as singles by the hotel, available via the membership forms issued since Novacon 36. We’ll do our best to help anyone who prefers a single, but would ask you to seriously consider sharing as a fallback option.

Additional hotel forms can be downloaded from our website, or posted out to you if you telephone Steve Lawson on 0114 281 1572.

Members are reminded the Quality Hotel is now fully non-smoking; this covers all accommodation, as well as the bar and function rooms

Directions to our venue - by car, rail, bus and air - will appear in our third progress report, due to be distributed in mid-October.

Those wishing to reduce their carbon footprint by sharing a car are welcome to join our online community (you don’t even need a Live Journal account), at http://community.livejournal.com.novacon_37.

Main Programme

At this stage, much of the programme is still in flux, but the basic framework's already in place and we can definitely promise the traditional Novacon mix of serious items, idiotic items, alarming items and a few surprises along the way - particularly on Saturday evening, of which we'll reveal more in our next progress report, due out in mid-October. (And before Tony Berry begins to panic: *no*, it's not a disco.)

Film Programme

In addition to Dave Lally's traditional line-up of televisual oddities, we'll once again be screening late-night movies on Friday - including the UK convention premiere of William Winckler's feature-length homage to monster cinema, *Frankenstein Vs The Creature From Blood Cove* - and showcasing a selection of shorter films on Saturday.

Children's Facilities

Although - as in recent years - Novacon 37 will not be organising an official creche, we will set aside a room for younger members to amuse themselves. Please note any use of this facility will be strictly the responsibility of their parents.

The Nova Awards

Voting forms for the 2007 Nova Awards will be available to download from the Novacon website in mid-October, for those members who wish to vote prior to the convention. Hardcopies will be included in the convention membership packs.

Eligible members are encouraged to vote in all three categories - best fanzine, best fan writer and best fan artist - and the results will be announced on Sunday afternoon.

The current rules and a regularly-updated "long list" of those fanzines known to be eligible (plus a few which aren't, but are still well worth checking out) are available at www.novacon37.org.uk.

New Members

(as at 18 July)

Alexander Clarke	Chris Stocks	Anne Wilson
Kevan Grayson	Mark Slater	Alison Scott
Ian Warner	Christopher Brooks	Steve Cain
Eddie Stachelski	Steve Jeffery	Marianne Cain
Greg Pickersgill	Vikki Lee France	Jonathan Cain
Catherine Pickersgill	John Ross Wilson	Gary Starr
Tobes Valois	Serena Culfeather	Robert Day
John Dowd	Phillip Collins	David C Holmes
Fran Dowd	Tommy Ferguson	Helen Holmes
Heather Turnbull	Malcolm Furnass	Peter Weston
David Kirby	Jane-Louise Cracknell	Eileen Weston
Christine Gould	Chris Murphy	Krystyna Oborn
Dave Lally	Michael Abbott	

[Updates are posted at our website, www.novacon37.org.uk.]

Novacon 38...

...will almost certainly be held somewhere in the Midlands during the autumn of '08. Anyone interested in working on Britain's longest-running regional science fiction event is invited to get in touch with the Birmingham Science Fiction Group by writing to Vernon Brown at 106 Green Lanes, Wylde Green, Sutton Coldfield, B73 5JH.

70 Years of British Science Fiction Conventions

1960-1979 by Peter Weston

Last time, we saw how the 1959 Brumcon was going to herald a bright new dawn, when the BSFA would run conventions, and they would be focussed on science fiction to make them more welcoming to newcomers. *That* idea didn't last the year! The 1960 event was a muddle from the start: first it was supposed to go to Harrogate, *then* to London, *then* they tried to switch it to good old Kettering, scene of so many fannish romps, *then* back to London, until - three days before Easter - the chosen hotel cancelled the booking. And Contemplation thought it had problems!

True fannish heroism was displayed by the formidable team of Ella Parker and Bobbie Wild, who tramped the streets of London to find a new venue in Bloomsbury, which was a much better bet than the original choice: at least this place wasn't teetotal! But the BSFA took no part in the organisation, publications were feeble, and the minimal programme had almost no sf content other than Ted Carnell's GoH speech. Even so, some 'first-timers' appeared and enjoyed themselves, and the 'London factor' helped boost numbers to 87 (my count). And when it was all over, Vince Clarke said, with no trace of irony, "...not to worry, KETTERING is the word for next year and things will be back to normal then." So much for 'a new dawn'!

Kettering was not to be: the 'George' was being refurbished, and instead Eric Jones and the Cheltenham Circle held LXICon in Gloucester, in a hotel much too small. An 'overflow' hotel was nominated (across the road), but attendees were advised not to mention the con as the management strongly disapproved! Still, this was the first time programme items ran on the Friday night, the first Eastercon to have a 'backdrop', and the first to secure a GoH who was a major professional from outside the field (Kingsley Amis, who reportedly had a fine time). LXICon was a great success but attendance was only 77; the rebuilding of fandom was evidently going to be a slow business.

In 1962, Ron Bennett realised a three-year-old dream and took Ronvention to the far North for a well-run event in Harrogate, this time with 94 attending. Numbers were boosted in a bizarre fashion, as Jim Linwood describes: "this was the one where a local Lord and

his lady enrolled, just for the Saturday night dance / fancy dress ball. I was there when the lady paid over her fee - she and her husband left in a chauffeur-driven Rolls."

And now Ken Slater showed what he could do with Bullcon at Peterborough. Ken's attitude towards membership was typically bullish: "We set a target that was about fifty more than the normal attendance outside London. GoH was No.1, Chairman was No.150, and we tried to fill the gap between the figures." They didn't quite succeed (with 130) but had wall-to-wall professionals: Amis again, Edmund Crispin, Tom Boardman, Mack Reynolds, Brian Aldiss, Dan Morgan, John Brunner and many others. Everything went so well that the hotel begged them to come back in 1964, and so Repetercon was born, my own first convention.

But, for the first time, older fans began to realise they had spawned a monster, as the BSFA's success in recruiting continued to bring in new faces: by now, roughly 25% of the 150 attendees were newcomers. And they had different attitudes, as Charles Platt swiftly made clear. He thought the whole thing was pathetic, and thus began the period of the fannish 'New Wave' which highlighted a massive 'generation-gap' in British fandom. This was illustrated at the bidding session, when older fans led by Ron Bennett campaigned for a return to Harrogate, but were defeated by just one vote in favour of Ken Cheslin's bid for "Birmingham in 65".

So what happened? They stayed away. Brumcon-2 was a tiny affair, only partly because of the second London worldcon due in August. And it was different in *kind*, not just in size, with a committee of 'new fans' such as Rog Peyton, who found themselves cast adrift from many of the traditions painfully evolved over the previous 15 years. They were saved only by the presence of reassuringly capable old hands like the Aldiss / Harrison double-act, who locked Charles Platt in a wardrobe, upturned it, and proceeded with their room-party over the muffled cries of "Let me out, you bastards!"

Loncon-2 was held over the 1965 August Bank Holiday weekend, with Brian Aldiss as guest of honour. Compared with the 1957 event, we were in a different age: the space race had begun, sf was re-making itself through the 'new wave', the BSFA had been born and British fandom turned on its head. Yet the organisers - Ella Parker being chairman - seemed oblivious to these changes, still appearing to regard

the worldcon as something just for the fannish in-crowd. They used a hotel in central London - the Mount Royal, in Oxford Street - bigger and more expensive than before, but hot, noisy, and with severely limited facilities. Again, the programme book contained nothing but the most basic information, and the programme had long gaps and makeweight items like 'trivia' quizzes, with the banquet, GoH speech, Hugo Awards and Terry Carr's TAFF presentation all crammed into a lunchtime slot on Sunday. It suffered from a major failure of imagination, and significantly, despite the new affluence, total numbers did not exceed 350, a very modest increase on its predecessor's 287.

Yes, there were some magic moments - Brian Aldiss and Tom Boardman pelted Harry Harrison with pork pies, John W Campbell dominated the floor and Karen Anderson was stunning as a 'She-Devil' in the fancy dress [see photograph, right] - but to many people, Loncon-2 was instantly forgettable, rather than the life-changing event it should have been.



Great Yarmouth was our site in 1966, where members of Dave Barber's Yarcon were entertained by an Easter Sunday battle between Mods and Rockers on the beach. Uniquely, the hotel stipulated 'half-board' terms which meant that almost all of the 100+ attendees dined together, something I enjoyed because it gave me opportunity to talk to fans like Eric Jones whom otherwise I would not have met. This was the year Ted Tubb blasted BSFA Treasurer Charlie Winstone for incompetence, and where the BSFA walked away from its nominal position of authority over the national convention.

The following year's Briscon was in the safe hands of veteran organiser Tony Walsh, in the rambling, comfortable Hawthorns Hotel in Bristol. For the first time, we had a solidly sf-oriented programme, with speeches by GoH John Brunner, Mike Moorcock and an excellent pro-panel. It seemed a very well-organised, civilised weekend, which was not quite the case with the cleverly-named Thirdmancon in 1968.

This was the brainchild of Harry Nadler and the Manchester Delta Group, who lost their original hotel a few months before Easter,

moved out to Buxton, and saw their new venue slide into bankruptcy a week or two before the convention. It was my wife Eileen's introduction to congoing, and we were conscious of strange people everywhere, including one man dressed in black who spent the entire weekend lurking behind the floor-length curtains in the main hall. The con attracted a record attendance of 160, but a good proportion must have been horror, supernatural and film fans.

Not so in 1969: the oddly-titled Galactic Fair was a cosmopolitan affair, chaired by Ted Tubb, with John Brunner, Ken Bulmer, Gerry Webb and other London fans on his committee. It was held in Oxford's upmarket Randolph Hotel and was noted both for the jousting session, which put one participant into hospital, and the sight of GoH Judith Merrill being carried into the hall on a large butcher's tray, prompting one wag to shout "Where's the apple in her mouth, then?!".

From these heights, we plunged to the depths with George Hay's Scicon in 1970, generally regarded as the worst Eastercon ever, one that had nothing to do with sf and which was held in a dreadful London hotel due for demolition the week afterwards. Rog Peyton and I were so enraged that, in a moment of madness (and with no location in mind), we made a successful bid for 1971 (against Brian Burgess' no-hope suggestion of Swanage).

We were rebuffed from several hotels, so - in an attempt to look respectable - I decided to print some headed notepaper demonstrating our long pedigree. But *how many* conventions had there been? I turned to Ken Bulmer, who from memory constructed a back-history from which we calculated this would be Eastercon-22. (But he forgot the 1957 Kettering event, which subsequently caused no end of confusion!). Eventually, we ended up at The Giffard, a modern hotel in Worcester and - though I say so myself - broke a few records with 284 attending, an excellent programme and the best-ever fancy dress parade, plus a boat trip on the Severn as a Monday-morning bonus.

That was only the first convention in the Midlands that year. Some months earlier, at a collating session for *Speculation*, the members of the Aston University SF group had been talking about doing some big project; I suggested they should run a convention, six months removed from the Eastercon. Vernon Brown took me seriously and came up with Novacon: a perfect name for a new convention.

James White was the GoH and it was a great success, with 150 attending, more than most Eastercons until a short time earlier. Since the Aston group had reached the end of its life - most members had graduated and were scattering to the winds - a backroom meeting was hastily convened to make the newly-reformed Brum Group responsible for the convention. And that's how it has been ever since, right up to this year's Novacon 37!

For the 1972 Eastercon, the Delta Group had won a bid for Blackpool, but again lost their hotel and ended up (via Harrogate) in Chester. for Chessmancon. Those in the con hotel had a great time, but others billeted in remote parts of the town were less amused. Larry Niven was GoH and gave a preview of *Ringworld*, although Mike Meara commented that "as a public speaker, Larry makes a good window-cleaner".

The 1973 OMPAcon was held in Bristol, with Samuel R Delany as GoH; unusually, it was run by members of an amateur press association, but they did a fine job. As did the Newcastle 'Gannets' with their fabulous, mythical Tynecon in 1974, widely acclaimed as the very best of the 1970s conventions. As I wrote somewhere-or-other, "it enveloped me in a glow of euphoria from the instant I walked into the hotel".

And Seacon '75 was very nearly as good. It was chaired by Malcolm Edwards, with a team of 'ratfans made respectable by responsibility' and Saturday night music provided by Graham Charnock's band, the Burlingtons. (The slight incongruity of using that particular title for a convention in Coventry, as far from the seaside as it's possible to get in this country, has been remarked upon in a recent fanzine). It seemed we were on a roll... and then came Mancon in 1976.

Nobody wanted Mancon, but it just wouldn't go away. Sidetracked in 1975, it came back to haunt us at Coventry and was only given a green light in the absence of any alternative. No one had much enthusiasm for chairman Peter Presford and his concept of a con in a university hall of residence, and we were right: it was dreadful. "A disaster," wrote Rob Hansen in



his fanhistory *Then*, "due not only to the collapse of the programme and the total absence of any signs of organisation, but also to the grimly awful venue."

We were so thankful for the luxury of the DeVere, when Eastercon 77 returned to Coventry, run by the Brum group with Pauline Dungeat as chair. It was a good year, despite the hotel's persistent problems with static electricity - **Crack!** - that made any physical contact perilous! Harry Harrison was GoH, Bob Shaw gave his talk on 'The Bermondsey Triangle Mystery' and The Burlingtons performed once again for the Saturday evening thrash. Ah, happy days...

Not that the 1978 Skycon was unsuccessful, though locating it in an uncaring hotel at Heathrow airport was definitely a mistake. However, chairman Kevin Smith and his committee ran an excellent programme, during which GoH Leroy Kettle gave a hilarious interview, and so many 'walk-in' members appeared that the convention generated an unexpectedly huge profit. A literal stampede resulted when Kevin announced that free drinks would be served in the bar for as long as the money lasted!

And so to the end of this decade, when, rather appropriately, the Eastercon returned to Leeds, the place where it had all begun, for Yorcon. It was a pleasant, well-run convention, organised by the new Leeds group and chaired by Mike Dickinson, but slightly overshadowed by the thought in everyone's minds that the Brighton worldcon was only months away - and this was going to be the Big One.



It certainly was! Under our slogan 'Britain's Fine in '79' (and with Harry Bell's fannish lion as our symbol), Seacon '79 went on to be a great success. Largely, this was because it was the product of a completely *united* national fandom, one that had come to full maturity and was eager to show the world what it could do. The Brighton Metropole proved a superb site and everything went like clock-

work. Over 5000 people joined, more than 3100 actually attended, and the availability of cheap travel meant that overseas visitors came in huge numbers. The sheer scale of the thing was unprecedented and it could so easily have been a huge disaster. The committee - just 10 of us - never even realised the enormous potential there was for things to go wrong. Yet we sailed through with apparent ease and enjoyed the experience immensely.

As Rob Hansen observes in *Then*, "In many ways the Worldcon was the culmination of all that had occurred in British fandom in the 1970s... And so it came to an end. The era that had started with the advent of *Fouler* was now over, perhaps lending weight to theories of fannish millennialism."

[In our next progress report, Mark Plummer grabs the baton from Peter and surveys the British convention scene post-Seacon '79.]

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FANTASYCON
21-23 SEPTEMBER 2007
THE BRITANNIA HOTEL
1 ST JAMES STREET, NOTTINGHAM

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