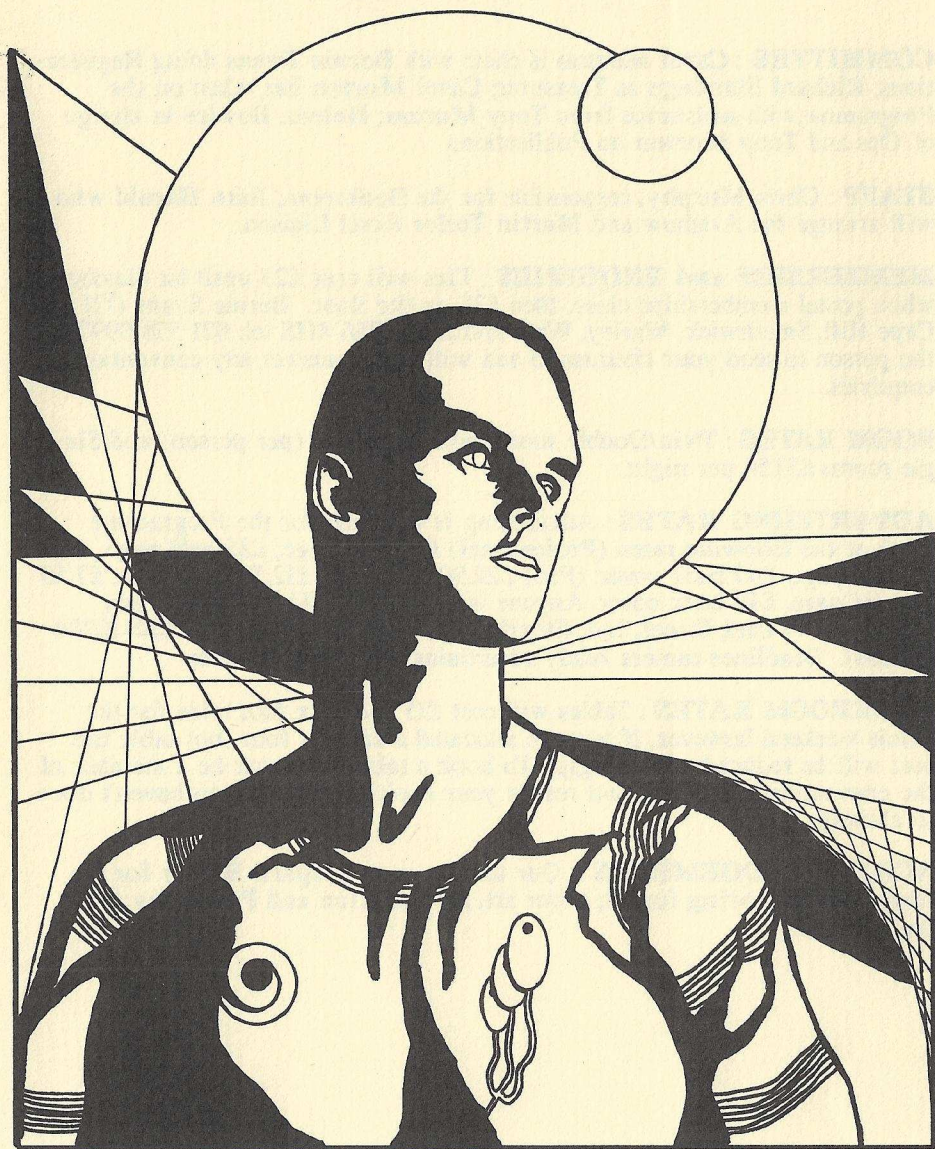


NOVACON 23

Progress Report Three



NOVACON 23
Guest of Honour Stephen Baxter
Royal Angus Hotel, Birmingham
Friday 5th to Sunday 7th November 1993

COMMITTEE : Carol Morton is chair with Bernie Evans doing Registrations; Richard Standage as Treasurer; Carol Morton has taken on the Programme, with assistance from Tony Morton; Helena Bowles in charge of Ops and Tony Morton on Publications.

STAFF : Chris Murphy, responsible for the Bookroom; John Harold who will arrange the Artshow and Martin Tudor Hotel Liaison.

MEMBERSHIP and ENQUIRIES : This will cost £25 until 1st October when postal memberships close, then £30 on the door. Bernie Evans (121 Cape Hill, Smethwick, Warley, West Midlands, B66 4HS tel: 021 558 0997) is the person to send your cheques to and will try to answer any convention enquiries.

ROOM RATES : Twin/Double rooms will be £29.50 (per person) and Single rooms £33.50 per night.

ADVERTISING RATES : Advertising is welcome for the Programme Book at the following rates: (Professional) £40 full page, £25 half page, £15 quarter page, £60 back cover; (Fan) £22.50 full page, £12.50 half page, £7.50 quarter page, £40 back cover. Anyone interested should approach Tony Morton at 14 Park Street, Lye, Stourbridge, West Midlands, DY9 8SS (0384 897206). Deadlines camera ready advertising copy 15th October.

BOOKROOM RATES : Tables will cost £15 for a six foot table for the whole weekend however, if you are allocated a smaller four foot table the cost will be reduced accordingly. To book a table you must be a member of the convention and fill in and return your booking form if you haven't done so already.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS : Our thanks go to Stephen Baxter for the story, Dave Mooring for the cover art, Al Johnston and Peter Day for their reviews.

PANICS FROM THE CHAIR

by Carol Morton

OK, so this is the last PR before the con itself, this is my last chance to talk to you before the event. So just what am I supposed to talk about? The weather? No, actually I do have one or two things to say.

First of all remember your hotel forms! Bernie will no doubt wax eloquent elsewhere in this PR on this topic but if you want to be in the main hotel and not the Midland (our overflow this year), you'd better get your form in soon.

All the problems with the hotel have been sorted (touch wood, crossed appendages, etc).

The beer will be charged at 1992 prices, but unfortunately this will not include any 'real' ale, the Angus can't cope with the extra barrels, kegs, whatever. So we have to put up with Gillespie Stout and Theakston's best, which went down so well last year. The programme is well on its way to completion - see notes elsewhere.

In fact everything is going well, so why do I wake up nights in a panic? My committee - and staff, tell me not to be so paranoid, they say that Novacon will be wonderful. Maybe it will, but one thing is sure, I'm not doing this job again, well not until I'm asked.

THE LAST DANGEROUS FORMS.

By Bernie Evans.

DON'T THROW AWAY THAT ENVELOPE!! Look at the label. It has your membership number on it, and also indicates whether or not I've had a hotel form from you. If there's an "H" next to your membership number, then I've got your form, and if there isn't, then I haven't. Simple, isn't it?

If I haven't had the form, then use the one enclosed. If I have had your form and you want to alter something, then use the one enclosed.

Also enclosed are yet another membership/general booking form, in case you've forgotten to book your Art Show space or anything like that. We can still use your ideas as well, it'll probably be too late for this year but next year's committee are already hard at it, and I'll pass them on.

The last form enclosed is the NOVA BALLOT FORM. Use the bloody thing! The wonderful Tony Berry (current Nova Administrator), needs those votes in. Send it to the address on the form NOW.

OK, that's it. Your last set of Bernie forms. Next year you can start to collect Carol forms as Carol Morton takes over. Wish her luck and treat her well, I'll know if you don't!!

OMEGATROPIC by Stephen Baxter (Conclusion)

In the twenty-first century, physics was unified, unchallengeable, a monument to human reason.

But there were difficulties. The Omega Numbers.

Some of the constants of physics - such as the ratio of the neutrino's mass to the electron's - had turned out, under the unified theories, to be non-computable. That is, it was impossible in principle for their values to be determined. The Omega Number whose existence had been the first to be deduced was a seemingly random series of digits, which contained within it the outcome of all possible finite computer programs.

Tracy tried to explain it to Angus. "There are algorithms to determine some numbers. Like pi. But there are no algorithms for any of the Omega Numbers".

"Non-computable." Angus seemed to be following her. "Unknowable."

"Yes.... in this universe."

Computability was linked to the physical structure of the universe. Computability was proven in terms of the working of ideal computers. But it was possible to imagine other universes so different - for instance, where no discrete objects could exist - that the Omega Numbers might be readily computable, while everyday sums of simple arithmetic weren't.

Angus smiled. "A charming notion. And you hope to find such a universe here, high over Culloden?"

Angus, all possible universes exist. We know this. And bridges between the universes are everywhere. But to find the bridges we've had to look beyond the physical, the mechanical - almost to the mystical pole of human experience."

The human mind - life itself- was not embedded solely in one cosmos. The walls between the universes were resilient, but thin. And - where life was created, or destroyed, in waves - there the walls could break down.

Tracy had been rendered Omegatropic - drawn to such points in spacetime.

Angus nodded slowly. "So your violation of the dying Lobster, your fingers piercing his eyes -"

"I was hoping to establish a bridge, through his new death. Yes. But I failed."

Angus licked bioengineered heather from his fingers. "Where life is destroyed, in waves. I understand why you were brought to Culloden. Yours is an unenviable mission, Tracy."

She shrugged. It's a living. "Five jaunts, five random sweeps through time, and I'm brought home. To a fat pension...." She had the visor clean itself, donned it. "Angus, blow out the candle. We'll sleep now, and move at first light."

Move where? She wondered why she'd saddled herself with this odd, half-educated romantic kid. What was she going to do, escort him all the way home?

Angus said, "Are you cold? I can spare some plaid, if you wish."

The thermostatic filigree of the suit encased her. "Thanks, Angus. I'm fine. Go to sleep."

A cry - quickly muffled - woke her.

She rolled to her feet, sensor systems fizzing. A washed out glare told her that dawn was well advanced.

The cave was empty. Angus' fir candle was a blackened stump.

She crawled towards the cave entrance.

A musket snout greeted her. "Out you come, lady. Don't try any sorcery, or it will serve your young rebel friend the worse."

Options cascaded through Tracy's mind. They have Angus. She could take this redcoat, but there would be others. Angus wouldn't stand a chance.

Holding her hands away from her body she moved out of the cave. She straightened up. Three redcoats. The one whose musket was trained on her; another holding Angus' arms behind his back; a third with a bayonet-blade at Angus' throat. There was a trickle of blood at the boy's neck; the mud on his bear legs was smeared by a fresh flow of urine.

"Take it easy, Angus."

"I'm sorry. I came to find more heather."

I guess you aren't much of a soldier, are you, Angus? "It's okay. You've nothing to be ashamed of. Just stay still; I'll get you home."

The soldier facing her - a corporal, by the look of his shoulder flashes - ran his eyes over her body, speculating. Her exotic body armour, the anonymity of her visored face, seemed only to intrigue him. "Now then," he said softly. "Now then, indeed?"

Unrequested, the datastore kicked in. *Accent derives from Suffolk, England.*

"Give me your fancy musket, miss. And don't make a performance about it."

She lifted her hand towards the Dislocation switch at her chest. I should just switch out of here, write off this period. I've four more jaunts before recall...

The datastore whispered. *After Culloden the victorious English destroyed the Highlanders' way of life, systematically. The glens were burned from the firths to the hills. Murder, rape and robbery by the troops became commonplace -*

Angus somehow understood what she was doing. "Go, Fernandez," he hissed. "Get away from this English hell."

"Come on pretty lady," the corporal said. "I'm not a patient man."

The gaols were filled. The Highlanders' cattle was driven from the hills, for sale to the farmers of Yorkshire and the lowlands. At last the jurisdiction of the Clan Chiefs would be abolished, and even the wearing of tartan outlawed. The Highlanders starved...

Some reward for their romantic Rebellion, she thought. But I don't need this. This isn't my argument.

Slowly, with every movement obvious, she handed her laser crystal to the corporal. She let her finger slide discreetly over its barrel, adjusting it to lowest power.

Angus struggled, but he was firmly held.

The corporal fingered the crystal, poking grubby fingers at the firing button. Tracy watched, hoping he'd blow his stupid head off.

He took a step towards her and pushed her visor back over her head, exposing her face. Again she had a feeling of sudden shocking immersion in this timeframe. She could see the dirt in the pores of the corporal's nose and cheeks, smell rum and meat on his breath. He said, "We saw what you did to Jack Martin. Above the battlefield."

She made her expression as hard and unyielding as she could. "And?"
He jammed the laser crystal into her left eye and pressed the firing stud.

*

Ruby Light.

She heard a pop. Streamers of blood erupted into her vision, laced with specks of dark matter.

The back of her eyeball had exploded.

She twisted away, straining to keep the beam away from her optic nerve. Damn, damn. With an exoskeletal whir her left arm lifted. She clubbed the corporal; she felt the crunch of bone under her reinforced forearm. The red light flickered out leaving the world a mess of blood and burnt retina fragments.

She heard a scream of defiance, a musket shot. From out of the bloody fog, Angus' face loomed at her. There was a hole in the front of his chest: bits of bone had burst out through charred plaid. "Go, angel!" He slammed his palm against the switch on her chest.

Dislocation switches were designed to be simple to operate.

The ground shuddered beneath her. Quantum functions - her links to this slice of spacetime - sparkled, like blue threads.

She tried to embrace Angus, but he was already lost.

*

A plain. Coarse sand under her back.

Her shoulder ached. The sun overhead was hot, harsh sudden. Her throat and chest hurt as she dragged at the air; the oxygen content seemed low.

Far future, maybe. A ruined Earth. Eco-collapse? A nuclear war?

She snapped her visor down over her face; with a soft whir the suit began to restore her oxygen balance. Her proximity sensors told her that nothing was moving for many hundreds of metres around her. No communications, on any wavelength. She was safe, here. She lay there, the ground unyielding under her back, and let the suit figure out where it was. She imagined its tiny imbedded sensors taking solar spectra, atmospheric traces, magnetic field declinations.

She looked out through her left eye. It was like seeing through a fishbowl filled with blood-laced water. She practised keeping the eye closed. Maybe she'd have to rig up a patch.

The answer came. *The end of the pre-Cambrian*. Not a burnt-out future, but the past: five hundred million years before her birth.

The datastore whispered to her. The land was empty, but the seas and tidal pools were bursting with life, with the greatest explosion of evolutionary diversity the biosphere would ever produce.

She smiled. Life, created in waves. Angus would have been pleased.

She lay there for a little longer, before staring work.

(END)

Here is a rough guide to the programme we have lined up for you. This, I hasten to point out, could change at a later date, but essentially this is it!

FRIDAY

7.00 pm - 7.30 pm opening ceremony

7.45 pm - 8.45 pm Julian Headlong gives a talk on: "I am Spock's Liver"

9.00 pm - 10.00 pm University Challenge round 1

10.15 pm - 11.30 pm Stephen Baxter's Book Launch/Andromeda Party

12.00 midnight - 1.30 am (aprox) Film 1

SATURDAY

10.00 am - 11.00 am Jack Cohen

11.15 am - 1.00 pm Book Auction

1.15 pm - 2.15 pm Bob Shaw

2.30 pm - 3.15 pm University Challenge Round 2

3.30 pm - 4.30 pm Guest of Honour speech

4.45 pm - 5.45 pm Panel on the lack of Ethnic minorities in SF

6.00 pm - 7.30 pm Crystal Balls: A Game hosted by Steve Green and Kev Clarke

8.00 pm - 9.30 pm (aprox) Film 2

10.30 pm - 1.00 am Live Band: Bad Influence

1.30 am - 3.00 am (aprox) Film 3

SUNDAY

10.00 am - 11.00 am Ian Stewart

11.15 am - 1.00 pm Art Auction

1.15 pm - 2.15 pm Panel on Why is Mars so popular in publishing at the moment?

2.30 pm - 3.30 pm University Challenge Final

3.45 pm - 4.45 pm Tomorrows world dialogue

5.00 pm - 6.00 pm Award ceremony

6.15 pm - 7.15 pm Turkey readings

7.30 pm - 9.00 pm TAFF auction

9.30 pm - (Until the beer runs out) beer tasting

???? - ????: peoples disco

Well, that's it, if you have any suggestions for programme items that you desperately want it's not too late to contact me on 0384 897206.

Carol Morton

HOW TO GET THERE

BY RAIL:-

Go out of the station and head for New Street. Go down the ramp into New Street and carry straight on up Corporation Street. Wander along until you find the stop for the 16 (can't be more specific because they keep moving the stop). The bus runs every seven to ten minutes or so in the day and after 7.00 pm, every twenty minutes. The Royal Angus is on St Chad's Queensway, near to the dental hospital, and opposite St Chad's Cathedral.

BY CAR:-

Leave the M6 at junction 6 and head for the city centre on the A38 (M) Aston Expressway. Carry on past the "End of Motorway" sign and just past Aston University the road bends round to the right. Get into the left-hand lane, because you want the next exit, signposted West Bromwich. As you leave the Expressway, you will see the Angus on your left. If you overshoot, get off at the next exit and go up and around the island back onto the A38 and try again! See enclosed map for local car parks.

BY COACH:-

Depending on which coach you get, you will be deposited either at Digbeth coach station, or in Colmore Row. From Digbeth, turn left out of the station's FRONT entrance and walk up the main road towards the Bull Ring. Just past St Martin's Church you will find the bus stop for the 16 which will take you to Snow Hill Station. Get up at this point and alight at Snow Hill Queensway. The Angus is diagonally opposite, but you will have to go under the underpass.

From Colmore Row, walk back along to Colmore Circus (you'll see the Wesleyan building: big, pink granite, turquoise glass). Turn left from Colmore Circus along Snow Hill and walk to St Chad's Circus. Look across to the cathedral on your right and the Angus is opposite that. Obviously some use of the subways must be made, but if you get lost, ask either for St Chad's Cathedral or Snow Hill Station, which is close by.

The map enclosed will give you a vague idea of where you are going. If you get really desperate, phone the Angus on 236-4211 and they'll give directions.

RAFT

Reviewed by Al Johnston

This book represents a part of the genre that I for one would like to see more of: hard SF speculation about the laws of physics. What if they were different? How would that affect human beings and the evolution of life? What is the minimum change required to give interesting results?

In the universe of the raft, Stephen Baxter has changed only one parameter; G , the universal gravitational constant; in this setting, G is one billion times greater than it is here. This change in magnitude still leaves gravity as the weakest force in the universe, considerably weaker than the electromagnetic force (10^{35} times weaker between two electrons, as opposed to 10^{42} times weaker in our universe), never mind the strong and weak nuclear forces. Therefore chemistry and biology still function as expected; with large quantities of matter, however, gravity becomes the dominant factor much sooner than it does in our universe and cosmology is dramatically different. Instead of galaxies the Raft universe has gaseous nebulae surrounding black hole cores. Mile-wide stars condense in the outer hydrogen reaches, then burn out to iron within a year as they fall into the core. Supernova debris provides the wherewithal to support life in the nebula, whilst in the core a weird and different life exists based on a gravitic chemistry impossible anywhere else.

Gravity this strong also gives effects on a smaller scale; human beings have an appreciable field of their own. The Raft itself, built around the remains of a spaceship from our universe, has gravity due to its construction rather than to artifice, although its shape causes some peculiarities.

All of this background is fascinating and original, but it is not populated to the same high level. The story and characterisation leave a bit to be desired and, perhaps worse, Baxter's biology is not as good as his physics, giving an inconsistent feel to the book. The plot owes a lot to WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE and the nebular environment is very reminiscent of Niven's Smoke Ring from THE INTEGRAL TREES.

That said there is a lot to be recommended, such as the propeller trees navigated by exploiting their phototropism, iron mining on the surface of a dead star and the migrating whales. Less convincing is Boneworld, a cannibal society that grew from a lost shuttle and now has a more grisly geology. All in all, the original invention of this novel overcomes the deficiencies of plot and character and carries you over any feelings of inconsistency. Well worth reading.

TIMELIKE INFINITY

Reviewed by Peter J B Day

Earth has been conquered by the Qax - oppressed, ground down, for centuries. Then a project begun 1500 years ago to use time-dilation effect to achieve time-travel comes to fruition. The spaceship Cauchy returns from its deep-space round trip, towing behind it a portal - one end of a spacetime

wormhole reaching back to that earlier time. As it enters the system a craft - crewed by a rebel cult calling themselves the Friends of Wigner - take off from Earth, approaches the portal, and enters it. The Qax prepare to follow and crush the rebellion before it begins.

Meanwhile, back on the earlier timeline, the man who devised and built the installation, Michael Poole, is recalled from his researches in the Oort Cloud to deal with the situation created by the arrival of the Friends. For the friends refuse to communicate with anyone. They have their own secret plan, one so cosmic in its implications that they might even be a more dangerous threat than the Qax.

This is good, solid, hard SF, full of challenging scientific concepts and paradoxes, fascinating technology, aliens strange enough to satisfy anyone, and plenty of action. Yet despite its wealth of content the book remains surprisingly lightweight. It lacks the rounding which would give it that extra dimension. The characters are not explored in any depth and never really come to life, the background is sketched in too lightly to give the reader any true feel of the era or the culture, and the plot itself, although exiting enough, seldom rises much above the level of basic action-adventure.

But does any of this really matter? So what if it read like an up-market, high-tech ripping yarn? So what if it's unlikely to sear itself on the memory? The author knows how to tell a good story, presents his ideas clearly and with commendable economy, never holding up the action for a moment, and he develops them with imagination. It's entertaining, holds the reader throughout, and gives him something to think about. What more does anyone have a right to expect from a rattling good yarn?

ANTI-ICE

Reviewed by Tony Morton

A novel, written with some verve, in the style of 'Scientific Romance' popularised by Wells and Verne; Baxter expounds the Victorian ethos. The 'gentlemen's club' attitude prevalent of English explorers or governors provides ample ammunition for Baxter's startling scientific achievements from 'Anti-Ice'.

Proving harmless if kept cold, this volatile element explodes with phenomenal force reminiscent of nuclear power, giving the British world dominance through technology - and fear. Who could stand against weaponry of such power?

The initial point as such force is unleashed to curtail the Crimean war, Britain is feared, yet the power is developed for technological marvels: mono-rails speeds the populace between the cities of the world, vehicles of all sorts are thus propelled, industries power machinery this way. The ingenuity of Sir Josiah Traveller in its applications provide many uses.

Partly the story of Ned Vicers, who grows up with the knowledge of what anti-ice did to Sebastopol and its more peaceful luxuries, his development as a civil servant in the Foreign Office and his involvement with Traveller. The

Chance meeting leads to startling adventures which involves war and the flight aboard the Phaeton to the moon.

Scientifically well thought out, periodically superbly set and explained into Victorian expansionism (politically and technologically); Baxter reveals a sparkling creativity that ignites the imagination. The characters, whilst self-indulgent (Victorian England?) interact in cleverly abstract ways - Vickers imagining the 'perfect' Francoise victim, whilst she proves something else entirely; Travellers' constant mix-up with Vickers name (Wickers) and other foibles prove entrancing.

After the well built climax leaves us questioning mankind's lot, Baxter leads us into his final irony that only fittingly concludes the adventure. Here Baxter adds another feather to his cap.

PARTY PARTY PARTY PARTY

Stephen Baxter will be signing copies of FLUX, his latest novel, on Friday night at Novacon.

This will be followed by an Andromeda Party which will include a Signing Session.

Are you an author with a book recently published, or one due out before Novacon who would like to join in this extravaganza? If so contact ROG PEYTON at Andromeda Bookshop Tel 021 643 1999 as soon as possible.

PARTY PARTY PARTY PARTY

MEMBERSHIP LIST AS OF 18 SEPTEMBER

147	Ken Cheslin	181	Sue Mason
148	Huw Walters	182	Christina Lake
149	Keren Gilfoyle	183	Peter-Fred Thompson
150	Moirra Shearman	184	Lisanne Norman
151	Neil Summerfield	185	Joyce Slater
152	Alison Tomkinson	186	Ken F Slater
153	Neil Tomkinson	187	Catherine Hill
154	Suzanne Godsolve	188	Tim Salter
155	Robert Day	189	Ashley Watkins
156	Julie F Rigby	190	Anne Wilson
157	Alan Cash	191	Carol Ann Green
158	Les Escott	192	Richard Hewison
159	Dave Wood	193	Keith Cosslett
160	Eric Furey	194	Rob Holdstock
161	Maggie Furey	195	Ian Brooks
162	David Symes	196	Barbara Kershaw
163	Fay Symes	197	Pete Wright
164	Al Johnston	198	Zy Nicholson
165	Philip Cooper	199	Stephen Johnson
166	Stephen Hall	200	Steve Brewster
167	Rik Blakey	201	Chris Baker
168	Nev Rawlins	202	Rachel Baker
169	Catie Cary	203	Kari Maund
170	John Meaney	204	Phil Nanson
171	Yvonne Meaney	205	Andrew Saxby
172	Valerie R Housden	206	Stephen Payne
173	Phil Plumbly	207	David V Barrett
174	Tony Berry	208	John Bark
175	Dathi McGroarts	209	Simon Ounsley
176	Jackie McRobert	210	Gwen Funnell
177	Simon Bradshaw	211	Peter Wareham
178	Claire Brialey		
179	Noel Collyer	S 2	Judith Faul
180	Doreen Rogers		

STOP PRESS

As part of the Programme we are having a competition along the lines of UNIVERSITY CHALLENGE. The questions will be SF based. If interested in taking part let the Registration Desk know on arrival. Competitors will be drafted should too few apply.

Have you any suggestions for the TURKEY READINGS to be held on Sunday night? If you, have contact CAROL MORTON on 0384 897206 (before 8.30pm) by 30 October or bring your 'favourites' along with you for consideration!