

## Memories of SPE London – (virtually) uncut!

Thanks to the following past, present and future Section Chairs for sharing their memories of SPE London down the decades. Extracts from the contributions featured in this document appear in a special 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary article in the [SPE Review May 2011](#) issue.

“Dennis Gregg and I started the London Section because we knew enough people who were either members of SPE, or should be! They were a great bunch of people and I have good memories of those early days. Dr ‘Woody’ Craig, Chief Engineer of Amoco International, came over from the US to give a talk at one of the early meetings. I’m still an SPE member and it’s good to be remembered as the London Section founding Chair. I’d like to wish them well and encourage them to keep up the good work!” **Robert Hansen (1970)**

“When I was on the SPE London Committee, there was a system whereby a Committee member would take the position of Programme Chair (organising the evening meetings) for a year, before becoming Chair of the Section. I found being Programme Chair more difficult than being Section Chair as it was a constant battle to get speakers, some of whom would drop out at the last minute, leaving me to stand in on some occasions!

There was a good mix of contractors and oil company workers on the Committee and in meetings. It was an opportunity to learn more about what each other did in a relaxed social environment (usually in the bar). The ‘youngsters’ from Imperial College would get involved and attend meetings and many would join the Committee afterwards. Board members would also take part in a panel session judging students’ presentations. There wasn’t a problem getting new people on the Board who were willing to help out. The main focus of the Committee was on attracting new members. At that time, the Society was very US-focused, with very few international sections.” **Paul Ellis (1985-86)**

“In 1986/87 London had global and regional head offices for many large international oil companies (eg British Petroleum, Texaco, Chevron), as well as many smaller independents (eg LASMO, Enterprise and Ultramar, with Phillips and Charterhouse in Woking). The North Sea was booming and the SPE London Section had lots of enthusiastic American members, who brought their strong SPE tradition to London. We had about 3,000 members (London was in a continuous battle with Aberdeen as to who could attract the most members) and held just three or four evening meetings a year, in opulent surroundings at the Grosvenor House Hotel. Meetings were typically attended by around 300 members, mostly oil company people, with some from the major service companies – notably Schlumberger and Baker Hughes.

The meetings had a 'long happy hour' of drinks and networking, followed by a sit-down meal and an after-dinner speaker – either a Distinguished Lecturer or a local presenter.

The Section Board had around 15 members, all of whom were very active, and typically meetings were attended by about 12 Board members. Board meetings were held on separate days from the evening meetings, rotating around different oil company offices. They tended to focus on Section finances and the technical programme. The meetings usually ended with members congregating in a local pub, where we got to know each other better.

In the early days, I personally knew about half of the meeting attendees and enjoyed networking and socialising with them. I also liked meeting the Americans, who brought a different perspective. 1986 was before the age of email and all communications were carried out by telephone, post or hand-carried messages. The focus on students was much lower then than now, with only one student chapter – Imperial College.

In 1996, during my second tenure as Section Chair, the industry was more cost-conscious and a number of companies had relocated to Aberdeen. There was a successful drive to generate more revenue for SPE London. The meetings retained their format, but moved from Grosvenor House to the more cost-effective Cafe Royale, on Piccadilly. I am proud that on my second occasion as Chair, I and my senior Board colleagues developed an ethic of diversity and inclusion. One of the results of this was the election of the first female chair, Calliope Webber, who took over from me. We also introduced the very successful annual dinner dance, which was held at the Portman Hotel, with 250 attendees.” **Tony Perry (1986-87; Jan-July 1996).** *Tony has also been a 'Serial Section Chair' in San Tome (Venezuela), Abu Dhabi and Aberdeen, and received a Distinguished Service Award in recognition of this.*

“I was the first female chair. Being the first is something I am used to, as I have built my career on pressing into issues and places where there is stuff to be done that 'sets precedents'. On joining SPE London as Continuing Education Chair, I was tasked with turning around the Section finances from being in the red to healthy. We managed to do this by holding very successful Continuing Education programmes.

The period I was on the Board was a time of change. Oil prices were low (\$20/bbl real) and companies were looking to cut costs. This resulted in some major companies moving out of central London and so the challenge was to maintain the interaction between members and offer value for money. The evening meetings were held at the Grosvenor Hotel and a very good rate was negotiated, so it continued to be popular. Unfortunately, London has changed and central hotels no longer offer such good deals. Clear communication is something I have always valued. During my time on the Board, we had a major overhaul of the *SPE Review* magazine, which transformed from a stapled-together broadsheet into the professional product we have today.

I found my time on the London Section Committee exciting, supportive and full of camaraderie. There was a mix of 'old guard' and younger, more energetic members which worked well and still works well today." **Calliope Webber (1987-88)**

"During my time as Chair I enjoyed working with an active and capable Committee. You got to be Chair after serving as Programme Chair. If you managed a good programme of events, you were made Chair as a reward. The Chair role was high profile and considered good for the career.

Evening meetings were grand affairs held in the Grosvenor Hotel and the format included a formal sit-down dinner with an after-dinner speaker, usually a Distinguished Lecturer. There was also an occasional, less formal pre-dinner panel discussion. Speaker topics were generally either designed to be provocative and of general interest, or be technically based with a broad interest. Attendees were a good mixture of oil company and service company people. The meetings programme was the main focus for the Section and meetings always offered good networking opportunities, although I always felt we could have done with more geoscientists attending, rather than the engineers who dominated the events.

I remember that as an enthusiastic Chair with a desire to develop a provocative programme of meetings, I spoke to Alex Salmond about speaking at an SPE event on nationalising the Scottish oil industry. The Board did not think this was a good idea, that our members were not ready to hear such a radical view and that it would cause the oil industry attendees some after dinner indigestion. In the end we chose not to issue the invitation to speak...

In those days the SPE was very American-focused. During my year as Chair the SPE decided to open its first office outside the US, and London and The Hague were the main candidates. We put a lot of effort into lobbying the SPE in the US for a London office and I am proud that history shows we were successful. The SPE office started up in London with two staff. Also that year, the *SPE Review* was started and I am amazed and delighted that it is still going to this day.

Overall, I recall it as a really vibrant time in the oil industry and have only good memories of it." **Doug Field (1989-90)**

"During my time on the Board there was a drive to generate more revenue, as a number of companies had relocated to Aberdeen and membership and attendance had suffered as a result. An improvement in finances was achieved in a number of ways, including adapting the website shared between London and Aberdeen to start earning revenue

and, more importantly, overhauling the sponsoring strategy, which almost doubled the income and rescued the Section's finances. This was led by Lawrence Camilleri.

I had a number of objectives as Chair, one of which was to make the Committee work more effectively. I achieved this by formalising the roles of Committee members and so making them more accountable for their responsibilities. I removed some Board members for not being sufficiently active.

A large reason for my becoming involved with the SPE Board was to understand how a committee works. In running my own business, I needed to know how a board worked and how best to make it work for you. I learned that in order to convince a committee to vote for something, brute force does not work! Diplomacy through explaining and convincing individual members before the vote, proved to be a much more effective strategy.

Another objective was to make the SPE move in the same direction as the industry. There was a shift from discipline-based groups to asset-based groups and, as such, I wanted the SPE to integrate with societies from other disciplines. As a result, memoranda of understanding were signed with the PESGB, Energy Institute and LPS. These are still in force today, allowing members to attend each other's seminars at member rates and there is a reciprocal agreement on advertising and promoting each other's events.

One amusing story I remember is when a representative from the British Antarctic Survey gave a talk at an evening meeting about global warming. Off the record, before the talk, he told me that he didn't actually think there was any hard evidence to support it! That was 11 years ago, however, and he is unlikely to make the same comment today." **Piers Johnson (1999-2000)**

"Prior to becoming Section Chair, I had been on the Committee for six years, on the Continuing Education Committee, the Schools and Scholarship Committee and had been Secretary and Treasurer. I've now been a Committee member for 16 years! I've always enjoyed contributing to the SPE London Section, as the SPE is something I firmly believe in and think it is an excellent professional society.

As Chair, I enjoyed the interaction at all levels within the London Section, but also in the greater regional and global context. I had a great Board to work with and we all contributed and worked hard to make it a successful year. We had a lot to live up to, as the previous year, the Section had won one of the awards for Best Section. A highlight during my time as Chair was having the Energy Minister, Brian Wilson, speak at one of our dinner meetings.

I think the Section should be most proud of the quality of the events it organises for its members and the variety and topical nature of the speakers and Continuing Education seminars. Certainly, during my 16 years, it has remained a Society that moves with the times and has been very well run by the Board each year. I think the contribution by the volunteers is exceptional and people should be very proud of what they achieve while serving the Section.” **Jane Christopherson (2001-02)**

“During my time on the Board (not just as Chair), we focused on changing the financial model of the Committee to reduce expense and ensure there were funds for helping students and promoting the industry. The oil price was low and membership and attendance had suffered as a result. We held a brainstorm and the following changes were made to Improve finances:

- the evening meetings were moved from the Café Royal to the Geological Society
- a buffet replaced the sit-down meal
- more members were attracted by keeping track of when a member left or didn't pay their dues and sending them a reminder
- we attracted more attendees to events by sending out a list of topics that the members would then rank. This would ensure that the evening meetings and seminars had relevant talks that interested the members
- cost-savings were also made on the website.

One amusing incident I recall was when I was chairing an evening meeting and introducing a senior VP. Looking at the introduction he provided, I read out: ‘Mr X is a vegetarian and teetotaller, but please don't read this out at the meeting as I am Australian!’

I enjoyed working with the Committee and gaining a consensus to change some of the ways things were done. I liked the fact that I was giving back something to the industry and helping a charitable cause.” **Satinder Purewal (2002-03)**

“My top aim as Chair was to increase active membership. As part of attracting members to meetings and events depends on good communication, I was keen to see *SPE Review*, the website and e-mail broadcasts used to best effect. Another priority was balancing the books. Then, as now, SPE sections worldwide received little financial support from the HQ in Richardson; activities had to be largely self-funded, and so the Board needed to run the section with the same discipline as any other business.

During my Chairmanship, the London Board continued its close liaison with the Energy Institute and jointly developed a website for schoolchildren to gain more knowledge of the industry. This website also includes a ‘virtual visit’ to an offshore North Sea oil platform, believed to be the first tour of its kind with SPE involvement (and may be the first ever). It can be found via [www.spe-uk.org](http://www.spe-uk.org) or directly at:

<http://resources.schoolscience.co.uk/SPE/ftv.html>. The host website is a UK National School Curriculum support service provided by the government, and the site is used as a source of material by science teachers all over the UK (and anyone else with web access). The London and Aberdeen Sections donated £10,000 each towards the cost of the virtual visit and have provided inspiration, technical input and reviewing of the material during development. The virtual visit was launched at the Annual Meeting of the UK Association for Science Education in January 2004.” **Pete Naylor (2004-05)**

“By 2005, we had established our regular meetings at the Geological Society; we had our first Summer Ball, with Michael Portillo as the after-dinner speaker; we had huge growth in membership during the year, and we introduced a partial scholarship scheme for Imperial College MSc students and, working with Anadarko, Perenco and Hess, co-sponsored three students through the course. At the Summer Ball, Alex McKay, our MC for the evening, asked me if I wanted to speak before or after Michael Portillo. I was pretty nervous about making my speech and had no hesitation in choosing to go first. Michael Portillo was much funnier and more interesting than me, so I obviously made the right call!

We had a very capable and energetic Board. The industry had come out of the slump of 1999 and was starting to boom, with a general feel-good factor. It was great to have one of the fastest growing SPE sections globally.

My main challenges were writing a massive annual report – it took me the whole weekend to write it – and making sure we had a first-class programme of evening meetings, though I was very lucky that Tim Lines did most of the hard work and was a consistently entertaining and amusing Chairman.

I am proud of getting an annual Chairman's Award (mostly based on the report that took all weekend to write), launching our joint industry scholarships, our membership growth and initiating a poll of our members about programme meetings and Continuing Education seminar topic preferences.” **Willem Bloem (2005-06)**

“One of my focus areas was to make the committee meetings more dynamic. I put time limits on each topic and I was quite a strict Chair. I tried to steer it so that the quiet people had a voice, too. I took my own minutes, because we didn't have a secretary, and I always tried to get them out quite quickly.

I've been involved in Continuing Education for eight years and have made lots of contacts and friendships. You do things such as Marketing, or getting up and talking in front of a hundred people, that you wouldn't normally do in your everyday job. And getting good attendance and positive feedback at events is very rewarding. We now use attention-grabbing posters to advertise events, and have more generic topics, to reflect

the demographics of the members. We try to look at the industry as a whole now, rather than focusing only on niche topics.

When I was on the Board our activities paid for sponsoring students; we've continued that by supporting a lot more universities and offering places at meetings for students.

There is a good atmosphere in the Section. The Committee is very supportive. I've made lots of contacts and genuine friendships during my time on the Board." **Clara Altobell (2006-07)**

"On transferring from Thailand three years ago, I was made very welcome by SPE London. I really liked the meetings topics and the diverse groups of people they attracted, so I joined the Board.

We have, of course, been impacted by the financial crisis and have responded by implementing some changes across the Section. Our Board has taken up the challenge and really run with it, and I have been amazed at how little direction they have needed in turning things around successfully. This year, we have also reached out to universities outside London – Manchester, Salford, Leeds – with some good success, and we now have some faculty members on the Board, which will help us better understand how we can adjust our programme to reach out to the universities further.

I'm very proud that we have a group of really great people running the Section well, on a totally voluntary basis." **Thijs Kuiper (2010-11)**

"A really vital foundation for our Section is having a strong technical programme of events. This gives our members the ability to develop and diversify their technical knowledge, and to provide important networking opportunities. We're in good shape, but we must continue to refresh our evening meeting and Continuing Education programmes. With Tim Lines and Clara Altobell in key positions, I know we are well-placed to do that.

An area I'm particularly keen to focus on in the coming session is how we can get better at spreading the word about the industry at school level. Aberdeen does a particularly good job there and there's a lot we can learn and borrow from them.

Thijs and I have also discussed introducing a big annual conference in London. I think we can put together a really interesting technical programme and so over the next year I hope we, as a Section, can develop that idea to fruition." **Stuart Girling, Chair Elect**