

CONFERENCE REPORT

VB '96: Brighton Rock

Once again, the *Virus Bulletin* conference rolls by: every year, regular as clockwork, it comes around again. In about the middle of September, the world's virus experts and corporate security managers gather together in a large hotel and drink beer. Oh, there are some presentations about current and future issues in the world of viruses as well, for those who make it past the bar.

Location

This year, the *VB* staff and helpers made the relatively short trip down to Brighton, on England's south coast; definitely a relief after last year's fairly long haul to Boston.

The hotel hosting the conference this year was *The Grand*, a remarkably beautiful building, which is in excellent condition, following total refurbishment subsequent to the IRA bombing of 1984.

In at the Deep End

Proceedings kicked off on Wednesday evening with a chance to meet delegates and speakers at the cocktail reception in the hotel's Victoria Lounge. Needless to say, this provided a springboard to a long evening – most of the conference staff retreated to dinner in Brighton early on, enjoying a very nice meal at a local restaurant (some of them even claim to remember it, despite the wine...), but returned to the hotel in full force before midnight.

The next morning, after what was in some cases as much as three hours' sleep, the first day of presentations dawned. After a brief introductory talk from *VB* editor, Ian Whalley, on the possibility of plugging anti-virus services into an operating system kernel, *IBM's* Steve White (one of the comparatively few people who has attended every *VB* conference) presented his keynote address; a fascinating view of the future – computer security in an Internet-enabled world, and the problems that are bound to result from the ever-increasing connectivity, and hence vulnerability, of the systems we use daily.

Following the opening addresses, the conference split into streams. In the Technical Stream, Vesselin Bontchev and Paul Ducklin competed to see who could overrun his allotted 45 minute time-slot the farthest. Bontchev won by fifteen minutes – in a late bid to grab the limelight, Ducklin fell yelping off the back of the stage, but recovered without breaking anything more important than his flow.

While Bontchev and Ducklin were fighting it out, other discussions of an equally weighty nature were being presented in the Intermediate and Corporate streams: Martin

Overton and Rob Stroud held forth on corporate issues; Steve Bailey discussed the feasibility (or otherwise) of Unix viruses, and Andy Harris spoke on the dissemination of viruses via email.

Lunch provided an invaluable opportunity to get the streams back in sync once again. The afternoon session once again divided: the highlight for the corporate delegates was the Management Briefing, chaired by Martin Smith, Paul Swarbrick, Nigel Hickson, and Rod Parkin.

Notable talks after lunch included ex-*VB* editor Richard Ford on the problems inherent in evaluating anti-virus products in today's world and the exuberant Carey Nachenberg on Java and ActiveX risks.

After a welcome coffee break, Joe Wells (*IBM*) presented a paper on the PC-virus 'hot zones', after which Lujican Caric and Boris Debic provided a timely reminder of the implications of an Internet-enabled world: if malware is able to send data silently to remote sites, then the problems, unfortunately, are all too clear. The less 'technically challenged' among the delegates took advantage of Righard Zwienberg's discussion of heuristics.

Time for Tuxedos

As regular *VB* conference attendees will know, on the evening of the first day we ask as many people as possible to don formal evening wear for the Gala Dinner. Amply provided for by the remarkably proficient staff of *The Grand*, and entertained by roving table magicians and an escapologist, delegates and speakers were able to relax for a few hours in an atmosphere which (despite all the formal clothing) still managed to be less formal than the sessions. The evening's festivities were extremely well attended; in fact, so much so, that to speak to someone at the next table,



A quorum of editors: Edward I (Wilding, now of *NSM*), Richard II (Ford, now *Command Software*), and Ian III (Whalley, present incumbent), continuing the line of *VB* succession.

it was only necessary to turn around! *VB* had become a victim of its own success. Nevertheless, the close quarters did encourage better communication.

Towards the end of the meal, diners were treated to the fascinating sight of conference manager Petra Duffield displaying suspicious expertise in securing the escapologist in his strait-jacket – a sight to remember...

The traditional after-dinner thank yous followed, and were given an unusual (not to say high-pitched) twist by Joe Wells (*IBM*) handing *VB* editor Ian Whalley a helium-filled balloon as he started to speak.

The Donald Duck voice wore off reasonably quickly, in time to allow congratulations to Jimmy Kuo (*McAfee*) on his new daughter, born (two weeks early) shortly after he left California to come to the conference.

This year's cabaret was somewhat different from those in previous years – Graham P. Jolley, a comic mind-reader, held the audience simultaneously amazed and in hysterics with his remarkable tricks and quickfire patter.

Post-prandial celebrations continued in the hotel bar, with delegates, exhibitors, staff, and invited guests enjoying a jazz band until the wee small hours of the morning.

The Last Day

Delegates often wonder why the second day does not start until ten o'clock; however, they usually only wonder this on the first day. After the gala dinner, the reason becomes more than obvious...

Friday opened with David Aubrey-Jones (*Reflex Magnetics*) in the Intermediate Stream giving a very well-researched talk on the effect of viruses on *Windows NT* – a remarkably high proportion of viruses, delegates learned, will not cause any noticeable ill effects.

Following Aubrey-Jones, Dave Chess (*IBM*) presented a clever talk entitled 'Things that go bump in the Net', a discussion of the problems which will occur in an increasingly connected society: he explained that the problems involving Internet agents ('smart' programs which scour the net for their human masters, either searching for information or performing tasks) map so closely onto the biological world that anthropomorphising was almost inevitable.

The morning session also saw *Virus Bulletin's* Technical Editor, Jakub Kaminski, discussing hidden partitions versus multi-partite viruses. The final session before lunch was dedicated to an exhibition by anti-virus software companies: although this exhibition was open throughout the conference, delegates appreciated the opportunity to visit stands at a time which did not conflict with presentations.

The afternoon kicked off with Sarah Gordon (*Command Software*) presenting a follow-up to her paper 'The Generic Virus Writer', which had been given at *VB '94*. The profile



The panel session at the end of the conference, after a 'red herring' start, was soon in full flow.

of some of today's virus writers is very different to that of two years ago, and the paper describes several disturbing tendencies in the area.

Keynote speaker Steve White, not to be let off his duties lightly, next made another appearance. His paper made elegant analogies between the way different types of computer viruses have come and gone over the past years with various aspects of the natural world. Linking Michelangelo with a lemming may seem like quite a logical jump, but that's nothing to the image of Buffalo Bill Gates killing off parasitic viruses...

The highlight of the final session before the speakers' panel was the paper given by Jason Khoury (*NCSA*) describing the legal implications of virus writing and distribution in various countries. This was a lively and confident presentation, and we will doubtless be seeing more of Khoury's work in the future.

In Conclusion

This year's conference saw well in excess of 200 delegates, in addition to dozens of representatives from anti-virus software companies exhibiting their wares. On both fronts, the numbers were higher than ever before, and both conference and exhibition were correspondingly successful.

VB '96 was the only *Virus Bulletin* conference not to have been marked either by a fire or a fire alarm – readers will recall the fire on the boat taking speakers and staff whale-watching last year (along with the alarm in the hotel), which continued the *VB* tradition. We hope to correct this unfortunate omission next year!

As always, thanks are due to the helpers (the so-called *VB* microphone girls) Jenny, Julia, Kim, Penny, and Muesli; to Alie Hothersall, who carried out much of the 'behind-the-scenes' organisation; and as ever to the remarkable talents of Petra Duffield, conference manager extraordinaire. Most of all, our gratitude goes to the speakers and delegates, without whom we could not hold a conference, let alone make it such a success.