

Chicago! Chicago! SGM meets ASM

Ron Fraser & Janet Hurst

● Have stand will travel

The early hours of 29 May saw Ron Fraser and Janet Hurst from SGM HQ standing by the side of the road in Reading waiting for the RailAir Bus to Heathrow Airport. At their side was a large blue container resembling a dustbin on wheels. Inside was the Society's display stand and a range of promotional literature. We were off to Chicago, to the ASM's 99th meeting, held to celebrate their 100th anniversary as a society.

At Heathrow the 'wheelie-bin' provoked much interest at the American Airlines security check, but it was allowed through and we were soon on the plane to Chicago. In the States, much to our surprise, we got through customs with no problems; the difficulty there was to find a taxi to take the monster on board! Finally, an Oriental driver with a large trunk (boot) took pity on us and learning that Ron was a Scot, entertained us with a conversation about the history of Scotland based on his viewing of the film *Braveheart*. With a shout of "*William Wallace*" ringing in our ears, we checked in at the hotel and then set off on foot to find McCormick Place, the exhibition centre, to make sure that our 'booth' was OK and to register as exhibitors.

Threading our way through the crowds celebrating the Bank Holiday weekend, we eventually arrived at the enormous, black, aircraft-hangar-like complex. There are two parts to McCormick – East and West – separated by an eight-lane motorway. The scale of the complex is hard to comprehend. Just moving around involved walking down endless corridors and through vast concourses.

Eventually we located the exhibition hall, collected our exhibitors' badges and found our booth in the 'publishers' park' area. Thankfully, our large consignment of journals and literature was there. Foomore from all the hiking we caught the shuttle bus back to the hotel.

Next day, we trundled the wheelie to McCormick Place and set up the stand. There was then time for a brief sight-seeing foray downtown and a boat trip on the Chicago River to view the fantastic architecture of the skyscrapers.

● Showing off

The conference opened on Monday 31 May, Memorial Day in the States. Our booth was one of 780 in the ASM trade exhibition and nearly 10,000 people registered for the conference over the three days. The exhibition was in a vast hall with the poster boards at the far end, so all of the delegates had to pass the stands to view the posters. As these were displayed according to a timetable, with two slots each day, this meant that new people were constantly in the hall and ensured a steady stream of delegates to the stand.

Apart from display panels giving information about SGM activities, we offered leaflets about the journals and gave away copies of recent issues, membership packs, *Microbiology Today*, meetings information and our educational poster sets. Pride of place was given to the laptop computer connected to the internet which enabled us to

demonstrate our newly available on-line journals and the SGM website.

We were delighted by the interest in our services. Everyone was highly complimentary about our journals, with many favourable remarks about the improvements made to IJSB since SGM took it over from the ASM. Delegates who said they had always been meaning to join the Society were persuaded to sign up on the spot and to subscribe to a journal. Visitors were impressed by the on-line journals and the wealth of information available on the website. Copies of our publications and free pens (printed with the on-line journals URL) disappeared at an alarming rate. Excited scientists leafed through the pages of IJSB to find papers that they had written and were thrilled to be able to take away copies for their family and friends.

● Stand in line

What were our impressions of the meeting? There were queues everywhere – to register, to buy refreshments, to get on the shuttle buses – but the site was so big that it rarely seemed crowded. With parallel sessions in the two McCormick buildings, there were long walks between the venues; some of the lecture theatres were huge. ASM had desks for every area of their activities, a shop selling centennial souvenir products, a bank of computers for on-line messages for delegates and a bookshop. The atmosphere was nothing like an SGM meeting – with everyone staying in hotels all over Chicago, the vast venue and over 9,000 delegates, it was friendly yet impersonal. That said, we managed to bump into most of our UK-based members, although there seemed to be relatively few delegates from Europe at all.

● Party-time

Wednesday marked the end of the trade exhibition, so we speedily packed up the stand and took our trusty wheelie and its contents back to the hotel before getting ready to join the crowds at the Centenary party at Chicago Science Museum. This involved yet more standing in line – to catch a shuttle bus, to get a drink, to collect some food and finally for champagne to help ASM President Stuart Levy toast the Society and sing happy birthday! It was an enjoyable occasion and we were able to look around the museum.

● Homeward bound

At 6 am the next morning we were in a taxi in the rush hour traffic (it starts early in Chicago) heading for the airport. After a tussle to get the wheelie on the plane ("you flew it in, so why won't you take it back?") we embarked for home, landing in the UK late at night. It had been an exhausting trip but well worth the effort. We received a very warm welcome, enjoyed the American experience and felt that we had been successful in promoting SGM and its publications 'over the pond'. Next year's big ASM meeting is in Los Angeles and SGM will probably be there.

Exhibiting at the ASM 99th Annual Meeting was a completely new venture for the SGM. Intrepid Marlborough House staff found that attending this huge American conference was certainly an experience.

BELOW:
Janet Hurst demonstrates the SGM website and on-line journals on the laptop at the SGM stand in Chicago.

