

Focus on UK Serials Group member

Mechanical Engineering Publications

Development of a Learned Society Publisher

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Any librarian walking down Birdcage Walk in Westminster would be well advised to call into the Institution of Mechanical Engineers and visit The Library. In a splendid second floor room the visitor will be able to browse through one of the finest collections of engineering titles in the world. There are documents dating from the end of the eighteenth century and, of course, the great Victorian engineers are well represented with much original material from George and Robert Stephenson, Brunel and Watt. As well as the unique collection of historical material, and the 125,000 volume collection, the Library also offers all the up to date facilities that you would expect from a major learned society with 76,000 members worldwide.

It is a requirement placed upon the IMechE in its Royal Charter that it should disseminate information. The work of the Library fulfils part of that task. However since its foundation the Institution has acted as a publisher in its own right. Over many years the publications of the IMechE have been used as a medium for the critical peer review of some of the major mechanical engineering developments of the twentieth century. The publications of the IMechE are rightly regarded as core material in any engineering collection.

In 1973 Mechanical Engineering Publications (MEP) was founded as a separate company to take over the responsibilities of publishing for the IMechE. In common with most major learned societies it was felt that an independent company, acting as a commercial publisher, could best serve the interest of its parent Institution. There were also sound financial reasons for forming a separate company which would operate without infringing upon the charitable status of the IMechE. Bob Milson was the first Managing Director of MEP and he oversaw the move out of



Birdcage Walk to what was then the rural tranquillity of Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk in November 1974.

The office in Bury St Edmunds is situated in what was a girls' secondary school built in the 1930s. Together with the newly formed publishing company a number of other departments of the IMechE moved up to East Anglia thereby freeing valuable space at the Birdcage Walk headquarters. So the home of MEP has always been in Bury St Edmunds with the exception of one important department of the company; it was rightly considered vital that the advertising sales staff remained in London. This has continued to be the case and out of the current thirty-four members of staff working for MEP twelve are based in London and twenty-two in Bury St Edmunds.

Bob Milson ensured that MEP became established both in its new home and also an independent publisher. In 1977 he moved to take up the important post of Secretary to the Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers (ALPSP). It is therefore no coincidence that MEP are a leading member of that important group of publishers and learned societies. Douglas Miller became the Managing Director and led the company through what was perhaps its most controversial period. The publishing activity expanded significantly with the

founding of a separate company, Northgate Publishing, whose remit was to publish outside the narrow discipline of mechanical engineering. Unfortunately for Douglas the launch of Northgate Publishing coincided with the recession of the late 1970s and early 1980s. The venture, like many other publishing activities at the time, was not a success. It was therefore the task of the new Managing Director, Patrick Caird-Daley, when he took over the responsibility of the company at the end of 1980, to consolidate the position of MEP. To do this he concentrated on the strengths of the company, which are that it is a publisher for a major learned society. Its output should therefore be a reflection of the needs and requirements of engineers throughout the world. The publications can be divided into three distinct areas.

There are three journals with large circulations which are dependent upon advertising revenue for their commercial success. *Engineering News*

is the newspaper of the IMechE which goes to all members free of charge, together with a small number of paid for subscriptions. The newspaper was introduced in 1973 and has since developed into a readable forum for Institutional news, which also incorporates an extensive classified section which is eagerly awaited by professional engineers throughout the world. *Automotive Engineer* is a bi-monthly magazine which goes to members of the Automotive Division of the IMechE, a controlled circulation and a significant number of paid subscribers. Though *Automotive Engineer* is designed to be a readable magazine it nevertheless contains a number of articles of great technical merit. *Professional Engineering* is the major magazine of the IMechE which goes to the membership on request as well as a number of paid subscribers and a small, but increasing, controlled circulation. Clearly when you produce such a monthly magazine for over 60,000 subscribers, the majority of whom receive it free of charge, advertising revenue is very important. Since this magazine took over from *Chartered Mechanical Engineer* in 1988 it has been well received by readers and advertisers alike.

A Learned Society will publish journals of a high academic standard. *The Proceedings of the IMechE* is, and always has been, the premier publication of the IMechE. Many so called 'corner-stone' papers of engineering research and development are contained within the covers of *The Proceedings ...* bound volumes which can be found on the shelves of academic and technical libraries throughout the world. Since 1847 *The*

Proceedings ... has provided engineers with the means to promulgate their work and over the years it has evolved from a random collection of separate papers to what is in 1989, an eight part, twenty-eight issue, learned society journal. The development of *The Proceedings ...* will continue over the next few years. Of particular interest to serials librarians will be the fact that any expansion will only be carried out because of the demands of the users of the journal. When such a development occurs we will endeavour not to increase the annual subscription rates of the journal any more than that demanded by inflationary pressure, after one has taken into account the increased size of the publication. As *The Proceedings of the IMechE* is an eight part journal much of the output of the Society finds itself channelled into that publication. In addition we also publish the quarterly *Journal of Strain Analysis for Engineering Design*

Following the difficulties of the early 1980s the book publishing programme was restricted. Emphasis was placed on the proceedings of conferences and seminars organised by the IMechE. An average of twenty of such titles have been published each year since the early eighties. In many cases the titles are taken by libraries on a standing order. As the publications are numbered they are often handled by the serials librarian on the staff. Equally as often they are not! This is yet another case of publishers not quite understanding the inner workings of libraries!

In the past two or three years MEP has tentatively, and successfully, begun publishing commissioned books again. It no longer concerns itself with historical tomes about eminent engineers or titles about industrial relations. Instead, MEP produces titles of use to engineers involved in the academic world or research and development in industry.

As MEP has developed it has naturally gained much experience as a publisher. Accordingly the company now publishes for other organisations. It currently publishes the journal *Environmental Engineering* for the Society of Environmental Engineers and the *Transactions of the Institution of Diesel and Gas Turbine Engineers*. It is also responsible for publishing a number of titles for the British Wind Energy Association, the European Group on Fracture and the British Cryogenics Society.

To sell its publications MEP has established exclusive agency arrangements in all major areas of the world. 70% of all journal subscriptions and 60% of all book sales are outside the UK. The

vast majority of its business is conducted outside the membership of the IMechE. So though MEP was founded to serve the IMechE membership it does so nowadays chiefly by earning important revenue for the Institution. In 1988 31% of the IMechE's income came from the activities of MEP. Together with this income it ensures that the scientific and technical information that the Institution produces is edited, published and distributed in an efficient and professional manner.

Libraries need to have confidence in their suppliers. They need to know that their

requirements are being satisfied by people who understand the problems affecting libraries. As a learned society publisher we have close links with the library community. We are aware of the commitment and dedication of the professional librarians. This belief is reinforced by the experience of our own library staff. The IMechE was founded in 1847, it moved to Birdcage Walk and established a permanent Library in 1899. The current Librarian is only the third person to occupy that position. Librarians are a dedicated bunch of people!