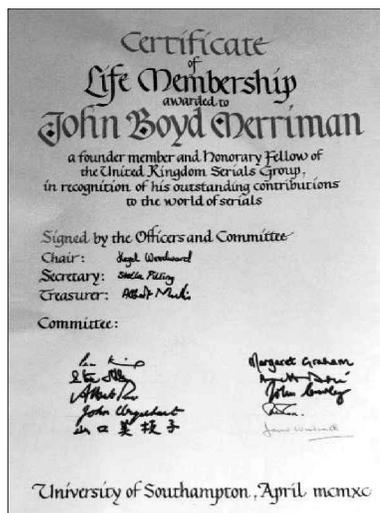


THE UKSG: PAST AND PRESENT

John Merriman



John Merriman's certificate of Life Membership

John Merriman is now retired but was formerly Managing Director of Blackwell's Periodicals and the founder of the UK Serials Group.

UKSG has gone from strength to strength over its 25 years of existence and I am now going back in time to see how it all started. The 1960s were the great bonanza time. It was a sort of gold rush for publishers and libraries. Libraries were starting up all over the world and publishers and agents were anxious to fill their shelves. There were a number of bodies involved in this activity: the Booksellers Association, the Library Association, the Publishers Association, Aslib, but as far as I could tell, not one of them ever thought, taught or published anything about periodicals.

Now it so happened that Blackwells had a very strong customer base in the university libraries of Britain, but the serials librarians never met together, and as far as I know, they never talked to each other. So I went to Richard Blackwell in 1975

and said "Why don't we hold a one day conference, invite some serials librarians along and see what happens?". In the event 69 people came along to Christ Church in Oxford and that was the first Blackwells conference. Our guest speaker was Robert Maxwell. That was the famous occasion when he said, "If I only have one subscriber to *Tetrahedron*, it will cost one million pounds". After his presentation I invited him to stay for lunch and, surprisingly, he said yes. So we stood in the entrance to the great hall of Christ Church dining hall and he said, "Who is the



John Merriman and Jill Tolson, Birmingham conference, 1989

Sing a song of conference...

1984

*Last year in Durham, now wasn't it fine
With the snow and the rain and the beer and the wine?
Dear John was our Chairman and wasn't he swell
With other "Merripersons" that you know quite well?
There was David and Margaret and John wanting fame
But Albert he knew how to make a prior claim
But whoever you are and whoever you be
The UKSG is the conference for me*

*There were agents and binders and publishers too.
They had stands everywhere, even outside the loo
The food was all good and the company fine
And the speakers all managed to finish on time
At the conference dinner the dancing was great
Even Torvill and Dean would have needed their skates
Imagine the scene at the last AGM
When no-one could agree 'bout who was us and them
But our friends from abroad we're delighted to see
And we hope that their visit will be worth the fee
Now we're looking forward to Guildford this year
Important decisions will be made right here*

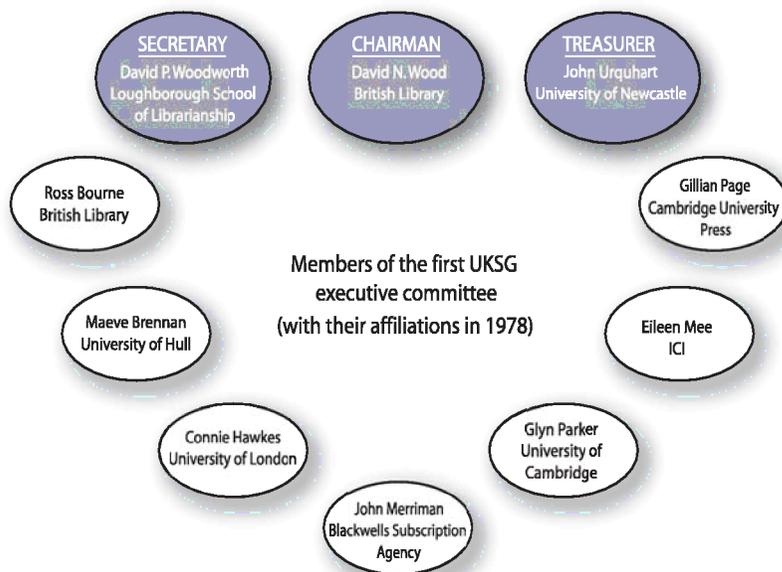
*We hoped you would ask us so here's our encore
And a copy we'll send to the BLL store
But we've had some trouble in ending the verse
Kept awake all last night with the knocking and worse.
If the glare from the speakers makes you curl up your toes
Just cover your head with some fine panty hose*

most important person in this room that I should sit next to?" I replied, "I'm afraid you will have to make do with me". However, the situation deteriorated even further because he sat opposite a very tough periodicals librarian from the University of Sheffield and she gave him hell all the way through the lunch about his pricing policy.

Everyone went away and said what a brilliant idea it had been and that we had better do it again. So the second conference was held in 1977 at Trinity College, Oxford. However, I did not want the meetings to go on being cosy Blackwell events. I wanted to have an independent organisation standing on its own feet. So a working party was set up and on 10-12 April 1978, amongst the beautiful daffodils of York, the UKSG was born.

The theme of the first conference was 'Non-conventional Serial Publications' and one of our speakers was none other than Professor Jack Meadows, who is still very much involved with UKSG as a member of the *Serials* Editorial Board. The important part of that meeting was the establishment of a constitution, a committee and the basic principles which have always been adhered to. The most important decision made was that we would always be independent. We had a few ritual dances with the Library Association, Aslib and other bodies, but we wanted an inclusive organisation, not an exclusive one. We knew that we could not have trade members if we linked up with the Library Association. We decided we would be independent and what a good decision that was.

We also wanted it to be affordable. We didn't even have a membership fee to start with. The funding came out of the surplus on the conference. After intense debate, a £10 membership fee was agreed but we were adamant that we wanted UKSG to be an organisation for all people involved in day-to-day work with serials. We also made a decision that we would always meet in





Left, the committee in 1987 and, below, in 2000

university accommodation because it was affordable. Well, we have gone very much up market since those days when conditions in university halls of residence were fairly primitive. Nowadays we are, comparatively speaking, in the lap of luxury.



The UKSG did not have any paid staff for many years until Ann Hillier was employed on a very part-time basis, around 1980. Her full time successor in 1989 was Jill Tolson, who will be known to many of you. Jill worked with the group for eleven years and was a great tower of strength. When I was editor of *Serials* she was my great support on all aspects of production.

The other decision made was that the group would be run by volunteers and I have shown a diagram of the first committee. The composition of the committee reflected the range of organisations involved in UKSG (librarians, subscription agents, publishers) and that mix has more or less carried on the same since as can be seen in the photographs.

I was looking back 20 years ago to see what seminars we were offering. 'Periodicals administration for junior staff'; 'Serials automation for middle and upper management'; 'Agents and their services'; 'Bibliography of serials'; and, 'Finance and serials control'. In the first few years there were

also conference themes, but they were found to be a bit restricting. What were we talking about at the conferences? Economics of serials management; financing of serials from production to user; automation of serials; resource sharing; and, the serials information chain. It all sounds very familiar!

Social life has always been a very important part of the UKSG conference. If we had a mission statement (and heaven forbid we ever should) it would be 'work hard and play hard at UKSG conference'. The quiz and various sorts of dances have proved very popular over the years. I have to confess that UKSG late night parties (with myself as ringleader) gained great notoriety. But the point of those parties was that anybody who wanted to come for a late night drink was very welcome. It was a great mixture – agents, librarians, publishers – and they were very successful. Langley Shearer used to play his guitar. He brought his guitar with him this year and he has re-strung it. But... you have got to keep off his blue suede shoes late at night. (It's his favourite number.)

Sing a song of conference...

1985

*Last year in Guildford we sang you this air
You may feel to repeat it is being unfair
We sang of the wine and the food and the beer
And told you what to do with your old underwear
Now it's next year we think of before you can dance
Mr Urquhart is paying a year in advance
So whoever you are and wherever you be
The UKSG is the conference for me.*

*Dear John Merriman has relinquished the chair
When he started he had a fine full head of hair
The late nights, and dancing, real ale had effect
So he's ending his stint which to us was perfect
He came to us young, slim, handsome and tall
And look at him now, sure he's not changed at all
At four in the morning we sat down to write
The definitive version it took us all night
The verse it was taxing, it took us so long
Do we have to pay VAT on this song
Now Robin Hood's found a new way to loot
He is running the bar in the new Jesse Boot*

*It's a record attendance at the conference this year
By land, sea and air they have come to get here
The word must have spread that the Group is a wow
'Cos there's more Dutchmen here than in Holland right now
Our suppliers have plied us with cheese, chocs and beer
So the serial orders should go up next year*

(Continued on page 100)



The UKSG Choir, Exeter, 1986

We used to have conference songs (reproduced in this issue) and a very talented choir, some of whom could even sing! The songs always had the same chorus: "...wherever you are and wherever you be, the UKSG is the conference for me". I hope we can all agree on that.

As conference organiser for 13 years, perhaps one of my biggest challenges was the Tenth Anniversary Conference at Blenheim Palace on April 1st 1987. It was the one time we really seriously went out for sponsorship from our trade members and we got a tremendous response. The snag was that all the Managing Directors and Chairmen thought they were going to come, until we had to tell them that it was only their registered delegates who would be going. I will always remember talking to the Administrator at Blenheim and he said, "You know, for another £2,000 you can have the Grenadier Guards beating the retreat". I thought if we booked them, our sponsors would be beating a retreat; so there were no Grenadier Guards at the UKSG conference that year. Our after dinner speaker was John Mortimer, who was absolutely brilliant. The whole event was a huge success.

UKSG has had a number of publishing ventures over the years. The first *UKSG Newsletter* is dated November 1978 and



Keith Courtney and Brian Cox in party mood, 1989

was edited by Connie Hawkes (University of London) and this relatively simple publication was sent to members for a number of years. During Albert Prior's editorship, the newsletter was upgraded and in March 1988 we finally produced a proper journal – *Serials* – which still goes to all members free of charge although it is also now available on subscription to non-members. And, of course, we now have *Serials E-News* ... so we are bang up to date.

It is probably true to say that the nearest UKSG ever came to going bankrupt was through publishing ventures. We used to publish the conference proceedings as a separate monograph publication and give it away to all members, hoping that we would sell other copies to make a profit. We published 'DOTIC', the directory of title pages indexes and contents pages, taking the top 10,000 journals (a joint venture with British Library) and 'Current British Journals'. Another joint venture, this time with ALPSP, the ASA and the Publishers Association, was 'Serial Publications: Guidelines for good practice in publishing printed journals and other serials publications'. Latterly, with the Library Association we published *The Serials Management Handbook*. The editors were two distinguished UKSG committee members – Tony Kidd and Lyndsay Rees-Jones.

I would now like to move on to international relations, because, although the group is rooted in the UK, we have very strong international links. Indeed, we are very much a model for other serials organisations worldwide. I suppose very special to me was the 1984 conference at the University of Surrey,



John Urquhart 'in the swing'

when 16 American serials librarians came over. From that visit, NASIG (the North American Serials Interest Group) was formed and I was very privileged to be involved in the formation of NASIG in its early days. It gives me great delight that it is such a flourishing organisation today. In the 1990s three very successful European Serials Conferences were held in The Netherlands, Ireland and the UK. The UKSG organisational model was also copied by other European countries and by South Africa and Australia, so the concept really has grown internationally.

I want to end now by saying Happy 25th Anniversary to UKSG and long may you continue to flourish.



Above, hard work goes into planning the conference programme



Left, members of the Dutch Serials Group, 1995