The Informatics conferences began fifteen years ago at Trevelyan College in Durham University: therefore, it was appropriate for the tenth conference to return north to Langwith College in York University. Langwith College is a dreary product of the 1960s' whitehot technological revolution, built of prefabricated units of the sort now associated with rising damp and demolition. The only permanent-looking feature is a slate slab recording that it was opened by Her Majesty the Queen.

The College staff were friendly and helpful, however, and breakfast ranged from the mildly dangerous to suicidal in cholesterol terms (bacon, egg, sausage, fried bread and black pudding). The other meals were also generous and good. About seventy were present to enjoy this hospitality and the spread of the conference over three days led to a greater coherence than had been experienced in more recent Informatics conferences.

The four keynote speakers served Informatics 10 extremely well (and reflect the important contribution made by Peter Willett of the BCS Information Retrieval Specialist Group who proposed most of them). The keynote speakers tended to attack some established positions. Alan Smeaton suggested that statistically-based information retrieval systems have probably been developed to their optimum level and little further progress is likely. Further improvement in retrieval system performance is to be expected from applying techniques from computational linguistics, however. Both he and Lou Burnard cited the emergence of machine translation as an indicator of success from this quarter.

Chris Paice's contribution was perhaps the most interesting from the viewpoint of indexers. He considered contemporary work on automatic back-of-book indexing. His main theme was of approaches to automating phrase extraction and/or the automatic generation of index phrases. Gerald Salton, the doyen of mechanized information retrievers, is currently interested in this problem—although presumably exploiting the limited (at least according to Smeaton) statistical approach. Unfortunately, lack of time precluded Paice from more than mentioning the potential for comparing paradigm, manually produced indexes (in machine-readable form) with computer housed texts. The techniques involved to correlate index with text would certainly not be trivial, but if properly conducted could be very revealing of human methods.

Lou Burnard, like a number of the more perceptive speakers at Informatics conferences, stressed the unique qualities of machine-readable texts, and in this process made reference to that once very fashionable (but now rather neglected) prophet of the age, Marshall McLuhan. His attractive presentation visited such unlikely sources as Comenius.

Philip Leith, the last of the keynote presenters, attacked the now fashionable topic of logic, arguing that logic does not lie at the roots of human activity, but is rather something imposed upon it. In many cases its imposition may be of questionable utility.

Several of the speakers were developing systems based upon Hypertext. Eve Wilson was using it to facilitate access to legal texts, some of which were of considerable antiquity. Elizabeth Duncan was exploiting Hypertext in a number of applications including the provision of information to primary school children. Her comments on the way in which children classify the world were especially illuminating. The slides of Hypertext displays showed much in common with Loll Rolling's arrow diagrams but the Hypertext screen manipulation enabled even more information to be presented. For instance, her screen displays incorporated formal definitions.

There were several papers on what parallel processing may have to offer, but at present the potential for searching completely unstructured text would appear limited. On the evening of the first day there was a poster session, including a most interesting display on the problems of handling information in Chinese (presented by a charming visiting student from the People's Republic). This session was enlivened by wine under the sponsorship of Pindar Infotek; on the following evening the pre-dinner drinks were courtesy of CAIRS. Informatics 10 was notable for its free market approach!

The conference dinner was a real Yorkshire effort, but unfortunately port was not served.

Apart from the missing port, Informatics 10 was a most enjoyable and informative conference. All the papers were well presented. Sessions in the main kept to time (although the undersigned let the discussion slope into the tea break on the first day—such was the interest of the topics). Unfortunately some papers had failed to reach the editor by the end of May—so publication of the proceedings will be delayed.

Kevin P. Jones

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Hvar, Yugoslavia  29 April – 3 May 1989

Having a wonderful time! 28 indexers from the UK and 7 from Yugoslavia together for a week of lively discussion of indexing, among beautiful island scenery, beside seductive seas, in Venetian-built 16th-C. Hvar. Not just a pleasure trip, but a conference . . . Geraldine Beare speaking on indexing popular magazines of ‘The Golden Period’, 1890-1940, to include covers, authors, articles, stories, illustrators, cartoons, photographs (and their juxtaposition!), with problems of anonymity and unnumbered extra pages; Helga Perry on ‘Musical Bumps’ – confusion resulting from international musical terminology, similar-sounding but various; Anita Reid and Doreen Blake on medical indexing, ‘the embodiment of disciplined, scientific order’, whose problems relate to adjectively controlled phrasing, constantly evolving terminology and inconsistent abbreviations; Largent Brown on indexing European law, distinguishing constitutional from administrative law, and national from supra-national, with opportunity for international indexing partnerships; Drusilla Calvert on the objections to and potential advantages of computers for indexing – but ‘there is no prospect of computers taking over entirely’. Full expositions too of the history of Hvar and Serbo-Croat language and literature, publishing and libraries in Yugoslavia. Singing and dancing, swimming, exploring the island – much wine – all our thanks to our beaming patriarch, Dr John Gibson, for envisaging and organizing it all. Looking forward to gathering again in 1991 and hope you’ll be here!

– H.K.B.
Hypermedia: Challenge for indexers and abstractors

The 1988 AGM of IASC followed a morning’s talks on the topic of hypermedia. Sally Grande gave a clear exposition of hypermedia as a network type of database architecture, and concluded that hypermedia will still need an index or some kind of map to show the user where he is, where he has been, and where he is going. Linda Farmer discussed the use of hypermedia by an author, saying it delivers into the hands of the technical writer a set of tools to implement all aspects of technical documentation, as the author uses key words to branch out to added text, illustrations, even sound and visuals. Daryl Raymond, from the Oxford English Dictionary project at the University of Waterloo, explained how the project editors had considered the use of hypermedia but concluded it was not suited to the form of the OED.

Christopher Blackburn
Liaison Officer, IASC

Indexing in the 1990s

19–20 May 1989, San Francisco; ASI

It was a great pleasure to represent the Society of Indexers at the 21st Annual Meeting of the American Society of Indexers held at the Marriott Hotel, Fisherman’s Wharf, San Francisco.

The first day was pretty heady stuff on various aspects of computer-indexing, including the use of electronic indexing at McGraw-Hill, indexing online documentation, and a number of contributions on hypertext. There was also a rather simplistic account of a personal indexing system for photographs called PHOTOVAULT and a fascinating survey by Jennie Lightner of indexing experiences and plans at the University of Chicago Press. Ms Lightner showed a transparency of a page from an appalling author index, with several lines of strings of page references, which had actually been used by the publishers of the Chicago manual of style! The next edition of the Manual of style is being prepared, and comments are invited. Before the current edition was published, 75 questionnaires were sent out and 129 returned—not a bad response rate!

My impression was that American indexers—or certainly those at the conference—are more computer-conscious than those in Britain. (On the other hand, I was told that the absentees on that day might well have been the members who were not particularly computer-oriented.)

The Wilson Award was also presented on the first day of the conference—to the compiler of a massive index who had used 5′ × 3′ cards and could not be present to receive the award because of a deadline for another index!

My contribution to the conference came at the beginning of the second day, and I chose to concentrate on three themes—standardization, computerization and co-operation. The revised British Standard 3700 seems to have been well received in the States (perhaps better than in Britain!) and the news that it is to be used as the basis of the revised International Standard was greeted with acclamation. On the co-operation front, I expressed the hope that our two Societies (and those in Australia and Canada) might work more closely together, perhaps agreeing on indexing principles (along the lines of the British-American-Canadian co-operation on the Anglo-American cataloguing rules) and possibly combining to produce a much needed manual of good indexing practice.

It was good to meet several American colleagues who had been just names to me, including BevAnne Ross, who gave the stimulating paper I expected on indexing serials and multi-volumed works. Speaking on medical indexing, Katherine Pitcoff warned about the pitfalls of terminology and supposing that, for instance, INULIN...