

# Megalomania 51 January 1993

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## EDITORIAL

Well, here we are again. A new layout and a new policy. The idea is to produce a small, regular(ish) chatzine available free-of-charge (probably) to anyone who wants it. Whether I'll live up to that remains to be seen, but I do at least have the facilities to produce it myself using a PC and a laser printer, and the price per page (if you exclude the capital costs) is quite reasonable. But don't hold your breath!

## MidCon 92

Having changed hotels again (back to the Royal Angus Hotel) I was optimistic that it would be successful, but more than a little apprehensive - words are one thing, but the reality could turn out to be very different.

My major job immediately before Midcon has always been to produce the Programme Booklet, and normally I end up collecting it from the printers the day before the con. This year I was slightly more organized - I took it to a printers (near where I'm working in Finchley) on Monday, and was assured that it would be ready by Wednesday.

They phoned me at 6 pm on Wednesday to confirm that it would be ready by the time I got there. When I arrived at 6.30, the machine had broken down but they were trying to fix it. They showed me one of the copies they had produced, and I was horrified to discover that not only was the pagination wrong but that half of the centre-page map was upside down!

Apparently, this was all the fault of the computer that they use - it scans the pages and automatically turns out a booklet. There is a simple formula for working out how pages fit together, as I have learned from my years of producing A5 booklets, but either this computer or its operator seemed to have other ideas.

The 'man who operates the computer' had gone home by this time, so I was told that I'd have to wait until the next day for it to be re-done. Which was a serious nuisance, as I had booked Thursday off work, meaning I'd have to go from Croydon to Finchley and back again (estimated round trip 3 hours) just to collect the booklets. Which I duly did, only to discover that the map was right(ish) but the pagination was still wrong (though different). Which explains why there were 4 blank pages and the map wasn't in the centre.

So, by the time I arrived at the hotel on Friday lunchtime, I was beginning to wonder if Midcon was doomed to disaster. My lunch did nothing to reassure me: fish crumble sounded a good idea, but was spoiled by being over-sweet - I'm not sure whether they put sugar in the crumble (as with apple crumble) or the sauce for the fish, but it was fairly nasty whatever they had done! Was this a sign of things to come?

We then set up the registration desk and waited for the hordes to arrive. I had already done the badges, so saving us one of the traditional Friday afternoon jobs. Instead we stuck quiz questions on to index cards, an almost equally boring job.

One of the regular features of Midcon is normally the number of people who turn up on Friday night or Saturday morning having not registered. This year we kept waiting for the big rush, and it never came! This became rather depressing, particular as the bar and lounge looked so empty. In fact we were only about 20 down overall, but somehow it seemed like more people than that were missing.

The first round of the quiz was more encouraging, with nearly 20 teams taking part. We tried a new format, where the answers for each round were marked whilst the contestants answered the next round. This made it a bit hectic for those of us doing the scoring, but it worked very well.

After that, I wandered into the bar, where I found (predictably enough) Pete Birks, Colin Gamble and Paul Oakes. Colin soon departed, somewhat the worse for wear, and we were joined by Stephen Agar. The barman was apparently a freelancer, and claimed that he earned good money for doing the late shift, and so was happy to carry on serving as long as we wanted to buy. (I'm sure he gets a better deal than the 'Deputy Junior Assistant Trainee Manager' who was behind the bar during the day!) His real job is fashion, and he told us about some of the ideas that he thinks will make his fortune, including shirts that you could attach to your trousers so as to still look smart after a hard night on the dancefloor.

He also had a few things to say about the management of the Royal Angus, advised us on which hotels we should use, and even criticised the selection of Italian restaurants in the Programme Booklet! Pete demonstrated his usual ability to converse with anyone about anything whilst appearing knowledgeable, even after quite large amounts of alcohol.

I seem to recall drinking a fair amount of whisky, and one of our number (no prizes for guessing which one) fell asleep on the bar, but it was otherwise an uneventful evening. I think I staggered off to bed at about 3.30.

Breakfast on Saturday was a bit of a disappointment: I nearly missed it all together, as they closed it at 10 rather than the agreed time of 10.30, but it would have been no great loss. The selection was not too good, and the scrambled egg was something to behold.

I spent most of Saturday mooching around, and John and I had an interesting chat with Xavier Blachot, who is very active in the French hobby. His organization, Federation Francais des Jeux de Diplomatie et de Strategie, seem to have parted the French government from a certain amount of money and obtained the use of various facilities free of charge. From Xavier's description it seems that the French hobby is very successful at the present time, with conventions of one sort or another most weekends.

Continuing the international theme, Christian Götze produced his computer program for running games of 1830. Unfortunately, John's laptop didn't run the program to its best advantage, and there wasn't room to copy the source. I now have it on my machine, and it works very well once you work out what the German all means!

Saturday evening saw the discussion on the 'Future of the Hobby'. This was originally conceived as a very informal chat, but the numbers involved meant that it would have worked better with a bit more structure. There was no real conclusion reached, though it was a useful exchange of views. If I have any more to say on this I'll do it as a separate article.

Then came the trip out to eat *en masse*, an idea nicked from Furrycon. We had booked a table for 20 at 7.30 at the Athens Greek restaurant and all but one of the places had been taken. ~~Too late, it dawned on me that~~ we had not made any arrangements about where or when to meet, and as a result I waited in reception till about 7.40 to make sure everyone got there! I set off confidently, and all I can say is that my confidence was misplaced and I was very grateful to have Malcolm Cornelius there to point us in the right direction. Without him we'd have been wandering around aimlessly in the persistent drizzle!

The food was good, and the atmosphere was excellent. The highlight was the belly dancer, who captured Adrian Maddox (who he?) from our table and undressed him as he danced with her! Meanwhile, Clive Palmer and Tricia Webley were dancing on their chairs.

Unfortunately, my enjoyment was rather spoiled by the problems when it came to paying: I had specifically told the restaurant that we needed to leave by 10.00, but no bill arrived, and even when I prompted them it took ages for anything to happen. Then they tried to charge us significantly more than we had agreed, so the bill had to be redone. All of this meant that we didn't get back till until about 10 minutes after the quiz was supposed to start, which was very irritating.

The Quiz semi-finals used a new and somewhat over-elaborate format which was designed to accomodate 3 teams and to be more tactical. It worked, but the main problem was that the first semi-final was too slow, and we made a small adjustment for the second semi-final that improved it greatly. The final also used a new format, and once again was a bit slow. Nevertheless, I think we were successful in our attempt to make it lighter and more enjoyable. More work is needed for 1993, but I think it was a good start.

Overall, Midcon 92 was very successful, and vindicated the decision to return to the Royal Angus. Both the hotel and the committee did a good job, and things went very smoothly as a result. The 'Midcon Snack Meals' were a conspicuous success, the hotel staff were helpful and friendly, and breakfast was the only real disappointment.

Which makes it all the more frustrating that we suffered a drop in the number of people who were there. In percentage terms, we were only about 15% down on 1991, but at times it seemed quite empty, especially with a number of well-known faces absent. The complicating factor was that we had more room than in previous years (by making better use of the space) and even the same number as 1991 would probably have made it seem relatively empty.

A number of people were missing for specific reasons that we knew about, and the recession must be partly to blame as well, so there's every reason to be optimistic about 1993. ~~Nevertheless, we mustn't be~~ complacent, and after having concentrated on getting the organization right, we must attract more people (and Manorcon proves that they are out there!). To address this, we have recruited Stephen Agar to the committee, mainly to deal with publicity.

**MidCon 93** is now organized for the weekend of 19th-21st November 1993 back at the Royal Angus again. Room rates are £26 per person per night, including VAT, English breakfast etc. There is a £6 per night single room supplement. Registration is available for £8 until 31st August 1993, after which it will rise to £10. Cheques payable to 'Midcon' should be sent to Brian Williams, 30 Rydding Lane, Millfields Estate, West Bromwich, B71 2HA.

The other problem, particularly this year, was the vast number of English people talking loudly in restaurants. The first occurrence came on the first night in the Dordogne, when the (not very full) dining room was 100% English. They sang the praises of the nearby town of St Cyprien, announcing that 'it goes all the way up to the sky': in fact it is very ordinary (at least by Dordogne standards), whereas if you go a few miles further east there are some incredibly dramatic towns (Beynac, le Roque Gageac) built on the side of the cliffs by the side of the river that really are something special.

The journey back produced one final example of the Englishman abroad - a couple who photographed each other eating each course. Then, for the main course, out came the video! Mind you, it was an excellent meal - expensive, but large and extremely good. I can just imagine their friends' reactions at being forced to endure a video of 'What I ate for my holidays'

Not the best holiday I've ever had, but it was very relaxing and France (and more particularly the Dordogne) is still a great place to be. This year we're going at the end of August, at which time it will probably be even more overrun with English tourists, but the weather ought to be better.

## BLACK WEDNESDAY

I mentioned this briefly in *Megalomania* 50, but I think it's worth a bit more space, so here goes.

There appear to have been two clear mistakes by Norman Lamont which doomed his strategy to failure, ignoring for the moment the question of whether it was the right strategy:

The first mistake was not to follow the German interest rate increase in July. This clearly signalled that the £1=2.95DM parity had ceased to be a key element of government policy, and that devaluation (by whatever name) was bound to follow, sooner or later. The reason for not raising interest rates was obviously that they were fearful of prolonging the recession, but it only needed a small increase, and it could have been reversed fairly quickly.

The second mistake was to suppress discussion at the Finance Ministers' meeting (in Bath in early September) of a general realignment. The logic here was that it would be bad for Britain's international prestige to be associated with 'weak' currencies such as the Peseta and Lira - if the French Franc had been 'devalued' as well, that would have been OK. There was even a second chance, to join with Italy (and possibly other countries) in a devaluation a few days before Black Wednesday, but that was also spurned.

The sole aim of government policy was apparently to try to wait until after the French referendum on Maastricht, at which point the French could be persuaded to join in a general realignment. This could then be presented as a revaluation of the Mark, and so the government's credibility would not suffer.

What seemed to have been forgotten is that in the early days of the ERM there were several realignments, that they are inevitable (certainly when a country first joins the ERM) and that they do not amount to a failure for the countries whose currencies are devalued. A willingness to make comparatively small adjustments when they are necessary makes the system more credible and therefore more stable.

Personally, I think that Britain probably went into the ERM at too high a level, and should certainly have devalued early in 1992 (probably to about £1=2.40DM), and cut interest rates to 5% or 6% at the same time. More crucially, Britain probably shouldn't even be in the ERM, given that it is dominated by the Bundesbank and its strongly deflationary monetary policy.

The most intriguing solution I've seen to this problem is that the Deutschmark should withdraw from the ERM with its place as the central currency taken by the French Franc. This makes a lot of sense, as it would free the Germans to solve their domestic problems and enable the rest of Europe to emerge from the recession more quickly.

The irony is that Norman Lamont has been forced by the markets to make a policy change that he probably should have made a long time ago. He is now following the new policy of cutting interest rates just as enthusiastically as the old policy of trying to maintain the exchange rate. If (or when) recovery comes, we'll all forget the cock-up he made, and the government will get the credit. Of course, an honourable man would have resigned, as James Callaghan did in 1967.

## COMPUTER TALK REVISITED

I was somewhat horrified to find that two of the four companies I had on my short list for buying a PC about 9 months ago have gone bust in the past few weeks! The first was Ti'Ko, an apparently Japanese company based in Scotland, and the second was Olympic, who had a showroom in Tottenham Court Road.

The irony is that these two companies definitely gave the appearance of being well-run, secure and professional, whereas the other two I was considering seemed rather amateur, but are still in business. I

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suppose that most people who order computers from these sort of companies use credit cards, and will therefore be able to claim back any money that they have lost, but it would make me think twice about ordering from a 'direct sell' company.

Prices seem to have stopped dropping like a stone, which is a relief to all those of us who've already spent our money.

Perhaps we could have reasonable software prices next?

### Things I don't quite understand: No.1

This is from *Windows User*: "The prospect of Windows running on consumer devices has become real with the arrival of Modular Windows, a scaled-down version of the operating system designed to run on non-PC based hardware. It is a fully functional version of the software that will eventually make its appearance on a wide range of electronic household goods such as video players and 'personal digital assistants'."

### Things I don't quite understand: No.2

The Iraqis invade a neighbouring state, break various United Nations resolutions and oppress people of other races/religions living in their country, so they get bombed by the American-led coalition. Israel does extremely similar things for many years and actually gets aid from the United States. Actually, I do understand this, but I don't agree with it.

### Things I don't quite understand: No.3

In Issue 50 I enthused about GLR, the BBC radio station for London. Well, that'll teach me to tempt fate: John Birt, the new BBC Director-General has decided that the BBC is not in the business of providing popular local radio and ordered changes at GLR. The new policy is to provide non-stop news at the peak periods (breakfast, lunch and early evening), and specialist music shows for most of the rest of the time, replacing the old mix of speech and AOR music.

This may seem a reasonable policy for a public service station, but GLR is in a uniquely difficult position, for two main reasons: London is very well served with radio stations, and 'local' radio is a difficult concept when the area is so huge and London stories dominate the national media. Anyone who wants news can choose between local LBC or national BBC Radio Four. The old BBC Radio London (which operated in a not dissimilar manner) had a tiny audience, and it was re-invented as GLR in a desperate attempt to find a successful format that would attract an audience. If it had failed, closure would surely have followed.

The biggest casualty looks likely to be Chris Evans, whose Saturday morning show meets none of John Birt's criteria. He has considered resigning, but currently plans to carry on until Trevor Dann sacks him, so breaking his promise that 'Chris Evans is safe as long as I am in charge at GLR'.

Interestingly, Richard Skinner has left GLR to become Joint Programme Controller at the new national pop station owned by Virgin and TV-am. Could he be thinking of making Virgin Radio a national version of GLR?

### THE JULIET LETTERS:

#### ELVIS COSTELLO & THE BRODSKY QUARTET

In Issue 50 I reviewed the world premiere of this work, at the Amadeus Centre on 1st July 1992. Now it has been released as an album, and has attracted huge publicity (a 55 minute program on BBC-2 and features in all the serious newspapers). And I still think it's excellent! The reviews have generally been very good, though it has not met with universal acclaim.

As one reviewer observed, the concept sounds distinctly dubious, and plenty of rock/pop artists have come unstuck trying collaborations with 'serious' music. One difference here is that this is a genuine collaboration between artists with a respect for each other's abilities - they got together after Costello and his wife had been to several concerts by the Brodsky Quartet and they in turn had been to several of his gigs. Certainly Elvis Costello is the senior partner, but the Brodsky Quartet have made a significant contribution to the song-writing and the string instruments are used to give it a very distinctive sound.

It consists of twenty pieces, all but three of them featuring Costello's vocals. The 'concept' arose from a newspaper story about a professor in Verona who replied to all the letters sent to "Juliet Capulet". Yes, it does start to sound pretentious again, but this turns out to be nothing more than a hook on which to hang a diverse set of songs, some of which are very funny.

It's a commercial risk, in that it may fail to interest either Costello's normal fans or the more 'serious' music enthusiast, but I'm sure he can afford that risk.

I would highly recommend you to listen to it if you can - it certainly won't be everyone's cup of tea, but you might be surprised.

Well that's about it. I seem to have avoided the 'Future of the Hobby' debate (prop. Stephen Agar), and no football either.

Well, there's always next time, he said confidently.