QLis30 - EDINBURGH - 11.10.14

A NOISY BUZZ OF EXCITEMENT

People attending the QLis30 dinner, whether they came by car or on foot, faced a challenge, Both entrances to the hotel were dark unfriendly places and on foot it was a long journey along corridors and staircases to find the reception.

QLis30 dinner? No sign of it! "Am I in the right place?" No sign telling people where to go, that is until John Sadler asked for one. It was only on the fifth floor that there was a pre-prepared sign directing QL-ers to the Balvenie Room. All the function rooms at the Holiday Inn are named after malt whiskies. You can get a bottle of 30 year old Balvenie, the same vintage as the QL, but it will set you back £480. We ran QLis30 for less.

Balvenie boasts its 30 year old whisky is "Exceptionally smooth and warming with gentle spice and lingering sweetness". The 30 year old QL is rougher all round, but I bet it has more character.

George Gwilt put the chickens to shame by denouncing the lift and sprinting up the stairs to the fifth floor. Not wanting to appear wimps most of us meekly followed and we were on the fifth floor before the people who had used the lift.

Slowly as more people arrived we got to know faces that previously had just been names in the magazines or online. Half of the people at the dinner were from the UK and the other half from Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland.

The dinner was laid out on three circular tables, each seating 7 people. The meal had a Scottish theme, although Scotland is not renowned for the quality of its cuisine. It was a simple fare of a haggis bonbon, which is not chocolate, but a haggis meatball; salmon with potatoes and French(!!) beans; and cheesecake with wild berries. For those who wished coffee came with a wee dram, although a wee dram has a large price.

I had a midnight bedtime and an early 6.30 start the next morning, and from my hotel bedroom I could see King Arthur's Seat silhouetted by a rising sun. It was tempting to play truant and spend the day walking the hills, but duty called and I made my way to the Gyle Hall.

I was seeing the hall from the inside for the first time and was relieved to see that it was about the right size for the numbers we expected. The church had asked us to reserve tables in advance and I was equally relieved to see that I had correctly estimated the number of tables the hall could comfortably hold. Relief turned to a slight panic when I realised the 3 small tables we had ordered were really intended for children.

Slowly the hall began to fill with the arrival of the Germans, who started setting up their equipment taking up most of one side of the hall. At about this point John Sadler disappeared to get the provisions for lunch. In his absence we discovered the password for the wifi had an indistinct letter and we had to experiment to get the correct value. In his car John had a CRT monitor that Peter Graf needed for his presentation and we waited for his return so that Peter could complete his preparations.

We started late, but then has any QL workshop ever started on time or kept to schedule?

Peter had a number of projects to profile and a bank of screens to display them. He initially described his plans for the Q68, a compact and modern QL compatible mainboard, running QDOS Classic and Minerva. He then moved on the QLPUI, a GUI with modern look & feel, with themes, proportional fonts, and other features not yet available on the QL. It runs without the Pointer Environment.

This was the item that attracted the most interest and comment.

A third project, QLwIP, a native ethernet and TCP/IP: Ethernet connectivity, webserver, email, browser and file transfer without emulation, he was unable to demonstrate for technical reasons, but he was hoping to be able to demonstrate later in the day.

I had intended to have three presentations in the morning, but with a late start and with so much interest in Peter's projects it was nearing lunch time and I was tapped on the shoulder by the ladies in the kitchen and told the soup was ready.

At the dinner the previous evening I had sat at the same table as John Taylor, former treasurer of Quanta, and his wife, Valerie. In the days leading up to the dinner there had been some confusion about the exact menu and Valerie firmly told me that if a woman had been in charge that would not have happened. She offered to take charge of the catering the following day and I was more than happy to accept the offer.

Together with Sarah Gilpin she provided a superb lunch of soup and rolls, sandwiches, cake, tea and coffee.

By the time everyone had finished lunch most people were hard at work on their laptops often demonstrating and discussing. The Germans were not sitting behind their tables, but in front of them so that you could see what they were doing. This stimulated interaction and should perhaps become the norm for shows. There was a noisy buzz of excitement throughout the hall.

I had asked Tobias Fröschle to do a short presentation on the present state of software, but he suggested doing it at that moment would interrupt a lot of hardworking people. The whole idea of the workshop had been to get people working and talking together. That was happening and it was better to let it continue. Urs König, who was also booked for a presentation, and who had already set up everything took a similar view. He suggested postponing it until the activity had ebbed.

It became quieter towards the end of the afternoon and Urs said he would like to do the presentation. It made a good conclusion to the workshop. Over the years Urs has produced a number of information disks, the most recent of which was the cover disk produced for the final issue of QL Today. This contained not just every edition of QL Today, but numerous other documents and programs. He is now in the process of updating this with new content. It could well be too large for a DVD and, for optimal performance, will have to be downloaded to a hard disk. It was a fascinating preview.

QLis30 did not go according to plan, but it did achieve its aim of getting an international group of QL-ers together to stimulate discussion in the hope that something would come out of the meeting of wider benefit for the QL community. Because so much of the discussion went on in small groups rather than in formal presentations it is difficult to predict exactly what that benefit will be.

There are several lessons that can be learned from the workshop and we were successful in debunking some persistent myths.

An anniversary event does not have to be expensive. The workshop cost approximately £350, mainly because it was a one day event in a church hall rather than in a luxury location. Because it was organised by a local group there were no committee or similar expenses.

The decision to hold just a one day event was controversial. It was said that no one would come from overseas to a one day event, but in practice it was the UK-ers who stayed away. However some of the Germans did say they would have preferred a two day event, although the attraction of Edinburgh as a location meant they could combine QLis30 with a short holiday. A two day event would, however, have doubled the cost of the workshop and would probably have had to be held in another location.

Personally I have doubts about two day events. For many years the Dutch QL user group Sin_QL_Air ran a one day annual international show which was always a well attended event with QL-ers from many lands. In my experience the second day of most UK two day shows is a bit of a downer. The exception was QL2000 which had a well planned program for the second day. Compare that with QLis25 in which there were just 4 presentations over 2 days, just one of which was relevant to the theme. These presentations together with the AGM filled just 5 hours of the 13 hours show time. What was happening in the other 8 hours? How much interaction was there?

The mistake that was made at QLis25, and which is habitually made in the UK, is to plan the venue before the content. At QLis30, as also happened at QL2004, it was the other way round. Obviously it is not possible to plan a detailed programme for an event months in advance, but it is possible to form a good idea of the topics to be covered. My first preparation for QLis30, not knowing at the time that I would be helping to organise the event, was to write an account of the last five years of the QL. This provided the basis for ideas of content.

Several of the overseas visitors commented on the lack of UK QL-ers at QLis30, but I had not expected a large UK attendance. I found myself telling people about the reluctance of UK-ers to travel to a QL event. QL-ers on the continent and North America have in the past frequently travelled hundreds of miles to go to QL shows, and find the UK attitude quaintly amusing. Currently UK QL-ers are contributing little to the international QL community other

than as the QL information specialists.

There has never been a tradition of social activities on the UK QL scene. One of the attractions of the former North American shows was a high degree of social activity that often made up for the small numbers able to attend. At QLis30 Peter Graf told me of the Sinclair group in Germany who hold a Sinclair weekend which is a family occasion. They sleep at the show location and do their own catering, helped by a professional chef in their midst.

On a final note, QLis30 was not a Quanta event but they had a vital role in ensuring its success. In particular their help in the mechanics of the financing, especially in collecting payments for the dinner, was much appreciated. They also made their projector available.

Quanta can no longer afford to organise workshops, but QLis30 may well be the model for their future involvement. SQLUG has just four members and if they can organise an event for a few hundred pounds then there is no reason why Quanta's other subgroups could not do so. They just need to think small and local with Quanta providing general help and support rather the organising nationally.