

GIRODisney!

Catherine Barton goes to Paris to meet Mickey Mouse. And a few other GI actuaries...



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PARIS – WHAT COMES TO YOUR MIND? *La Tour Eiffel?* *Vin et fromage?* Perhaps Disneyland? But 300 actuaries visiting Disneyland for a conference? Mickey and Pluto never imagined they would be so lucky. As this year's GIRO delegates chugged in on the Disney express, a memorable convention began.

The venue for the convention was Hotel New York. The hotel, and Disneyland Resort Paris as a whole, must be due an award for being the first American state in Europe. Never before have I seen a place so decorated with big apples – there was very little indication that we were en France at all. This was a bone of contention with the French delegates. Indeed, in the opening plenary session, the first Frenchman to address the conference, Jerome Vignancour of Axa, encouraged us to go to Paris and see a bit of the real France. 'This is not France', he told us. I was inclined to agree.

As Monsieur Vignancour described the gathering of general insurance actuaries in France, where the general insurance side of the actuarial profession is comparatively in its infancy, I was reminded of the way GIRO veterans describe fondly the convention's early years, when just 30-odd general insurance actuaries attended. Times have moved on, to which this year's large and lively convention bore testament. Monsieur Vignancour expressed the hope that we, as a more experienced actuarial body, might show French actuaries how actuaries can be important to insurance companies. Much as I'm sure that we would be delighted to guide our European counterparts, they should bear in mind that general insurance business in the UK has been less profitable than in the rest of Europe, in spite of having the highest number of general insurance actuaries. Surely this is due to market conditions, rather than actuarial involvement *per se*?

Willing contributions

The convention programme comprised a medley of plenary sessions and workshops, guest speakers and working party reports, listening and contributions. The guest speakers provided useful perspectives on areas that are, and will continue to be, relevant to the business environment in which general

insurance actuaries work. We are grateful for the contributions made by Mark Butterworth of the Institute of Risk Management, John Tiner of the Financial Services Authority and Peter Clark of the International Accounting Standards Board. Similarly the considerable effort of the working parties during 2001–2, as published in two chunky volumes and presented in the plenary sessions and in numerous workshops, added greatly to content of the conference. In all, there were 39 different workshops, which demonstrates the commitment and effort of GIRO delegates to making their convention a success. Thanks must go to all.

This year's conference was characterised by lively debate and more contributions by younger speakers than has been the case at previous GIROs. Maybe it was the incentive of a bottle of Champagne for the best contribution by a younger speaker (however so defined), or just genuine enthusiasm about the subjects under debate, but the contributions from the floor were plentiful. Where questions weren't forthcoming, strong-arm tactics came into play as James McPherson gambolled around the grand ballroom giving a very credible Jerry Springer impression. The responsibility rested with each delegate to have a question ready for the speaker by the time James demanded it. I'm sure I wasn't the only one whose eyes were concentrated firmly on the table in front of me to avoid James's pounce, while desperately trying to compose a question with some semblance of relevance...

Toilet training

For some, work pressures meant that they weren't able to participate in the conference quite as much as they planned. However, this gave plenty of opportunity to put the hotel 'facilities' to the test. In spite of Hotel New York having 'Disneyland Resort Paris Business Solutions' emblazoned liberally across its letterhead, it was unable to provide a speakerphone to enable a conference call to be made. The solution devised involved one person using the phone in the bedroom, while the second participant sat on the toilet (with the seat down!) to use the handy extension found in the bathroom. The facilities were hence put to good use!



Left Jane Butler, Richard Winter, and a prospective honorary fellow

Awards

Over the past few years, a number of awards have been made at GIRO conventions. New to this year's conference was the prize for the best working party paper, which was awarded to the Cost of Compensation Culture working party, chaired by Julian Lowe. The working party is now looking forward to a slap-up meal to reward them for their efforts in producing a very strong paper. Derek Newton and Doug Lacoss won the Actuarial Prediction Survey awards from the 2000 and 2001 conferences respectively; congratulations to them both for being proficient in guesstimating the future progression of the UK general insurance market, house prices and... results in premier league football. This year's Lifetime Achievement Award for contributions to GIRO went to John Ryan – who almost was not there to accept it! A moment of panic prevailed as John was spotted preparing to leave for his flight a few minutes before his surprise award was due to be presented. Consequently the award wasn't a total surprise, as he was hastily given an explanation for why he must stay until the end of the session!

Paris match

Away from the plenaries and workshops, there was plenty to do. A relaxed first evening at Billy Bobs; the 'dine around' in Disney village; the children's party, where there was much over-excitement and face paints aplenty; the Discoveryland Evening, with the thrills of Space Mountain, 'Honey I Shrunk the Audience' and Star Tours; the gala dinner; complete with Hervé the Magician's frustratingly good tricks. The evenings were rounded off in the bar at the hotel and, after last orders were called, Hurricanes night club, which offers music that can only be described as quality *fromage*.

For some, of course, the draw of the real Paris nightlife away from Hurricanes and Billy Bobs was too appealing. As Parisian early-bird commuters wended their way office-ward, certain of our eager delegates were hurrying back to Disneyland, fearful of missing breakfast and the first conference sessions of the morning. And breakfast was something that shouldn't have been missed, especially Thursday's Disney character breakfast. Although Mickey didn't fancy OJ and crois-

sants and wasn't there himself, there were plenty of characters to provide breakfast entertainment... and surprisingly many delegates to appreciate them given the high attendance in the bar just a few hours earlier.

We were particularly fortunate this year to have the presidents of the Institute of Actuaries, Faculty of Actuaries, and Casualty Actuarial Society attending the conference, as well as the CAS president-elect. Jeremy Goford closed the conference with this message: 'I feel that this has been an excellent conference. As you go back to work, make sure that you think about the needs of your clients and employers, and by putting your advice into the business context, help truly to make financial sense of the future for your clients and employers.'

But for us, is the past a guide to the future? Next year's conference is in the less Mickey Mouse venue of Cardiff. Which brings to mind the Millennium Stadium, all things Welsh... and the promise of 350 actuaries meeting for the 30th GIRO Convention. Let's hope it's as good as the 29th. □

Below (left to right) Tom Ross, Bob Conger, Gail Ross, Jeremy Goford



Below David Golder with the two latest recruits to the conference team (David is the one on the right)

