

# A funny thing happened on the way to the Annual Dinner

The very first Health Care Supply Association Annual Conference and Dinner took place 40 years ago and great credit must go to all Association members who, year on year, have voluntarily taken responsibility for the organisation and delivery of this highly successful event. For those involved in arranging the Annual Dinner, there will also be many memories of hotel liaison meetings, menu selection, seating and table plans, guest invitations, extra accommodation requirements, guest speaker selection, arranging receptions and so forth.

From the many delegates who have attended the Conference and Dinner over the years, there have been few complaints; there is a general feeling that the arrangements have gone reasonably smoothly.

This article concentrates on the history of the Annual Dinner and is essentially a collection of personal memories of some of the special – often funny, embarrassing, silly or even stupid – happenings I now associate with the event. These memories come from my attending most if not all of the Association's Annual Dinners either as guest, delegate, council member, Chairman or even Conference Organiser.

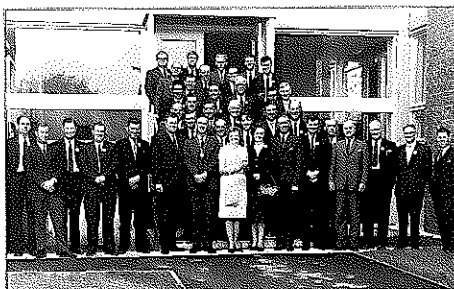
For the first ten years, the Annual Conference and Dinner was held at the University of Nottingham, with delegate accommodation and the Conference sessions located in the somewhat austere surroundings of a hall of residence. Because of space restrictions, it was also necessary to hold the Annual Dinner at the University's main building, some three quarters of a mile away.

No arrangements were made for delegates to be transported from the Hall of Residence to the University for the Dinner and, due to parking restrictions, the majority walked the entire distance there and back. This was fine on a pleasant evening, but I can still remember those times when it was wet, cold or windy with over 100 delegates trudging across the grounds in formal evening wear. No one seemed to complain – we were hardy souls in those days.

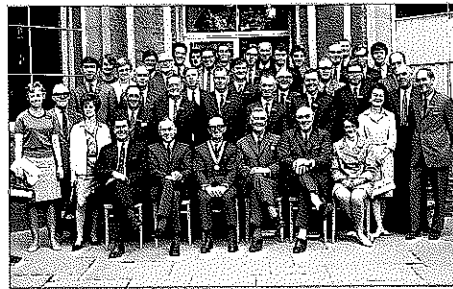
Another memory of our time at Nottingham was when I hosted the 1982 Annual Dinner as Association Chairman. In those days, the Annual Dinner programme was much more formal than it is today. The proceedings were hosted by the Association President (Chairman in today's terms) and our guest speakers were always very high-profile leaders in the NHS. The general

format was that the guest speaker would sing our praises and urge us on to greater things and the Association President would then respond with suitable assurances. In 1982, our guest speaker was Ken Clarke, currently a Cabinet Minister in the coalition Government but then the Minister of State for Health. I remember having to postpone the start of the Dinner because he was delayed by over an hour and then having to stand guard outside the gents (due to a broken lock) while the Minister of State for Health changed into his dinner suit. Previously, and to enable me to prepare a suitable response, civil servants at the Department of Health had passed me a copy of Mr Clarke's intended speech, which comprised some five or six pages. On the day, Mr Clarke spoke for over half an hour, did not refer to any notes and was word perfect. This in turn made my constant referral to my response notes a little embarrassing – or at least I thought so at the time.

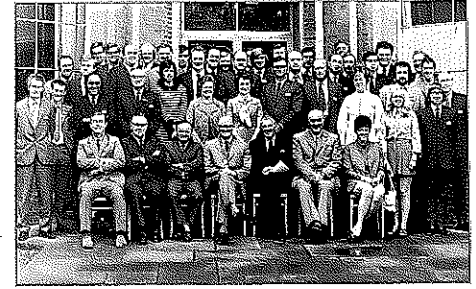
In 1982, the Association undertook a major review of the arrangements for providing the Annual Conference and Dinner. It was then that the decision was made to transfer the Conference from a University setting to a commercial hotel venue and to



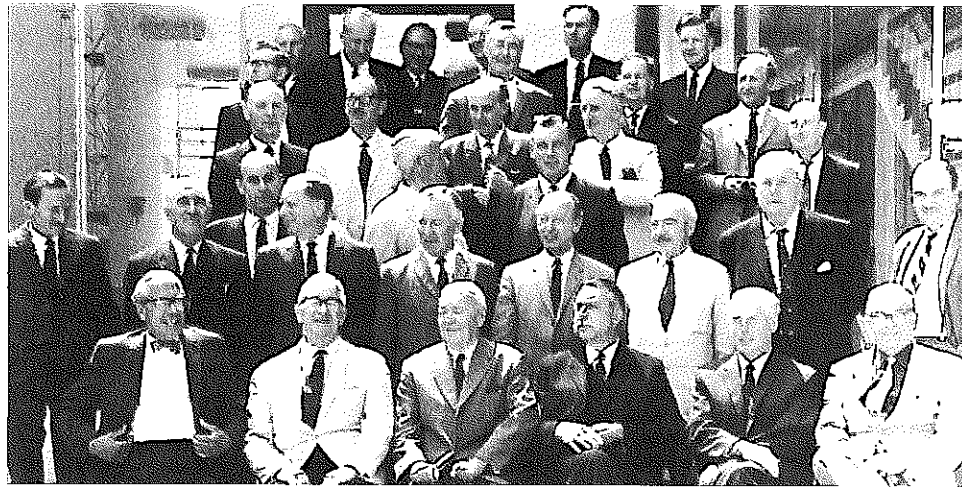
1966



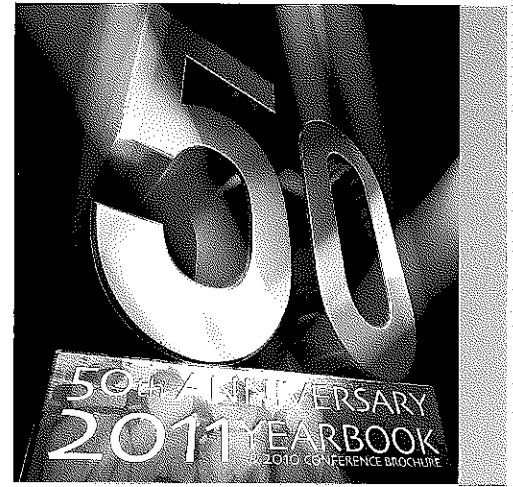
1969



1972



Times gone by



reduce the level of formality associated with the Dinner. From then on, all events have been held in far superior hotel surroundings with celebrity guest speakers employed to liven up the proceedings.

In 1983, we held our first hotel-based Annual Conference and Dinner in Bristol and the changes proved to be a huge success. I was Association Chairman at the time, so it fell to me to host the first of the updated Annual Dinners. Everything went well until the guest sitting to my left asked if, as representative of the City of Bristol, he could say a few words of welcome. I readily agreed but, unbeknown to me, the guest's day job was as catering officer to a hospital in the Bristol area. He was also not known to be a friend of Supplies. After his initial welcome, our guest proceeded to denigrate and heap criticism upon the NHS Supplies Service and the Chief Executive of the then National NHS Supply Council (Alex Campbell, for those of you who have been around a while). It took a few minutes to call an end to the 'welcome' and for everyone to calm down!

Since 1983, the venue for the Annual Conference and Dinner has moved around the UK with visits to Birmingham, Bournemouth, Bristol, Coventry, Edinburgh,

Glasgow, London, Manchester, Solihull, Stratford-upon-Avon, York and Newcastle in County Down. Each event has its own tale to tell, but here are just a few that stand out in my memory.

An early hotel-based Conference and Dinner was held at the very elegant Railway Hotel in York. This event coincided with Sir Michael Carlisle, Chairman of Trent Regional Health Authority, accepting the newly created role of Association President, and he was invited to be the Guest of Honour. Unfortunately, someone forgot to mention (or he himself had forgotten) that the dress code was black tie and he arrived at the hotel in his civvies. But initiative is a great thing in times of crisis and it took just a short time, and a willing volunteer, to scour York to find a dinner suit that fitted Sir Michael like a glove.

In 1991, the Association decided to support its Northern Ireland branch and hold the Conference in Newcastle, County Down. This was when the Troubles were at their height and some people had reservations about the choice of location; although in the end the event attracted a full house. My lasting memories of this Conference are the sheer beauty of County Down, where the Mountains of Mourne

really do reach down to the sea, and of the somewhat less relaxing events that took place during the final day. We had heard that the NI branch had secured a very high-profile guest speaker for the Dinner and that, for security reasons, delegates would not be told who this was until later on the final day. Reality set in when, at lunchtime on the Friday, the driveway to the hotel filled with military and police vehicles. We were then told that the special guest was Peter Brooke, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and that his protection required a high military and police presence leading up to and during his visit. For the rest of the day, delegates had to live with soldiers and armed police patrolling the grounds and corridors of the hotel. They also had to accept the need for all rooms in the hotel to be 'checked' for security purposes. In the end the Dinner went smoothly, but the memories live on.

Another personal memory of County Down in 1991 is its timing in regard to the setting up of the NHS Supplies Authority. The new Authority had only recently been announced and Terry Hunt had just been appointed as its Chief Executive. Arrangements were in hand to select and appoint Chief Executives to the new



1975



1976



1977

divisional branches of the Authority. Terry attended the Annual Dinner in Newcastle and, having myself recently accepted an early retirement package, I could afford to stand back and look on as my ex-Regional Supplies Officer colleagues, all of whom were potential applicants, manoeuvred to spend personal time with Terry. As it turned out, this approach seemingly paid off for most of them – but the lobbying has stuck in my mind ever since!

It was in Birmingham that we learned that Duncan Eaton had his dinner suit stolen from his room on the day of the Dinner. The rumour was that it was an 'inside job', but no one confessed and this theory did not stand up because no one could possibly imagine any benefit that stealing Duncan's suit could bring. I do not know if this crime was ever solved.

On another visit to Birmingham, we had TV comedian Lenny Bennett as our after-dinner speaker. Lenny was soon entertaining us with his stories and jokes when one of our guests began interrupting him to question the 'political correctness' of some of the things he was saying. Lenny was very well known for his quick wit and responses, so I will leave it to you to guess who came off best.

However, things do not always work out as well as expected. In Coventry, we had attracted so many delegates that it became necessary to organise alternative accommodation for some of our Dinner guests who were only staying one night. This was arranged at a nearby hotel of equal quality, as was a limousine to transport them to and from the main hotel for the Dinner. It was with some sadness, therefore,

that I received a strongly worded letter of complaint from one of these guests, who expressed the view that his status as a past Association President demanded he should be accommodated in the main hotel. Unfortunately we never heard from this gentleman again; however, we did learn a lesson and have ensured that both delegates and guests are accommodated together ever since.

In a lighter vein, we have all greatly enjoyed and been entertained over the years by a truly magnificent range of after-dinner speakers representing politics, sport, business, entertainment, the professions and many other walks of life. Many were national figures well known to the general public and have included Ken Clarke, Minister of State for Health; Peter Brooke, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland;



Brian Johnston, cricket commentator; Giles Brandreth, politician and broadcaster; Lenny Bennett, comedian; Ian McCaskill, TV weather man; Willie John McBride, Irish rugby captain; Reverend Roger Royle, broadcaster; Rabbi Lionel Blue, broadcaster; and John Stalker, Deputy Chief Constable, Manchester Police.

Finally, it never ceases to amaze me how generous the Association can be. On many occasions over the years we have supported various charity appeals which coincide with our Annual Dinner date and have raised many thousands of pounds in the process. In 1989, we surpassed ourselves when we raised the magnificent sum of £1000 for children in Need – a result we should all be very proud of.

In summary, I think it is fair to say that the Health Care Supply Association's Annual

Conference and Dinner has always been a success and I am certainly not aware of any serious problems that have occurred to adversely affect the quality of dining and entertainment on the night. Admittedly, not all of our after-dinner speakers have been as good as expected, but none were a disaster. There has been many a crisis behind the scenes but, in most cases, these have been resolved with minimal disruption to the event. I am confident that those Association members, past and present, who have attended an Annual Dinner will remember their attendance as a most enjoyable experience.

I am told that some members are looking for changes in the way the Annual Dinner is organised and I welcome this as a positive move. These days life seems to be all about change, and so I earnestly hope that the

Association and our partners BiP Solutions can work together to come up with answers that meet the needs of today's members.

*My only plea is that you do not dismiss or lose sight of what has gone before – as there is much that can be learned from earlier experiences.*

Don Greenslade

*With acknowledgement to John Smith, Neil Argyle and Peter Wragg for their input to this article.*



1981



1991



1997

