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Editorial

Another year, another Conference. Users have said it will be easier to find time and money for one-day events, so 1995 may have been the last of the three-day Conferences. It is fitting that it was the best yet. Several of the papers were around the theme of the future development of SIR, each from a different perspective. There was some unanimity on specific features, such as Graphical User Interfaces, the need for Dynamic Data Exchange, Object Linking and Embedding, and a run-time version of SIR.

The release of version 4.0 of SIR is behind schedule, but should be worth waiting for. The initial Beta testing identified a number of problems which have now been solved, and Beta testing of the full GUI system is scheduled to start in February/March.

SIR has an array of excellent features, and its users appreciate its strengths. However, to survive and indeed prosper in today's competitive market the package needs to expand its user base. It has to address what IT users want, therefore, and adapt accordingly. The strength of SIR lies in its data management engine, which is second to none. There is a vision of this engine being at the heart of several peripheral packages, which could move data to and from SIR.

In 1996 the User Group is organising two one-day Conferences, in response to the feedback from the last User Questionnaire. Dates for your diary appear in this issue of **Reporter**. What are the preferences of you, the users? What topics would you like to see covered? As ever, we rely on hearing from you in order to gauge what it is that you want. In **Reporter**, you have the ideal forum.

Michael Staley

REPORTER

As Michael has said, this year we are holding two one-

Chair

A Canadian gent from Colchester said "In SIR I'm a major investor".

So he joined the committee to whinge at SIR Pty, as Chair he could pressure and pester.

day e... difficult... confere... who Intern... said that they find it... to go to the 3-day... of the fortunate ones... why not go to the... next month? There are still places - see the next column and complete the enclosed booking form asap. Hope to see you there!

Not only was the 1995 Conference our last residential conference, but the AGM saw the resignation of John Lemon after 10 years on the committee. John has been a major contributor to SIR in so many ways: as a leading member and former chair of the Committee; as a speaker at conferences; as a SIR converter; as a Beta tester and as a provider of SIR training in Aberdeen. His contribution to our meetings will be greatly missed and I know you will want to join me in thanking him for all his efforts. However, despite leaving the committee, John is continuing to help out with events in Scotland and will continue to run the sir-users mailbase (to join simply email a message containing the line **subscribe sir-users** *Firstname* *Lastname* to **mailbase@mailbase.ac.uk**).

And, speaking of the Committee, the astute reader will note that we're one short. John Roberts, lately of the University of Manchester, was elected to the Committee at the AGM but has since moved to the US. So, if any of you would like to get more involved in the user group, don't hesitate to let me know.

This issue of reporter contains a write-up of last year's conference (for which proceedings will be published in due course), and a note of the dates of this year's conferences - please note them in your diary NOW, and start thinking about the abstract for the paper you would like to present!

As usual, we have a lengthy tips and tricks section, but there is a new feature in this issue of **Reporter** - a series

of limericks on committee members. Thanks go to the anonymous author, and apologies go to the committee for libelling them. Keep the contributions coming please. Send articles, tips, tricks, poems, letters etc to the Editor, Michael Staley, at the address on the back cover.

Randy Banks

March 14-15 SIR International User Conference

Bremen, Germany. DM250

June 28

SIR Users Conference

London.

A combination of training, tips and tricks and user papers. To be held at Forvus House.

Events

September 11-13 ASC Silver Jubilee International Conference

London.

Details from Diana Elder, ASC, PO Box 60, Chesham, Bucks, HP5 3QH.

Phone, Fax: 01494 793033

Email: asc@essex.ac.uk

November 13

SIR Users Conference

Edinburgh

A combination of training, tips and tricks and user papers.

It is not too late to book for the International Conference

International al Conference

in Bremen next month, but don't delay because the hotel and flights are getting full!

Don't worry that all the papers will be in German - there will certainly be lots of English-language papers and English-speaking delegates. From the UK, speakers include Randy Banks on SIR Anytime Commands; Dave Doulton on Using Host in a User Management System; and Kathy Brooks on the School and College Performance Tables. Heather Goldsmith is coming from SIR Pty in Australia and other speakers include Nick Gawrit (USA) on Heartbase; and Niels Veldhuijzen (Netherlands) on tabulations.

The conference will take place at the Novotel Hotel near Bremen and further details and a booking form are included with this issue of **Reporter**.

The 1995 Conference was held at the Perequito Hotel,

Conference Report

Chesford Grange, Kenilworth, near Leamington Spa, over three days from Wednesday the 8th to Friday November 10th. There were 25 delegates, fewer than in previous years, reflecting both the difficulties users face in justifying a three-day absence and the perennial problems of budgets. Nevertheless, this was the best SIR Conference which I have attended, with a varied programme of talks and workshops. It may well be the last three-day Conference which we run, and therefore it was something of a nostalgic occasion; such Conferences represent a chance to get together with other SIR Users and exchange views, working practices, and discuss other applications. Thus, no matter how understandable is the passing away of this type of Conference, it is to be regretted.

After preliminaries from our revered Chair, the Keynote address was given by **Tony Reardon** of SIR Australia, owners of SIR. Tony's main point seemed to be that the IT market these days seems geared up to market the flash and glitter, rather than the content of their products. SIR Users have been influenced by the hype of DDE, OLE, ODBC etc but Tony asked how they would expect to benefit from these facilities in SIR. As a concrete example, he asked users whether they would expect a SIR output table in a Word document to be updated automatically when the data in their SIR database changed, or updated just when the report which produces the table is re-run. It was a light address and I felt it would have been better to concentrate on how SIR Australia see the future, and how to make SIR an even better package than it is.

Hilary lives up in Colchester too,
 and works at the Uni along with guess
 who.
 We certainly need 'em
 the skills of a Beedham.
 But why does she still use SIR 2?

Said Toni "Hey guys I'm not
 foolin'
 my ardour for SIR isn't
 coolin'."
 But with stress
 insurmountable
 she can't keep SIR
 accountable.
 "I shan't do the audit" said
 Moulin.

We then moved on to hear a paper from **Toni Moulin** of the BBC, entitled "Exploring the Outer Limits of the Television Experience", which for some of us older hands brought back memories of a sci-fi program from the 1960s. Toni's talk was more down-to-earth, though, being about the BBC's system of analysing

Television Audience Measurement. This was originally based on a Caseless database in SIR version 2.2 under Unix; but because SIR 3.2 is slower than 2.2, it was decided to restructure and optimise the system. The system now has at its heart a case-structured database. This has brought coding efficiencies, but the new system is still not as fast as the former one. Nevertheless, the revised system does include various new features that are guaranteed to thrill users, such as GUI interfaces. The output from the SIR analysis run goes into Word or Excel in order to give the optimum presentation. I reflected especially upon the performance aspect of the move to 3.2, since my own experience of moving to 3.2 PC is that it is much faster than 2.3. Then again, this is not comparing like with like, since it was the Extended Memory version of 3.2 which I used from the outset.

It had been decided for this Conference to merge the training and the Tips 'n' Tricks sessions, and **John Lemon** gave the first of these, on Secondary Indexing with Tabfiles. This related to a request for some specific analyses drawn from the datasets of the Aberdeen Maternity and Neonatal Data Bank. Deriving these analyses from the SIR database records would have been a horrendously long task. The solution was to prepare tabfile extracts of the variables required for analysis, and index on the items selected. Using secondary indexes was much faster - matching in minutes rather than hours.

After fortifying ourselves with tea/coffee/biscuits (who pinched my share of the bourbon creams, by the way?) we reassembled for a talk by **Catherine Ellis** on "The

Future Development of SIR - Why (continue to) Use It?". Catherine is an IT Manager at The Office of Population Censuses and Surveys, whose use of SIR has been diminishing because of the move towards Computer Assisted Interviewing. The talk challenged the attractiveness of SIR in today's terms, outlining its advantages and disadvantages. She highlighted the need for a Windows version with full GUI, as well as the need to port data to and from other packages more readily.

The theory of the polyomino
 is hard to prove but easy to
 show.
 Dave's not one to boast
 but he wrote it in Host
 and it goes like the clappers,
 you know.

The final talk of the first day was given by **Dave Doulton**, and concerned a personal project which he has been developing since he was a third year student, based on the pattern matching of polyominoes (like the shapes in Tetris made from n squares). In his

quest for perfection, Dave developed this program through a variety of languages such as C, C Host, and PQL.

Mick Staley produces
 Reporter,
 he writes it up once every
 quarter.
 But his favourite treat
 is to dance with bare feet.
 He doesn't wear shoes when
 he oughta.

Thursday opened with a talk by **Michael Staley**, again on the future development of SIR, from the perspective of programmer/analyst needs. This followed on from what Catherine Ellis had said the day before - yes, you've guessed it; he too works at OPCS, and is indeed one of

Catherine's underlings. Michael outlined the use of SIR in surveys pre-CAI, and illustrated how the development and needs of CAI had made much of the SIR work redundant. He then went on to consider the views of two of his colleagues as to how SIR needed to develop. One was an emphasis on Object Linking and Embedding. The other was playing SIR to its strengths as a dynamic data management tool, which would pass data to and from various other packages.

We next had the second of the Training/Tips sessions, this time a SIR 4.0 Introductory Workshop from **Tony Reardon**. Tony concentrated on the WDL language which SIR would contain for generating user Windows etc. There were some very nice looking screens to show us how 4.0 Windows would look.

After a break, **Tracy Kirk** of Forvus gave a paper on an SQL Generator which she has been developing. Tracy gave a specific example of using UK Trade Statistics to generate SQL Batch jobs from PQL. SQL Generators are always very welcome, since it is pointless tying up programmer time in drawing up routine code.

This was followed by the SIR UK User Group Annual General Meeting. The Chair, **Randy Banks**, reported that it had been a good year for the User Group, with the one-day Conference in Scotland earlier in 1995 and the present three-day Conference. A Mailbase list had been set up by John Lemon, and there had been a User

Questionnaire which had given some useful information. **Reporter** had continued with three issues plus a Conference special. The User Group had good relations with both Forvus and SIR Australia. He looked forward to a good year ahead also. Dave Doulton reported that our finances were healthy, and Charlie Owen reported on the User Questionnaire.

After a fortifying lunch break, **Kathy Brooks** from Forvus gave a paper on the School and College Performance Tables, for which Forvus had been commissioned for the second year running by the Department for Education and Employment. This is a massive operation which details the performance

of over 5,700 schools and colleges, drawn from 6 million results for 1 million candidates. The data was processed using SIR/Master in the 3.2 Extended Memory version, which performed admirably. The database was a elephantine 800 megabytes!! Kathy showed us the final output tables, which were presented in an attractive Windows format.

Adrian Birch of the Economic and Social Research Centre delivered a paper on the automatic generation of SIR forms. Again, utilities such as this are welcome where they take away the need for slaving over reams and reams of repetitive code. Developed primarily for a Unix environment, it is still being enhanced. **Philip Street** of the General Registrars Office in Scotland then gave us a talk on the use of SIR in the retrospective processing of 1971 Census data, due to the absence of the package which had been used at the time.

Following a tea/coffee break (once again, someone purloined my bourbon creams, causing me to incandesce ever so slightly) we had a talk from **Steve Flack** of Forvus on a marketing strategy for the future development of SIR. He charted the changes in the use of SIR in recent years, analysing the causes. Steve highlighted the desirability of new developments such as Windows, and a run-time version of SIR.

Barbara Stowe gave a talk on "Making the Transition: From Mainframe to Unix and Beyond", which was essentially a horror story of timing a switch in hardware with an upgrade from SIR 2.2 to 3.2. The message was on the lines of "don't do it, kids; just say no", or something like that. More to the point, she itemised a number of lessons which could be drawn from the experience. The final session on Thursday was a panel discussion on SIR 5.0 and beyond, which explored some of the future development options of SIR which had been thrown into relief in several of the papers over the course of the Conference. Much of the discussion was around the need for facilities

Charlie produces the questionnaire to collect the opinions of users who care. Please answer our questions and make your suggestions for things that you want in SIR software.

*Darlington's given us Barbara and Bill.
Barbara's a Beaver guide - oh what a skill!
But Bill wore a basque, suspenders and mask when he cycled round town for a thrill.*

Kathy is our ex-officio member except in the months of June to November. When we ask for support she's never caught short - assuming that she can remember

such as greater GUI, dynamic data exchange, object linking and embedding, etc., and it was very interesting.

The Conference Dinner - very delicious it was too - was followed by the disco, this year on a "Roaring 20s" theme. A number of people looked extremely dapper flappers, and the whole evening was great. Don't expect too much in the way of description from me, though. Drowning my sorrows over the loss of my bourbon creams, too much of the amber fluid flowed across rather too many brain cells. I did, though, hip-hop with the best of 'em.

Pet
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It ta
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T I P S

&

T R I CK S

Manuals

If you have been delaying buying manuals because you thought they would be reprinted for Version 4, we have good news for you.

Version 4 will be released with new versions of Getting Started and the Environment Reference; and an Update Summary. The other 5 version 3.2 manuals will not be reprinted. Forvus is offering version 3.2 manuals at a special discounted price.

Usual price	£100
Now	£60 (including postage and packing).

The final morning dawned. After a Forvus distribution update from **Steve Flack**, we had the third training session, this time from **Bernie Enlander** on disaster recovery, concentrating for the most part on Verify File and the options of this utility, which are indeed extensive. This was followed, after a coffee break, by a short talk from **Niels Veldhuijzen** on some undocumented features of the Tabulate command. The Conference finally closed after a panel discussion on the general use of SIR, problems, etc. In the long tradition of truly awful puns, it was entitled SIRgery - makes you think, dunnit?

Thus closed possibly the last of the three-day Conferences. It was the best that I have attended, and I personally mourn the loss. Still, no doubt it will give way to something good.

Michael Staley

Just a quick round-up of some of the work that Forvus

The logo for 'Forvus News' is presented in a dark grey rectangular box with a thin white border. The word 'Forvus' is written in a large, bold, white sans-serif font, and the word 'News' is written below it in a slightly smaller, bold, white sans-serif font.

has been carrying out since the last newsletter hit the streets.

Steve Howard was asked by British Gas to undertake some SAS work on their behalf. This involved conversion of load duration simulation programs from Univac Fortran to SAS using the SAS/BASE and SAS/Macros.

Philip Truscott has been working hard at finishing the Windows version of QuickTAB. It is hoped that the commercial release of this will be available in March. Philip has also been carrying out consultancy for the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority, converting examination results data into QuickTAB.

Having successfully completed the conversion of the Home Office Fire Statistics database into QuickTAB (See the Summer '95 issue), Forvus were asked to import the whole of the 1994 data. This will then be used by Home Office to produce their annual publications, and eventual dissemination to all Fire Brigades.

Bernie, Kathy and Janet have been finishing the 1995 Performance Tables for the Department for Education and Employment. SIR handled the 7 million records and 60,000 updates without any corruptions or failures. If you haven't seen the Tables yet, they are available on the internet <http://www.open.gov.uk/dfee/perform.htm>. We are looking forward to starting the 1996 Tables in May: the first stage collecting data on pupil absence from all 26,000 schools in England!

Tracy Kirk has been down at TIL (Occam), where she has been carrying out on-site SIR support. This contract is likely to last for approximately a month.

On the training front, Bernie Enlander took himself home to Belfast in January to hold a SIR course for the Northern Ireland Office. Forvus has also just released its 1996 programme of training courses. These cover SIR, QuickTAB and SAS, and the programme was sent to clients at the beginning of the year. If you haven't received a copy please contact our Training Manager, **Melanie Singh**, on 0171 498 2602.

Steve Flack

Conditional Finish

The tips in this section are all from DBMS features which are documented in the Environment Manual, chapter 6. References to page numbers

refer to the Version 3.2 Manuals.

I have two retrievals which I run every night but I want the second retrieval to be run only if the first was successful. How can I do that?

There are system globals (Environment page 111) which include

```
compiled only if prog  
program  
write 'Program 1 OK'  
end program
```

In this example the first program has a compilation error, so GERROR is 1 and the FINISH command is compiled and processing stops. If the first program is corrected the FINISH will be skipped and the second program will be compiled and executed too. If you wanted to check for warnings during execution (eg illegal array index) you could use GWARNING instead of GERROR. The CIF command is described in Environment page 122, with Finish on page 126.

Consider this case:

GERROR Total
number of errors in commands during current session; and

member in the null or c

GWARNING Total
number of warnings issued during current session

Current session would mean a single batch execution, or a single interactive Run Member/File/Buffer. So the easiest way to abort a two-stage process is like this:

```
c Program 1  
program  
set LONG_NAME (1)  
end program
```

```
if Program 1 fails  
c Program 3 - run whether or not program  
1 was successful  
program  
write 'Program 3'  
end program
```

In this case we could either skip the line call prog2 by encasing it in a CIF block like this:

```
Environment page 110  
cif gt <GERROR>,0  
. finish  
cif end
```

```
c Dummy - see  
member in the null or c  
cif eq <GERROR>,0
```

Key Macros

manual on page 130. To define a key macro interactively using the PC version simply press Shift F10 and press the key you want to define. Then press all the keystrokes involved with another Shift F10 at the end. For example to define Control W as the keystrokes necessary to set the page size to 60,190 follow this sequence:

Make sure you start at the top menu bar of the system and press:

```
ShiftF10 ControlW n s p 60 return
190 return escape escape shiftF10
```

Then try pressing ControlW and you will see the pagesize alter (It will only work if you press it while you are on the top menu line). If you want to save the key definitions for use in future sessions, use the *eNvironment, Dump key macros* option which dumps key definitions to a member. The following was dumped to member SYSTEM.KEYS.

```
. pend | Environment page 126
KEYMACRO                                0014
'nsf60^030580^0305^0299^0299'
KEYMACRO 0016 'process rec '
KEYMACRO                                0023
'nsf60^0305190^0305^0299^0299'
```

c Program 2 -
Having saved the key definitions as a member they will be automatically invoked in every future session interactive session if you edit (or create) the special member called SYSTEM.MPROFILE (pages 91, 231) to include the line

```
call system.keys
```

This example created the ControlW mentioned above; a similar ControlIN which sets the pagesize to 60,80; and a ControlP which is equivalent to 'process rec ' to be used as a shortcut key in the editor.

```
program
write 'Program 3'
end program
```

or, instead, we could edit prog2 and add a CIF to it like this:

```
cif gt <GERROR>,0
```

```
cif end
```

```
program
write 'Program 1 OK'
end program
```

The PEND command returns compilation to the command after the CALL PROG2 command, in other words program 2 is not compiled or executed. Note that Call is a synonym for INCLUDE MEMBER, and that there are equivalent INCLUDE FILE and INCLUDE BUFFER commands described on page 116. It is possible to pass parameters to macros called or included in this way (Page 114).

This useful feature is described in the Environment

Process Rec

PROCESS REC VIA | WITH (PQL Manual page 145)

Via and With are actually synonymous, but they cause some new users a good deal of grief so it may be useful to run through some examples. These PROCESS REC commands are all assumed to be used in a case-structured database.

PROCESS REC N

A loop over all records of type N within the current case (as defined by the PROCESS CASE loop). The loop ends with an END PROCESS REC or an END REC command. If the case has no records of type N, execution skips to the command after the END REC.

PROCESS REC N VIA (1)

A loop over all records of type N in the current case, where the first keyfield (sometimes called a sort-id) variable takes a value equal to 1. If the record has only one keyfield this will be at most a single record; if there are other keyfields they can vary freely. If the current case has no record(s) where the first keyfield is equal to 1, execution skips to the command after the END REC.

PROCESS REC N VIA (4,5,6)

A loop over all records type N (in the current case) where the first key field is equal to 4, the second keyfield is 5 and the third keyfield is 6. This command would be invalid unless there were at least three key fields. With exactly three keyfields this would define a single record which may or may not exist for the current case. If there are more than three keyfields, the fourth and succeeding keyfields can take any value.

The examples above use constant values as the arguments in the brackets, but you may use any mixture of constants and local (sometimes called summary) variables. Eg PROCESS REC N WITH (A,B,C) will only compile if A, B and C are the names of local variables (created with GET VARS, COMPUTE etc). If you do not know what your keyfields are, there are various options under the *Database* menu item which will show you.

In the COMPANY database the OCCUP record has one keyfield called POSITION, which means that the command:

PROCESS REC OCCUP VIA (10)

will retrieve the OCCUP records where POSITION has value 10. Because it specifies a keyfield value and thereby uses the indexes, it is much faster than its functional equivalent:

```
PROCESS REC OCCUP  
. IFNOT (POSITION = 10) NEXT REC
```

which has to read every OCCUP record.

The keyword VIA (or WITH) matches exact values; ranges are supported with the keywords FROM, THRU, AFTER and UNTIL (PQL Reference page 145).

SIR UK User Group Committee Members 1995/96

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