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Editorial

Welcome to the September 1998 issue of *Reporter*. As I write, autumn has come early this year to the dappled, cobbled streets of London, and with it the anticipation of ripening fruit, falling leaves, and mushroom forays yet to come.

Since the last issue of this august journal, we have had the annual June one-day Conference at Forvus House. It was well attended, and had a good variety of user papers. One of the highlights was a demonstration of what was then the latest version of SIR 4.1, which had in fact arrived from Australia that very morning. There has been a great deal of development, and it seems to answer the reservations which some had about 4.0. Altogether, it looked very good, and a beta release is expected later this year. A review of the June Conference, including the demonstration of 4.1, appears elsewhere in this issue.

We are planning an exciting International Users Conference in 1999 at Edinburgh, more details of which appear elsewhere in this issue. We are still commissioning papers, so if you have a topic which you think would be of interest to other SIR users, and which you would like to present at the Conference, please get in touch. Not all papers need be at the cutting edge of technology. One already set, for instance, details an application for reading data from SPSS into SIR, by producing a SIR schema from an SPSS data dictionary and then loading ascii data into the resulting SIR database. Like many such applications, it may look an ungainly bird but it does, nevertheless, fly. Doubtless it is only a matter of time before Open DataBase Connectivity (ODBC for those who eat, drink and dream in acronyms) consigns it to the dustbin of history; but in the meantime there is a need to be filled, as the bishop said to the actress.

Anyway, we look forward to a good International Conference, and to seeing as many of you there as possible.

Michael Staley

Why not visit SIR's web site at www.sir.com.au?

Note from the Chair

As you will read elsewhere in this issue we had a very successful one-day conference in June and are looking forward to the International Conference in Edinburgh in June 1999. Now is the time to think about offering a paper or some

training on some aspect of SIR as you use it. Your efforts will be distributed throughout the world on CD. **Please complete the Registration Form and Call for Papers on the final page of Reporter if you are interested in attending.**

Unix SIR 4.0 is getting closer to release, with a character mode version of dbms and forms under test as I write. The PC version as we saw at the conference is moving along at a vast rate of knots such that the expected version 4.1 due later this year is to be 4.5 due for beta testing in October along with ODBC.

For some of us ODBC will be a major leap forward and I am sure there will be papers on its use in Edinburgh so make sure you book your place to see this and the new Visual PQL. For those not in the know Visual PQL is PQL with added functionality to produce buttons, check boxes, list boxes etc as in WDL but dynamically from your PQL program. Exciting times are ahead.

Dave Doulton

We are planning a mix of user papers and both introductory and advanced training to cater equally for new and experienced SIR users from around the world.

By June next year many users will have started using version 4.5, and we should have a range of papers on ODBC, VisualPQL and the other new features, as well as training in all the new PQL commands.

Those still using version 3.2 or earlier versions of SIR should come and find out what they are missing and how they can make the transition smoothly to the newer versions. Users at the cutting edge of the new developments should come to meet each other and share their experiences and knowledge.

Users, distributors and developers will contribute a range of papers and training sessions on:

- Transition to the GUI versions of SIR
- Transferring existing User Menus to WDL and VisualPQL
- API and ODBC applications of SIR
- Database and PQL design
- Introductory SIR training
- Advanced SIR training

Abstracts and titles for training sessions and/or users papers are invited on these and any other SIR related topics. Do not feel that you cannot contribute if you are using an older version of SIR as your experiences are still relevant to the majority of users. Papers on any topic will be considered, but users have expressed particular enthusiasm for papers considering:

- Database design options and experiences
- Transferring data between SIR and other packaged software
- Interfaces from other software to data in SIR databases.
- Dealing with the millenium
- Problems of large databases
- Caseless databases and when to use them
- Database and PQL problems

Please send your ideas, titles and/or abstracts to Kathy Brooks at Forvus if you may be able to present a paper. It will help us to plan the event if everyone thinking of attending could complete and return the **Registration Form and Call for Papers** at the back of this issue of *Reporter*.

The draft programme has been devised to accommodate the needs of those travelling to Edinburgh, and the conference fee will include all meals, accommodation and training materials. The fee has not been finalised but is expected to be between £350 and £400.

Wednesday 16th June

Events

16-18 June 1999 International SIR
Conference, Edinburgh

Edinburgh 1999 International Conference

First Announcement and Call for Papers

The next International SIR Users Conference will be held on 16-18 June 1999 at the Apex International Hotel in Edinburgh.

14.00 – 17.30	Keynote and user papers
19.30	Dinner and ghost tour of Edinburgh

Thursday 17th June

09.00 – 17.30	Training and user papers, with parallel sessions for introductory and advanced training
19.30	Conference dinner and dance

Friday 18th June

09.00 – 12.30	User papers and tips and tricks
12.30	Lunch and close

News from SIR's R & D Department

The SIR R & D department is working hard on a number of projects and this is a brief summary of the current situation. Any dates or forecasts are our current best estimates but please be aware that these are targets we are aiming for and we must be realistic about the possibility of slippage.

The current release of 4.0 for Windows is proving popular and has a low level of reported problems. If you think you may be impacted by a problem, there are downloads available from our Web page (www.sir.com.au) of revisions which contain fixes for the following:

- Warning 456 on Retrieval Update
- Table Space 100000 limitation
- Real numbers in SAS Save File
- File conflicts on procedures
- Master connection/communication problem
- Minor enhancements to default DBMS interface
- SirEasy

We are working on 4.0 for other platforms. We have spent the last couple of months trying to identify and eliminate the last few problems for our Unix version and, at times, it has felt like we are going backwards with extra bugs appearing in new versions shipped for testing. We now seem to have no more problems on our Intel based systems (SCO and Linux) but we are still working on Solaris. This exhibits different behaviour because a) Memory is not automatically initialised to zeros and b) the byte order is different. This can give rise to the situation where processes that work fine on Intel give wrong results on Solaris. We continue to work on this and we are very close to a release. (Many thanks to our beta testers who are doing a sterling job.)

We are also working on the Alpha platform. As you are all probably aware Compaq have recently taken over Digital which has meant that we lost a number of senior contacts and has led to a few hiccups in such things as software licenses. We are being promised that these have now been fixed and, as soon as we get everything we need from them, it should only take us a couple of weeks to get 4.0 ready for OpenVMS and available for customer testing. We are trying to organise necessary components so that we can also tackle Unix and, possibly, Windows NT for this hardware.

We have to co-ordinate with hardware vendors/customers for access to other platforms and I can't arrange this until we really are ready to go but I would expect IBM RS 6000 & HP9000 to follow shortly.

The curses version for Unix (i.e. support for dumb terminals) is up and running with some minor additional bugs which we are addressing. This will be available as a separate executable should you need it.

Now to our next release. We are developing new system dialogs using our new VisualPQL and that seems to be going fine. We have also created the Motif version of SIR to support VisualPQL (for Unix/OpenVMS) and have gone to a lot of trouble to get this identical to the Windows version. This really is going to give us a terrific tool for cross-platform GUI development

We have finished all the client/server stuff for ODBC that is external to SIR itself, and now have to write the SQL engine. Essentially what this will be is our current SQL which gets its commands from ODBC and sends its responses to ODBC. It must run with no other terminal interactions.

We have been deep in DBMS putting in support for multiple databases in PQL and in general sorting out how database switching will work. This is a non-trivial change to DBMS and has meant serious and far reaching changes. (It affects everything to do with databases from schema definition through to backup and recovery!) We have finished all the development work and are now debugging it.

We think we should renumber this next version to 4.5 to avoid the impression it is 4.0 with the bugs fixed which is not the case at all. Since the version 4.0 release, we have made a lot of changes including the following:

- 1) All development is now on Windows (moved from Alpha)
- 2) SIRTRAN has been heavily modified to produce more modern, more structured

Fortran. (This also involved changing macros and source code).

- 3) All source SIRTRAN definitions have been combined across all products.
- 4) Internal memory and table management has been completely rewritten.
- 5) VisualPQL is new with a major set of new commands. This also allows the execution of one PQL program from another and is a major change in how PQL operates.
- 6) The whole DBMS approach to databases is altered to be aware of multiple databases. PQL retrievals allow access to multiple databases.
- 7) There is support for the new spreadsheet interface.
- 8) There is support for the new graphics interface.
- 9) There will be a new ODBC module.

These changes will require extensive testing and will mean a full beta test program, especially for DBMS. Once we have finished this latest set of DBMS changes and have a reasonable interface in VisualPQL, we will try and get this to distributors and any really interested parties for 'playing' but we do not anticipate that we can get real customer beta testing underway much before October 1998.

If anyone has detailed comments, questions, etc. on R & D, I would be pleased to hear from you. My email address is tony@sir.com.au.

Tony Reardon

SIR vs Oracle : A Personal Review from a Reluctant Escapee

This paper was presented to the SIR UK Users Group Conference on 25th June 1998, and is reproduced here with the kind permission of the author.

Introduction

As many of you may know, I have been using SIR at the BBC for over 10 years. At the end of last year I moved to Taylor Nelson Sofres (the 5th largest Market Research company in the world

for those of you crying 'Who?') and on to use of the market leader - Oracle. I have now been on a 5 day Introduction to Oracle course, a 5 day Developer 2000 course (Forms and Reports) and have started to use it in reality. So I am now in a position to give an initial, highly personal, review of the two systems.

In this David verses Goliath competition, it initially seems a very unequal battle. Oracle - market leader throughout the world, suites of programs including Developer 2000 and their case tool Designer 2000, used by many corporations. SIR - specialised use throughout the world, serving a niche market, consisting of an integrated system including schema, forms and reports. In addition, like many long term SIR (or other product) users, one begins to feel that the other products out there must be somehow better and more advanced than those one knows and loves. The grass is greener syndrome is strong! And yet in my initial comparison I have to say that Oracle does not fair very well.

Systems Review

As I started to use Oracle, I was first struck by how 1980's it felt. It is completely reliant on SQL statements to create, alter and update tables, keys and data, which seems archaic after SIR GUI interfaces. We, like very many companies using Oracle, do not use their case tool, as it is prohibitively expensive. Without it, you are completely reliant on SQL, and you had best make sure you have every comma and semicolon in the right place as it is very unforgiving. So, to create a table we are back to typing in -

```
CREATE TABLE employee (  
    empnum      NUMBER (4),  
    fname       CHAR(20),  
    lname       VARCHAR2(30),  
    birthdate   DATE,  
    salary      NUMBER(7,2)  
);
```

How archaic!

I also greatly missed the many SIR Schema features I had taken for granted like Value Labels, Valid Values and Var Ranges. The whole ease of creation and use of the SIR schema was missing in Oracle. Querying the data dictionary for schema information requires a convoluted set of SQL statements, relying on your knowledge of obscure system tables and variable names.

Creating Schemas in SIR is so easy in comparison, and accessing the system level information is simple and user-friendly. The ability to use meta-data in SIR is also extremely powerful. The whole suite of SIR Utilities which

we took for granted - such as Read Input Data and Add Rec, are sorely missed once they are no longer available and you are expected to create such facilities yourself in SQL.

SIR database design does have some clear drawbacks in comparison with Oracle. A major advantage of Oracle is the ability to create many keys for a table, an area in which SIR remains weak.

Oracle Forms is a very strong part of the Oracle system, allowing very powerful forms to be created with full GUI functionality. However, the background code is still reliant on PL/SQL statements - which remain far more cumbersome and limited than SIR PQL. Otherwise programmers are reliant on calling other 3GL to achieve the required functionality. In addition there are a surprising number of bugs in the system. SIR forms are leaping forward, although they are still only Windows-like rather than fully Windows compliant (I believe). They now have the full set of menus, buttons and lists available, and can use the powerful PQL to control processing.

Oracle Reports were a real shock to me. Even the trainer on the course recommended using SQL instead! They are cumbersome, rigid and non-intuitive, making creating even simple reports an arduous chore. We hate them here! SIR Reports, consisting of both Simple and Full Reports, are flexible and easy to use. The simple reports are excellent for creating quick and easy reports, while the full reports are a very powerful tool for producing complex reports.

Overall Oracle is a robust, multi-user system, suited to many corporate tasks. It is simple to connect to 3GL's to add functionality where its own systems are limited. It is also ODBC compliant. However it is reliant on SQL for database control, and its PL/SQL language is limited in comparison with SIR's PQL. Its reporting facilities are shockingly poor, and a surprising number of bugs are found throughout the system.

SIR has some major advantages over Oracle, including its Schema, the SIR Utilities, Data Dictionary facilities, and its wonderful PQL. SIR is not as robust as Oracle, nor perhaps can it serve as a huge multi-user multi-update platform as well as Oracle. It also lacks the links with other languages and systems that Oracle has, though ODBC connectivity seems to be on the way.

Conclusion

Like so many people who use a product for a long time, we begin to undervalue what is familiar and take it for granted. SIR is a very different product to Oracle and will never be able to compete with the immense multi-user corporate

platforms which Oracle suits so well. However in many areas SIR shines in unexpected ways. I never expected SIR to trounce Oracle so easily over reporting facilities, nor that the schema and data dictionary features in SIR would be so much more comprehensive and user-friendly than those provided as standard by Oracle. In conclusion I would say that for all Oracle's many strengths and facilities, I do miss SIR and all its features, and will end by saying - give me back my PQL!

Toni Moulin
Taylor Nelson Sofres

June 1998 Conference Review

After the Coffee & Registration, and the Welcome from our illustrious Chair **Dave Doulton**, the first paper was "**SIR vs Oracle : A Personal Review from a Reluctant Escapee**" by **Toni Moulin** from Taylor Nelson. (*The full text of this paper is reproduced elsewhere in this issue of Reporter*) The speaker had been using SIR for many years, and then a change of job gave her the opportunity to use Oracle and thus make a comparison between the two packages. From her background as a SIR user, Toni found Oracle cumbersome. Too much of the package is reliant on SQL statements for creation and subsequent change. There are no equivalents of the SIR Utilities, no simple Value labels, Valid Values and so forth, and the data dictionary can be interrogated only via SQL. The Forms module in Oracle sounded fairly good, but the Reports module sounded awful - many Oracle users resort to SQL instead. Overall, Toni felt that Oracle had some good points - ODBC; a robust, multi-user system; simple to connect to 3GL; and an extensive user-base, but that on the whole it suffered in comparison with SIR.

The next paper was "**Using a Workflow System using SIR**", given by **Jenny Simpson** from the Department for Education and Employment, and

looked at how a new survey system was developed, using Staffware and SIR. Staffware is one of the leading workflow management software packages, and after outlining how it was used at the DfEE, Jenny went on to describe how it had been used on the annual 'Aid to Students' Survey.

This was followed by a paper on "**BBC Audience Data SIRvices**", presented jointly by **Dave Greatorex** and **Lisa Zaninetti** from the BBC. This summarised the processing of TV and Radio Audience Measurement data, in which SIR (with or without vices) is used to develop and maintain databases which are accessible to the BBC's researchers and analysts. The amount of data which has to be processed and stored is huge, and comes from a bewildering variety of sources. With such massive databases to process, optimisation of the processing system is vital.

The last slot before lunch was given over to the **Annual General Meeting** of the User Group. This was actually the second AGM in eight months (which seems enough to slake the thirst of even the most inveterate AGM lover), due to there being no Edinburgh Conference in November 1998. As usual, it was an oasis of calm and contemplation amidst the hurley-burley and frenetic activity of the Conference, the more piquant for being the last for so long.

The afternoon programme commenced with **Forvus News** from **Steve Flack**. As usual, Forvus goes from strength to strength, taking on new projects and acquiring new staff.

Next was a demonstration of **SIR 4.1**, given by **Kathy Brooks** of Forvus. This version is still under development, and Kathy had received the latest version of it from Australia only an hour or two before she was due to give the demo, based on an earlier and quite different version. 4.1 looked impressive from what we saw. Windows Development Language (WDL – a sweetie of an acronym) has now been subsumed into PQL, and in fact the GUI screens that we were gazing at so rapturously had been created by PQL commands, which Kathy in particular found a sobering thought. We spent some time exploring with Kathy the look and feel of the new version, and people were impressed and enthusiastic. Beta testing is expected later this year, with the commercial release early in 1999.

Then **Dave Doulton** of Southampton University gave a presentation entitled "**SIR API**". Application Programming Interface (API) is a way of accessing SIR from a user-written program, using languages other than SIR – e.g. Fortran, C, or Visual Basic. This can be used to access data from existing systems that use other software, to write access programs for the Internet, and to allow the creation of other Windows interfaces.

Dave's presentation was very interesting despite being hit by occasional problems with network access.

After breaking for the traditional beverage and biccies, we had "**WDL'ing my Archive**" from **Niels Veldhuijzen** of CITO Netherlands. He told us how he has used Windows Design Language to improve the interface with an archive of statistical and psychometric research papers which he has set up on a database. This was a simple and straightforward but interesting application of WDL, though Niels prefaced his presentation with the rather doleful observation that the assimilation of WDL into PQL in the forthcoming release made much of his presentation a little obsolete.

The final paper of the day was a review of the **International Conference in Florida**, given by **Frances Williams** of Essex University. I shall not review it here – this is no place to mirror infinite regression – apart from saying that it sounded like a very interesting Conference.

The day was wrapped up by **Randy Banks** on behalf of the User Group. He reviewed each paper, presented speakers' gifts, and radiated general bonhomie and good cheer. Finally we sojourned upstairs to end with wine, cheese, and convivial conversation. Once more, an extremely useful and enjoyable Conference.

Michael Staley

Forvus News

We've been Certified!

Well, we have done it at last! Forvus has gained certification under ISO 9001. ISO 9001 is the model for Quality Management in design/development, production, installation and servicing, and is the most comprehensive standard in the ISO Quality Assurance series.

For the last 9 months Forvus has been getting into place all the documentation processes and procedures necessary to cover the key areas of our business – application design and development, survey processing, data analysis, forecasting and training services. While Forvus has always adhered to a high standard of documentation (honest!), the requirements of ISO 9001 came as a revelation to some. Nevertheless, we buckled down to it and after a searching two-day audit by Lloyd's Register Quality Assurance, finally gained our certification.

The certificate was handed over with due ceremony, with a professional photographer on hand to record the event. Unfortunately, the piccies haven't come back from Snappy Snaps yet, so these (and the mugshots of new boys James and Adam – see below) will have to wait till the next Reporter.

Goodbye (again) and Halloeee

It seems that recently no sooner have we filled one vacancy than another one occurs! Having reported in the last issue that four of our inmates had escaped by digging a tunnel from the basement of Forvus House that came out on the Common opposite, another one has now gone over the wire. **Mark Carter**, who headed our QStat development team after Philip Truscott left for America, took a job at Logica. No longer will our hallowed halls echo to the sound of his maniacal laughter, or the rhythmic sounds of snoring as he took his lunchtime snooze.

On the plus side, our recent newspaper advertisement for more slaves elicited an overwhelming response (The response from the ad in SIR Reporter elicited a totally underwhelming response, ie none). From the near 200 replies, we have taken on **James Mills** and **Adam Bailin**. James has already started and has settled in well, working with Matthew Johnson on various education contracts. Adam starts later this month and will be working on QStat development.

Men at Work

Since the last Reporter, Forvus has been carrying on with a number of long-term contracts for Teacher Training Agency, the Qualification & Curriculum Agency and Dept of Social Security, as well as a number of smaller projects. The annual round of DfEE Performance tables has also kicked off again, which means lots of extra worker elves wandering about the place, cancellation of Christmas and most of our consultants suffering from a total sense of humour failure.

As a bit of light relief, Janet has been looking at the BBC Audience Research Department's SIR systems to get them ready for the Millennium, while Bernie has been seeing about changes the Court Service require to their SAS systems.

Frequently Asked Questions

Tip: Don't keep using a database that appears to work fine without a verify occasionally even if it does take hours, and do not rely on an export that you have not proved will import again successfully, and keep the raw data if possible.

Dave Doulton

How do I know if my database is OK?

There are several types of corruption which can occasionally occur and not all of them are detected by Verify File. The following table lists the more common of these very rare problems.

	Problem	Caused by	Detected by
File 3	Corrupt database structure, bad indexes	Crashing Forms, Master problems, going too long without unload/reload on database with lots of transactions	Verify File
File 3	Individual variables contain junk	Restructuring other variables nearby. Mostly a problem in version 2.2, but has been known since	Import crashes
File 4	Procedures lost or scrambled	No clear cause, possibly linked to user menus. Usually members in first or last family are lost	Possible crash on Import, condense, pread, or just gone!
Files 1 and 2	Schema corrupt, retrievals crash for no reason	So rare it is difficult to guess what caused it.	Import, sometimes by viewing Write Schema output

As you can see, Verify File only catches a few problems, so to be really sure all is well it is a good idea to Export and Import sometimes – then you really know that everything is OK. Of course, if the Import fails you have really had it, so keep a copy of the 4/5 database files before trying the Import.

What is the best way to back up a database?

It depends on what you are doing, and what the purpose of the backup is. There are several possible situations when you need a backup:

Only worried about procedures being lost:

Use PWRITE often and keep old versions eg pwrite to DB980831 on 31st August 1998. Then you can get back old versions or programs which you mess up or lose.

Lunch time backup done as quickly as possible, because systems need to be live again asap:

You could simply have a backup subdirectory and copy the files across eg
`Xcopy *.sir backup`

But, if the world will end if the database is corrupt, take the time to verify it first with Verify File.

End of day/week backup:

Verify and unload the database, leave the unload on disk if you can and **also** copy it to some other medium and take it off site.

Backup before a major restructure:

Verify, then unload **and** export, and keep the unload and export files archived in case problems take a while to surface. If SIR performs a restructuring unload, delete the database and reload before doing more schema changes.

What is the difference between Unload and Export?

Unload is usually faster but is less safe than an Export. When you Reload SIR loads the data without looking at the variables – it just rebuilds the indexes. When you import a database, it reads every variable and builds the indexes. So a Reload may not notice rubbish in a variable, but Import will crash if the data is duff.

Export/Import can also be very useful for restructuring a caseless database which is too large for a restructuring unload – see the example on the next page.

Any other tips for backup?

1. Whatever backup method you use, make sure you Verify before doing it. There is no point in having a nice archive if it is corrupt.
2. If you use any kind of standard archive to tape or disk, do check that it worked. It is amazing how often it turns out that the archive has failed to run every night for a week but no-one noticed.
3. Also check that you can recover the files from your archive. People sometimes discover that the files they need were left off last night's backup because a job was running and the files were open, or that the archive has not been written properly and cannot be used.

Kathy Brooks

How can I restructure my large caseless database?

This client needed to add an extra digit to their key fields to accommodate the years from 2000 onwards. The decided to keep values like 98nnnn for existing data and then use 100nnnn for the year 2000, 101nnnn for 2001 etc.

Usually we would recommend a simple

```
Modify schema x / lock / noold
Data list ...
```

But this means SIR has to do a restructuring unload and their caseless database is too large: SIR runs out of memory. So we recommended an Export, edit the data list in the export file and then Import. Of course you cannot actually edit a huge export so a more devious path had to be used:

1. Export the database
2. Write schema to a file
3. Pwrite the procedure file
4. Edit the schema file to change the columns, ranges as necessary
5. Run the schema to create a new database
6. Pread the procedures
7. Run an awk program to create a subset of the export containing only the lines from 'IMPORT' onwards:

```
awk 'BEGIN {i=0} /^IMPORT/ {i=1} {if (i==1) print $0}' infile > outfile
```
8. Import the data from outfile using

```
Dbms in=outfile/db= ...
```

This process may be inelegant but it worked!

NB Thanks to Randy Banks for the awk program.

Janet Dyson

SIR UK User Group Committee Members 1998/99

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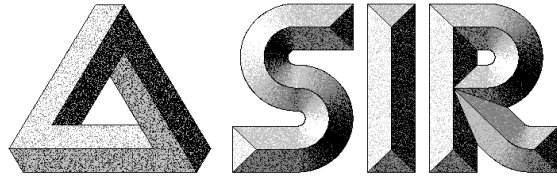
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You can email the whole committee by addressing your message to **sug.comm@essex.ac.uk**



**International SIR Users Conference
June 16-18, 1999
Edinburgh**

Registration Form and Call for Papers

Organisation _____
Address _____

Contact name _____
Phone _____
Fax _____
Email _____

- I would like to register for the Conference
- I would like more details about the Conference
- I am interested in presenting a paper/tip & trick
- I am interested in display space for demonstrations/posters/other

Please send your completed forms to:

**Kathy Brooks, Forvus House, 53 Clapham Common South Side,
London SW4 9BX, UK
Tel: +44 (0)171 498 2602 Fax: +44 (0)171 498 1939 Email: kathy@forvus.co.uk**