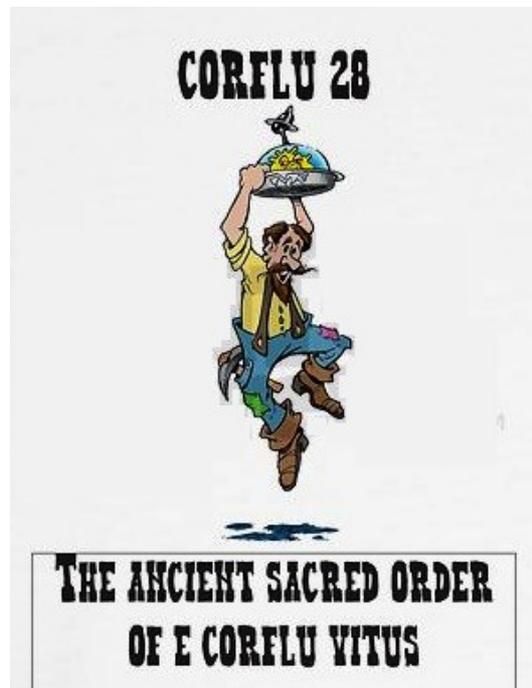


# Corflu Memories



## Issue Two

**From:** Peter Sullivan, [peter@burdonvale.co.uk](mailto:peter@burdonvale.co.uk)  
Boring webpage at <http://www.burdonvale.co.uk>  
Slightly less boring livejournal at <http://ceemage.livejournal.com>

Corflu Memories is both an electronic fanzine, available on <http://www.efanzines.com>, and a paper fanzine, with copies available for the fannish usual. Letters of comment are welcome.

Above: The official T-shirt art from Corflu 28, held in Sunnyvale, CA. For reasons know only to Christopher J. Garcia, the convention was named "E Corflu Vitus."

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## Interview 2 – Mark Plummer

*Mark Plummer has co-edited Banana Wings (originally “Waxen Wings & Banana Skins”) since 1996, during which time it has won 6 Nova Awards for Best Fanzine. He has also been a judge for the Arthur C Clarke Award on a number of occasions.*

PS: How did you discover science fiction fandom in general, and fanzine fandom in particular?

MP: My throwaway answer is that fandom moved in on me. In 1985 I was living in a shared room in a hostel in London, a place that provided cheap accommodation for young civil servants who found themselves posted to jobs in the capital. It was shortly before my twenty-first birthday and I'd been away at the weekend. I returned on the Sunday evening to find that somebody else had moved in. He wasn't in the room at the time, but had left as the most distinctive signs of his manifestation a pile of multi-sided dice and a rolled-up towel with two plastic white mice sitting on it. John, I later learned, had been involved in fandom for several years at that point – he'd been at the 1979 Worldcon – and he was the one who introduced me to the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy fanclub ZZ9, the London 'first Thursday' pub meeting which at that point was still in the One Tun, and sf conventions of which my first was Mexican 2 in 1986.

I was aware of fanzines right from the start and I suppose my first direct encounter was probably Small Mammal, Margaret Austin and Martin Easterbrook's one-sheet newsletter distributed at the One Tun, but for my first few years in fandom fanzines were mostly the province of the other, older, more serious fans. My friends and I, all involved with ZZ9, did pretty much reinvent the form for ourselves on Brighton beach during the 1987 Worldcon and we distributed our own fanzines – which were stylistically more influenced by Private Eye than anything fannish – amongst our circle. But by the end of the 1980s I was moving more towards – for want of a better term – mainstream fandom, specifically through involvement with the BSFA and the SF Foundation. In 1993 Maureen Speller started a new apa, Acnestis, and I was invited to join, an invitation I took up despite having never seen

an apa mailing or contribution. At about this time I also started getting various fanzines such as Attitude (which seemed to be consciously reaching outside the traditional fanzine crowd) and Rastus Johnson's Cakewalk; and as a consequence of being in Acnestis I started receiving fanzines from fellow apa member Bruce Gillespie.

Then came the 1995 Worldcon and in the wake of that my first 'proper' fanzine was part of the vast wave of publications distributed at that year's Novacon.

PS: When did you first hear about Corflu?

MP: I'm really not sure. Probably I saw a mention in the BSFA's newsletter, Matrix, or maybe in Critical Wave or Small Mammal. Somewhere like that, I imagine. Like a lot of the fannish stuff, it was probably a half-understood concept at the time but also, I think, one of those formative fannish experiences: there was something going on, I didn't really understand it, and yet I knew somehow that I wanted to understand. Later it was more that it was far away, something that happened in America and thus of purely academic interest – like I was ever going to go there? I know I was aware of the Corflu tradition of choosing guests of honour by picking a name out of a hat. I pinched the idea and suggested it to Incon 2 in 1994.

PS: Which was the first Corflu you attended? Was it what you expected?

MP: There are two answers to this.

Literally, the first Corflu I attended was in Leeds in 1998, the first Corflu outside the US. Beforehand I was agnostic about the event. There had been some friction about the very idea of a British Corflu and it seemed to me that if we wanted to have a fanzine convention in the UK we could do just that, and encourage overseas fans to come along without needing to import the Corflu brand to do it. The 1997 Attitude convention was a reasonable model in that respect.

But I went along to Leeds – obviously I wasn't going to miss it – and had a perfectly fine time, simply because it was a convention. We had the guest of honour from a hat thing, and we had the communal meal on Sunday lunchtime although we had to trek to a nearby restaurant

for that, but those elements were only a little unusual. In most other respects it didn't feel a lot different from the Attitude convention or the MisCons, aside from having a few more Americans.

So that's why there's a respect in which I feel that the first real Corflu I attended was Corflu Valentine in Annapolis in 2002, which was also my first trip to the US. We went to that one in particular because Nic Farey was running it and Nic's been a mate since... well, he'll probably claim we've known each other for sixty or seventy years now. Shortly after we arrived at the hotel from the airport, Nic dragged me out to 'navigate' for him on a beer run. We drove out to some liquor store and inevitably got completely lost on the drive back, until we arrived at a junction that I remembered from the trip in from the airport a few hours earlier. 'I think we go right here,' said Nic. 'No, I'm pretty sure it's left,' I said and we went left and got back to the hotel in a couple of minutes. I still marvel at the way chance brought us to the only junction on the entire North American continent where I knew which way to go.

There were quite a few Brits at that Corflu: Ian Sorensen and Yvonne Rowse, the Harveys, Peter Weston and Max for sure, and maybe others. Oddly, I don't remember meeting many new people; it seemed I already knew a good few of the Americans from their trips to the UK. I remembered Ted White, for instance, from that Mexicon back in 1986. The only people I recall meeting for the first time that weekend were Randy Byers, Lenny Bailes, Tracy Benton and Bill Bodden... oh, and Ron Salomon, just to show that I wasn't ignoring everybody whose surname didn't begin with 'B'.

The most surprising thing about Corflu was the near-endless supply of free provisions courtesy of the con suite. Given that Nic was in charge there was inevitably going to be plenty of beer, but I remember thinking, god, does the membership fee really cover all this? I was constantly thinking I should be giving Nic more money. And the brunch was spectacular. Ever since I've felt that all British hotel chefs should be sent to America to learn how to cook bacon.

PS: Which other Corflus have you attended since?

MP: Just about all of them after Annapolis. Since 2002 we've missed only two. We didn't go to Las Vegas in 2004 because at the time we'd have needed to commit to the trip we thought we might be moving about then. In the end it didn't happen, we went to the Worldcon in Boston later that year, and ended up moving a few days after we got back from that. And we didn't go to Toronto in 2006, mainly because they were really late in confirming their hotel.

But now Corflu is pretty much an annual feature of our personal convention circuit alongside Eastercon and Novacon.

PS: What makes a good Corflu? And how much of it is stuff that the concom can influence, and how much things that "just happen"? Is Programme important for a Corflu, or is it almost irrelevant?

MP: The key thing has got to be the membership, in that if the right people show up then so long as everything else is basically functional it'll be fine. A good crowd probably wouldn't transcend one of those quasi-mythical hotels that feature in horror tales about package holidays to Spain – you know, where the place is only half built and guests are woken at dawn by the builders who are still working to finish it, where there's no kitchen, and you can't even describe the swimming pool as Ballardian as it never had any water in it in the first place – but it seems to me that Corflu is primarily a social event, and so while other elements like location and venue could break the conviviality they're unlikely to make the weekend. But really that's all pretty theoretical, as Corflu invariably attracts at least some subset of the right people, with a smattering of interesting locals to supplement the hardy perennials. And I've certainly never experienced a truly bad venue.

I suspect I'm probably atypical in thinking that a programme is important, primarily because if it's done well then it is a spur to the socialising. I'm not averse to some serious discussion, which I don't see as antithetical to fun so long as it's not unduly earnest. It's merely a more structured part of the dialogue.

PS: What's been the single most enjoyable event for you that's happened at a Corflu?

MP: That's really tough. Maybe the first of Nic Farey's 'Unusual Suspects' gatherings at the last

Las Vegas Corflu. Nic had upgraded his room to the Penthouse Suite, and a group ended up there most evenings: as well as Nic and Bobbie and us, Randy Byers, Jay Kinney, JoHn Hardin... umm, Ted White and Frank Lunney maybe? Others too. Honestly, details elude me, leaving an enduring sense of sociable ambience. Or the last night in Austin when, with an almost military precision that would have shamed Operation Overlord, Geri Sullivan shepherded just about everybody left at the convention to an out-of-town barbecue place. Or sitting in our room in Sunnyvale last year with Dave Hicks and Randy as most of Friday afternoon slipped by in company with several bottles of wine we'd acquired during the previous day's peregrinations around the Bay Area. Or even the way that, after the Austin Corflu was over, the convention began to re-coalesce at the airport as everybody headed home...

PS: How important are the conversations that you have at Corflu? Who have you most enjoyed meeting and talking to at a Corflu Anyone you wanted to speak to and didn't?

MP: I like the written aspect of our community: the fanzines, obviously, but the letters and emails that flow directly from the fanzines and around them. I like that we had a virtual community before everybody had a virtual community.

But for me it's a parallel activity with the in-person interaction of conventions, pub meetings, parties and a simple drop-in visitor (who is inevitably James Bacon). I do occasionally wonder whether we lost something when the once-in-a-lifetime experience became a commonplace – the sense that the early fan fund delegates had to live every minute of their trip to the maximum, because they were finally meeting the people they knew so well on paper but equally they recognised that they would quite probably never see them again – but honestly it's hard to regret the way that it's now relatively easy to see friends who inconveniently live many thousands of miles away. And Corflu does represent a good incentive to draw lots of them to the same place at the same time, so I only – only – have to get to wherever the round-up is this year.

I'm really not ducking this, but I honestly

couldn't say who I most enjoyed meeting and talking to. The answer is simply all the people whose voices I already knew through fanzines and correspondence, whether it was Andy Hooper and Carrie Root in 2003, or Robert Lichtman, Jerry Kaufman and Suzle in 2005, the Katzes in 2008, or Carl Juarez in 2009 (perversely, I first met Rob Jackson and the Nielsen Halls at American Corflus too). And I really can't recall anybody I wanted to speak to but didn't. I'm trying to avoid coming over all rhapsodic about the experience but people at Corflu are all pretty accessible, and the event is small enough that in a way it functions more as a party.

PS: How do US Corflus compare to US Worldcons? To other US conventions that you've been to?

MP: I've only attended one US convention that wasn't a Corflu or a Worldcon and that was Potlatch in 2005, one week after (and just around the corner from) Corflu and so with many of the same people. And I've only been to two US Worldcons, 2004 in Boston and last year in Reno.

The obvious difference between Corflu and Worldcon is scale. The Worldcon simply has more of everything: attendees, programme, parties. I do see strengths in both forms. I like Worldcons because I remain interested in SF and so, yes, the programme and the dealers' room are definite attractions for me. I much prefer the Corflu con suite to the jammed open parties at Worldcons where you have to fight your way through milling hordes to get a free can of cheap beer, but then a good Worldcon evening fan lounge – such as that run by Catherine Crockett in Reno – can meet that need.

I have a sense that at a Corflu I'm more likely to meet people I already know by reputation – say, Kat Templeton last year – whereas at a Worldcon it's more likely to be chance encounters with strangers. Shortly before Reno we had an email from a chap in Chicago who I didn't know, asking about getting a copy of our fanzine. I didn't get around to doing anything about it before we flew to the US, which saved me a stamp as I bumped into the guy in a London in 2014 party.

PS: How does it compare to a British Eastercon, or a smaller UK convention like Novacon? Any major differences (positive or negative) to be aware of?

The main difference has got to be the con suite versus the bar. With Winchester we did consider whether we should attempt to replicate in some way the US-style con suite since it is such a core part of a US Corflu. We didn't do it, partly because you can't really get away with it at a UK hotel but also because it's not part of the UK convention experience whereas a bar definitely is.

I'm really not sure to what extent, if at all, it changes the social dynamic, though.

PS: For the 2010 Corflu in Winchester, England, you were involved in pulling together the Fanthology, featuring the best of British fan writing from the last decade or so. How did you and the other editors decide what to include? Were there any pieces you especially liked that failed to make the cut? Are copies still available?

MP: In fact we had a decade-and-a-half to cover, because we'd decided that we wanted to follow on from the previous British fanthologies, all of which had been published to coincide with Worldcons. By British and Mood 70 had covered the 1970s, Now Read On spanned 1979 to 1987, and Time Bytes from 1987 to 1995. We set ourselves some ground rules, at least one of which we then broke. As well as ensuring a good range of contributors, we wanted to represent the period reasonably evenly and also draw on a range of sources (although I concede that Banana Wings is disproportionately represented).

In the end we went well over our intended page-count – and indeed budget, although the Cobalt committee were very good about that – and there's obviously a lot more we could have included.

We all started off with a few specific articles in mind. I knew that I wanted to include 'Women Behaving Indecorously' by Yvonne Rowse, 'Mimeomento' by Alison Freebairn and 'Running Up That Hill: or, Life with the Brunners' by John Nielsen Hall, for instance. With other writers and artists it was clear that they needed to be represented although there wasn't an immediately obvious choice, and so basically we

all – Randy Byers, Claire and I – spent several months reading a lot of British fanzines, tossing ideas back and forth in email, trading scans of pieces we hadn't seen first time around.

Did you notice, by the way, that the first article is called 'Slow Train to Nirvana' and the last is 'In Pursuit of Immortality?', hence the whole anthology is Slow Train to Immortality. I was convinced we'd end up typing the title as Slow Train to Immorality...

We do have some copies left (I think Rob Jackson has some too). If anybody's interested they could always email me.

PS: You mentioned your scepticism in 1998 about the need to "import" the Corflu "brand" to the UK. Did Winchester 2010 change your mind at all? Why (or why not)? What are your thoughts about the putative 2015 bid?

MPL Winchester didn't change my mind as such, no. Rather I think the dynamic changed between 1998 and 2010. I think the key thing about any British Corflu is that it needs to be a British Corflu: you take the essence of Corflu and put a British slant on it. I miss that some of the North Americans I'd expect to see at a Corflu aren't going to be able to make it to any UK iteration, but equally the occasional UK Corflu brings the convention within striking distance for a whole bunch of British fans who almost certainly aren't going to visit the US. So, yes, 2015 over here is fine by me.

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*Yours Sincerely, Wasting Away*

((PS: To steal from Earl Kemp (and, if you're going to steal, why not steal from the best?): "We get letters. Some parts of some of them are printable":))

**Ned Brooks, Lilith, GA:** Hi Peter - Thanks for the CORFLU MEMORIES #1 and the GLITTER. I never got to a Corflu, hard to believe it has been going 29 years. And probably never will now, unless it was held on this side of the Atlanta megapolis, as I have lost any urge to travel. I was at just one Ditto, the 4th one, in Virginia Beach in 1991.

((PS: The East Coast of the USA has been a bit of a black hole in terms of recent Corflu bids. When I went back and checked the list, it's not really since 2002 (Annapolis) that Corflu has

been anywhere on the East Coast of the USA. Actually, I believe that Curt Phillips was looking at hosting a Corflu in Virginia, and even got as far as finding a suitable hotel. However, although Corflus aren't as intensive to organise as, say, a Worldcon, he still (rightly) decided that trying to run a Corflu single-handed was probably asking a bit too much.))

**Andy Hooper, Seattle, WA:** I read Corflu Memories #1 with considerable interest. It was fascinating to me to eavesdrop on such an earnest conversation on the future of the convention on its own merit, but it becomes even more so when I consider it was conducted between two Britfans. I don't know if anyone in North America is that passionate about the convention at this moment.

Corflu's two visits to the U.K. have been highly successful, and Corflu Cobalt seems to have particularly kindled a desire to see the convention return to Britain again and more frequently. Right now, it seems very likely that Corflu will be back in the U.K. in 2014. But after that, I think it would be well worth considering a permanent, annual analog to Corflu at different locations in the British Isles. Whether we want to share the convention that frequently on our end isn't really important, as I think you will start wanting your own event soon. That would not preclude Corflu returning to Britain occasionally as well; the two events could be combined in the years that occurred.

All knowledge is contained in fanzines; From you and Jim, I've just learned that Liverpool is a "Shithole" swarming with thieves and unemployed vandals. I'll make a note of this.

If asked, I don't think I would have guessed that Jim Mowatt has been involved in fandom for nearly 30 years. I also recall the Leeds fanzines of the 1980s with considerable appreciation, but I'm not sure I ever thought of them as a particularly good stylistic model for the aspiring fanzine hack. The idea that fan writers are supposed to *hurt* for their work would be easy to extrapolate from the writing of Simon Ounsley, et al, but I'm not sure if fandom as a whole can be expected to embrace that model. (Interesting sidebar: Simon Ounsley actually visited Seattle in the mid 1990s. Of the agoraphobic misanthropes working in Leeds fandom, who would thought it would be

Ounsley to visit North America?)

Jim definitely seems to be on the side of more intellectually-involved programming at Corflu, with the apparent goal of somehow sharing the secret of "Good" writing and other fan activity. To quote Rocky the Flying Squirrel, "That trick never works." In the past 24 years, I've seen a dozen approaches to Corflu programming, and relatively few of them have actually worked. The plays that I and other people have written for performance at Corflu are mostly terrible. We keep trying to play trivia games – again, just terrible. What usually works are interviews with old fans who will likely be dead before the convention comes through town again. Conversations between fans who genuinely enjoy letting each other participate are also pretty entertaining, but even harder to arrange. The greatest single program in Corflu History took place 12 years ago at the 2000 Corflu in Seattle. David Levine's "Iron Faned" competition to create a fanzine in front of an audience was incredibly funny and exciting – I've never seen anything quite like it at any other convention.

Whatever you do, avoid scheduling a panel discussion on the changing role of technology in fanzine fandom. Most fans have resolved to commit suicide rather than endure another one of those.

While I'm on the incredibly tedious subject, you say the PDF vs. Paper debate is a done deal – is it really? People keep saying it's over with, but it isn't that settled for me. All of the fanzines that I have ever voted for an award, FAAn or Hugo, have appeared on paper. I appreciate all the reasons why people choose to publish their work online, but I'm simply never going to feel as though a fanzine that exists only in pixels is as "good" as a fanzine that comes to me on paper.

The central issue is that an online title like *Beam* doesn't "come out" at all in the sense that a traditional fanzine does. An online fanzine can certainly inspire me to reply or write a review, but how and when do I know that a "new issue" has been posted? I usually discover online fanzines exist because someone else reviews them on paper. If I'm checking eFanzines.com every week I'm sure to know another *Beam* has fallen, but I've often gone 60 or 90 days without doing that. Actually, the best thing about being

the FAAn Award administrator this year is that I had to page through all the year's PDFs to create a list of 2011 fanzines, and caught up on a whole year's worth of output along the way. I've toyed with the idea of sending out an additional mass postcard mailing to let people know that a new CHUNGA has been posted online – that would still be a hell of a lot cheaper than sending everyone in fandom a paper copy.

That being said, I still mean to send Jim and Nic a LoC.

Podcasts have their charms as well, and I have listened to a reasonable number of them, but talking isn't writing. Jim says that what he respects most in fanzine fandom is our skill at writing, so it should be no surprise that many of us also prefer text to audio.

Video is not exactly writing either. People are already able to present multimedia content and call it a fanzine, but unless the people on the screen are reading articles and other material written in advance by fanzine fans, they won't be publishing fanzines either.

Fanzines are a written medium. That's where I'm drawing the last line of defense between reason and complete semantic abstraction, wherein the Best Fanzine Hugo can go to a lump of green putty rolled up in a piece of tinfoil.

Jim gives voice to a few odd ideas here and there, but one that I think needs refutation is the notion that "the people who attend Corflu deserve to be there." One is tempted to respond, "They certainly do – and much worse besides!" Corflu and its members are constantly being accused of cliquishness, but I'm not sure what we can ever do to dispel that idea. People generally attend the convention to connect with friends that they have known for years, but I think everyone there also relishes the opportunity to meet people who are relatively new to that fandom. In the pages of a fanzine, experience, skill and polish as a writer are all important attributes for being taken seriously. At a convention, other social skills are temporarily somewhat more significant, and one gets a lot more mileage out of relaxing and having fun than standing around *respecting* everyone.

On the other hand, the general *bonhomie* of

Corflu does not mean that all enmities and feuds are forgiven for its duration, and there may indeed be more than one party going on at a time. Not every fan at Corflu can be expected to embrace you like a long lost brother – what you can expect is that if you've spent any time interacting with people in fanzine fandom, *someone* there will act like you were their first crush. I always spend time with my usual suspects, but I also always end up sharing significant conversations with people I've failed to connect with for years. At Corflu Vitus in Sunnyvale, I enjoyed some long and fascinating conversations with Michael Dobson and Gary Hunnewell, finding out a great deal more about them as professional writers, and figuratively bringing them into the front row of my imaginary audience.

Knowing how much Jim would like to attend a North American Corflu suggests a number of intriguing possibilities. There was a visiting English fan at Corflu Zed in 2009, and that seemed to work out very well. Would Jim be willing to masquerade as Lionel Fanthorpe? Portlanders still revere him like Santa Claus. All I can say, Jim, is that you should be sure you have a current passport when we make our way toward 2013.

This letter is in danger of spooling out to 1500 words, which is probably much more than its content warrants. I haven't written very many letters of comment for the past decade or so, and I'm afraid I'm not particularly good at it yet. Maybe practice I pretty write far far day.

I'll close by noting that as someone with distinct opinions about fanzines, you are the exact model of the sort of person I want to cast a ballot in the 2012 FAAn awards. There are about five days remaining until the deadline as I write this – I hope you'll consider sending me your choices! The ballot is available online at Corflu.org.

((PS: Liverpool has produced the Mersey Beat, two world-class football (or, if you insist, soccer) teams, and many excellent comedians. It also, alas, has a reputation – at least in part justified – as containing a large number of people of the criminal classes. As the old joke goes:

Q) What do you call a Scouser in a suit?

A) The Defendant.))

((When I said that the paper vs PDF debate was settled, I meant in the sense that I don't think anyone seriously claims that PDF fanzines aren't "really" fanzines any more. Whether paper fanzines are "better" than PDF fanzines is a separate debate, and one that will no doubt run and run. I still personally have an aesthetic preference for paper fanzines, which is part of the reason this fanzine appears in both paper and PDF formats. But I equally recognise that, for many people producing fanzines, the choice is not between PDF and paper fanzines, but PDF and no fanzine at all – using the Arnie Katz formulation.))

((Would Jim be expected to do the Lionel Fanthorpe trick of actually writing a full novel over the course of a weekend? That might be

somewhat tricky. Otherwise, your idea of getting him to impersonate everyone's favourite Fortean multi-author priest sounds eminently do-able.))

((I have shamefully delayed this issue beyond even the revised deadline for the FAAn Award voting, thereby rendering moot my original plan to include a ballot form. However, you have my votes, at least.))

((Also, I should note that Gary Farber commented on Facebook that he *wasn't* drunk at Corflu Sunnyvale, as suggested by Jim Mowett. Which I'm sure is right. I know that, when I'm surrounded by inebriated people, despite not drinking myself (too many tablets, dear hearts), I tend to take on their style of acting & speaking.))

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ObDisclaimer: Corflu Memories is a independent publication; nothing in it reflects the official position of the Corflu 29 con committee, or indeed any other fannish or non-fannish organisation. Now, fannish dis-organisation, that's another matter. Objects in mirror may be scarier than they appear.

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