

# We are Spartacus!

RICHARD HALL

**V**irgin? Newbie? Neophyte? Call me what you will, the truth is that this year's AGM was my first time and, in time honoured tradition, and thanks to some cunning 'volunteering' by Mike Simmons, I have been asked to share my experiences with you.

When I found out that conference was going on the road and was only a stone's throw (38 miles) from Sheffield, I thought that this would be a great opportunity to attend. This year also saw the completion of my final TPDP 2012 exam and so I had no more excuses not to go.

Before setting off to Nottingham I had gone through all the AGM papers looking at the agenda, motions and the rules to try to get an understanding of what we would be doing for the two days. Even though I had seen the articles in ARC News and spoken to people who had been to the conference before, I still expected that it would be an extremely formal affair, similar to the State Opening of Parliament, with a rigid structure of speeches and voting with here-here's and aye's to the left etc. There were still the speeches and votes but it was nowhere near as formal as I thought. It also helped that we (the newbies) had a pre-conference get together with Paula Houghton who let us know what was about to happen, she even mentioned the obligatory round of

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applause you'll get if you mention that you're a first-timer! This year saw the AGM split over two days so only about half of the motions were covered on the Tuesday with the rest being held over to Wednesday morning. Day one was fairly straight forward with all the motions passing with little/no opposition. In between the two days came the (in) famous ARC formal dinner. Everything about the evening was beyond what I expected. The food was great, the speeches were entertaining (and brief) and I got the chance to meet a lot of new people, catch up with some others I hadn't seen for a while and do all this wearing a three piece suit. It was great to see everyone letting their hair down and enjoying themselves, even if it did mean getting in at about 3.30am!

Day two of the conference involved a lot more debate (and paracetamol) with Wednesday seeing the conflicting motions regarding Pay. This led to a pretty action packed morning with calls for

remission, arguments for, arguments against, rights of reply and rounds of applause for the proposers. This is what I wanted from the conference, real debate on what we do in the future.

Overall the conference far exceeded what I expected and was much more fun than I thought. I have been racking my brain to try and think of the words to sum up how it made me feel and why you should attend but I couldn't put it better than Ashley Falla (Leicester centre)/ Kirk Douglas (aging actor). I AM SPARTACUS! After I got home from conference and the days passed I remember that phrase spoken so emphatically by Ashley during a motion on pay. I remember sitting in the conference hall seeing my fellow union members debate this issue and it reminded me of just what the union is here to achieve. We are a group of people who join together to stand up for better pay, working conditions and a fair deal for all of us. WE ARE SPARTACUS! It doesn't mean we all have to agree all the time, nor am I saying we could defeat the Roman empire, but attending conference has inspired me to want to get more involved, and maybe even put forward a motion or two myself next year. So why not come next year and see what it's all about! And, if you do, come and find me, I'll definitely be there. ■



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# Getting back on speaking terms

VICKY LAMB



**T**his year I found myself at the ARC union conference for the first time in my dozen years of membership. No-one else had volunteered and once I was reassured that the union would cover my expenses, that I could wrap a training course round the AGM to preserve my annual leave, and that I wouldn't have to speak, I realised that an all-inclusive two-night break centred on a champagne reception and formal dinner was probably the best offer I've had in at least a decade and I'd be an idiot not to accept.

Most of my colleagues don't take an active interest in the union any more – they're just too busy for it and many feel that ARC doesn't represent them and is full of middle-aged men harping on about the old days and reserved rights to first class travel. I hoped to reassure myself that this wasn't true.

Initially I was daunted, but I found that I knew, or knew of, a

surprising number of the 120 or so delegates. Most people were a lot younger (and more enthusiastic) than the disgruntled old codgers I'd been warned to expect, and there were lots of trainees.

There were lots of first timers too, and we were quickly talked through the procedures before the AGM started. Motions debated at ARC's AGM set the direction the membership wants the union to take and which issues to take to HMRC to discuss, negotiate or challenge.

While there were lots of motions pertaining to trainee issues, terms and conditions and pay, the dominant theme was Building our Future. If you include flexible working, it was the subject of over a third of the motions, highlighting the importance of the issues to the union and its members.

So, at the behest of its membership, ARC is to do all it can to ensure clear communications every step of the way between HMRC and both itself and its members. ARC will also be trying to establish what roles, at what levels, will be available where, and working with HMRC to try to ensure that there are adequate career development opportunities in every location. They are also to engage with HMRC to try to create opportunities within the organisation for staff with no access to a regional centre.

On the buildings themselves,

ARC will continue to press for adequate locations and facilities for staff, and ensure that diversity and the additional needs of many of our colleagues are always considered. ARC will also press HMRC to ensure Mapeley continues to adequately maintain our existing offices till they close.

Unsurprisingly, none of these issues were contentious and almost all of the motions were passed. There was only one point in the AGM where the debate got more heated as three conflicting motions on pay incentives to reward specialist skills were debated. Speakers started to get involved, eloquent, even passionate, at last. I was enthralled as a committee member summarily resigned mid-debate and ARC narrowly achieved a mandate to discuss proposals for additional payments for specialists rather than immediately rejecting them. Personally I was, and remain, absolutely gutted with the outcome. I'm only thankful that my first AGM wasn't such a roller-coaster ride from start to end.

I should mention the speeches and, as you can imagine, there were a fair few over the 2 days. Highlights were hearing the Jedward joke for the first time (sadly not the last), discovering that Jon Thompson is the spit of Bob Carolgees (if you'll pardon the pun), and having William Hague assure us that PMR is here to stay while simultaneously forewarning us of its demise by alluding to the pilot "tweaking it" (Google "PCS VOA PMR"). The appearance at the AGM dinner of Messrs Thompson, Troup and Hague was a surprise to me and a testament to outgoing ARC President Tony Wallace's success in getting ARC and HMRC back on speaking terms. Given the momentous changes going forward, it's a huge relief.

The dinner was lovely, by the way, though I dread the photos. And first class travel wasn't mentioned once. ■