



Hosting IYPT –

A retrospective account of the 27th IYPT in Shrewsbury, United Kingdom

Having first attended an IYPT in Uppsala, Sweden back in 2003 and ten more since in various capacities, as Team Leader, IOC Member and EC Member, I felt that I had a good idea of what hosting an IYPT would involve. I knew about the possible pitfalls. I knew not to risk financial ruin and certainly had no plans to lose my house and car! I had to make sure that before I offered to host the 27th IYPT, I had the full backing of the management of my school. I brief chat with the boss of the finance department and the headmaster suggested that I should go ahead although I am not entirely sure that they knew exactly what they were letting themselves in for. I knew that Shrewsbury School would make an excellent venue and I will explain why later.

It was back in 2010 in Vienna, Austria that I made my first tentative bid as a future host. This was ratified by the whole IOC in Bad Saulgau, Germany in 2012 and there was no going back or should I say the thought of going back was unthinkable. I knew that having enjoyed many wonderful IYPTs in many countries, it was time to return the generosity and provide a tournament in the UK. I also knew that it was highly unlikely that I would be able to obtain the level of funding that I had seen in Korea for example in 2007 or Taiwan just the year before in 2013. A quick costing by our finance department suggested that I didn't need a million dollars or indeed anything like it. My first job was nevertheless still fundraising and letters need a logo so that was done. The same logo was put on the medals so that was done. T-shirts, bags, banners, brochures; everything had to be designed and acquired. The ball was well and truly rolling and there was no stopping and no going back.

Shrewsbury School is what in the United Kingdom is referred to as a Public School. In the United States, a Public School is just that; a school for the general public to attend. In England a Public School is a private school, which can be confusing. Shrewsbury, that is the school not the town, was founded in 1552 by royal charter under King Edward VI. The school was originally in the town centre but outgrew the space available and move to its current site in 1882. The school therefore has quite some history. The 'School Site', as it is referred to, occupies a delightful location covering an area of about 55ha on a bend in the River Severn. Rowing on the river is one of the most popular sports at the school and they get rather good at it.



So we had a perfect venue. The school has eleven boarding houses for boys and girls along with numerous classrooms, meeting rooms, large halls, dining facilities, sports facilities and lots and lots of space. In my mind, one aspect that made it a perfect venue was the fact that it was completely self-contained. From the opening ceremony to the final party, nobody really needed to leave the school site. This removed both the cost of regular transportation and of course the potential logistical nightmare of moving three hundred or so people several times a day. It is necessary to provide a certain level of accommodation for those taking part but that was not a problem. Four boarding houses were made available for team members and team leaders and two hotels were used in the town of Shrewsbury itself for independent jurors and visitors as well as EC members. The town is a very pleasant ten minute walk from the school.

The town of Shrewsbury is steeped in history and can be dated back to the 8th century when it was known, in Old English, as 'Scrobbesbyrig'. Things have moved on a bit since then but it is still an attractive town with many mediaeval buildings and a 12th century castle. A trip to Shrewsbury for many is an end in itself so perhaps we needed to look no further for one possibility of an excursion!

Inter-cultural experiences are a valuable aspect of IYPT and I was determined to provide a taste of the local area for those who were to come to IYPT 2014. Only half an hour away from Shrewsbury are the towns of Coalbrookdale and Ironbridge. This area of the county of Shropshire was the ideal target for the full-day excursion. Coalbrookdale and Ironbridge boast between them no fewer than ten museums that are mainly concerned with the incredible industrial heritage of the area. It was here that Abraham Darby I produced iron from a blast furnace using coke rather than charcoal in 1709. It was Abraham III who built the famous Iron Bridge after which the town is named. There are still iron foundries in Ironbridge Gorge working today three hundred years later. The Blists Hill Museum is a recreated Victorian Town that is a major tourist attraction in its own right and I was sure it would be a good place to visit. For the half-day visits, I would offer the Royal Air force Museum at Cosford, also just half an hour away, but containing a fascinating collection of planes, missiles and flying memorabilia. It also houses the award winning Cold War Museum which I thought might be of particular interest, possibly controversially, to our visitors from behind the former 'Iron Curtain'. A short walk into town and a visit to the newly refitted Shrewsbury Art Gallery and Museum, and maybe a few shops, would complete the visits. I really did not want to plan anything that would involve three or four hour bus rides to Oxford or London or wherever as they are too big and too far away for a day trip. There was quite enough in the locality of Shrewsbury itself.



Getting everybody to Shrewsbury required a fair amount of planning and thankfully there were no major problems. All the teams that landed at UK airports on the arrival day made it to their beds that night. Our friends from Nigeria arrived during the opening ceremony so we had our full quota of 28 teams. It was very regrettable that the 29th team, Iran, were not able to obtain their visas to the UK. It was certainly easier to get people from Manchester rather than Heathrow as the latter is huge and complicated and that much further away. I am very grateful to Longmynd Travel who provided all the buses for IYPT 2014. I have worked with them for nearly twenty years and I new they would be in the right place at the right time.

The opening ceremony was fairly straightforward and I did not want too much in the way of razzmatazz. I was delighted that Lord Rees, Astronomer Royal and former President of the Royal Society had agreed to attend and give a presentation. What few people knew is that he was giving a lecture in Geneva the day before and only just made the last flight to the UK the night before and arrived by car at 1am on the same day as the ceremony. For many, the highlight of the opening ceremony is the draw for the rounds and that went according to plan even as Team Nigeria were racing from the train station to the school.

Nine classrooms had been converted from teaching geography and religious studies, physics and chemistry into IYPT fight rooms. Our AV department did some fantastic work as did the IT department with the help of Georg and Tim, or was it the other way around? I think it would be fair to say that we suffered very few technical hitches and even got through the weekend with no support staff in the school! The rooms were perhaps a bit small but I guess it added to the atmosphere in a way. I looked in on several fights and everybody seemed to be totally focused on what was going on.

As the saying goes, 'an army marches on its stomach' and I guess an IYPT does too. The school normally caters for nearly a thousand people and so IYPT was fairly straightforward. I'm afraid I didn't make it to many meals due to the 101 jobs that I was doing but I know that the food was up to scratch. It was also really handy that everybody was in easy walking distance of the school canteen. It would have been nice to have kept it open for longer but that was just not possible.

As the selective rounds drew to a close, it soon became evident who the stronger countries were but as always it is never definite until after the fifth round. From an organiser's point of view, the prospect of a four team final was a bit daunting but when it happened, it just had to be catered for; start a bit early, finish a bit late; just get on with it! It was a good final. Singapore, China, Poland and Slovakia all gave great performances and the level of physics was as high as ever. It is always amazing to think that these students in many cases still attend school or have only just left. Well done to Singapore for retaining the title and the trophy.

No IYPT is complete without a party and that usually involves entertainments. It was good to see many of the teams 'letting their hair down' and having a really good time together. As I said earlier, one of the great things about IYPT is putting young people, and a few oldies, from different cultures together for a week or so and seeing what happens. What does happen is that long-lasting friendships develop and the IYPT family just keeps on growing. I was really touched by the response that I got when contacting former UK team members from several years ago and in many locations across the world. They all had very happy memories of Sweden or Switzerland or Slovakia and so on. Long may it continue.

I would finally say to any countries that have not yet hosted IYPT that it is perfectly possible to do so and as I said, does not need a million dollars. Organising IYPT is great fun and immensely satisfying (when it is all over). If in doubt, go for it!

John Balcombe was born in Manchester, England in 1957 and has been interested in science and technology more or less ever since. After a successful school career, he went to Cambridge University to read Engineering but then made the switch to Pure and Applied Physics and soon decided that his passion was for teaching. After nearly thirty five years in the job, he still loves it and his involvement in IYPT over the last twelve years has only served to reinvigorate his personal interest in experimentation and sharing his experience and expertise in that field with his students. He went to Uppsala, Sweden as a Team Leader in 2003, became IOC member for the UK in 2004, Executive Committee member in 2008. He has been on countless IYPT juries both as jury member and chair of jurors. John was the driving force behind the UK's successful hosting of the 27th IYPT in 2014.