

Meeting Review

Bruce & Paula Horrocks

Hello. My name is Bruce Horrocks and my background is in Information Technology and software development. Automatic document generation has long been an interest of mine, having started with `nroff` and `troff` from the Unix world, then generating PostScript documentation from the source code of software applications to ensure accuracy. I dallied with $\text{L}^{\text{A}}\text{T}_{\text{E}}\text{X}$ but never really liked it and also with Jeff Kingston's "Lout" which I liked but development had stopped.

I found ConT E Xt by chance and it quickly became clear that it was "the one", and I've been a ConT E Xt user for 5 or 6 years now. Inevitably at first I had to make use of the mailing list which was my first exposure to the ConT E Xt community. I progressed very slowly from asking questions to being able to answer questions and eventually felt confident enough to attend a few of the monthly video calls: these re-assured me that Hans and Co. weren't weirdos (not in that sense at least!) and I thought hard about attending the 2022 Dreifelden meeting. But I wasn't sure and the timing wasn't great. The 2023 meeting clashed with personal events, so by the time 2024 came around and Lutten was announced it seemed almost overdue for me to attend.

And having attended, Hans has twisted my arm into providing a write-up from a first-time attendee's point of view.

So let's start with the venue which is a former water tower, converted into a conference/meeting centre in Lutten, near Zwolle in The Netherlands. Getting there was easy (from the UK) as we drove. And after the motorway finished, we drove, and drove, and drove for seemingly ages on long stretches of 70 kph or 80 kph limit roads with no overtaking. I was left thinking that the Dutch government are trying to make a small country seem bigger by making it take longer to get from one end to the other!) Still, we (my wife Paula and I) got there in the end.

The tower has a communal area on the ground floor with a large, open-plan kitchen, a large dining table and comfy seating for 20+ people. The first floor has a lecture room, perhaps a little bit of a squeeze, but more than good enough for our presentations, with the bedrooms on the 2nd, 3rd and 4th floors. The bedrooms were excellent and the surrounding area is all farmland, so lovely and quiet and sleeping soundly was easy.



Fig. 1. The tower

photo: Harald

contextgroup > context meeting 2024

Meals – breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks in-between – were all included in the cost and prepared onsite by Gina, a professional caterer. Every meal was excellent and my wife has a new friend and several new recipes! In fact my wife has several new friends as one of the non-ContEXt activities was felt-making, organised by Ton's wife Annelise. It took rather longer than the afternoon it was meant to, but the group bonded so well no one minded. I've asked Paula to give her own impressions which follows this.

On to the meeting itself...

The presentations are listed on the conference website so I won't go through them all but highlight the ones that I particularly enjoyed. (Actually I enjoyed them all but there is only so much space.)

First-up were Ton Otten and Hans Hagen describing a day in the life of Pragma ADE. Ton's starts with a bicycle ride to the office which involved a few tiny roads, but mostly cycle paths and canal paths almost right up to the office door. This also seemed to take ages and again I wondered if it was a specifically Dutch trait to make the country seem bigger?

The actual working day started with coffee (and maybe croissants – I can't quite remember now) and a discussion of the morning's news. Then a period of putting the world to rights. Then a bit more coffee and a bit more discussion of the day's work. And finally some working. For Hans, working involves contemplating the current problem. Quite a lot of contemplating. In fact, to a casual observer who didn't know better, contemplating might be mistaken for snoozing! I also realised that I have the same ideal physique as Hans for "contemplating". I should apply for a job with them!

Sooner or later, contemplation spawns an idea and Hans' hands spring to life on an old-fashioned, loud, clicky keyboard. (For some reason Ton's thoughts on sharing an office with a loud, clicky keyboard weren't included.) ; -)

Seriously though, working at Pragma looks to be idyllic: the office is large and pleasant, the town is lovely and the people that work there are great. I knew then that I'd made the right decision in coming to the conference and that I was going to enjoy myself.

Next, or at least early on, was Daria Kuzina describing how to make a "book nook" which is an artwork which appears to be just an ordinary book on a bookshelf but when you open it, a miniature imaginary world is revealed.

I was impressed by the creativity, ingenuity and detail: there were tiny lamps that lit up, for example.

Keith McKay gave two presentations remotely. The first was on producing a book of asemic writing with MetaFun. Asemic writing (no I'd never heard of it before either) is art that looks like writing but isn't in a real language, doesn't use letters from real alphabets and has no meaning. Traditionally it is done by hand, but MetaFun can



Fig. 2. Daria's book nook

photos: Bruce

be made to do a very good job of it, as we were shown.

“Bonkers presentation of the week” (this is an award given purely in my head!) went to Riviera Taylor for her demonstration of how to use Tidal Cycles, which is a musician’s tool to produce layered drum and percussion tracks, but instead of producing sounds or music, she used it to generate ConT_EXt code which was converted live into PDF document reflecting the shape of the rhythms. As I say bonkers – but also containing that germ of genius where artists do things that you yourself could never have thought of.

The field trip

As a break from all things ConT_EXt there was an excursion to the nearby Hunebed Centrum museum. The Hunebed itself is a 22 metre long pre-historic tomb, constructed from large stones resting on each other, built by some of the first human settlers, around 3400 BC.

Coming from the UK, there are hundreds of Neolithic sites around the country so it was interesting to see a European one. Something that also caught me by surprise was the guide showing a flint axe and explaining how rare flint was and how valuable it would have been. (A surprise to me because the area I grew up in has so much flint it was often used as a building material for cottages.)

The museum also had reconstructions of dwelling houses from the stone age, the bronze age and the iron age. We noticed that the bronze age hut was better constructed than the stone age one, but the iron age one seemed less sturdy. So the old



Fig. 3. Overview of our field trip destination

photo: Hraban

man's complaint that "things were better in the past" is a very old complaint indeed!

Finally...

So, in conclusion, it was well worth attending and Paula and I thoroughly enjoyed ourselves. The venue was great, the food was great, the conference was great and most importantly the people were great.

ConteXt Felt Workshop 2024

Bruce asked me to write a few words about the fabulous felt workshop, run by Annalies and enjoyed by all!

When I saw 'felt workshop' on the timetable, I didn't know what I was letting myself in for, but Annalies really didn't know what she had let herself in for! As a primary school teacher, I could see all the ingredients of an 'interesting' group of students was there: star pupil, hard grafters, pupil with some experience and myself – there's always a tricky one! Looking at the wonderful hats and amazing sculptures Annalies brought to inspire us, I was in awe. Making our own felt was an intricate process and was very satisfying. We developed a shared sense of purpose, bravery and camaraderie. Annalies was determined to bring out our hidden creativity and she did a great job, the results were brilliant. Many thanks to Annelise for her vision, perseverance and inspiring teaching!

Fig. 4. Hard work on soft material

photo: Hraban

Fig. 5. The felters: Götz, Annalies, Paula, Daria, Willi, Guianna

photo: Harald