

## BOS Computer Users Group

An account of the evolution of this group by Nigel Harradine

The British Orthodontic Society Computer Users Group (BOSCUG) – a brief history of IT in our times

BOSCUG began life in 1985 as the Consultant Orthodontists Group Computer Working Party and was born when IBM had just deigned to start making "personal computers" and had collared the initials PC to apply to their products. At that time, off-the-shelf programs for word processing and data collection on a microcomputer were only struggling into existence and there were no commercial digitising programs. A small group of orthodontic enthusiasts had often been writing their own programs in a wide variety of incompatible languages and formats, whilst others were starting to commission expensive and individual bespoke programs for their own use. The initiative to bring some much needed order to this primaevael soup came from Professors Bill Houston and Chris Stephens who had the vision and drive to see the need for collective efforts and to organise action.

The first meeting was at Guy's Hospital on February 10<sup>th</sup> 1985 and in addition to Bill and Chris, David Birnie, Nigel Harradine, Peter Gordon and David Stirrups made up the party. The minutes of this meeting contain a roll call of hardware and software long since consigned to the dustbin, but also see the birth of 'Cogsoft', the banner under which inexpensive programs have been made available on a non-profit basis to orthodontists ever since and which became the name for the group itself. Peter Gordon's basic digitising program was for sale at £20, Nigel Harradine and David Birnie's Orthognathic Planning (later OPAL) was yours for £100 and Bill Houston was still working on his generic digitising and statistics package for research purposes.

A Cogsoft stand was first seen at the first joint orthodontic conference at Bournemouth in that year and the fledgling group was off and running. Hardware names such as Amstrad, Comcen and Dell replaced Commodore, BBC and Hewlett Packard. PC-Write and Wordstar were advocated for word processing. Peter Gordon's GELA appeared for digitising routines. Other names featuring in the minutes in the early years were Sisira Weerakone and George Chauvet, developing software of great effectiveness and value.

The group became the source of official recommendations and friendly, unbiased advice. What should I buy? Why won't it work? How should I back up my data? Can you write to my hospital to reassure them that this is sensible? Cogsoft programs were continually updated and new areas of activity grew in importance, such as Computer Assisted Learning, lecture presentation using Harvard graphics and reference filing using ASKSAM. The Windows system appeared and programs were re-written to take advantage of it. CD-Roms arrived and were an exciting educational prospect. Links were made with audit programs from the Royal College of Surgeons of England. Mice appeared and flourished alongside keyboards.

A major landmark was the decision in 1994 to widen the remit of the group to all members of the newly formed BOS. And so a new name – BOSCUG – and the first meeting at Bournemouth in 1995. Adrian Hart, Ross Hobson and John Turner were now stalwarts of the group and Tim Bamford and David Barnett were an influx of energy and expertise from the unified society. 1995 also saw the release of Windows 95 (promoted with the Rolling Stones "Start me up" – they seemed ancient even then!) and the first serious discussion about the World Wide Web.

The group pressed BOS council to finance and enable a BOS website and urged the promotion of E-mail within BOS as a new and highly effective means of communication. In 1996, Sisira Weerakone wrote an excellent advice document called "Going on-line", Ross Hobson took on a lead role in establishing the website and OPAL appeared, running in Windows. In 1997, the group noted that it was hoped that Ann Wright would soon have a connection to the Web and an e mail address! 1998 saw the first discussion about digital cameras and the offer within COG of £50 to help people with costs of buying a modem.

The final meeting of BOSCUG took place in 2004 at the BOS in Bournemouth. Discussion included predictive morphing in OPAL, John Turner's initiative in developing a multimedia patient education package and the plan to re-run the 'Cases' audit on-line. Reflecting after the meeting, I decided that a live meeting of an official group was no longer required. The rise of electronic communication meant we no longer needed to meet and the coming of age of cheap, compatible and powerful computers and software made the world of IT as normal and accessible as reading and writing. What a wonderful pace of change over the 20 years. Cogsoft and then BOSCUG took pride and pleasure in promoting and assisting those changes within British orthodontics.

Is it a coincidence that almost all who were at the early meetings are still very active in many aspects of orthodontics? We remember with sadness and great admiration the work of Bill Houston who was equally skilled at inspiring and leading people as he was at working with computers and programs. We salute the boundless enthusiasm and energy of Chris Stephens who made this group happen and we thank all those who contributed and continue to contribute to advancing British orthodontics through computer technology.

Nigel Harradine  
Secretary and Chairman of Cogsoft / BOSCUG 1987-2005