

History

The 25th International Meteor Conference

Paul Roggemans¹

Since the founding of the International Meteor Organization, the International Meteor Conferences guaranteed the vital personal contacts between its members. In recent years IMCs were sometimes assumed to have started with IMO. However, the IMCs grew out of a much older initiative, the Meteor Seminars that started in 1979, later also called International Meteor Weekends. These events played a crucial role in the making of the IMO. The 2006 IMC in Roden, the Netherlands later this year is in fact a jubilee edition as it is the 25th edition since the very beginning in 1979!

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1 Introduction

At an IMC the many unfamiliar names get faces of human persons who become friends encouraging each other's creativity to explore meteor astronomy. The atmosphere at these IMCs is a kind of irresistible magic. But how did it all start? The lectures are in general of a very professional quality and the proceedings provide very valuable references, but has it always been this way? On the occasion of the 25th IMC, it is worthwhile to look back at the very beginning of this initiative.

Few people remain from those who were involved at the very early years of the IMCs. Recent editions of the IMC give a feeling of comfort as if future IMCs can be taken for granted. However, many obstructions and difficulties had to be overcome to achieve the current quality of organizational standards, lectures and proceedings. Before the early editions of IMCs get completely forgotten, it seems to make sense to describe the origin and the history of the IMC and to compare some statistics of the past 24 editions.

2 How it started

The first Meteor Seminar took place in June 1979 near Bonn. The initiative was taken by amateur astronomers from Bonn in West Germany, some of whom participated in a meteor group of the IAYC. They wanted to meet each other again some time after the camp to look at results of projects started at the camp. The first Meteor Seminar involved some other interested persons and took place in June 1979 at Königswinter, Germany. The first organizers were Bernhard Schmitz and Hans Joachim Becker. The announcement of this first meeting described its aims :

Es ist dies das erste Zusammentreffen auf dieser Ebene und wird von der AG Meteore Bonn veranstaltet. Erwartet werden auch ausländische Gäste. Dort könnte die Diskussion um eine gesamt-europäische Z'arbeit ein Tagesordnungspunkt sein... (3 November 1978 letter from Bernhard Schmitz.)

¹Pijnboomstraat 25, B-2800 Mechelen, Belgium.
Email: paul.roggemans@telenet.be

Proceedings were prepared afterwards and another meeting planned for 1980. This meeting finally took place in November 1980 in Pullach near Munich, Germany, organized by Hans-Georg Schmidt. Most participants of the 1979 meeting took part again, joined by other participants from Germany, Belgium, Austria and Switzerland. Lectures were given in German, the participation fee was about €30 and the event started with informal presentations Friday evening, with Saturday as main lecture day, including a professional guest speaker. Sunday morning was reserved for discussion about the coordination of amateur meteor work. The meeting ended after dinner Sunday noon. Proceedings were planned but failed to materialize due to a lack of time. The intention to have a third Meteor Seminar in 1981 failed. The lack of continuity in amateur meteor work almost meant the end of the initiative. Most 1979–1980 participants quit meteor work for various reasons after 1980.

Through correspondence, Paul Roggemans and Hans-Georg Schmidt decided that a third meeting should be planned. The name changed to 'International Meteor Weekend' and the meeting was organized in Belgium in February 1982. Most of the participants of 1979–1980 were no longer interested, no more than four people from the Munich area in Germany, four Dutch amateurs from Denekamp and only four Belgians registered; on Saturday some more Belgian meteor observers attended the meeting as visitors. At that time very few amateurs were used to travelling far, staying overnight for amateur meetings. In 1982 the initiative survived, involving the Dutch amateurs for the first time. The circumstances at that time made it impossible to compile Proceedings.

The Dutch participants exported the idea of such Meteor Weekend to the Netherlands where they took care of the next IMW in May 1983 in Denekamp, the Netherlands. At that time it was a problem to get amateurs motivated to present a lecture. Most amateurs struggled a lot with presentations in English, another aspect to learn: how to give a lecture and this in English? It is most remarkable that the initiative was kept alive in the years 1982–1983. After 1980 it was the intense correspondence by letters that served to motivate some amateurs to have the International Meteor Weekends.

In 1983 Hans Georg Schmidt of the Munich team agreed to take care of a next International Meteor Weekend in Southern Germany. The search for a good location led to the Bruder Klausheim in Violau near Augsburg. This facility was under construction in 1984. The IMW became the very first and thus opening activity of this perfect conference center in February 1985. The number of participants was higher, the quality of the lectures had improved, organizational experience was gained. In 1985 the first efforts were made to get participants from East European countries to the IMW, but the Iron Curtain proved to be too solid yet. The main concern was continuity as the first five editions depended on initiatives of individuals. Proposals to work towards more formal cooperation between the different meteor observing groups failed to convince a majority of the IMW participants.

3 The 1986-edition: a breakthrough

Meanwhile international amateur cooperation intensified through other processes. Many amateurs spent most successful observing weeks in Southern France and such international observing efforts became very popular. An intense exchange of observing reports happened via WGN which became popular as an international circular for meteor observers. In the mid 1980s the IMW became the place for observers and WGN-subscribers to meet each other personally. For the first time the International Meteor Weekend 1986 was announced one year in advance with plenty of publicity in journals. The first IMWs had certainly suffered from a lack of publicity and attention. For instance no written report can be found anywhere of the 1983 edition. The 1986 IMW was a very ambitious edition with a very carefully prepared discussion forum. In WGN (Vol.14, 1986, pp.134–136) we read a summary of the topics on the program:

- International co-operation between amateurs and professional meteor workers, contacts, information, ...
- Universal method of rate correction, which corrections to be used?
- To improve the worldwide instruction of amateur meteor observers: edition of a 'Handbook for amateur meteor observers' and an international circular for meteor workers.
- The edition of a bibliography on meteor literature.
- Future meetings, an international meteor observing camp, the foundation of a permanent meteor observatory in the South-East of France at Puimichel ...

The sixth edition was an absolute breakthrough: 50 participants of the teams from Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands but also representatives from five other countries. The projects around the comet Halley return triggered new interest from the professional astronomer community for more cooperation with amateurs. The

IAU Commission 22 saw in the IMW a good communication channel to get in contact with amateur meteor workers and sent two representatives: Dr. I. Williams and Dr. B.A. Lindblad. It became obvious that amateurs had to create a channel to communicate with one voice to professional meteor researchers. Moreover professional astronomers have no time or interest to sort out all kinds of incomparable observing and reporting methods which made amateur work often quite useless. At the IMW the IAU representatives witnessed the ongoing process of discussion to define a standard visual observing method as well as standard reporting formats. The sixth IMW was a historic and decisive step towards the formation of IMO.

The 1986 IMW got plenty of attention in the meteor publications as well as the next editions of 1988 and 1989. The success of future IMCs depended on the publicity and attention given to the event — a golden piece of advice to future organizers: do not neglect the necessity of making publicity for each IMC!

4 IMW became IMC when the IMO was founded

Having in mind several frustrations due to the 'International Halley Watch', a big fiasco for meteors, the ever failing comparison of data due to different methods, the uncertainty due to the absence of a well organized framework, etc. ... had convinced many amateurs of the necessity of an international organization for meteor studies. Endless discussions at previous IMWs learned that each time again that the regular long-term meteor workers wanted to get something like IMO, but the opposition against the idea came from local amateurs who most of all never came to a meeting more than once or twice. Since the first debate on how to coordinate meteor observing, discussions were twisted into polemic disagreements by amateurs who were opposed against any form of agreement of standardization. Time has proven that the opposition came from people who mostly had a short-lived interest in meteors.

At the 1986 IMW, participants agreed to have the next edition about one and a half year later in the Netherlands, with Casper ter Kuile and his group as organizers. Meanwhile the 1986 IMW organizers had worked out all plans necessary to officially start with IMO. The 1988 IMW was organized with a lot of enthusiasm by Casper ter Kuile and his group of Buurse. The 1988 IMW was very well organized and an ultimate occasion for discussion about IMO. As at previous IMWs, the opposition came from local amateurs who were opposed against a formal IMO-structure. But a vast majority, many of who were unable to be present at the 1988 IMW, decided in favor and the IMO was established with 1 May 1988 as official birthday.

From 1988 onwards the 'International Meteor Weekend' occasionally happened to be called 'International Meteor Conference' which became its official name since 1990. The edition of 1989 was the first IMC organized by the Hungarian amateurs as local organizing committee together with the provisional IMO administration.

The 1989 IMC hosted the IMO founding general assembly. Some significant changes were introduced to the concept in 1989. The meeting was extended by one day, from Thursday till Sunday instead of Friday till Sunday. Also from then on IMWs or IMCs would be planned annually. Another new aspect was the Saturday afternoon excursion, providing time for a relaxed social contact between people. The fall of the Iron Curtain that had split Europe since 1945 coincided with the foundation of IMO and the first IMC in Eastern Europe. Meteor work was much more popular and better developed in Eastern Europe than in Western countries. The overall majority of East European meteor workers welcomed the birth of IMO with much enthusiasm.

5 The role of IMO in the IMCs

In 1990 the IMC took place at the same site as in 1985: the Bruder Klausheim in Violau near Augsburg. For those who were present at both events, it was obvious that the meteor observers community had made tremendous progress. For a very last time some protest was expressed against IMO, that became the main organizational structure to assure future IMCs. It was pointed out that the IMO should guarantee continuity, help local organizing committees, or organize the event in case no local organizers would volunteer for the job. In this sense IMO has a useful role to play while 'All meteor workers are a big family, whether someone is a member of IMO or not, everybody will always be welcome at the IMC to share in friendship the common interest in meteors'. This explains why no IMO membership is required for IMC participation, contrary to many other astronomical societies. Most societies limit access to their meetings to 'members-only'. IMO on the contrary wants to create an optimal co-operation environment where everyone is welcome.

The 1991 IMC got less intense publicity and the effect was reflected in a much lower participation. The necessity of publicity should not be underestimated by future organizers. In 1992 another experiment took place: the 1992 IMC was linked to a professional symposium on Meteors in Slovakia. It was a success with many professional astronomers and amateurs participating in each others' meetings. The concept was repeated in 1998 and may be repeated in 2007. In 1993 the proposal of having an IMC in England didn't work out. Then the IMO itself had to plan a last-minute alternative event that took place in Puimichel, France, in order to maintain the annual frequency of the happening. After 1993 the IMO Council got every year proposals from candidate IMC organizers, sometimes a choice has to be made out of several proposals for a same year. It happens that candidate IMC organizers overlook organizational aspects or commitments, risking the 1993 situation to be repeated. The role of the IMO Council in selecting IMC proposals as well as in verifying the organizational qualities, proved to be a necessity.

The four days proved to be more worth the effort and costs of traveling than the three-days events of before 1989. Also the annual frequency of one IMC a

year proved to be better than a frequency of one IMC every 18 months. While the first IMCs relied almost completely on the personal correspondence between organizers, today the contacts are kept more between the participants themselves. This may explain why more people became loyal annual IMC participants and create together the typical but indescribable atmosphere that characterizes the IMC.

Since the very beginning of these meetings discussion forums were organized to deal with questions of standardizing observing and reporting methods. Once the IMO was founded, these discussions were continued in workshops most of which were very unproductive. As a consequence workshops ended in borderless discussions without results. Workshops became unpopular and the time was used for free expression and social contacts.

6 Some statistics about the IMCs

In the past 24 years many hundreds of people participated at one or more IMCs. Participants came from 35 different countries: Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belarus, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, China, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Macedonia, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, U.K., Ukraine, U.S.A., Venezuela and Yugoslavia. In total 1343 registrations were recorded which is an average of 56 per year, recent years being well above this average. Since 1979 about 500 presentations were given at IMCs, most of which were worked out as papers in the Proceedings, accumulating a total volume of over 2300 printed pages.

IMCs were always low budget events: the fee was as low as about €25 in 1986 for three days, including Proceedings. The most expensive IMC so far was Frasso Sabino in Italy in 1999 with €120 which is due to annual inflation still 12% more expensive than the €120 of the 2005 IMC. With 95 participants, the IMC 2000 in Romania had the largest number of participants ever. The IMC 2005 had the largest number of countries represented (20) as well as the largest number of presentations (59). With 194 pages the Proceedings of the 2003 IMC were the most voluminous so far.

The following overview with some data of all 25 IMCs covering the period 1979–2006 has been derived from correspondence, proceedings and WGN.

1. **1979 Königswinter (Bonn)** — Germany, 8–10 June, 18 participants from 2 countries, 9 presentations and Proceedings of 24 pages, fee €33.
2. **1980 Pullach (Munich)** — Germany, 21–23 November, 31 participants from 4 countries, 10 presentations but Proceedings were never completed, fee €31.
3. **1982 Hasselt** — Belgium, 26–28 February, 12 participants from 3 countries, about 10 presentations, no Proceedings attempted, fee €32.

4. **1983 Brecklenkamp** — Netherlands, 13–15 May, no Proceedings, 23 participants from 3 countries and about 10 presentations, fee €41.
5. **1985 Violau (Augsburg)** — Germany, 22–24 February, 37 participants from 4 countries, 10 presentations no Proceedings, fee €35.
6. **1986 Hingene** — Belgium, 3–5 October, 50 participants from 8 countries, 16 presentations and Proceedings of 80 pages, fee €25.
7. **1988 Oldenzaal** — Netherlands, 25–27 March, 65 participants from 9 countries, 17 presentations and Proceedings of 84 pages, fee €32.
8. **1989 Balatonföldvár** — Hungary, 5–8 October, 66 participants from 11 countries, 20 presentations and Proceedings of 103 pages, fee €90.
9. **1990 Violau (Augsburg)** — Germany, 6–9 September, 58 participants from 13 countries, 19 presentations and Proceedings of 64 pages (15 papers, 2 posters, 17 lectures), fee €70.
10. **1991 Potsdam** — Germany, 19–22 September, 36 participants from 6 countries, 22 presentations and Proceedings of 90 pages (20 papers, 10 posters, 12 lectures), fee €90.
11. **1992 Smolenice** — Slovakia, 2–5 July, 71 participants from 17 countries, 20 presentations and Proceedings of 93 pages (18 papers, 0 posters, 20 lectures), fee €75.
12. **1993 Puimichel** — France, 23–26 September, 55 participants from 16 countries, 31 presentations and Proceedings of 113 pages (31 papers, 9 posters, 22 lectures), fee €90.
13. **1994 Belogradchik** — Bulgaria, 22–25 September, 57 participants from 8 countries, 15 presentations and Proceedings of 89 pages (15 papers, ? posters, 12 lectures), fee €85.
14. **1995 Brandenburg** — Germany, 14–17 September, 45 participants from 11 countries, 20 presentations and Proceedings of 133 pages (20 papers, ? posters, 17 lectures), fee €95.
15. **1996 Apeldoorn** — Netherlands, 19–22 September, 61 participants from 12 countries, 25 presentations and Proceedings of 143 pages (25 papers, ? posters, 22 lectures), fee €98.
16. **1997 Petnica** — Yugoslavia, 25–28 September, 69 participants from 11 countries, 16 presentations and Proceedings of 109 pages (16 papers, ? posters, 15 lectures), fee €70.
17. **1998 Stará Lesná** — Slovakia, 20–23 August, 64 participants from 14 countries, 21 presentations and Proceedings of 117 pages (19 papers, ? posters, 21 lectures), fee €85.
18. **1999 Frasso Sabino** — Italy, 23–26 September, 56 participants from 13 countries, 26 presentations and Proceedings of 156 pages (21 papers, ? posters, 26 lectures), fee €120.
19. **2000 Pucioasa** — Romania, 21–24 September, 95 participants from 14 countries, 44 presentations and Proceedings of 132 pages (27 papers, 14 posters, 30 lectures), fee €87.
20. **2001 Cerknó** — Slovenia, 20–23 September, 69 participants from 19 countries, 32 presentations and Proceedings of 109 pages (19 papers, 7 posters, 25 lectures), fee €102.
21. **2002 Frombork** — Poland, 26–29 September, 64 participants from 15 countries, 28 presentations and Proceedings of 175 pages (28 papers, ? posters, 26 lectures), fee €100.
22. **2003 Bollmannsruh** — Germany, 19–21 September, 79 participants from 15 countries, 29 presentations and Proceedings of 194 pages, fee €115.
23. **2004 Varna** — Bulgaria, 23–26 September, 73 participants from 17 countries, 20 presentations and Proceedings of 115 pages, fee €100.
24. **2005 Oostmalle** — Belgium, 15–18 September, 91 participants from 20 countries, 59 presentations and Proceedings of about 200 pages (? papers, 18 posters, 41 lectures), fee €120.
25. **2006 Roden** — Netherlands (14–17 September).

7 Future perspectives

Several disciplines in amateur astronomy were much better organized than meteor observing. With IMO, amateur meteor work got a global working structure, with WGN a worldwide referenced journal and with the IMC its annual opportunity to meet colleague meteor observers in person. The 25th edition as jubilee IMC is extra motivating for those who participated in the early years to join again to recall the unique IMC experience.

So far all IMC's took place in Europe, with participants from other continents. Let the 25th edition be an excellent occasion for our overseas friends to join the IMC in even greater number than ever before, enjoying the magic IMC-spirit, perhaps inspiring for a first overseas