

New steer for steel from SCI's Director

Dr Graham Couchman initially joined the Steel Construction Institute (SCI) in 1995, spending 9 years working in a number of areas. He returned to the SCI as its New Director in November 2007.

One year in to his Directorship he talks to *The Structural Engineer* about how the SCI is evolving under his leadership, the challenges for the industry and his passion for Italian sports cars...

How did you start in the industry?

After graduating from Cambridge I worked for Taylor Woodrow on a number of sites followed by 2 years in a design office. I then spent 5 years as a research assistant at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne, where I gained a PhD on the behaviour of steel-concrete composite beams. After a brief spell with Mott MacDonald I then started my affair with SCI.

How did you find returning to a previous employer as the CEO?

It sounds like everyone's ultimate dream doesn't it? Returning to your employer as boss! Professionally, it was a real pleasure to return to the world of steel and composite and construction. Unsurprisingly, the steelwork sector I have returned to is substantially different from the one I joined many years ago, and to reflect these changes I'm working hard with the management team to evolve SCI in some subtle, yet significant, ways.

On a personal level colleagues have been hugely supportive, and whilst there is some very welcome 'new blood' many people have remained with SCI, so I was stepping back in to an environment with which I was familiar. It's also great to be able to cycle to work again, and reduce the mileage I put on my Alfa Spider!

What do you think you have to offer SCI second time round? Wouldn't the organisation have benefited from an external Director coming in, new to the field?

My time away from SCI was hugely beneficial as I was working predominantly outside steel, and was exposed to significantly different ways of doing business. I had an excellent boss who expected a lot from me. That meant a steep learning curve and much learned even though it was only 3 years. Combined with my understanding of how SCI works and what it means to the sector this has put me in a good position to facilitate the changes that are needed. I was also exposed to a lot of different types of clients during my



Graham Couchman: 'Give clients what they want...'

time away, and lessons learned are reflected in one of my key visions for SCI which is to give clients what they want and need to improve their businesses.

It's amazing what you learn about the external perception of a company when you have left it and my returning to the SCI gives me a great opportunity to play to our strengths, re-address balances and capitalise on opportunities.

In terms of my own qualities I believe in treating people with respect, and dignity. Team working is essential. To digress into Italian cars for a moment the Ferrari F1 team has achieved what it has in recent years because it combined a number of truly talented people working together. The excellence of Michael Schumacher would not have allowed him to win as many races as he did without the team management skills of Jean Todt, the tactical understanding of Ross Brawn, and the design skills of Rory Byrne behind him. SCI needs to be like that.

What has been your initial focus for this first year?

It's been to ensure that all staff know where we're going, why we want to get there, and how we are going to get there. Much of our literature has previously highlighted the facts that we are independent and member based. Whilst these remain true in terms of what we are, I'm trying to emphasise what we do, which is provide technical support and disseminate good practice to the sector. It's important for people internally and externally to know this.

We have a stated aim to strengthen our position as an organisation that works with

members, customers and partners to meet their needs and ensure that steel is widely used in a sustainable built environment. With input from all staff at the end of 2007, we identified a number of specific objectives to help us achieve this and have ensured we met our targets. Recently I've worked with the management team to create some further specific things we want, or in some cases need, to achieve in the coming 5 years.

Knowing what we want to do and how we are going to do it certainly contributed to a very successful year financially. Thankfully 08/09 is also looking good, as I fear we will need some reserves to get us through the economic downturn.

What specific service areas are you targeting to drive SCI's growth?

We offer a range of accreditation services, including SCI Assessed and CE Marking. From both a regulatory point of view and as a differentiator these are things manufacturers will need more of. Specialist consultancy is also a potential growth area for us, although this could be adversely affected by the problems in the world

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around us. We remain committed to providing sustainable solutions, which of course runs through all our work. I'm particularly interested in considering overall building performance, rather than 'just' the materials that go into them. I like to think of it as sustainable engineering rather than just sustainability. That's probably because I'm an engineer!

I guess the key message in terms of our project work is that we have some very bright people with a broad range of skills. We can therefore do much more than many clients may think.

In addition to this we are thinking how to enhance still further our member benefits. We know our members' advisory desk is very popular, and our publications. Closely linked to our members are the activities we undertake for the good

of the steelwork sector. One of the reasons for the growth in steel use in the UK has been us working effectively with Corus and BCSA. This continues; for example all three are contributing to a new range of Eurocode publications that will make it easier for designers to choose steel, and to produce state-of-the-art designs.

What is the biggest challenge to the steelwork sector?

At the moment the biggest challenge we have is clearly the global economy. Construction projects being postponed or even cancelled is having a big effect on the steelwork contracting community, and indeed the need for steel. Official figures show that not only housing is seriously affected. Once the markets pick up, however long that takes, steel remains an excellent choice for designers because of the flexibility it offers. Its high market share has been achieved on the back of merit, and should continue. We just need the markets to get back up to size again.

Attracting world-class engineers is an industry wide challenge. We would like to be able to do something to help bring more people in, and indeed have some initial plans.

I'm sure the global downturn will have an effect on SCI, the difficulty is predicting how big and when. We are already making provisions to avoid being caught out, and thankfully the type of work we do means we still have a healthy order book. Very little of what we do is 'short term' for specific construction projects.

4 things you didn't know about Graham Couchman...

- He was fluent in French in the early 90s and can still get by if you talk slowly.
- He is married with three children, two Alfa Romeos and four bikes.
- He is passionate about Italian sports and racing cars.
- He is a keen cyclist – Cambridge Blue.

The CV Dr Graham Couchman

- The Steel Construction Institute 2007.
- Building Research Establishment 2004 – 2007.
- The Steel Construction Institute 1995 – 2004.
- Mott MacDonald 1995
- Swiss Federal Institute of Technology – Lausanne 1990 – 1995
- Nuclear Design Associates 1988 – 1990
- Taylor Woodrow Construction 1984 – 1988