

Enjoy Journey Starts with One Small Step

John Castle

ISTT Past Executive Director 1998-2008



Every journey starts with one small step. That first step for trenchless technology occurred in England in 1985 when a series of conferences, being held in support of the water industry, included a one-day session which adopted the term “No-Dig” as a title for a session to embrace all the methods and technologies available at the time for the installation, maintenance and repair of underground utility services.

This first “No-Dig” was a great success and attended by 385 delegates, including 100 from 20 different countries, which gave the idea for the creation of an international organisation to cover the same disciplines.

As with any organisation at first there are faltering steps. Where should it be based? How should it be run? Should people have to pay to be members?

In terms of organisation, it was like a newborn baby having to learn to speak and then to walk and then to live in an ever-changing world.

By 1998 the ISTT was well established as a Limited Liability Company and Charity in London governed by English law. There were a great number of similar examples with a Chairman, Executive Secretary, with Technical and Membership Secretaries to support him with a prestige address in Belgrave Square. The ISST also had its first President, Ted Flaxman, who had led and organised the first “Trenchless Construction of Utilities” event in April 1985 which came to be known as the first “No Dig”. It was Ted Flaxman who led the new born society towards a teen age maturity.

The unique feature of the new Society however was that each affiliate formed its own society in its own country according to its customs and practices, and joined the ISTT as a central, global, organisation to which it appointed a representative to the ISTT Board of Directors. This board met each year which in turn appointed an Executive Sub Committee of five fellow directors to run the day-to-day activities of the Society served by the Executive Secretary.

The first Executive Secretary was David Dacam, who got the organisation going in London, and set up an office, made all the formal reports required by authorities in England who authorised its activities, organised a first members magazine "Underground" and set up a central, global register of members of the national member societies.

John Sutro, a retired army officer took over from David Dacam in 1988 and he affiliated the first two national societies from the Netherlands and Scandinavia. These were joined in 1989 by France, Germany and North America with the number growing to 23 countries by 1995.

In 1998 Jon Sutro decided that, after 12 years, he wanted to retire. The board by that time had become used to having an ex-military officer as the day-to-day Executive Secretary so that John Sutro placed advertisements for retiring military officers to replace him.

The selection committee was chaired by Rolf Beliecki who had been elected chairman in 1996. Rolf did not speak English but because I had learnt German both as a child and later as a naval attaché in Bonn in Germany, Rolf conducted a curious interview in German with me, which I then translated for the other committee members. It came as no surprise that I was offered the appointment!

Business was conducted in a very different way in those days. Communication was by telex, accounts were kept by hand and letters were typed on an electric type writer! The internet was just starting to make an appearance so that each day in the office started by dialling up the internet which with luck would get a connection. But the daily postal dispatch was dwindling quickly and it soon became possible to send "packages" of information electronically which made office life both quicker and easier. I purchased the first ISTT computer and in 1999 started electronic book keeping. The office mechanical calculator fell silent and the monthly reconciliation of the accounts took place at the touch of a button followed by a couple of hours sorting out any errors.

The Board wanted the ISTT to have a website. Before leaving, John Sutro had found that the Water Research Council, for a fee, could design and host a website using material produced by ISTT members. Because No-Dig was so new, the most useful page on the new website was a dictionary of terms like "slip" and "cured in place" linings. It had about 50 terms for members to use in contracts and instructions. The first international language was at last in place.

They were exciting times The society survived on the surplus (profit) from each years No Dig. The 1998 No Dig in Lausanne Switzerland had not been a good choice as Switzerland had not developed a taste for No-Dig. The new Chairman, Gert Fischer, who had taken over in 1999 and was the Managing Director of Copenhagen Water had access to Scandinavian funds from which he was able to arrange a generous loan in advance for the No-Dig in Budapest, Hungary, in October 1999.

The technologies for working underground were advancing rapidly. Methods for handling all forms of geological underground structures such as sand, clay, and rock were being developed to meet demand. Methods were often country specific, for

example dealing with ground frost, snow, desert sand and tidal sea/land interfaces. The availability of water for drilling could be a problem, and probably the most difficult issue was local politics where men with shovels were cheaper and popular with clients in comparison to comparable costs for just a few operators with expensive No-Dig machinery.

A successful No-Dig was held in Perth, Australia in 2000 followed by a traumatic No-Dig in Prague in 2001. In the mid-morning 9 September, the No-Dig was in full swing when suddenly groups gathered around TV screens in the exhibition area watching the twin towers in New York under attack. The No-Dig stopped and the final conference dinner and prize giving was held quietly in respect to all those who had lost their lives. Air flights were delayed worldwide and members had to manage their journey's home. Few will forget that No-Dig but for all the wrong reasons.

2002 saw the No-Dig held in Copenhagen where Gert Fischer handed over to Professor Ray Sterling as Chairman. Back in London as Executive Secretary I had found that the expensive office in Belgrave Square was never visited and was simply an expensive correspondence address. Looking at ways of making economies the Board accepted that the Society could just as easily be run by staff "working from home". Once again, the ISTT was leading the way with a management organisation which no longer needed to be based in England but with just the formal registration retained under English law with a London address. The Executive and Membership Secretaries could operate just as effectively working from home using the internet.

Just one problem had to be solved which was the large archive of the hard copy history of the iSTT and the 23 records of the No-Digs which had been held since 1985 in Belgrave Square. For historians these records provided a unique history of the start of trenchless technology. Ray Sterling well placed to negotiate a home for the archive in the library of Louisiana Tech University, Minneapolis where he was head of the Trenchless Faculty. This is the most complete history of trenchless technology in the world and readily available to members

Further No-Digs were held in Warsaw 2003, Hamburg 2004, Rotterdam 2005 Brisbane 2006, Rome 2007 and for me, finally, Moscow in 2008. In some years there were additional events in Hong Kong, Cairo, Dubai and Shanghai to further promote trenchless technology where there was already a growing market and, in some cases these events led to the formation of new national societies.

Dec Downey took over as Chairman from Ray Sterling in 2007 at the No-Dig in Rome with 25 affiliated societies and a lean international organisation with John Castle replaced in 2008 by John Hemphill in Washington as Executive Secretary and Kyoko Kondo as Membership Secretary in Tokyo. The ISTT was now an adult fully grown organisation which Dec Downey set about expanding its activities with master classes, a research group, awards for students and an expanded website.

These teenage years of the Society were fun and very enjoyable for me. Trenchless techniques with all the advantages they bring for reducing the carbon footprint of maintaining, repairing and installing underground utilities has changed from being

considered a novelty to an imperative. For sure, the next 40 years are going to see the further increase in the use of trenchless as a significant contributor to net-zero. .