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MARY KILLEN ON SUMMER DRESSES

The Oldie

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Pete & Dud & Me

Peter Cook and Dudley Moore by Dick Clement

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Front cover: Peter Cook and Dudley Moore *Not Only ... But Also*, 1965, BBC

The Old Un's Notes

The Anthony Powell Society has just celebrated four anniversaries at a lunch at the National Liberal Club.

First, it's 25 years since the author of *A Dance to the Music of Time* died, in 2000, aged 94. Secondly, it's 50 years since he finished the famed 12-volume sequence. Thirdly, it's 25 years since the Anthony Powell Society was founded.

And, finally, it's 60 years since the writer embarked on his huge boiler-room collage – the Sistine Chapel of the West Country – in the basement of his home near Frome, Somerset. His great-granddaughter Hope Coke wrote about the collage in the June issue of *The Oldie*.

At the society's lunch, Antonia Fraser and Jilly Cooper recalled Powell.

Lady Antonia, 92, Anthony Powell's niece, remembered lodging with Anthony and Violet Powell in 1949, when Powell was embarking on his 12-volume magnum opus – like seeing Homer start *The Iliad*.

Lady Antonia said, 'We used to have breakfast together and then Violet would say, "Buck up, Antonia, and finish your breakfast. I have to clear the table, so Tony can write his novel."'

Jilly Cooper, 88, remembered the joy of jolly lunches with Powell. They first bonded over the fact that they both lived in houses called The Chantry – his in Somerset, hers in Gloucestershire.

'Although I must say his was built in 1829, and mine is 14th-century! It was a monks' dormitory before. Tony and I loved wondering what the monks used to get up to!' she joked.

Great dames: Antonia Fraser and Jilly Cooper salute Anthony Powell

Among this month's contributors

Catriona Olding (p16), a writer and painter, contributed to *Low Life: The Spectator Columns – The Final Years* by her husband, Jeremy Clarke. He died in her arms in 2023 in her Provence home.

Dick Clement (p18) and Ian La Frenais wrote *The Likely Lads*, *Porridge*, *Lovejoy* and *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet*. In 1965, he directed Peter Cook and Dudley Moore in *Not Only ... But Also*.

Paul Heiney (p21) presented *That's Life!*, *In at the Deep End*, *Countrywise* and *Watchdog*. He wrote *The Last Man Across the Atlantic* about his transatlantic trip in his family boat.

John Humphrys (p31) presented the *Today* programme from 1987 to 2019. He was the *Mastermind* host from 2003 to 2021. From 1981 to 1987, he was the main host on the *Nine O'Clock News*.

The Old Un salutes Bill Haley (1925-81), one of the founding fathers of rock music, who would have celebrated his 100th birthday on 6th July.

We tend to forget how uptight people were in the 1950s about young people and their music. Haley's first tour of the UK in 1957 went ahead to a soundtrack of fans braying and squealing, with MCs sternly asking for order – and police chiefs rumbling, 'Disgraceful!'

There was a full-scale riot going on by the end of most shows, brought to an end only by everyone freezing in place for the national anthem. Appraising the 'youthquake' hitting the nation's provincial assembly halls, the *Times* harrumphed that Haley was 'inciting our boys and girls to anarchy with his primitive tom-tom thumping'.

The man who took 'Rock Around the Clock' and 'See You Later, Alligator' to the top of the charts was an unlikely symbol of youthful rebellion.

Already in his thirties by the time his career got going, the portly, cheroot-smoking Haley might have risked cancellation today for his right-of-centre views.

NOT MANY DEAD

Important stories you may have missed

No searches for missing man this week
Oxford Times

Man kept awake by noisy manhole cover
Dunfermline Press

Former *Coronation Street* star spotted working 'normal job' after being axed
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'I'm not trying to change society,' he insisted in 1957. 'Anyone smashing up a room where I'm playing is no friend of mine.'

An excited interviewer once enquired of Haley whether his trademark kiss curl over his right eye was a sign of rebellion.

'It's a sign that I'm completely blind in my left eye – so it draws attention to the other side of my face,' Haley said. Never an especially gregarious man, he saw his final years blighted by poverty and alcohol.

Haley's maternal family came from Ulverston, Cumbria, birthplace of Stan Laurel of Laurel-and-Hardy fame.

Seaside rock: Bill Haley of Ulverston, Cumbria

The rocker always made a pilgrimage there on his visits to Britain, calling it the 'most agreeable place to live in the world'.

Waspish: A C Benson (1862-1925) by William Nicholson, 1924

Time for a civic statue of the first great rock 'n' roller.

* The Old Un is loving *The Benson Diary*, just out.

Arthur Christopher Benson (1862-1925), son of the Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote the words to 'Land of Hope and Glory'. His younger brother, E F Benson, wrote the *Mapp and Lucia* series.

A C Benson was also a marvellously waspish diarist, writing over four million words. His diaries cover meetings with Churchill, Lloyd George and Edward Elgar.

In one delicious entry in 1912, he visits Max Gate, Dorchester, the home of Thomas Hardy and his miserable first wife, Emma Gifford. She died less than three months after the visit, provoking a guilt-ridden Hardy to produce his most stirring poems of love and regret.

Benson is unsparing in his description of Emma Hardy, wearing 'the funniest little bonnet, like a large bun made of flowers with four white-metal ornaments on the top'.

After lunch, 'a solid, plebeian, overdressed niece' suggested a game of croquet on a woefully uneven lawn.

Hardy suddenly exploded: 'If you had told me you wanted to play croquet, I would have had it put to rights. It is level underneath.'

And then Benson really puts the boot into poor Emma Hardy: 'It gave me a sense of something intolerable, the thought of his having to live day and night with the absurd, inconsequential, huffy, rambling old lady...

'She is so queer, and yet has to be treated as rational, while she is full of suspicions and jealousies and affronts which must be half-insane.'

Then again, Mrs Hardy gave as good as she got. She confided that she was always squabbling with her husband. 'I beat him!' she said. 'But with the *Times* rolled up.'

* Talking of dogs ... Hereford Cathedral has opened its doors to them.

Hereford's waggy-tailed Dean, Sarah Brown, has announced that woofers are being allowed into the building on a six-month trial.

'They don't have to be smug about it'

THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

'A water bowl is provided in the Chapter House Garden and dog-friendly ice creams are available from the café,' says the cathedral, before a discreet cough, adding, 'We would kindly ask owners to take their dogs into the main cathedral close for toileting needs rather than the Lady Arbour or Chapter House Garden.'

Hereford Cathedral has had a dog, or at least a statue of a dog, for centuries: the pet hound shown at the feet of an effigy of its master, Sir Richard Pembridge (d 1375).

Despite the new leniency, dogs will still not be allowed to participate in cathedral services. Pity. At Sollershope Church in the Hereford Diocese, an elderly sausage dog called Henry often waddles up to the altar rail during communion services, accompanied by his mistress.

He seldom lets the side down and is much loved by other congregants.

'I'm jumping from home'

✻ Did Labour peer Lord Faulkner of Worcester mislead Parliament? In a House of Lords debate about the management of the Malvern Hills, he proudly claimed that the Herefordshire Beacon, often called the British Camp, was the site of Caratacus's last stand against the Romans. This old chestnut is highly dubious.

Caratacus was the first-century British chieftain romanticised by poets and painters for his resistance to the Roman invaders.

Tacitus wrote that he was defeated near a river. The British Camp is miles from any significant river; nor is there archaeological proof to support the claim.

Several other sites in Shropshire and Herefordshire have more persuasive claims to poor old Caratacus.

The Malvern Hills are handsome enough without need for ahistorical jiggery-pokery, your lordship!

✻ The pithy, pungent and politically incorrect writer Simon Raven (1927-2001) would have been intrigued by Iain Pears's *Oldie* article (May issue) about Francis Haskell and his connections with Guy Burgess and Anthony Blunt.

Raven was a close friend and contemporary of Haskell's at King's College, Cambridge; he left having failed to write a word of his Fellowship thesis.

Raven recalled how dons such as Dadie Rylands would say, 'Why can't you be more like Ant Blunt? He had a lot of fun, like you, but he worked hard, he behaved nicely, he was a good socialist – you're not, you're just a beastly reactionary. *Be more like Blunt*,' they said.

So when Blunt was exposed, Raven sent round postcards to all of them, saying, 'Thank God I wasn't more like Blunt.' Raven said, 'It wasn't answered by many of them, I can tell you!'

Raven contrasted this with the same people's reaction to the defection of Guy Burgess. 'They'd all known him, and I think it did worry them, but they weren't going to show it. So what they did was make jokes about how dirty Guy was, how homosexual he was and, in the end, how utterly unsatisfactory he was ... "But oh, my dear, *wasn't he charming*!" '

How dirty was Guy Burgess? Well, Noel Annan (1916-2000), Provost of King's College, Cambridge, said of him, 'Shit under his fingernails, cock cheese behind his ears.'

✻ This year marks the 250th anniversary of Jane Austen's birth on 16th December 1775.

Happy 250th, Jane Austen!

No doubt her many fans will celebrate this in style. Given that she now adorns a ten-pound note, it would be a pity if this pithy, backhanded compliment by W H Auden were overlooked:

'It makes me most uncomfortable to see
An English spinster of the middle class
Describe the amorous effects of "brass";
Reveal so frankly and with such sobriety
The economic basis of society.'

P G Wodehouse's Plum Lines

To salute the 50th anniversary of P G Wodehouse's death in 1975, at the age of 93, *The Oldie* remembers his great quotes.

She told us for three quarters of an hour how she came to write her beastly book, when a simple apology was all that was required.
The Girl in Blue (1970)

PG WODEHOUSE ESTATE/CAZALET FAMILY

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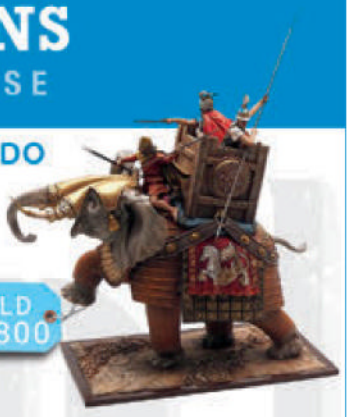

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De Niro makes me an offer I *can* refuse

The great actor said I should have more children. At 77, it's time for me to shut up shop

Merlin Holland, the grandson of Oscar Wilde, first introduced me to Robert De Niro.

Look, if you're not into name-dropping, this really isn't the column for you. Skip straight to Dr Dalrymple on page 43. He's very much on form this month.

It was at a screening of the film of Wilde's *Salome* at the British Film Institute on London's South Bank.

Sorry, I've got that wrong. It was Al Pacino who directed and starred in *Salome*. That's who Merlin introduced me to.

So where did I meet De Niro? Now I think about it, it was probably at De Niro's Manhattan restaurant, the Tribeca Grill, now closed, but a cool dining spot in its day.

And, believe it or not, I think it was one of the grandchildren of the great American poet Robert Frost who effected the introduction.

What I remember of our conversation is that we talked about the number of children a man should have. Robert Frost had had five. De Niro at the time had five. I had just three and said that I felt three was ideal.

'No,' said De Niro. 'Keep going, son. You're not done as a dad until you've had at least seven.'

Well, as you might expect of a double Oscar-winning giant like De Niro, he was as good as his word and in 2023 became a father for the seventh time at the age of 79, two years older than I am now.

Boris Johnson, 60, is still having children. I reckon his latest (Poppy, born in May) is probably his ninth.

Al Pacino, 85, had his fourth only a couple of years ago and looks ready for more.

Should my wife and I, married now for more than 52 years, take a final plunge into the pool of parenthood? According to my friend De Niro, 'Having kids keeps you young.'

There is no legal age limit for intended parents in the UK, and science is here to help. Thanks to IVF, an Indian woman, Erramatti Mangamma, became the world's oldest mother when she gave birth to twins, a few days after her 73rd birthday in 2019.

You talking to me? Robert De Niro, 79, with Gia, his seventh child, born 2023

My wife tells me she has no plans to follow Erramatti's example. 'To everything a season,' she says.

Besides, she's not sure that, at my age, I'd have the energy for all that's involved.

I think she means the nappy-changing and the 2am baby feed.

I agree. Late-onset fatherhood is a risky proposition. When Erramatti's twins were barely toddlers, her husband, Sitarama, 84, died of a heart attack. You have been warned.

It is bad manners at a dinner party to correct your host, so I am a tad nervous about what I am about to say.

I regard *The Oldie* as the most entertaining dinner party in town and our editor is unquestionably the most delightful and erudite host. So what follows is possibly very (very!) bad form – but, heaven help me, in the name of literary accuracy, I am going to do it anyway.

In last month's Commonplace Corner (one of my favourite features in the magazine), this quotation was attributed to A A Milne: 'Promise me you'll never forget me because if I thought you would, I'd never leave.' A A Milne, poet, playwright, children's author, never wrote or said any such thing.

There is a sentiment of sorts a bit like it (but not much) in an exchange between Christopher Robin and his bear towards the end of *The House at Pooh Corner*, but the quote as given is an invention by an unknown hand.

It is one of scores (yes, *scores*) of lines wrongly attributed to A A Milne.

In 2025, the most popular 'Pooh quote' appearing on the internet is this: 'You are braver than you believe, you are stronger than you seem, and you are smarter than you think.'

Everywhere, the line is incorrectly ascribed to A A Milne. In fact, the line made its first appearance in 1997 in the Disney movie *Pooh's Grand Adventure: The Search for Christopher Robin*. So the credit belongs not to Milne but to the film's screenwriters, Karl Geurs and Carter Crocker.

I know this because I have just finished writing my latest book, *Somewhere, a Boy and a Bear*. It's a biography of A A Milne to be published in the run-up to the centenary of Winnie-the-Pooh this Christmas. My publishers would like me to tell you that you can 'pre-order' the book now. I won't.

'Pre-order' is a nonsense word. You can 'order' the book now. It will arrive in September.

When I met Robert De Niro I told him my favourite two-line poem about him. Amazingly, he claimed never to have heard it before:

'Robert De Niro is a screen hero.
Only a slob would call him Bob.'

Gyles's podcast, Rosebud, *is out now*

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Where the wild things are? My garden

The rat-infested jungle speaks volumes about my character

MATTHEW NORMAN

As those of you versed in the exploration of human-soul data must be aware, the home is an illuminating metaphor for the person in it.

If the didactic tone of the above hints at intimate acquaintance with psychotherapy, that misleads. Here, as in all facets of human existence other than incompetent parking, unsuccessful gambling and the wasting of time, I speak from a standpoint of total ignorance.

I do however have the twin abilities to type words into a search box and read whatever the AI tool churns out in response.

Thus I can state that the notion of house as reflection of psyche is popular in psychotherapy, and that Carl Jung himself had much to say on the matter.

In a sense, and not to brag, I have a decisive edge over the Swiss dream boy. There is no need to interpret dreams to unravel what this property says about its owner. All it takes is one functioning eye.

The melancholic façade that greets the passer-by has been mentioned here before. The polystyrene burger boxes on the gravel, the random collection of filthy plastic wheelie bins, the corrupted wood of the window frames, the peeling paint on the door, the damp patches on the brickwork, at least one browned and desiccated Christmas tree…

No witness can doubt that the owner is a sad, defeated little man who raised the white flag to life long ago.

Since I last described this vista, there has been a notable addition. For months, the hole in the wall thoughtfully left as a going away present by the rogues who charged several thousand not to fix the leaking roof has been occupied by a family of pigeons.

While the flavour of despair was potent enough before the arrival of these avian house guests, they lend an additional layer of piquancy all the same.

My AI chum tells me Jung believed that pigeons symbolise the divine. Apparently the old boy wasn't plagued by loud cooing reverberating through a chimney stack from his first conscious breath of the day until the last.

And yet the most depressing thing about the frontage is that it is by no means the worst of it. Nor is the interior.

That is not to suggest that the house is one iota more attractive inside than out. The last time an estate agent valued it, before resurgent post-pandemic inflation massively hiked the costs of labour and materials, he said it would take £250,000 to make it look 'vaguely habitable'.

Matthew's backyard: Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963)

He wasn't being unpleasantly brutal. He spoke in the same tone of clinical professionalism with which a personal trainer told my late-30s self, fitter then by far than at any time before or since, 'You have the suppleness and range of movement of a man of 80.'

For all that, pride of place on the honours board of aesthetic horror somehow belongs now to the garden.

Actually, 'garden' probably isn't the technically correct noun. 'Post-apocalyptic wilderness' seems more accurate for this result of an experiment with rewilding gone monstrously awry.

But it is impossible to be precise, since there is no way of discerning what lurks beneath the impenetrable patina of unidentifiable flora. Standing six or seven feet high, and laden with thorny tendrils, this vegetation is too lush to brook any prospect of walking the 100 feet to the shed at the other end of the 'garden' without a scythe and a biohazard suit.

Anything could be going on beneath whatever it is. It might be a cadre of centenarian Japanese soldiers, still in blissful ignorance of Hirohito's surrender. It could be a reclusive Bengal tiger – though, given the flourishing rodent population, that is a long shot – or a misrouted naval frigate.

It could be a meth lab of the sort popularised in New Mexico by the late Walter White. It might be Amelia Earhart's missing plane, the ossified remains of Shergar, the aquatic kingdom of Atlantis, or some other mysteriously vanished entity such as Liz Truss's brain.

The one thing it cannot be is grass. No species, however hardy, could survive in such an environment.

A friend came over a while back to watch darts. Although a military man himself, he has family connections to the world of horticulture.

On that basis, I asked him to take a gander from an upstairs window, and offer advice as to what can be done.

His first suggestion involved cauterising the entire area via the judicious use of napalm. His second, though superficially less fanciful, was more outlandish. 'Why don't you get a professional in to work out what's going on,' he said, 'and take it from there?'

The answer I gave him was the same one, verbatim, that I've given for decades to the many well-intentioned souls who have advised, and in some cases begged, me to submit to intensive psychotherapy.

Unquestionably there are hideous and terrifying forces buried beneath the surface, I said. Absolutely the last thing I ever want to discover is what they are.

MAURICE SENDAK

OLDEN LIFE

WHAT WERE revolving restaurants?

In a shuttered fairground site by the side of a motorway, in the industrial outskirts of Rotterdam, sits Europe's newest revolving restaurant.

Opened five years ago, the UfO is the invention of 75-year-old maverick Dutch entrepreneur Hennie van der Most. A former scrap-metal merchant, Van der Most believes the sky's the limit for his 66-seater Dutch eatery.

The UfO is not only the latest but probably the last revolving restaurant to rise in European skies. Since the start of this century, revolving restaurants are winding down.

London's great landmark the Post Office Tower (now BT Tower and Grade II listed) first pirouetted 60 years ago, in 1965.

At 581 feet, the tower was the tallest building in Britain. Its silhouette was instantly recognisable – a symbol of the capital's dominance as Europe's first city.

Within a year of opening, it was starring in *Doctor Who*. Although it was constructed as a telecommunications

High living: Post Office Tower, 1966

transmitter, its best-known feature was Billy Butlin's 34th-floor restaurant.

The first revolving restaurant appeared in the TV tower in Dortmund, Germany, in 1959, quickly followed by examples in Cairo, Honolulu and Thessaloniki. These tall, thin towers were a distinctive feature on postcards and tourism promotions. By the 1970s, there were over 200 revolving restaurants worldwide.

Despite being symbols of progress, their mechanisms were quite simple. A revolving restaurant operates as a large turntable with steel rotating platforms resting on the core. The lifts, kitchen and toilets are in the stationary centre. Diners are often seen chasing after the toilet from their moving platform.

Only around 100 are still working. I've eaten at 32 of them, from the Egon in Trondheim, Norway, to the Seri Angkasa in the Kuala Lumpur Tower. They share certain styles, often relying on 1970s décor and retro menus: half an avocado, duck à l'orange and Black Forest gâteau. Floor-to-ceiling windows, for admiring the view, are essential.

'Not currently rotating' is now a frequent note on former rotating restaurant websites. Rumours have spun about the BT Tower's restaurant reopening (it's been closed since 1985), but no concrete news yet.

It's unlikely we will ever again be able, in Britain, to watch the world turn while eating prawn cocktail.

In Rotterdam, Hennie van der Most is on a mission to reinvent the revolving restaurant. The UfO, he says, is a new technical miracle, just as its predecessors were.

It not only turns; it rises too. The diner enters at ground level and the restaurant lifts, with you seated inside at your table, to 138 feet.

Van der Most says he's sold patents for his design to developers in Japan and the Emirates. The revolving restaurant might yet come round again. **Dea Birkett**

MODERN LIFE

WHAT IS looksmaxxing?

Looksmaxxing is the practice of 'maxing out' your appearance through a series of strategic interventions.

The idea, increasingly popular with a subset of online men, is to take what God has given you in the face department – and make it better.

You might think of looksmaxxing as the male equivalent of teenage girls trying on each other's mascara or giving each other 'glow-ups' in the school loos – only the looksmaxxers have decided to give it a serious-sounding name, apply a dubious patina of evolutionary science and treat the whole business like a kind of real-life video game.

You can tell looksmaxxing is much more serious and masculine because – like the male chromosome – it has two *x*s. This is testosterone toner.

At its most wholesome, looksmaxxing is just a generation of young men discovering moisturiser – a little like the metrosexuals of yore. It might involve a better diet, good posture, a gym routine, some vitamin D and perhaps even some dental floss. So far, so sensible.

But, like all online phenomena, the closer you look, the deeper and darker it becomes. In the murkier corners of TikTok and Reddit, you will find charts ranking men by 'facial harmony' (eugenics have been making a surprise comeback in 2025) and tutorials on 'mewing' — a technique involving pressing your tongue to the roof of your mouth to, allegedly, reshape your jawline over time.

There is talk of 'hunter eyes', 'canthal tilt', and 'orbital recession', all delivered with the reverence of medieval monks illuminating manuscripts – except the manuscripts are YouTube thumbnails with titles like *BECOME A 10/10 CHAD IN SIX MONTHS (NO SURGERY!!)*

Should you be of a YES SURGERY persuasion, you can take it further. 'Hard looksmaxxing' might involve nose jobs, jaw implants and, in extreme circumstances, limb-lengthening surgery – when you pay a surgeon £50,000 or so to break your thigh bones and pull the two bits of your legs apart in the hope you'll grow four inches taller.

This really is a thing. 'Life as a short man is hell. Life is better when you're taller – trust me,' said a young man I recently interviewed about the phenomenon. There have been articles about 'bone-smashing' too, which is when you take a hammer to your face in the hope your bones heal in a more aesthetically pleasing manner.

Undergirding all this is a more troubling philosophy. Life is really just a fleshy video game. As in any video game, you need to upgrade your hardware to win. The male body, thanks to social media and dating apps, is now subject to the sort of scrutiny females have lived with since time immemorial.

Still, not all of it is tragic. Much looksmaxxing advice boils down to: 'Shower. Go to the gym. Stop playing Fortnite.' Which, for a certain type of young man, may be life-changing advice. **Richard Godwin**

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Forty years ago, Mel Smith and *Griff Rhys Jones* played Live Aid – as policemen

PC Smith & PC Jones rock the world

My earliest stage appearance necessitated taking about three paces from the wings before I hit the limelight.

That distance grew in time. The stages got larger. 'Let them see the suit,' Max Bygraves advised me.

In those unending London Palladium benefits of the eighties (*The Secret Policeman's Other Testicle* etc), where enthusiastic organisers booked so many acts that there was a queue to get on stage at one in the morning, the walk was long.

Left to right: **Mel Smith, Pamela Stephenson, Griff Rhys Jones and Billy Connolly backstage at Live Aid, 1985**

The trick was to exit with as much applause as your entrance. TV sketch comedians sometimes lacked the live material. It was quite a stroll out to the lonely microphone and it could be an even longer one back.

And then there was Live Aid.

On 13th July, it will be 40 years since I walked out on to the biggest boards I ever trod. The Global Jukebox played to a worldwide audience of 1.9 billion from a platform like the deck of an aircraft carrier.

And, by the way, it's astounding that so many of the acts who headlined then are still at it, isn't it? McCartney? Dylan? The Who? Jagger? Elvis Costello? The rocking geriatrics rock on. We thought they were clapped out in 1985. As ephemera go, pop has legs.

Mel Smith and I asked for respect for the elderly – Status Quo – when we finally made it out front.

We were there to introduce the 'pop combo' Queen. They were the absolute hit of the show, of course, and, let's face it, this was all down to Mel and me – though I am not sure that anybody else quite sees it that way.

I have sat my children down in front of the live recording to prove their father once played to bigger houses than the Savoy Theatre in Monmouth. They were not particularly impressed and thought it was an AI fake.

Queen rehearsed for two solid weeks in advance of their appearance.

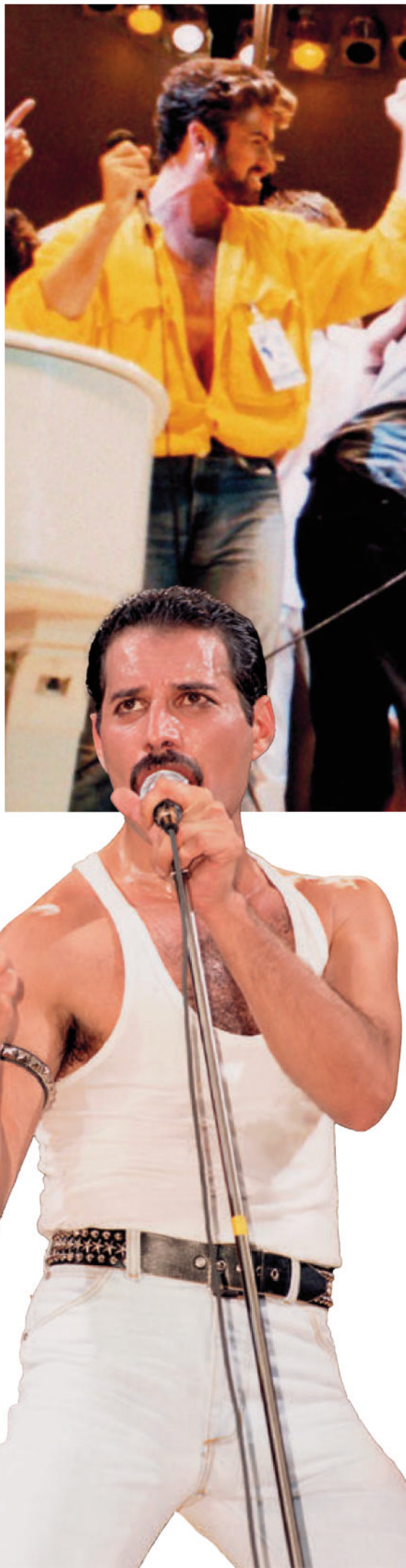
Mel didn't.

He turned up a little late and asked me to give him something to say. I had come down on the train from Suffolk with time to mutilate a few old jokes – so I gave him those. We had ordered a couple of policeman's uniforms, too.

We went to a backstage artistes' café to talk it through. It was at some sort of junction of byways and surrounded by big screens.

Every now and again, harbingers would arrive. Three or four fancy dudes would hurry in, look round laconically, and then disappear back up the access route.

A minute later they would return,



Left: **Freddie Mercury.** ***Above, from left:*** **George Michael, Bob Geldof, Bono, Freddie, Jody Watley, Andrew Ridgeley**

GETTY; PA

along with Mark Knopfler or Elton John – or whichever star they had been sent to check out the place in advance for.

And everybody would be cool together. We were no threat, clearly. It was like something out of quattrocento Siena.

But the actual walk out front at Wembley was bizarre. There was no real wing to the stage. We set off in the general direction of the front, past film cameramen, charity workers, press photographers and roadies, towards a sea of audience.

Halfway there, rumbustious Svengali Harvey Goldsmith jumped us from behind a speaker stack. He grabbed me by the lapels and stuck his bearded face into mine. 'Keep it fucking short!' he hissed.

'Nice to meet you too, Harvey.'

We didn't have much choice. We had only three jokes.

Er… 'We've had a complaint about the noise…' – a pause – '…from Belgium.'

The laugh travelled to the far end of the auditorium, and then slowly back to the front again. I worried that Harvey might come out with a sledgehammer.

I was on a plane back from New Zealand when I finally got to see the film *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018), in which Queen's 1985 glam-rock triumph at Live Aid was recorded in forensic detail. My mate Tom Hollander played their lawyer in the film. He told me beforehand that they had actually cast a Mel and a Griff. I was excited but, come the moment, Tom was there – and we were not.

Paul McCartney and David Bowie

There is a shot of the auditorium while the introduction is happening. It's from the control box. Tom dramatically raises the volume knob to 11. As he leans forward to do so, he obscures the stage and everyone on it. That was us. We become one invisible line off-camera in the story of Freddie Mercury.

On the actual day, we got all the trimmings. After our moment, we were ushered to the VIP stand and the best

Paula Yates and Roger Daltrey

view of the legendary concert, though it was partly obscured by Princess Diana's hairdo. Or it might have been Roger Daltrey's. The backcombing was similar.

Mel sat next to me, watched for a few minutes, sighed and stood up. 'I'm off,' he said.

I was staggered. 'Mel, this is the greatest rock-and-roll concert ever.' I had actually skipped my son's christening to be there. Yeah, yeah, all right.

'Yes, but I've got a horse running in Doncaster,' Mel said. He left.

He gave me his 'access all areas' pass, though. I handed it to Peter Fincham, who had come down from Suffolk on the train with me.

That is why, during the rousing singalong climax of *Feed the World*, when the topmost rock-and-roll royalty are swaying back and forth and giving it some welly, if you look very carefully you can see Zelig – Fincham, the future programme controller of ITV, at the back of the stage – next to the Thompson Twins waving at the billions.

As for me, that was peak stage. I have gradually downsized and have just been at the Savoy Theatre in Monmouth.

There's now a musical of Live Aid, too. It's written by my friend the brilliant John O'Farrell. So I can be assured that we don't feature in that, either.

Griff Rhys Jones plays Jim Hacker in Jonathan Lynn's I'm Sorry, Prime Minister *at the Apollo Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue, in January 2026*

Thrill of the chaste

Young Frenchmen flirt innocently with older women. *Catriona Olding* loves it

Catriona in Provence today

News travels quickly here in the Var, Provence.

Within days of the young fishmonger's starting work in the Intermarché supermarket six miles away, everyone abandoned our village store, Utile, and headed across to see what the fuss was about.

I stood at the back of the fish-counter queue and watched. Yes, the WhatsApp messages were right. He was handsome: pale, twinkly blue eyes, a lovely mouth, a ready smile and good forearms. Chatty and knowledgeable: he held eye contact with each customer in turn and asked how they were before telling them what was fresh in that day and taking their order.

He was generous with portions, too – sometimes adding a little extra for free and saying, 'See you tomorrow?'

Was it shop charm or flirtatiousness? It didn't matter. Each woman, regardless of age, left the counter with a silly doting expression on her face. And a lot of fish.

I noticed when I moved to France, aged 51, ten years ago, that young Frenchmen look at and flirt with older women in a way young British men never do. Having been ignored by men my own age or younger in Scotland for a decade, I was taken aback.

Literally. I looked behind me to see who they were looking at.

Even now, when I'm walking or driving through the village, younger men will sometimes look at me, hold a glance and smile fractionally longer than is usual.

Given the age difference, this fleeting exchange can, surely, have little to do with sexual intention. It merely demonstrates a young man's desire for the dopamine hit of approbation.

Catriona at 29

I asked around. One male friend said this was nonsense. Young men faced with an attractive woman of any age can't help themselves.

Another told me that if a young man looked at a young woman, he'd be deliberately ignored, for a while at least. But if he looked at an older woman, she'd notice right away. He added that casual or playful flirting was akin to a predator eyeing up prey when it wasn't hungry.

The girlfriends I asked, aged from mid-50s to 83, enjoyed the gentle flirting opportunities afforded by youthful Frenchmen but weren't interested in analysing why.

'It's great!' said one of them – a super-fit 55-year-old, before admitting she'd avoided a speeding fine last summer by flirting outrageously with the two young policemen who stopped her.

Brigitte Bardot once said, 'I have always adored beautiful young men. Just because I grew older, my taste doesn't change. So if I can still have them, why not?'

But when I was young, male beauty meant nothing to me. I was a silly, ludicrously pretentious student nurse and thought the few good-looking men I met – doctors I worked with or the boys my friends and I met in pubs or clubs – were vain, arrogant, stupid or dull.

Perhaps because I'd been an ugly child and bullied on account of it, even though I became quite pretty as a teenager, my own vanity made me fear rejection.

As I got older – 25 years too late and, let's face it, uglier again – I began to appreciate youthful male beauty. Not in a lascivious way – I was married. But even now I'm single, romance with a younger man is out of the question; I'm too maternal.

Still, I enjoy the company of the few younger male friends I have. I live above a village in a cave house at the top of a steep cliff path and need help with barrowing wood up for the fire, keeping the garden tidy and fixing stuff.

I've got to know the lads who help and sometimes they come in for a drink. Because they don't like wine and I never have beer, they've taken to gin and tonic.

They confide in me about their relationships; one visit full of love and optimism, the next sad because it hasn't worked out. I listen to their political opinions.

We have a laugh but there's no flirting. That happens only in public with slight acquaintances or strangers.

Older men, though, can be a nuisance. I was once pinned against a sofa at a party in Edinburgh by the then richest – and that night probably the drunkest – man in Scotland. He looked into my eyes while stroking and repeatedly lifting my long red hair with both hands, and told me he was in love with the most beautiful woman in the world.

He sang 'Puff, the Magic Dragon' to me as if it were a love song. Both his wife and his mistress were only a few feet away. No danger of that sort of thing with young men.

A French friend, André, who turned 80 last year, spent 40 years in England. He thinks flirting is a cultural and genetically-driven pastime for Frenchmen, who adore the company of women – while British men, more reserved and anxious about rejection, prefer the familiarity of their own gender, in the form of competitive masculine company in pubs.

These days, post #MeToo, André, a terrific lifelong flirt himself, is scared of causing offence. He prefers women of any age to flirt with him.

Catriona Olding wrote a tribute to her late husband, Jeremy Clarke, in Clarke's Low Life: The Spectator Columns – The Final Years *(Quartet Books)*

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Pete & Dud & Me

Dick Clement loved directing the charming, inspired double act, 60 years ago

'We're playing the piano on a ship. A crane picks us up and lowers us into the river. We keep singing and finish the song underwater.'

I listened to Peter Cook, wondering how the hell I could direct that. This was our first production meeting on *Not Only … But Also*, in 1965, 60 years ago. There were no scripts.

Roger Race, my assistant, broke the silence.

'Well, we can't do that, Peter, surely?'

Peter gave him a steely look. 'Why not?'

A few weeks later, we were on a freighter moored in London's East End near Tower Bridge. It was January. Peter and Dudley settled at a grand piano sitting on the deck and began to sing the show's opening number. The piano sat on a wooden platform. A crane picked it up, swung it over the side and began to lower them towards the murky Thames.

When it reached the water, I yelled, 'Cut!' The crane's cables went slack. As they began the return journey, one of them draped over Dudley's shoulder. For an awful moment I thought it might decapitate him when it went taut.

Dudley would have been 90 on 19th April. He died in 2002, aged only 66, suffering from PSP (progressive supranuclear palsy). The saddest aspect of this was that he could no longer play the piano, his greatest joy. Peter Cook died 30 years ago, aged only 57.

Women adored Dudley and the feeling was mutual. My writing partner, Ian La Frenais, was sometimes mistaken for him.

We were having dinner in the Virgin Islands – one of them – when a man at a nearby table kept looking at Ian knowingly. When he got up to leave, he was too cool to ask for an autograph. He said instead, 'The people of Philadelphia really appreciate your artistry. When you hopped across that beach…'

This was a reference to a scene from *10* (1979), many years later, when Dudley was becoming a movie star.

Let's circle back to Shepherd's Bush. We shot the show on Sunday evenings with a live audience. Demand for tickets was intense. They were free, but people were always asking for favours.

Afterwards, inevitably, we had a few drinks. The following morning, we'd set off, slightly bleary, to shoot location sequences for the next-but-one show. On Tuesdays, we'd debate what we would shoot that week, rehearse and decide on the sets and props we would need, and I would slope off to edit the filmed sequences. I think I got Saturday afternoons off.

There was never anything on paper; perhaps a few scribbled notes. My principal role was less one as director, and more one as nanny.

Peter's ad-libs were brilliant – and never the same. So I had to tell him, 'That's very funny, Peter, but yesterday was funnier.'

He'd already forgotten what he'd said the day before, but if he agreed with me, that's what we went with.

One of his main delights was in making Dudley corpse. This was especially true on their Pete-and-Dud segments. I never knew quite what they were going to say. So I had to put four cameras on them – two singles and two two-shots – and wing it. If Peter detected the hint of a grin on Dudley's face, he seized on it relentlessly until his shoulders were shaking. The audience didn't mind, feeling they were in on the joke.

When I was given the assignment of taking over the show – this was the second series – Frank Muir took us all to lunch at the White Tower. Peter was so funny that I felt daunted. How could I

compete with his brain? I felt reassured when I read that most people felt the same way.

Alan Bennett said, 'It takes me a week to come up with a joke, which I present like a delicate flower. Then I find that Peter has come up with at least two dozen of them in the same period.'

Peter was keen to start each episode of the show with something startling. In one episode, they were cavemen carving the Westbury White Horse on Salisbury Plain. A helicopter shot revealed this, together with the letters 'NOT ONLY … BUT ALSO' in matching white.

It was all very well having no script for these location shoots, but understandably questions were asked. What props do you need? What sort of location? Any other actors?

One week there was a very simple answer: Pete and Dud were taking an out-of-season holiday. That was about it. We found ourselves, slightly hungover as usual, on a train to Felixstowe. I looked out of the window and realised we had an amazing stroke of luck: it had snowed overnight.

This meant that I was able to shoot Dud and Pete in deckchairs, looking out to sea, discussing the benefits of beating the summer crowds. When they got up to walk away, the camera revealed that the beach behind them was white with snow.

The Gods of Comedy had another gift for us. We went into the local fairground, which had a rollercoaster. We asked the man in charge if we could shoot something on that.

He looked gloomy and said, 'There's ice on the rails and I don't think the cars would make it over the first "big dip".'

Our eyes lit up – this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. We got the cameras ready. The light was fading. Pete and Dud were the only passengers in the leading car as it trundled up the first rise. It sailed down the rails, went up, faltered and then went into reverse, leaving them stranded. All that remained was to find a long ladder so they could get down. Peter revealed that he was scared of heights, but he obviously overcame this fear in the interests of comedy.

This was one of the best – and luckiest – sequences I ever shot. It kills me that it didn't survive when the BBC decided to make more shelf space available and wiped more than half of the series.

One sequence that still exists is Peter and Dudley playing puppets in a parody of *Thunderbirds,* a popular children's show of the time. They named this one *Superthunderstingcar*. Dudley played the aristocratic Lady Penelope, Peter her butler, Parker. He was also the evil villain, with a bald head and bushy eyebrows. Dudley was the hero and Brains, the backstage boffin with outsize glasses.

This one really needed a script to create time for changes of make-up and costume. I volunteered to write it with this in mind, and they agreed.

My favorite exchange was:

Peter: 'How did you get into this show?'

Dudley: 'I knew someone who pulled strings for me.'

The villain then produced a giant pair of scissors and cut the strings one by one till Dudley slumped to the floor.

Don't expect any backstage anecdotes about tension and rivalry between them. That came later, when Dudley was suddenly a movie star and Peter felt left behind.

When I was involved with them, they were riding a wave. The show was a huge hit, people were clamouring for seats and Peter never ran out of ideas – such as bare-knuckle boxing on Wimbledon Common with real boxers as their seconds: Henry Cooper and Terry Downes.

The underwater sequence from the opening routine was shot in a swimming pool at a Butlin's holiday camp. Peter checked his make-up in a mirror; they both had a cup of tea and continued to sing in a bubbly way until a mermaid swam by and they pursued her, Dudley on a bicycle he happened to find.

Working alongside them, with an occasional light hand on the tiller, was one of the best experiences of my life.

Peter Cook and Dudley Moore in *Not Only … But Also*, 1965

Dick Clement wrote, with Ian La Frenais, Porridge, The Likely Lads, Lovejoy *and* Auf Wiedersehen, Pet

Small change

As *Ann Shearer* has got older, she's shrunk by more than two inches – but don't call her a little old lady

For decades, I've bristled at the term 'little old lady'.

It's so carelessly used – by broadcasters too – to bundle up a whole spectrum of individual lives into a class that's faintly risible and certainly dismissible.

When I think of the older women I've known, their very different interests honed by perspective, their accrued wisdoms and the witness they bring to history through memory, that implied assumption of equivalent shrinkage between body and wit is a downright insult.

But, now, I have to accept it. A little old lady is what I've become.

I was once 5 foot 4½ – and more in heels. Now, at 81, I'm 5 foot 2 – on a good day.

This came to me with a shock of realisation the other day at the theatre, as I was jostled towards my seat in a surge of young people who suddenly seemed like giants.

Glasses in hand, laughing and chatting way above my head, they seemed totally unaware I was struggling among them.

Let's not impute malice. I had to accept the real possibility that *they didn't even see me because I was so small.* Come the interval, I obsessively confirmed this. Yes, it was true: I was the smallest person in the bar.

'Well,' my kind companion said, 'there *is* that one woman who's smaller.'

'But not much,' I said.

I should have been prepared. The young assistant in our local ironmongers gave me a nudge last year, when I left something to be collected without giving my name.

The only way he could define me to his colleagues, he told me, was as 'the little lady'. Already I must have been his smallest customer! Though thank you, dear man, for your tactful omission of the 'old'.

Years before that, the delightful anaesthetist, almost a friend after my third orthopaedic operation, had foretold the inevitable. 'You're a very healthy woman,' she said. 'But, oh, you've got a rubbish skeleton.'

I knew it, and we laughed. But knowing and true realisation are two different things.

So now I feel a bit like Alice after she'd drunk that little bottle of shrinking mixture: on my way if not into Wonderland, at least into an unknown territory.

Alice shrinks to ten inches in Wonderland

But she was young and, as young people must, she had many adventures ahead in search of her own proper size in an often bewildering world.

I'm old, and this is the size I've got – I won't grow. Will I soon have to carry a cushion so that I can be sure to reach other people's dinner tables? Or a little stool to reach shop counters? Will stair treads seem higher as my legs get shorter?

It's not easy to see the upsides of this shrinkage. I suppose I'm now a good size to wriggle to the front of a crowd massing to catch a glimpse of Taylor Swift at a concert.

But I'm not sure I'm limber enough to duck under the steward's restraining arm, and I doubt that a visit to our little country town is on her schedule.

It may possibly be easier to get down to the weeding, now that there's less far to go. But the same doesn't seem to apply when it comes to getting up again.

In one of those group photos, I'm bound to be directed to a place near the front, but these days I really can't think of an occasion to be glad of the chance.

Yet there *are* consolations. Thank goodness I can still haul the steps across the kitchen to reach the top cupboard shelves and confirm that the bag of lentils I *knew* was there indeed is. Thank goodness too for the footstool that enables me to reach for the remembered book just at the moment it's needed.

I love these little triumphs of memory and capacity. See? I may be old and little but, just like so many others people write off, I'm not finished yet.

Such are the small encouragements of daily life. And there are larger consolations too. A stranger who, unbidden, hefts my suitcase up the railway steps; another who courteously stands aside to give me sight of a painting on the gallery wall; another yet, who puts aside his or her own shopping to stretch up the supermarket shelves for mine.

> At the theatre, a surge of young people suddenly seemed like giants

When the daily news can make me doubt it, all these and many others keep alive the precious truth: most human beings are also kind.

And there's a larger consolation. When Alice drank that potion, she felt nervous that the shrinking would go on and on until, like a candle flame, she'd go out altogether.

She tried to fancy what the flame might look like then, but she couldn't remember ever having seen such a thing.

That's beyond my imagination too. But I like to hope that if that's how I go out, shrunk to an invisible flame, I'll go contentedly.

Nice as pie

Fray Bentos pies may be much mocked – but *Paul Heiney* devoted a whole dinner party to his favourite comfort food

By rights, I should loathe Fray Bentos pies. Remember them? Greasy crust, like a lumpy duvet. Meat that needs a forensic eye. Gravy like a brownish tide after a water-company outflow.

Then, unbelievably, the whole mass is squeezed into a tin the size of a frisbee. Its greatest virtue is that it costs less than three quid in Tesco: we are not talking Wagyu beef.

Fray Bentos is a major city on the Argentine-Uruguay border – beef country. From 1899, it turned out corned beef, commemorated in a factory museum where Oxo cubes were also born. The pies are now made in Scotland.

My greatest regret is that, sailing down that coast a few years ago, I didn't head up the River Plate to pay formal tribute to Fray Bentos pies. For they were a staple of my childhood.

Father would come home starving after driving his coal lorry all day, and Fray Bentos was the answer. Not only did a pie feed us cheaply and quickly, but the empty tin made a good bowl for the cats, which we had in growing numbers, once Grandfather retired from drowning kittens.

I was a fat child, and still bear the emotional scars from playground taunts. It was probably the pie's fault – so I hate them. Yet I also adore them. Not the newfangled impostors such as Chicken Curry and All-Day Breakfast, but slap a Steak & Kidney in front of me and my evening is complete.

Despite appearances, the crust is surprisingly light and rises in the oven to a golden height. Given enough heat, the meat just about passes. The magic is in the glutinous gravy, soaking its way into the pastry until meaty flavours are released like starbursts. When the tin is empty, you can run your finger round it when nobody is watching and take a lingering suck at your gravy-soaked digit.

I normally cook from scratch, with health in mind. But a dark old memory revived when our neighbour, Mr B, a man never far from a fully loaded dinner plate, confessed that he too was partial to them.

A plan was formed; a bring-your-own-Fray-Bentos-pie night, held secretly amid friends, for believers to reconnect and doubters to be educated.

Round the table were: my wife, already despondent at the thought; a distinguished actor of fine palate who was up for the challenge; and a classy American lady already making excuses. Mr B made mashed potato and mushy peas, the perfect accompaniments.

Judge a person by the pie they choose. Mr B and I showed leadership with manly steak, ale and kidney. The actor chose similar, to bolster his rich deep gravy voice.

The American lady, bewildered, waltzed down to Waitrose and, after lengthy enquiries, found the tins placed on the lower shelves of shame. She chose chicken. Big mistake – no robust gravy ever came out of a chicken.

Food of the gods: a Fray Bentos classic

The actor's companion brought something dainty. We looked away. Panic! Had we got a tin-opener? Fray Bentos has not embraced the ring-pull age.

The old tin-opener, the most used of the sparse *batterie de cuisine* of my childhood, had a pointed blade which required you to stab the tin. If that didn't disable you, you could rely on the sawing motion used to work round the lid, amid threatening curls of metal.

In its handle, there was a superfluous corkscrew. I often wonder how many people mangle the lid off a Fray Bentos pie and draw the cork from a bottle of claret.

Through the oven glass we watched the pies swelling, darkening, bubbling, before withdrawing them from the oven.

Then the actor upstaged everybody by upending his tin, gravy dribbling over the pastry, hanging over the side of his plate. The American lady cautiously lifted the lid, gazed underneath and let it fall back for good.

Mr B and I have form with food adventures: in the village, they call us the Sausage Brothers after various attempts to harness the power of a 40-year-old Kenwood Chef to recreate, among other things, Austrian cheese-'n'-pork sausage.

Once we made haggis with offal and diced sheep's lung: delicious. The black pudding didn't go quite so well, the kitchen looking like a bad day in A&E.

We press on, undaunted by yards of animal intestine. But sometimes we seemed to hear the old siren song from Uruguay.

So Fray Bentos pie night was a success, even if the gentlemen were happier than the ladies – and the chic American went home hungry.

Paul Heiney was on That's Life, In at the Deep End *and* Countrywise

Fray Bentos saved my life

During my three decades of living with HIV/Aids, well-meaning people have always foisted advice on me: from macrobiotic diets to much more drastic treatments.

I shunned all that and stuck to a rigid diet of tinned Fray Bentos steak-and-kidney pies with Cadbury's Smash and frozen peas, washed down with God's own tonic – soluble Solpadeine in ice-cold Perrier. It would be my death-row meal.

Fray Bentos pies have never been bettered. They would survive a nuclear holocaust. They prop up anything substantial. And, in the right hands, they're quite an effective weapon.

Charlie Mortimer and Roger Mortimer wrote *Dear Lupin...: Letters to a Wayward Son*

Long live the novelty act

Freak shows have disappeared, thank God – but *Piers Pottinger* still adores weird, wonderful and inspired comic turns

As a boy in Edinburgh in the 1950s, I was captivated by the acts at the Bertram Mills Circus.

I especially liked the plate-spinners, whose curiously tortuous routine had a hypnotic effect on the audience. The Filipinos who juggled cigar boxes and two teams of footballing boxer dogs were also favourites. And so, from an early age, I developed a keen interest in the novelty act.

Throughout history, bizarre, ludicrous and often painful acts have been performed. In 1870, Joseph Pujol (1857-1945) discovered, aged 13, he could ingest air through his rectum and expel it at will. And so was born his flatulist act – he was known as Le Pétomane.

In 1892, at the Moulin Rouge in Paris, he delivered cannon fire and thunderstorms via his bottom. He played '*O sole mio*' via a rubber tube inserted in his anus, and blew out a row of lighted candles. An instant success, he toured the world until retiring at the start of the First World War. Today, Paul Oldfield performs a similar act as Mr Methane.

In 1674, Matthew Buchinger was born in Germany without hands or feet, a deformity he turned to his advantage.

As an adult, he toured England and Ireland playing various instruments, including the bagpipes. An accomplished calligrapher, he was the first man to put a ship in a bottle. Known as the Greatest German Living, he died at 65, leaving a substantial fortune.

The great P T Barnum persuaded a tiny Charles Stratton to change his name to General Tom Thumb when he was 11, in 1843. A colossal draw, he was presented to Queen Victoria three times.

Barnum and Norman were the undisputed leading promoters of performers unfortunately termed 'freaks'.

Tom Norman (1860-1930), nicknamed the Silver King for his success, managed poor Joseph Merrick, aka the Elephant Man. He also managed Mary Anne Bevan, the World's Ugliest Woman, and John Chambers, the Armless Carpenter.

In 1900, Oofty Goofty began a short career as the Wild Man of Borneo. He would tar and feather himself and consume chunks of raw meat thrown at him, all the while shouting 'Oofty goofty' and rattling his cage.

In 1921, Martin Laurello toured the world as the Human Owl. He could rotate his head 180 degrees, baffling both doctors and scientists.

Performing animal acts have largely disappeared because of cruelty issues. One is still going. Hugh Lennon's Hypnodog, Oscar, became famous in 1995 when he got loose in the streets of Edinburgh and randomly hypnotised pedestrians who approached him. His piercing eyes failed him a few years later.

But the act continues: Lennon's niece, Krystyna, now performs with Oscar's descendant.

Other novelty acts survive. Zippos Circus still thrills us with the Globe of Death: three motorcycles hurl around a steel globe at breathtaking speed. *Asia's Got Talent* gave us Gonzo the Sumo Tambourine Master.

In 1990 and 1991, Vic Reeves and Bob Mortimer featured Novelty Island in their *Big Night Out* on Channel Four.

Sadly, they now fish and paint, leaving a huge gap in the comedy of the ridiculous.

My favourite act was Disgusto, the Human Dustbin. His flyer read, 'You bring it and he'll eat it!' He performed in the early 1950s at small country fairs and fêtes, where he would eat a huge variety of household goods brought by the audience.

He once consumed most of a pram; it took him all day. Most of the audience got bored and went home by the time he finished. A disagreeable drunkard, he spent much of his life living rough. His real name was never known but his death was noted in a parish magazine after he tried to eat six live terrapins. It was a speedy and deeply unpleasant demise.

The modern world no longer craves the more distasteful aspects of these performances, thank God. But long live the diversity, humour and ingenuity of the novelty act.

From top: **Le Pétomane, Joseph Pujol, 1870; Human Owl, Martin Laurello, 1921; P T Barnum and General Tom Thumb, 1843**

Piers Pottinger is a public-affairs consultant

My bed of nails

Peter Hanks, bedbound since February, is learning to accept home confinement

I am beginning to feel like one of those melodramatic characters in fiction who take to their beds and are still there 30 years later.

I have been confined to bed since mid-February after a moment's inattention: I hooked a toe under a rug and over I went, breaking and dislocating my left ankle, and changing my life for ever.

I made a thorough job of it, and had to begin life in bed, because the foot was not weight-bearing, even in a cast, and so I was forbidden use of crutches or Zimmer frame. I had carers four times a day, from Home First, part of our wonderful NHS, which cares for people just out of hospital. I had a commode by the bed.

I am fairly pragmatic and resilient, and made my mind up in hospital to accept the situation, since it could not be avoided; 20 years of ME/chronic fatigue syndrome has taught me about acceptance. I had spent a lot of time in bed resting because of it – so the situation was not entirely new.

You cannot fight something like ME:

Bedfellows: Morecambe and Wise, 1970

there is no drug therapy; rest, as you wait for it to lift, is the only recourse. Some are completely bedbound by it.

There is no point wasting precious energy raging against your fate, and I took the same attitude to my present predicament. I have some lovely local friends, without whom life would be a lot more difficult, who are doing my shopping and laundry.

I began to think about the nature of this life in bed. I quickly realised a good mental hinterland is a great asset. Modern technology is essential: broadband, the internet and a smartphone have been my mainstays.

I am able to conduct much of my life via the laptop: financial dealings in and out of my account, buying stuff and entertainment through free streaming channels such as iPlayer and ITVX.

I write fiction – the laptop has enabled me to go on with this. DAB radio and the ability to download programmes to my smartphone are great assets.

I use the laptop to follow my cricket team, Middlesex, because the BBC website offers ball-by-ball coverage of county matches. *Test Match Special* it is not, but it's a great diversion – at least while my team are winning.

My ankle has improved enough for me to have an orthopaedic boot fitted, which allows it to be weight-bearing. So, with two Zimmers, upstairs and downstairs, and a stairlift, I can get around the house, and in particular to the bathroom. I can now have a shower.

This has made me contemplate what my future life will be like. I will always need a boot of some sort – hopefully a lighter one. I have realised life in bed is not so bad.

I was already housebound, with severe peripheral neuropathy as a side effect of chemotherapy. This has also prevented plates from being inserted into the ankle, because the risk of infection is so much greater – so a boot it is.

I am having two visits a day from private carers. I want to return to cooking and cleaning for myself, since such care is unaffordable long-term.

My life has changed fundamentally, but not necessarily all for the worse. I am positive about it.

The lying game

We all spend our lives not saying what we really mean. *Joseph Connolly* tells the truth behind his favourite white lies

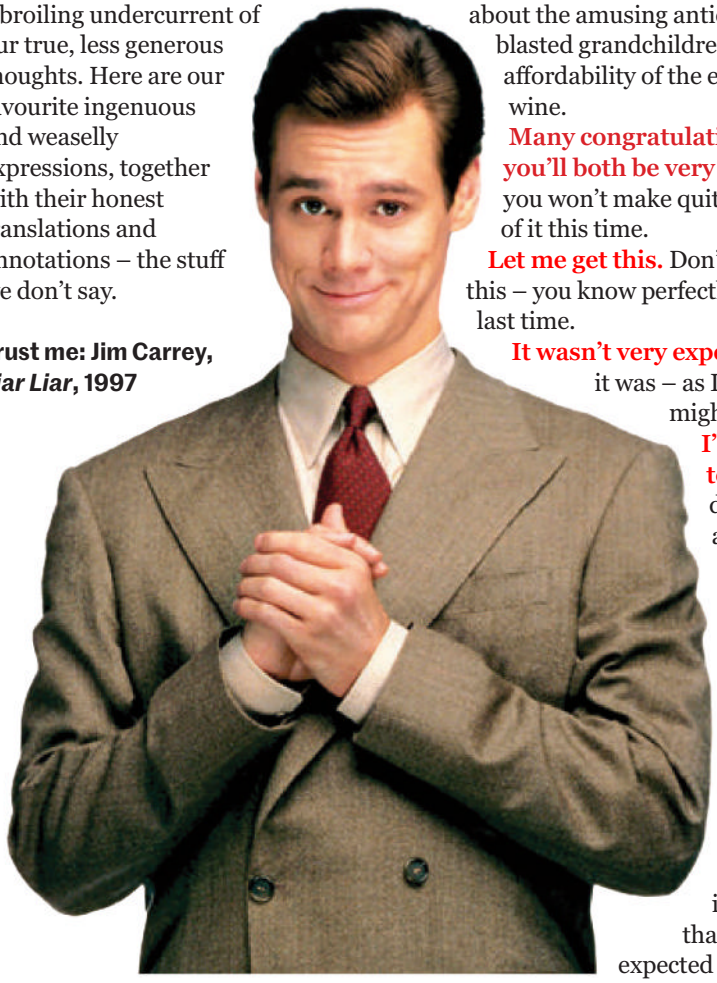
We're not really all two-faced duplicitous liars. It's just that we like to appear as kind and polite as possible. So we voice all the platitudes and evasions that come unbidden and so very naturally to our lips.

We oldies are particularly given to all of this – manners, you know – but anyone British will know the situation exactly.

The word 'sorry' is the most frequently uttered piece of nonsense to trip off the British tongue – something foreigners seem to find charming and bewildering in equal measure.

Someone walks right into you: you're sorry. Someone speaks over you: you're sorry.

In speech, we are innately self-effacing and given to understatement. But beneath the ready smile lurks a broiling undercurrent of our true, less generous thoughts. Here are our favourite ingenuous and weaselly expressions, together with their honest translations and annotations – the stuff we don't say.



Trust me: Jim Carrey, *Liar Liar*, 1997

Sorry – not quite sure if you got this. I know bloody well you got this. Why haven't you had the decency to reply?

I think I might be right in saying... I'm sure – so please don't argue.

It's not actually a great time for me. Nor will it ever be, because I so absolutely don't want to do this.

I'll certainly give that some thought. In one ear and out the other, matey.

You could well be right about that. What an unutterable fool you are.

With all due respect... I hope you do know how very deeply I despise you.

I'm so very sorry you can't make it. Oh what blessed relief! A free evening!

How very nice to hear from you again. And you are...?

That sounds fun! That sounds vile.

I expect you've been somewhere fabulous this summer. Please God don't tell me a single word about it. Not about the amusing antics of your blasted grandchildren, nor the affordability of the excellent local wine.

Many congratulations – I hope you'll both be very happy. Maybe you won't make quite such a pig's ear of it this time.

Let me get this. Don't let me get this – you know perfectly well I got it last time.

It wasn't very expensive. Actually, it was – as I hoped you might have noticed.

I'll look forward to that. I shall dread it, and almost certainly cancel.

Aren't we looking smart? Christ, what a get-up.

Yes – I hear what you're saying. And it's total rubbish, which is hardly more than I would have expected of you.

Could you just run that last bit by me again? Wasn't listening. And that goes for the first bit as well.

How are you? Please, please, please do not tell me. Just say, 'Fine, how are you?', to which I shall answer, 'Fine.'

It's not you – it's me. It's you.

How about lunch sometime? Just say 'Yes, great.' Do not say, 'Wonderful – when?' and then produce your diary and reel off possible dates. I don't have to consult my own diary because all those dates are impossible

> 'Let me get this' = 'Don't let me get this – you know perfectly well I got it last time'

because I don't have the slightest desire or intention to have lunch with you – ever.

Fancy running into you! Yes ... I might have known you'd be here.

No pressure, of course – just whenever you have a minute. Oh, just get it done, for Christ's sake – I can't hang around for ever.

Sorry – do you think I could just squeeze past you? For the love of God, get out of the bloody way.

Not to worry – I'm sure I can sort something out. Oh sweet Lord – what on earth am I supposed to do now?!

Well, of course everyone is entitled to their own opinion. But why oh why is yours so habitually fat-headed and inevitably wrong?

Did you read that leader in the *Times* today? No, you didn't – and I didn't, either.

I know you by reputation, of course. Might have vaguely heard the name somewhere...

Lost a bit of weight? You look on the verge of death.

Well, I must love you and leave you. Frankly, I've had quite enough of you.

Joseph Connolly owned the Flask Bookshop in Hampstead

Glass half-empty

Decanters are out of fashion – time to fill them up! By *Simon Berry*

Once upon a time – not so long ago in the scale of geological epochs, but somewhere between Margaret Thatcher and the smoking ban – no self-respecting English household was complete without a decanter.

Stout ones, slender ones, heavy-bottomed crystal numbers that could fell a burglar if lobbed with force. They glinted like chandeliers on sideboards across the shires.

A visiting bishop could hardly lower himself into an armchair without being offered 'a little Amontillado' from a decanter that looked as if it had been looted from Versailles.

Remember the marvellous scene in *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949), when the Reverend Lord Henry D'Ascoyne desperately asks Louis Mazzini (Dennis Price) for the decanter: 'My Lord, the port is with you.'

And now? Decanters are gone. Practically. As endangered as the pangolin or civility in the House of Commons.

Decanters emerged a century or so after the glass bottle (first used for wine in the early-18th century). That evolved from the leather bottle, which might have been practical to transport but probably didn't do much for the taste of wine.

Back in the 18th century, glass was expensive, and wine was bought in wooden barrels. Corks hadn't been invented, really, and the concept of wine improving with age was unthought of.

Perform the ritual. It will feel like civilisation again

It wasn't until the 19th century that a bottle became something to be laid down for years, and it was necessary to separate the clear bright liquid from the sediment that had formed.

Modern wines aren't made like that any more. It is said that 94 per cent of all wine, red and white, is drunk within a year of the grapes being pressed.

ALAMY

'My Lord, the port is with you' – *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949)

Vintage port and the very best clarets are the main exception to the rule. Many of the top Burgundy-producers have long questioned decanting, worried that the delicate flavours of their wines didn't need the aeration the process affords. The decline has been as slow and insidious as the erosion of the House of Lords.

I think I own a decent proportion of the few decanters left in captivity. I have my father's collection, many of which were from his father before him: Georgian and early Victorian beauties, surely free of any harmful lead content by now; magnum decanters, half-bottle decanters; beautiful wedding presents, often engraved with initials, dates or wayward tendrils of the vine. Every one with a story.

Decanting wine is, above all, an act of performance. It requires foresight, elegance and the physical dexterity of a bomb-disposal expert.

I once saw a Japanese sommelier decant a bottle of port using red-hot decanting tongs, and it seemed straight out of Kabuki.

There's the setting of the scene – the silver coasters, the ceremonious pulling of the cork, the gentle *glug-glug-glug* as the liquid flows through time and tradition. And now? We're too busy watching Scandi noir and arguing about oat milk to bother.

But all is not lost. Hope remains. A small but brave resistance survives – mainly *Oldie*-readers, I suspect. Buckingham Palace has one of the finest collections of Georgian decanters in the world, and I hope they are still used regularly.

So here's my plea: dust off your decanter. Polish it. Invite a friend over and decant something – port, claret, Vimto … it hardly matters. Perform the ritual. It may not solve climate change or reform the BBC but, by God, it will feel like civilisation again.

And who knows? Perhaps, in the flickering candlelight of a decanter's glint, we might just remember who we are. Or, at the very least, remember where we put the corkscrew.

Simon Berry was Chairman of Berry Bros & Rudd, the wine merchant founded in 1698

Sun, sea and clichés

In 17 years as a travel editor, *Mark Palmer* was driven crazy by hackneyed expressions

My professional home for the last 17 years has been a des res in the back pages of the *Daily Mail* and *Mail on Sunday* – and I've loved (almost) every moment.

I have now been put out to pasture and am left to graze on recollections of more than 40 years' working in newspaper offices, while putting a brave face on future financial uncertainty.

One annoyance during my tenure overseeing, among other things, the travel pages has been the consensus among those who've never written a travel article in their lives.

All you have to do, they say, is gush about 'sun-kissed beaches' and the 'succulent fried calamari washed down with a crisp local Sauvignon blanc' – and hope the PR will invite you back for another freebie in a few years' time.

Decent travel writing is the hardest form of journalism. No other scribing is so easily derailed by appalling clichés that 'stretch out into the distance as far as the eye can see'.

The temptation to take refuge in facile descriptions about the 'vodka-clear' water and the hotel that 'ticks all the boxes' because of its 'barefoot luxury', 'serious pampering' or 'food to die for' which makes 'time stand still' hovers over one's keyboard in menacing fashion.

As with any journalism – or any writing, whether it be a condolence letter or an old-fashioned thank-you letter – the intro is all-important.

Repeatedly, I have been confronted by an opening paragraph that starts with something like 'When I told friends I was off to Sunny Beach in Bulgaria, they looked at me with raised eyebrows.'

Not only is this interminably dull but you know for sure we will later learn that those same friends were wrong to raise their eyebrows because Sunny Beach – despite its reputation for cheap booze and expensive hangovers – turned out to be far more civilised than expected.

Mark Palmer's Banned Words in Travel Pieces

- Stunning
- Playground of the rich and famous
- Marmite (unless it's the actual stuff you put on toast – never as in 'Jeremy Corbyn is Marmite')
- Ancient – unless it's pre the fall of Rome
- City of contrasts
- Go the extra mile
- Azure
- Stylish accommodation
- A nightmare
- Dream
- Footprints
- Hubby
- Nothing beats seeing a lion/elephant/leopard in the wild
- Must-see and must-do
- Brits
- Whilst and amidst
- Winding, cobbled streets
- Boasting, as in a hotel boasting 24 restaurants
- Picturesque
- Breathtaking
- Brill
- Chillax
- Melting pot
- Eye-watering
- Pampering
- Blighty
- 18-30 crowd
- Airport Hell
- To-die-for
- Vibrant
- Vivid hotchpotch of colours, smells, sounds
- Summer's lease
- Delicacies
- Teeming
- Laid-back lifestyle
- Innate sense of rhythm/calm
- Chock-a-block
- Tolkienesque, as applied to vaguely medieval defensive architecture
- Mouth-watering
- The Bounty ad
- Hearty
- Rustic
- Authentic
- *En famille*
- No frills
- Spa heaven
- Traditional hearty cuisine
- Whistle-stop tour
- Magical Mystery Tour
- Barefoot luxury
- Under the stars
- Alfresco dining
- Retail therapy
- Sun-drenched

Or, rather, proved to be 'a hidden gem', where you can 'find your own slice of paradise' because Bulgaria is 'having a moment'.

Then there's the lazy, old trick of quoting the taxi driver who picked you up at the airport:

'In Antigua, we tell people they should relax as hard as they want,' said Winston, as we headed for the 'jaw-droppingly beautiful' resort, 'nestled amid cliffs' and with 'powder-white sand', where you 'wake to nothing but the sound of waves'.

Mind you, I couldn't resist quoting the cab driver in New York as we came over the 59th Street Bridge:

'Hey, man, you know how in some cities it feels like you're watching a movie. Well, here, you're in the goddam movie.'

I approach writing a travel piece as I would a news story. What's really going on? Who's in power? Why has the President absconded to Venezuela? One of my first tasks is to buy a newspaper to get a feel for the place as experienced by those who live there, rather than by moneyed tourists who've put the country on their dreaded 'bucket list'.

A local paper might tell you church-service times or what's on at the opera house. Both will give you a far better insight than chatting to Brian and Mary from Cheltenham at the breakfast buffet in the hotel – where, inevitably, the service is 'attentive yet unobtrusive' and the staff always 'go the extra mile' to make sure you 'leave the modern world behind'.

I've been on my fair share of press trips. It's essential to get a list of who else is going. I recall a three-nighter in Cape Town, where I was joined by a learned man from the *Telegraph*, a feisty woman from *Grazia* magazine and a young female 'influencer' who spent all meals photographing her food and the rest of the day photographing herself.

She was clearly in 'selfie heaven', except the weather was awful and she badly needed a shot of herself on the beach. Time was running out.

So, on the way to the airport, she persuaded the minibus driver to stop at the side of a road, whereupon she whipped off her dress to reveal a bikini. And we all had to wait in the bus while she posed, with the Indian Ocean in the distance, for the delectation of her 'followers'.

I've nothing against name-dropping, but I'm afraid St David is banned – as in 'this was my David Attenborough moment'. Likewise, Bear Grylls ('Then I summoned my inner Bear Grylls') must be discarded – along with 'like a scene from *Downton Abbey*' to describe anything remotely grand.

Write about other people rather than yourself. Watching the fat Italian in Speedos chatting up the blonde lifeguard who happens to be engaged to the windsurfing instructor is far more interesting than a dreaded 'sundowner' as the 'sun sinks over the horizon'.

Italian novelist Cesare Pavese said, 'Travelling is a brutality.' Nonsense. It's travel-writing that can be brutal.

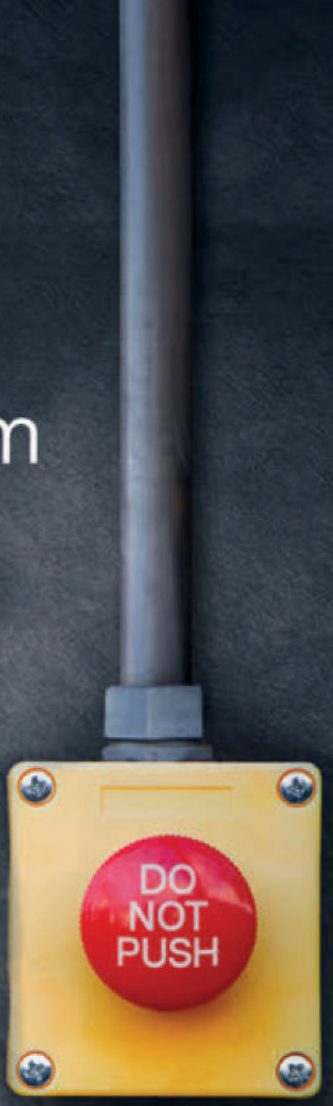
Mark Palmer was Travel Editor of the Daily Mail

- Holistic
- Back-to-nature
- Unchanging landscape
- Child-friendly – or anything friendly, for that matter, unless it is plain friendly
- Time immemorial
- Priceless treasures
- Subtropical (unless you actually mean subtropical)
- Leaving the modern world behind
- Time stands still
- My own/ your own/ our own slice of paradise
- 'Attentive yet unobtrusive' staff, butlers, waiters etc
- Exuberant vegetation
- Ooh-la-la!
- *Par excellence*
- Bygone age
- Untrammelled
- Studded (as in studded with pine trees etc), dotted, nestled or peppered
- As far as the eye can see
- Yesteryear or bygone age
- Quintessential
- At one with nature
- David Beckham
- Verdant or leafy
- *Je ne sais quoi*
- A-listers
- Seriously (as in seriously funny or seriously expensive etc)
- Robinson Crusoe
- Wellness
- Celebs
- Having a moment
- Game-changing
- Does what it says on the tin
- Unlocking a treasure chest of…
- The abbreviation of neighbourhood to 'hood
- Eateries
- The place that time forgot
- James Bond
- Kids
- Fashionistas
- *Strictly Come Dancing*
- 'Could be anywhere in the world'
- Offers, as in the restaurant 'offers' views
- Anything on tap, eg beaches on tap, sunshine on tap
- Achingly hip (or anything aching, unless it's a genuine aching part of the body)

The Scottish American Investment Company (SAINTS)

Tempted by a big short-term yield at your fingertips?

You could regret it.



There are investments out there offering some handy-looking short-term yield figures. Trouble is, succumbing to short-term temptation can be disastrous when it comes to long-term growth. The Scottish American Investment Company (SAINTS) focuses on capital growth as well as income. Aiming for growth plus yield. You could still opt to think short-term. But it'd be hard to put your finger on why.

Please remember that changing stock market conditions and currency exchange rates will affect the value of the investment in the fund and any income from it. Investors may not get back the amount invested.

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A Key Information Document is available. Call 0800 917 2112.

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Burial grounds

Highgate Cemetery is packed – but Parliament has allowed new arrivals to rest in old graves. By *Liz Thompson*

The issue of reusing graves is a sensitive subject. But, given the number of people who have ever lived (and died), it's one that societies have to tackle.

For centuries, churchyards accommodated the dead of their parish in a tiny amount of space. Successive generations were buried on top of one another, with the remains of their predecessors lowered further down into the grave or removed to a charnel house.

It was a sustainable solution until the massive growth in population in the late-18th century. The Victorians responded with the idea of large urban cemeteries offering private family graves where members could be buried together. Rights of burial were granted in perpetuity.

Yet families often proved more mobile and less keen on maintaining a single burial place than anticipated, and many graves have been simply forgotten altogether by descendants. Do you know where all your grandparents, great uncles and aunts are buried?

One of London's most prestigious cemeteries is now embarking on a programme of grave renewal.

Highgate Cemetery was opened in 1839 as part of a plan for private companies to create a ring of cemeteries around London. Notable Victorians buried there include Michael Faraday, George Eliot and Karl Marx. More recently Beryl Bainbridge, Jacob Bronowski and Jonathan Miller have been interred there.

Highgate Cemetery now has 53,000 graves, with 170,000 people buried there. It is still a working cemetery, with approximately 50 burials a year.

For it to continue to offer itself as a sustainable place to accommodate future burials, it needs to find more space.

Other old cemeteries have closed to new burials, and have begun to lose the connections to people living around them. Highgate wants to avoid that.

A renewal plan was submitted for approval to the government, following which a new Act of Parliament, the Highgate Cemetery Act 2022, was enacted. The scheme is not for a wholesale removal of remains but rather for a sensitive renewal of graves no longer wanted by their owners, carried out with the greatest respect for them and those buried in the cemetery. Such things are not done lightly.

Highgate Cemetery and the headstone of Karl Marx (1818-83)

GETTY; ALAMY

These powers are not unprecedented. They are already available to other cemeteries, including those owned by local authorities.

Within the consecrated part of Highgate Cemetery, any disturbance of remains is subject to authorisation from the Diocese of London.

Still, the Church of England takes a realistic approach to the problem. The Chancellor of Southwark Diocese has stated that 'there should be an expectation that grave spaces will in due course be reused, and this is necessary to economise on land use at a time when grave space is a diminishing resource.'

Initially, around 500 graves have been identified at Highgate for renewal. Only long-abandoned graves are considered. Often plots were bought by a family but then not used. Work is done piecemeal and sensitively. It is not a comprehensive redevelopment of the cemetery.

Strong safeguards exist for grave-owners. Graves must have been last used over 75 years ago; or, if the grave is empty, been sold more than 75 years ago.

The cemetery first tries to contact the owner by writing to them at the address in the grave register. Notices are also placed in the *Times*; on the cemetery website; at the cemetery entrance; and on or near the grave itself. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission and Historic England are also notified.

A positive outcome of this recent publicity is the number of people now contacting the cemetery to take ownership of long-forgotten family graves. If you think you may have a family grave in Highgate Cemetery, please look at the list on our website (www.highgatecemetery.org).

New burials will be made in empty graves, on top of part-used graves or in space created by lifting and reinterring earlier remains at greater depth. Relatives can always prevent the disturbance of any remains.

Heritage protections are also strong. No significant gravestones or memorials (which make Highgate Cemetery such a special place) will be removed. Priority graves for renewal are those with no memorial, or where the memorial is extensively damaged. Records will be made of any removed memorial and deposited with the Registrar General.

Careful implementation of the act will help preserve the character, heritage and memorial significance of the cemetery, while allowing it to continue as a valued place of burial for future generations.

Visitors are also very welcome at the cemetery – open every day except Christmas Day and New Year's Day. It is now very popular among domestic and foreign visitors. Excellent guided tours are available – or you can explore by yourself. There are also lots of opportunities to volunteer – including guiding, helping visitors and gardening.

This cemetery is a place for the dead and a museum of people – and it is also full of life.

Liz Thompson is a volunteer tour guide at Highgate Cemetery

My golden secret

John Humphrys has found the most valuable treasure on earth – the perfect builder

Building society: O'Reilly the builder (David Kelly), Sybil Fawlty (Prunella Scales) and Basil Fawlty (John Cleese) *Fawlty Towers*, 1975

Maybe I'm not one of the leading authorities on Thomas Aquinas.

But everyone knows he was one of the most influential philosophers and theologians of his time, some 800 years ago.

You may not know his words are as relevant today as they were then. Especially if you happen to have a home that occasionally needs a bit of work done to it. As in a leaky roof.

It's true that when Aquinas argued about Aristotle, it was more likely to be about the age of the universe than about how to find a decent builder who won't charge you so much to make your roof waterproof that you'll have to sell the house to pay his bill. Payment in cash preferred.

But even if Aquinas never did solve that pesky universe problem, he did know a thing or two about human nature that have stood the test of time. His key observation takes me back to the days when I wrote a column for my local newspaper.

There was a hole in my roof directly above my bedroom. I managed to find the perfect builder. He arrived when he said he would, quoted a reasonable price and mended the roof. He fixed a few other things for me too. So I wrote about it in a column.

This is where I disregarded the wisest of all Aquinas observations. I named my builder. And, yes, the inevitable happened. The next time I needed him for an emergency, he was too busy. His phone had not stopped ringing since I'd bestowed my praise. I had forgotten the immortal Aquinas caution: 'No good deed shall go unpunished.'

That was all a very long time ago, but nothing much has changed in the Wild West of house repairs.

I had another hole in the roof just recently. A friend recommended a roofer. He arrived in a small, unmarked van (a giveaway warning sign) and used my ladder to get on the roof and inspect the damage. The following conversation ensued:

Roofer: 'So where did he tether the horse, then?'

Me: 'Umm…?'

Roofer: 'The cowboy who fixed the roof the last time!'

I tried to smile. I tried again when his estimate came: £35,000. Then I tried not to remember that the first house I bought, 60 years ago, when I was 22, was a lovely newly-built semi in a delightful village outside Cardiff with garage and garden. It was £2,500. Yes, I know prices have gone up – but *that* much?

Anyway, I found another builder who wasn't a cowboy. He's Polish and rather stern and he came, inspected the roof and sent me an estimate: £5,000. The roof no longer leaks.

So I got off lightly. Most don't. The Citizens Advice bureau reckon that last year in England there were more than 30,000 complaints about dodgy builders. Most claim to be roofers and most get away with it. And the law doesn't care.

If you need a gas or electricity technician, you can check his credentials. Fair enough – a faulty boiler can blow you up. But can't a dodgy roof fall on your head? And can't a dodgy builder steal your life savings? Yet anyone can trade as a builder, with or without qualifications.

Unsurprisingly, the construction industry is lobbying for an official licensing scheme to weed out charlatans. According to the Federation of Master Builders, the problem 'shames' the building trade.

'At the core of the problem is a lack of industry standards,' says Brian Berry, the federation's chief executive. 'This leaves consumers without a clear route to challenge cowboy builders for their bad work, and the construction industry reliant on the shaky foundations of unregulated builders.'

So what's the best thing to do? The federation says personal recommendations are best. Ask a friend or neighbour. If you don't have any friends, you can get a steer from a WhatsApp or Facebook group.

And do not rejoice if the builder says he can start next week. Instead find another one. Good builders are busy. Always.

I started this piece with a cautionary tale from my youth. I end it with a more recent one.

Soon after I had bought the house I now live in, a nice man knocked on the door to tell me he'd seen some loose slates on the point of falling off and decapitating the neighbours' cat.

He happened to be a roofer and if I had a long ladder, he would happily fix them. So he did, I gave him a few quid and off he went.

And then (yes, I know) he came back again and said he had his ladders and his van with him and he'd be happy to give the rest of my roof the once-over. I said fine. What happened was entirely predictable, very expensive and too embarrassing to recount.

I now really do have a builder I can trust. Sadly, I've run out of space – so I won't be able to give you his name.

John Humphrys presented the Today *programme from 1987 to 2019*

Bag for life

Katia Pilar, 76, resented her stoma bag but is now completely at ease with it

In October 2024, I returned from a bridge-playing holiday in Sri Lanka, with a hugely bloated stomach. I attributed it to diverticulitis, diagnosed 30 years earlier.

I went to my GP, who recommended I attend Ashford A&E for a scan. It started an NHS experience: triage, CT scans, two nights waiting in corridors and a five-hour emergency operation.

On recovery from the anaesthetic, I felt down my body to find a bag attached next to a huge five-inch scar starting from my belly button.

The surgical team passed by the next morning and said they had removed a blockage from my sigmoid colon. They had also created a stoma, or opening – and around it a bag had been stuck on, to collect my poo.

This stoma was reversible. So I did not need worry.

I was very grateful to be alive, thanks to my consultant, Mr Shrestha, his knife and his team. But I could not adjust to the stoma, emotionally or physically.

It looked like the baby alien as it emerges from John Hurt's tummy in the first *Alien* film, but without the teeth. I resented it.

Speciality stoma nurses came daily to instruct me how to change the bags. But I could not manage to overcome my mental aversion to the stoma itself.

It was only on discharge from hospital to home, with my stoma travelling bag, containing a key for disabled lavatories in the UK plus stoma paraphernalia, that I was forced to cope.

The NHS organise a local stoma nurse team to visit patients at home, along with Secure Start, a private company who make contact over the phone across the country, working with the NHS.

The number of patients on their books is more than 20,000. My local stoma support team has 3,000 patients.

I started researching my condition to try to come to terms with it. I am classified as disabled (but am unfortunately not eligible for a Blue Badge parking permit).

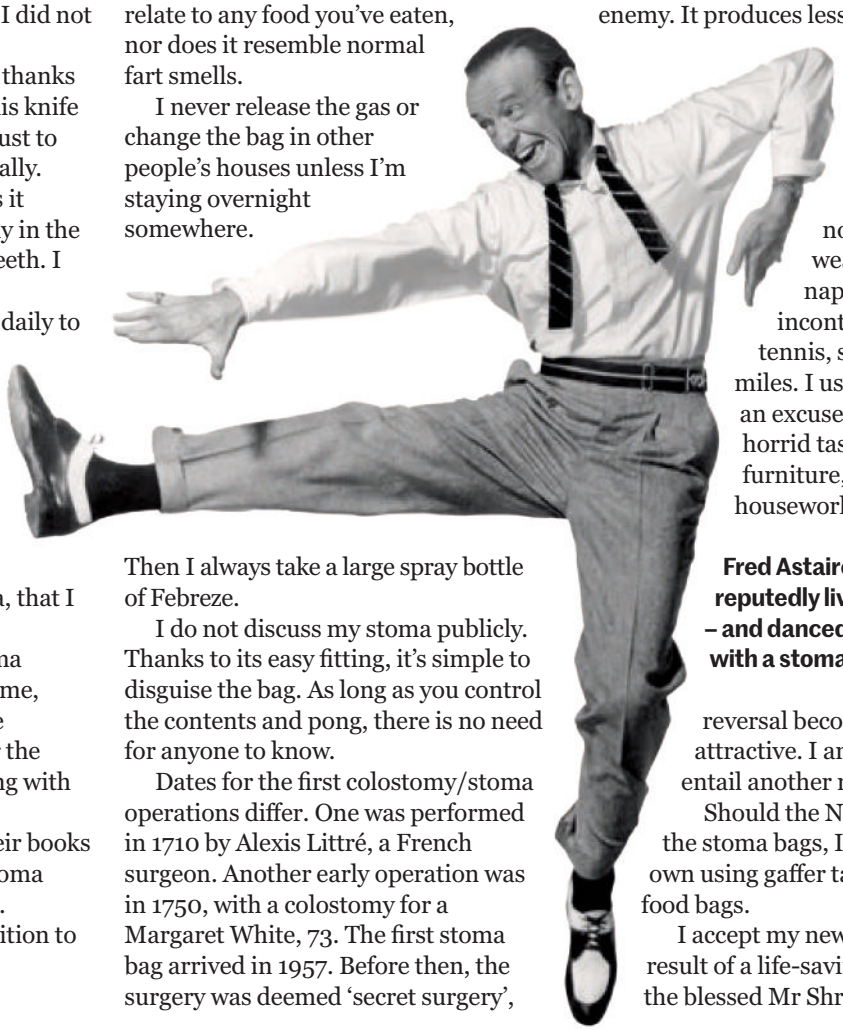
I have a new identity – ostomate or colostomist – and I use ostomy supplies. These supplies – stoma bags, wipes, disposal bags – are provided free of charge through the NHS and delivered to ostomates' homes.

You should minimise a high intake of alcohol, which can be conveniently interpreted as you see appropriate – don't hit Jeffrey Bernard levels.

You can eat normally with a stoma, though certain foods and drinks, such as cabbage and beer, should be avoided because they cause gas.

The gas can be prolific and cause the bag to inflate like a rugby ball. The smell created – open drains, with a hint of cabbage – is putrid. It weirdly does not relate to any food you've eaten, nor does it resemble normal fart smells.

I never release the gas or change the bag in other people's houses unless I'm staying overnight somewhere.



Fred Astaire reputedly lived – and danced – with a stoma

Then I always take a large spray bottle of Febreze.

I do not discuss my stoma publicly. Thanks to its easy fitting, it's simple to disguise the bag. As long as you control the contents and pong, there is no need for anyone to know.

Dates for the first colostomy/stoma operations differ. One was performed in 1710 by Alexis Littré, a French surgeon. Another early operation was in 1750, with a colostomy for a Margaret White, 73. The first stoma bag arrived in 1957. Before then, the surgery was deemed 'secret surgery', which left patients as social outcasts owing to the fear of odour and leakage.

Before that first bag, all sorts of devices were used – they look as if they've come straight out of an S&M catalogue.

Now there is a large range of suppliers, with a huge choice of products at various price levels – my bags cost £52.27 for a box of 10. Given that 190,000 people have stomas in the UK (one in 335), what a huge cost this must be to the NHS. More people than you think have a colon condition. Sufferers have included Napoleon, Fred Astaire, Dwight Eisenhower and Tracey Emin.

As I became more adept at changing bags, the stoma started to change in appearance – shrinking, becoming benign, friendly and no longer the enemy. It produces less gas and fewer noisy emissions.

I can control my bowel functions. There's no constipation and no prospect of years wearing grown-up nappies because of incontinence. I play tennis, swim and walk miles. I use the condition as an excuse to get out of horrid tasks such as moving furniture, tedious housework, mowing lawns and carrying heavy shopping.

The idea of a stoma reversal becomes less attractive. I am 76. It would entail another major operation.

Should the NHS stop providing the stoma bags, I would make my own using gaffer tape and plastic food bags.

I accept my new appendage – the result of a life-saving intervention by the blessed Mr Shrestha.

Save the girls from the lost boys

SOPHIA WAUGH

We no longer need to talk about Kevin. School shootings are no longer the primary focus when we think about disaffected young men. We now need to talk about Jamie.

Jamie is the protagonist of the television show *Adolescence* which shook audiences the length and breadth of the land. It really needed to be seen before it was talked about, as the gradual unravelling of the truth about Katie's murder, and Jamie's involvement, were all the more powerful without the pundits' preloaded views dancing round the edges of our minds.

The four-part series explored the frankly frightening power of social media over the lives of young boys, most especially their attitudes to women.

We have all heard of the vile Andrew Tate, and we need to be aware that the misogyny he promulgates is not exclusive to him.

We see it every day in our classrooms and corridors. So much so that, before this show even aired, our school hired a team to come in and deliver a series of workshops to our Year 10 boys. It was a much-needed step, but I am not entirely sure how successful it was.

Many of our young men believe misogyny is something to do with not treating their girlfriends nicely. They do not understand that it goes much, much deeper than that.

They cannot see that the way they talk to women, the way they use their bodies as blockades, their threats (however mild), the way they talk about and to girls and women and the fact that they believe they deserve respect while women must earn it all add up to a pernicious and sometimes dangerous way of being.

Most of my pupils like me. They tell me so, particularly when I am challenging them over aspects of their behaviour and ask why they do not behave badly – or badly to me – when they do to other teachers.

'Because I respect you,' they say. 'I like you because you talk to me as though I am a person. You are straight with me.'

They come to me for help when they have done wrong, and for praise when they have done right.

But when – before we even had the workshops – I told two of my more troublesome tutor-group boys that I did not like their misogyny, they flared up and scoffed and were furious.

Their reasoning? They liked their mums and bought their girlfriends presents.

I pointed out that the way they were – at that very moment – blocking me from the door, towering over me and refusing to do as they were asked shrieked a lack of respect for me with every bone of their bodies.

A particular target for these Year 10 (14-15-year-old) boys is a young English teacher. When skiving lessons, they circle her classroom like sharks, staring in or pointing and laughing. They lurk in corridors to film her.

They arrive at her classroom door in large groups to harangue her about 'unfairness' in her issuing of detentions or homework. They despise her – partly because she does not give in to them – and they make sure she knows it.

So what did this workshop (groups of 20, four weeks in a row, run by an outside company of young men with ponytails and sincere expressions) teach them?

It told them about dildos and women's right to sexual enjoyment. It suggested some changes in language used to describe women. In trying to curb locker-room chat, it created it.

I have four daughters and four granddaughters. For years, my daughters have joked about 'the mothers of sons' who run around after their boys and encourage their sons' views of themselves as demigods.

'Boys! You can't get them do to a thing!' sighed a friend of mine, as my daughters cleared up supper and her three sons sat and watched.

At that point, my daughters, as one, sat down and turned to the boys. 'Your turn,' they said. 'If we do it, it can't be that hard, can it?'

And, to be fair, the boys set to it.

Misogyny is not all down to Andrew Tate and social media, you see.

'We need something flushable'

Summertime – and the clothing is easy

You can't beat a summer dress for universally flattering comfort

And now summer – the sartorial season to celebrate.

We can pause the itchiness and heaviness of wool or tweed and the rustlings of gilets by day. We are spared the restrictions of stiffened satin and thermal layerings by night. The freedom!

And what does the oldie woman wear once the thermometer climbs?

The uniform, of course. At the Chelsea Flower Show and a fundraising lunch in the Cavalry and Guards Club in May, almost every woman wore a floral-print mid-calf 100-per-cent cotton dress.

And why not? The classic Sloane/boho summer dress – which must be made of cotton or linen – is the nearest thing in comfort to a nightdress. Universally flattering, practical and cool, with the right accessories to dress it up or down, could it be your wardrobe's most versatile item?

But before you agree heartily and rush out to buy another, we should pause to reflect.

1. Do we want to be wearing a uniform?

2. Do we have room for another dress in the first place?

A recent *Times* survey revealed that only 12 per cent of the British population have a walk-in wardrobe. Meanwhile, 30 per cent of the typical UK woman's clothing collection goes unworn. Does the oldie woman, after decades of acquisition, really want to overpopulate her bedroom space further?

Marie Kondo, Japanese tidying expert, makes a lot of sense when she advocates the sorting of our clothes into categories – give to friends, give to charity shops, bin and keep. We keep the ones we know we like and wear, and give ourselves more living space by dispatching the rest.

It is tempting to hoard. But just remember how happy you are in a hotel room with only a few items hanging in the wardrobe.

But the more-is-more mindset is endemic in those with the finances to indulge it. It is a generation-wide issue.

A millennial friend owns a small converted barn, the sole occupant of which is her dress collection. She knows the space could be generating income via Airbnb but says she cannot risk being 'triggered' by the emotional difficulties in divesting herself of garments associated with her heyday.

A more sensible – and more financially restricted – millennial I know recognises that a superfluity of dresses entering a woman's existence will be a fact of life.

She therefore ruthlessly makes regular trips to Retro Woman in Notting Hill Gate, exchanging a bin-bag of high-quality dresses for a meagre £20 voucher.

'To me, it's worth the loss in value of the dresses to have the space back in my wardrobe and just not to have to think about them again,' she reasons. 'Yes, I might make some money if I sold them through eBay or Vinted but I haven't time to do the admin.'

Flower power: Myleene Klass at the Chelsea Flower Show

GETTY

Meanwhile – owing to the housing shortage – other millennials and Gen Z use their parents' larger houses as spillover spaces for 'limbo' clothes rails.

I recently saw one of these with a sticky label on it, in the daughter's handwriting, saying 'Only quite nice clothes'.

When her mother suggested that the daughter get rid of the trousers, skirts, jumpers and dresses, the daughter looked up from her screen and said, 'Can that be your work, Mum?'

The 'Only quite nice' dress rail remains, for ever in purgatory.

The summer dress, by contrast, takes care of both upper and lower body, and therefore takes up less precious horizontal space in a wardrobe.

It's also an adaptable item. Pair with flat shoes and cardigan by day, or introduce elegance with stilettos or wedge espadrilles and a jacket at night. Jewellery and the right hat can instantly lift a summer dress from casual to smart. Fabric is important – no synthetics.

The floral-print summer dress has become ubiquitous, though. Why not consider the shirt dress, a popular choice this season? With a simple tie belt on the waist, it adds shape to the garment and will help define your contour.

You have the practical option of releasing the belt at any moment should you feel constrained or out of breath.

A consolidation of your summer-dress collection to a maximum of ten high-quality pieces is advisable.

Our mothers' 1950s dresses were more carefully made – and, moreover, made in the days when cotton was cotton and not sprayed with more pesticide than any other crop on the planet. Their linen dresses were somehow less subject to crumpling than today's linen dresses.

We too should go for quality over quantity. Brora, Boden, Cabbages & Roses, Sophie Dundas and Ghost are all acceptable mid- to high-end range choices which do not involve floral prints.

If you do intend to buy afresh, remember to pass by Oxfam on the way.

Mary Killen hosts The Oldie *Beauty Day – see details on opposite page*

Elegiac: Matthew (John Hannah) in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*

Deep condolences

Amy Dancer, widowed three years ago, on what helps the bereaved

As the current TV ad for the Alzheimer's Society says, you lose your partner to the disease multiple times.

None of the times is easy to adapt to. None of them is pleasant. You need friends and family to help you navigate the emotional tempest.

When I lost my husband three years ago, for the final time, I found myself viscerally recoiling from well-meant platitudes. They were shared in the hope of indicating empathy or in an effort to conquer the unease we all feel when grappling with someone else's grief.

'You must feel awful. You must be feeling devastated.'

Please don't tell me how I must feel – when I hardly know myself.

'Despite everything, you are looking quite well, really. I expected you to be distraught.'

After years of disturbed sleep while caring for my husband, I am actually able to sleep for a few hours each evening without interruption.

'Surely you aren't planning to go back to work now?'

It's the thought of being able to return to a semblance of normality that makes work so appealing.

'Why not retire and focus more on yourself?'

My life partner's death doesn't mean that I don't still have ambitions and plans, some of which would have involved him.

At a time of raw emotion and loss, I was not myself. I was barely in control of my frayed emotions. But I certainly did not wish to be told all the ways I was supposed to 'be'. Supposed to feel. Supposed to act.

I'm sure the polite offenders all meant well. Because I know they really are warm, loving people. I do, however, wish someone had shared a rant such as this with them. We should all be able to welcome an offer of solace in unbearable times.

Overcome your own unease or desire to empathise. Try being quiet! Try listening. Hugging. Just. Being. There.

It might just prove to be a most restorative tonic at a time of great need.

ALAMY

Living la Dolce Vita in my local shopping centre

TOM HODGKINSON

Near my nest in Shepherd's Bush is a gigantic shopping centre called Westfield.

Until recently, I was accustomed, like the other middle-class people in my neighbourhood, to criticising Westfield as a hideous, sterile, overheated monument to crass consumerism.

After all, most of it is indoors and the 320 shops within its cavernous interior are all chains: Armani, Boss, W H Smith, Sports Direct and so on.

It's an outpost of the Brave New World: an airport without the planes, right on my doorstep, with advertising screens and a multi-screen cinema to keep you entertained after shopping.

And where is the field of its name? Like many of these modern developments, it's named after the very thing it destroyed. Where there were fields, there is now concrete and a giant car park.

What a far cry from the cosy, tumbledown 18th-century Devon farmhouse I used to live in, with its chickens, apple trees and roses round the front door.

Still, Westfield has one major attraction for me – a Waitrose. This is the only grocer anywhere near me that has a decent range of real ales.

So I visit frequently. And every time I do, I go up the escalator, past the Astroturfed picnic area, through the uncovered walkway, past the chain restaurants – Wahaca, the Real Greek, Gourmet Burger Kitchen, Rudy's Pizza, Bill's and Spaghetti House. I walk past the fountains with their statue of Paddington, past the smoking area and the giant advertising screen.

The walk used to make me angry. Westfield is always busy. Why can't all these people patronise small, family-run, independent shops and cafés? Why do they allow themselves to be seduced by these bland retail outlets with their billionaire owners?

But, as time has gone on, I've learned to love these strolls. What you see is a bit like life in an Italian city state. There are no cars, and the streets are clean. Young couples court by the fountain. Oldies walk slowly with their families.

It's a *passeggiata*, no less. Visitors swarm in from out of town, to be uplifted by its splendours, like Italian country folk arriving in Florence in 1436 to see the Duomo.

And the people are from every background and country imaginable. It is a very diverse group, to use the modern lingo. They're dressed smartly and the women and girls wear expertly applied make-up.

Clearly, a trip to Westfield is not merely a question of utility. It's a pleasure. It's a bazaar, a place to meet, chat, eat and hang out.

For young people who can't go to the pub, or are not allowed to go the pub, Westfield offers a democratic space open to everyone.

It's also the largest shopping centre in Europe, thanks to a 700,000-foot extension completed in 2018. It now covers a mind-blowing 2.6 million square feet.

Multiplex, an Australian company, built it in 2008 on the site of the 1908 Franco-British Exhibition, celebrating the 1904 Entente Cordiale between Britain and France.

Opening in the year of a financial crisis was dangerous. But, even at the time, Mary Portas, who advised on the launch, was upbeat. And Westfield contributed £170m to redeveloping Shepherd's Bush Tube Station and opening a new Hammersmith and City Line stop.

And, speaking very selfishly, I'm also grateful to Westfield because the price of my nest has increased since its arrival. As has footfall down the Uxbridge Road.

Our local MP, Andy Slaughter, was somewhat negative about Westfield in 2008. He said, 'They're not pitching it at many local people. They're going for people coming in from Kensington and Westminster, or people driving in from Berkshire and Buckinghamshire along the M40. Can a relatively small local centre like Shepherd's Bush cope with this?'

Well, we've coped with it very well. The grumblers like me should shut up.

Tom Hodgkinson is editor of the Idler

Country Mouse

My worst fear? Mary and I become silver splitters

GILES WOOD

The fact that it's Mary's birthday doesn't mean I have to spare her a firm but fair mansplanation of why I believe my wife to be, if not the world's worst shopper, a curate's egg of a shopper.

There are fresh lessons to be learnt daily from her better half.

First up: full marks for not going to the Co-op again. That brace of sustainably caught North Atlantic cod had about as much flavour as a Kleenex tissue.

Congrats for going to Lidl, this time, but *nul points* for buying asparagus spears from Peru rather than from this country, and *nul points* for buying a Rainforest Alliance product – peppermint tea bags. We already have real garden mint coming out of our ears in our own one-acre Nature Recovery Zone.

But, as I warmed to my theme, I was rudely interrupted – my father would have called it insubordination. Rudely, because my private education set me up to be a leader of men. It signally failed to prepare me for life in a household of assertive females.

Mary uses various code words as shorthand to shut me down when I am on what she calls a 'mansplaining rant'. Just two words will shiver my timbers. 'Silver splitters.'

Silver splitting is a new phenomenon among many couples of our vintage and it's always the man who is the first to express astonishment and the woman to initiate the splitting. This two-word Oreshnik missile of a tactic has me striding in fright to my greenhouse. It's a sharp reminder that today's women are (unlike those of my late mother's vintage) less willing to put up with unsatisfactory life partners, irrespective of a man's age and/or his medical issues.

The strutting martinet/Lord of discipline/armchair general type of husband who previously ruled household roosts is no longer relevant, it appears, in 2025, in the Englishman's home which was previously his castle.

And yet discipline is in desperately short supply in our country and particularly in its capital, thanks largely to its London Mayor. Moreover, our Walter Mitty of a prime minister is saying we must now enter a war-footing mentality.

This despite Britons' already enduring the cost-of-living crisis, unsafe streets and a legion of other morale-sapping skirmishes to get doctors' appointments and see off a daily round of would-be internet scammers. We are already battling and we don't want to get into an actual war.

My Balham-based 'war correspondent', Miles, sends me regular crime-incident updates from the city, which conjure up images of crumbling authority and institutions, coupled with a complete absence of bobbies on the beat.

Prefiguring Robert Jenrick, I had already received an extensive image bank of grinning, athletic passengers jumping over the exit gates at Miles's local tube station, while supine officials watched on passively.

Today's update shows a goat being spit-roasted in a tented encampment in Mayfair with an add-on featuring a one-litre bottle of what appeared to be Lucozade. Far from 'aiding recovery', it was a litre bottle of urine – allegedly one of hundreds left daily and thoughtlessly on pavements by minicab drivers. The latter image was wittily captioned by Miles, 'Still warm!'

It's a different story – so far – down here in the country, where courtesy and good behaviour are still considered the norm. Still, I had something of a culture shock this morning when I observed, from my shed at the bottom of the garden, a young blonde, boiler-suited woman at the wheel of a giant John Deere tractor.

She was using a huge boom to both harrow and pulverise the soil at the same time as sowing a crop of maize.

But from what I hear when drifting in and out of Mary's workroom – she always has Talk radio blasting away – most Britons, it is clear, are currently dissatisfied with our government. Not one section of society – rich man, poor man, beggar man or thief – is happy with its performance.

What is to be done? Where to turn for leadership when our Prime Minister is absent, missing in inaction (sic), constantly globetrotting? And warmongering as well. Where are the sound Englishmen – the present-day equivalents of John Bull or William Cobbett?

It's at times like these that I return to the much loved book *England: An Anthology*, compiled by the great *Oldie* founding editor Richard Ingrams, who can still be counted on to play the organ in his local church in Berkshire. I like to dip into this in times of desperation to remind me of what is keeping us in this septic isle at a time when so many Britons are heading for Dubai.

As Ingrams points out in his foreword, 'The mystical response to nature runs through a great deal of our finest literature, which is generally overlooked by foreigners as they observe condescendingly the prosaic and philistine English with his incomprehensible cricket and his inedible food.'

Within seconds, my sense of national pride returns when I read the reassuring words of William Cowper's *The Task*:

'England, with all thy faults, I love thee still ... I would not exchange thy sullen skies and fields without a flow'r for warmer France with all her vines.'

'Maybe it's paranoia – I keep thinking David Attenborough's watching me'

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Feeding the 450 – a modern miracle

Last year, at the Wilderness Festival on the Cornbury Park Estate in the Cotswolds, I was congratulating the caterers on the food, and their boss, Alex Head, said, 'You should be one of our guest chefs.'

I said that would be fun – and then promptly forgot about it. If I'd thought about it at all, I'd have assumed it would be for 40 or 50 people for a couple of courses for lunch.

So when I had a reminder that my recipes for this year were two weeks overdue, it was a shock. Especially as they were to be for not 50 people but 450.

Twice. Lunch and dinner. And five courses. And no nuts. And gluten-free and vegan options, please. Oh dear.

I did what I always do in a food crisis, which is call on the miraculous Katrina Whittaker. She has helped me write my last few cookbooks, been the home economist on my *Cotswold Kitchen* TV show, filled my freezer, assisted me on stage demos and catered for our parties.

We devised a menu and set off to test the recipes with the caterers in their London kitchen. I hadn't worn whites since demonstrating ten years earlier at the Good Food Show. I dug out a jacket and put my favourite knives in a canvas roll, and we got the train to London.

It reminded me of my days as a cook for hire, travelling on the tube, afraid of being arrested for carrying dangerous weapons.

I've been a guest chef before only in hotels, for a week in New York, in Hong Kong and in Bangkok.

I hope attitudes have changed – in my day, head chefs were arrogant, scornful of women in the kitchen and resentful that a 'British Week' or 'Leith's Dinner' was being forced on them by management.

The hotel in Hong Kong was the worst. The chef did his best to sabotage my efforts: not collecting our Scottish raspberries and Angus beef from the airport, refusing to let us use the pastry kitchen (then the only air-conditioned kitchen in the hottest month of the year) and lumbering us with doing the room service for the hotel.

Event catering chefs can't afford to be arrogant or stuck in their ways. They have to keep up with the latest trends, offering new and exciting menus to customers on their big day. Every event is different. You don't get a rehearsal, and if there is a crisis, you have to fix it and keep smiling.

Knives out: Prue Leith, 1975

I loved my catering days.

I'd forgotten what a joy it is to work with a bunch of talented cooks, who love what they do. The head chef, Richard Gynn, was a joy, helpful, enthusiastic and efficient. We tested, tasted and tweaked all our dishes, and I was thrilled with them.

Of course, I'll be nervous on the day in August, but I'm pretty sure it will go like clockwork. My only worry is Hollandaise sauce for 450!

But Richard has no qualms.

Prue Leith presents
The Great British Bake Off

Trollope's best idea? The Irish Post Office

The Victorian novelist set up the finest postal-delivery service on earth, says *Mary Kenny*

I hope the Prime Minister's 'great reset' with the EU will eventually reach the postal services. Countless small businesses have struggled with the bureaucracy of sending goods to Europe.

I've almost given up on postal dispatches to Ireland because of the vexations involved (let alone the cost).

Last year, I tried to send a package of books – mainly poetry, history and religious content – as a gift to a voluntary library in Dublin. The postage cost £25 and the documentation required was voluminous – it took the postal clerk ten minutes to fill in the paperwork.

Eventually, the package was returned to me by the Irish/EU customs, with a note attached referring to 'insufficient documentation'.

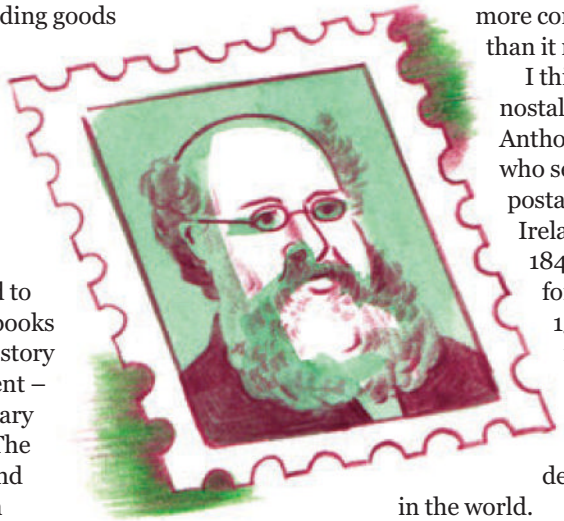
Honestly, once people couldn't send condoms to Ireland. Now it's a struggle to send poetry books – whereas condoms are supplied free by the Irish state.

Recently, I went to the Post Office to dispatch a copy of *The Oldie* to County Cork. The young postal clerk went through the minute details of documenting the contents, registering the value, weight and gift status, as well as my name, address and legal signature, and whether I needed the package tracked for over a tenner. I opted for a simple postal fee of £5.80.

The postal official pored over the details once again and, finally, the envelope was placed in the dispatch bag.

The bureaucratic palaver involved in posting an innocuous item is absurd.

Some blame Brexit. But I also blame the love of nit-picking control which is, frankly, the hallmark of many of those employed on behalf of the European Union. They just love box-ticking – and making everything more complicated than it need be.



I think with nostalgia of Anthony Trollope, who set up the postal service in Ireland in the 1840s, ensuring, for the next 150 years, the most efficient and hassle-free postal-delivery service in the world.

Can it be revived with a 'reset'?

Margaret Thatcher's father taught her the French were 'decadent'. This may have influenced her attitudes to our Gallic neighbours.

Yet there's also been a British sense of admiration for their more liberated manners and morals. The French don't make a fuss about mistresses. The French understand *le crime passionnel* – from a French court Ruth Ellis would have walked free.

But when does a liberated attitude spill over into scandals and crimes? The Dominique Pelicot rapes were extraordinary not just because a husband repeatedly drugged his wife to allow other men to have intercourse with her – but because the men involved seemed to think it was all normal fun.

More recently, there's been the very disturbing case of Dr Joël Le Scouarnec, found guilty of sexually abusing at least 299 young people under sedation.

Even the 'national treasure' Gérard Depardieu has been given an 18-month sentence for sexual assault – behaviour that might formerly have been greeted with a shrug. *Séduire* has always had a positive connotation.

Oldsters such as Brigitte Bardot have denounced the 'new puritanism' – she's said there's nothing amiss with a little grope. But she's looking dated, and the *oh-là-là* French factor has been tainted by a darker hue.

Whenever I attend a funeral – oh yes, the frequency increases yearly – I think of what Conrad Black once said to me: 'The English are Congregationalists at heart. They just like to get into a church and sing hymns.'

Humanists' funerals can be thoughtful, even if crematorium practice can sometimes seem like a conveyor belt. But without those hymns, it's hard to achieve the essential requiem 'vibe' of farewell, nostalgia, awe and uplift.

I notice that 'Dear Lord and Father of Mankind' is usually a hit. The melody is moving and the lyrics evoke the follies and consolations of life. And there's something continuous and historic about mention of Galilee and the Syrian sea.

Kent, where I live, is now Reform UK-dominated terrain.

The County Council has 57 Reform members. It has five Tories, two Labour, five Greens and 12 Lib Dems.

And so flag-flying is subjected to new rules. Official council sites may fly only the Union Flag and the flag of England.

Yet those with private flagpoles are still free to fly whatever standard they choose. The most enchanting house in my town, Deal, sits directly on the seafront facing the white cliffs of Calais, and has its own tall flagpole. Marietta Ryan, an Irish writer who lives there, hasn't yet chosen which flag she might now run up the flagpole.

Some boatmen's vessels fly the Jolly Roger, the grinning skull favoured by pirates – and smugglers. Droll!

TOBY MORISON

The Wild West of Cleethorpes

Even in the morning, the town is alive with pub fights – and Rioting Ron's new romance

JEM CLARKE

Jem Clarke is in his mid-fifties, is five foot zero inches tall and has never left the family home in Cleethorpes, which he shares with his parents...

STEVE WAY

I got up early for the first time since last year. It was time to reacquaint myself with the morning habits of the seaside-town folk I slum it with.

They are very much clockwork Camberwick Greenians in their regularity. They are still all in the same grooves and ruts as last year, still looking as if they're trying to solve the individual puzzles of their own personalities.

There's the pigeon-toed neo-pensioner who lives his whole life in sheltered housing and shadowed understanding.

He looks down at his own tiny, double-timed, careful quicksteps, like a Lipizzaner horse dressaged in a mixed-media tracksuit.

Then comes the street sweeper with the wrinkled face of a basset hound. He still has the twinkly smile that says, 'The robots haven't taken my job yet.'

But, this year, he's unshaven, stooped and with one leg stiffened, as if leaning towards a pension perpetually out of reach.

Here is a woman of later years, impeccably turned out, but with her year-round Russian fur hat detracting from her seasonal ensemble.

Her clear-as-a-bell non-northern newsreader voice is wasted on retail requests such as 'Do you possibly sell strawberry-and-cream lozenges?' Or 'Perhaps a lottery scratchcard is in order to break up the week.'

She then takes her items up the metal fire escape that leads back to her room above a shop. But she never answers the question of how she settled here, in a box without a garden.

I, myself, am also observed. A woman whom I have seen on and off over the years, escorting her twin children to and from endless karate classes, has asked the local café-owner about me.

Until she saw me recently, she thought I had died last year. She said, 'I'm glad he's just got older-looking.'

In the spirit of reportage, I have asked the loose-lipped barista to report back to Karate Mum that one of her twins has had an unusual growth spurt. And so he is sorely in need of a new karate outfit. I've never seen a ninja with exposed knock knees. Uniform-shaming minors may be 'punching down' but, hey, that's karate for you.

The comment irked me. Is that all I've done this year – got 'older-looking', with nothing more explored or learnt?

I do still learn something new every day. After living with dimmed bathroom lighting, owing to a current feud with my local electrician, I accidentally brushed my teeth with Anusol.

Later that same day, I learnt that sensitive toothpaste really is sensitive. I had no internal issues, despite applying Colgate's finest to my anus.

And every encounter with Mother is a philosophical thought experiment. She asked me today to put her grabbing stick in a cupboard at the other end of the house. She says it doesn't go with anything and makes her sitting room 'look like the back of a tradesman's van'.

I explain that if I remove the grabbing stick from her direct reach, it no longer fulfils its function. She insists I remove it from her reach before she finds another function for it – ie dispensing summary justice on my unintentionally minty fresh and fluoridised buttocks.

'Who's fighting?' 'The women,' he clarified

I have learnt never to go into a public house before noon. As I'm walking past one of our oldest and earliest-opening establishments, a pensioner patron stumbles back into the street, warning a passing regular, 'Don't go in there. They're fighting again.'

'Who's fighting, then?' asked his pal, more with interest than in alarm.

'The women,' he clarified, rolling his eyes, as if this was always the most obvious answer.

Shuffling past the double doors before being buried, Wild West-style, under the bodies of ejected women, I am surprised to recognise a couple exiting the establishment: Rioting Ron and new girlfriend Fion.

Looking at Rioting Ron, with his half-shut eyes and unhurried energy, some might think his nickname is sarcastic. But at one point he was the local bastion of Psychobilly, the rockabilly-music sub-genre. Some gigs were rowdy, and that's in a town where women fist-fight before *The World at One*.

Fion gushes, 'We're getting married!'

Ron, wearing the biggest smile I have ever seen him wear – which, admittedly, is not much – confirms this: 'I proposed to her last night.'

'In a restaurant,' she boasts.

'Was it on bended knee?' I ask Ron.

'Nah, it was in Pizza Hut,' he says.

God

SISTER TERESA

A good election? Is the Pope Catholic?

It is wonderful when the Roman Catholic Church gets it right. The conclave for the papal election made me proud to be a member of the Church of Rome.

It was a very impressive occasion – and not because of its pomp and antiquity. Its keynotes were dignity, charity and lack of fuss. The cardinals, including the Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Vincent Nichols, were clearly moved and awed by the occasion.

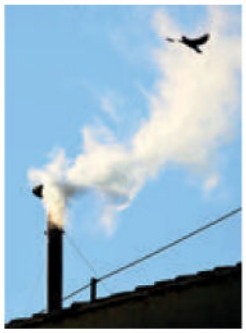
To summarise Cardinal Nichols's comments after the event: he specified that being sealed off from the world (literally – the doors of the Sistine Chapel were locked and stayed locked for the time it would take to elect a new pope) was immensely peaceful. He went on to say that there was no rancour or politicking among the cardinals. It was a calm process.

Furthermore, he stated that he learnt about patience and about taking things step by step. All those present just wanted to do things well.

The contrast with what took place in the Sistine Chapel in May and at elections in the world at large is startling. The speed and efficiency of the choosing of a new pope puts electoral procedures elsewhere to shame.

The Church of England has taken over six months to find a new Archbishop of Canterbury since Justin Welby's resignation.

There was no tedious year-long campaigning as in the election of a President of the United States, nor was there the briefer but so often bitter canvassing that takes place in this country before a general election.



Holy smoke: Pope Leo XIV is chosen

There was no mud-slinging, false accusations or animosity. The cardinals just got on with it.

There are various translations of Paul's Letter to the Philippians. My favourite is 'Do not do anything from personal ambition or a cheap desire to boast' (Philippians 2:3-7). Other versions deplore empty conceit and vainglory.

Philippi, in Greece, was a place of disunity at the time of Paul. It is all too reminiscent of our own times with its political factions and quarrels, and with the members of any political party seemingly unable to stop quarrelling among themselves and unable to back their leaders when support is obviously called for.

St Paul has more to say about the undesirability of disunity in 1 Corinthians 1:11-12. 'From what Chloe's people have been telling me, my dear brothers, it is clear that there are serious differences among you. What I mean are all those slogans that you have, like "I am for Paul", "I am for Apollos", "I am for Cephas", "I am for Christ"…'

'Slogans' says it all. Paul is exasperated by having left Corinth in a state of harmony, only to discover that subsequently quarrels are splitting the Church.

There was no such fragmentation in Rome last month – just a fine example of harmony.

Memorial Service

13th Marquess of Lothian (1945-2024)

A service of thanksgiving was held at Westminster Cathedral for the Marquess of Lothian, known when he was an MP as Michael Ancram.

Deputy Leader of the Conservatives from 2001 to 2005, he fought for the leadership unsuccessfully in 2001.

The service was led by Bishop James Curry, auxiliary bishop of Westminster.

Sir Malcom Rifkind, former Foreign Secretary, recalled being at the family seat, Monteviot House, near Jedburgh, when Michael on the guitar and his father Peter Lothian on the piano sang folk songs.

Ancram nearly became a victim of the IRA bomb in Brighton in 1984.

He later became a key figure in the negotiations that led to the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. Sir John Major, who was at the service, recounted in his memoirs how skilfully Michael moved the peace process forward.

Rifkind suggested that Ancram's credibility on Irish matters was helped by the fact that, although an aristocrat, he was a Catholic:

'He was known by his friends and family as a man of charm, friendliness, humour and integrity; by his parliamentary and ministerial colleagues as a man of courage and principle, whose public life and service derived from his personal beliefs and religious convictions.

'He came from an aristocratic background and accepted that that created obligations as well as privileges.'

Nick Hurd, former MP and son of the late Douglas Hurd, former Foreign Secretary, and Lord Howard of Penrith also paid tribute.

Ancram's brother, the 14th Marquess, read 1 Corinthians 13: 'Love is patient'.

Hymns included 'Hail, Queen of Heaven, the Ocean Star'. The choir sang the 'Londonderry Air', 'Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart' and von Schlegel's 'Be still, my soul'. James Carrington sang Ralph McTell's 'Streets of London'.

JAMES HUGHES-ONSLOW

GETTY

CAT scans aren't the cat's whiskers

The first scanners were venerated – but they aren't miraculous

DR THEODORE DALRYMPLE

A former colleague – in the hospital where I worked – called the scans to which patients are now routinely subjected 'the answering machines'.

This was not meant as a compliment to the technology. It was a lament about the loss in younger doctors of the skills of physical examination of their patients and of logical deduction therefrom. It had taken him a lot of time and trouble to acquire these skills, and now they were almost redundant.

Under the new dispensation, a patient arrived in the hospital, was scanned and received a diagnosis, rather as someone who puts money in a vending machine receives a bar of chocolate. No need for thought or reflection.

Bitterness about changes in the way working methods have changed is not confined to the medical profession.

The poet Vernon Scannell wrote a fine poem about the sorrow of an accounts clerk at the passing of the old leatherbound account books of his youth, which he regarded as beautiful.

I remember, however, the excitement caused by the arrival of the CAT scan in medical practice. It was the answer to our prayers, a step on the way to personal immortality via rapid diagnosis.

At first, machines were few and far between. Patients who were scanned were a fortunate, important elite, and accordingly felt honoured by their selection.

In the years since, CT scanning (as it is now called) has become routine, rather like blood tests. Everyone with a tinge of headache wants a scan and is not satisfied until he or she has had one.

Every year in the United States, CT scans are performed on very nearly a fifth of the population in a year, on average one and a half times: that is to say, 93 million scans on 62 million people.

So far, I have managed to avoid having such a scan, but I doubt that I shall get through life unscathed. Call no man happy (or healthy) until he has had a scan.

Be that as it may, most people imagine that so great an advance in technology (the inventor was awarded a Nobel Prize) can do only good.

Alas, this is not so, at least if a recent estimation of cancers caused by the radiation involved absorbed during a scan is to be believed. Such estimations are always hazardous, of course. They require sophisticated statistical methods and often entail doubtful assumptions.

We often forget that statisticians are like economists: where there are two of them, there are at least three opinions.

I was once asked to investigate a statistically unusual series of occurrences, only for a subsequent statistician to say that the series was not unusual at all. On the contrary, it was rather to be expected.

At any rate, it was estimated that the 93 million scans performed on 62 million patients in the US would result in 103,000 extra cases of cancer over the lifetimes of the scanned patients. Commonest among these would be lung cancer, followed by bowel cancer.

This information is of limited use to an individual, however. For there is no knowing (at least, not yet) whether he or she will be one of those who get the cancer that, but for a past CT scan, would not otherwise have developed; or whether the cancer that *has* developed was caused by a CT scan.

Most readers of this magazine, though, need not fear having a CT scan.

They are already too old for a CT-scan-induced cancer, which takes years to develop. There are, perhaps, not many compensations for growing old, but immunity to cancer resulting from CT scans is one of them.

My advice remains not to need scanning in the first place.

'We're full, but you could give Hell a try'

READERS' LETTERS

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To sign up for our e-newsletter, go to www.theoldie.co.uk

Lowry at the Kardomah

SIR: David Wheeler's article on Kardomah Cafés (May issue) brought back many pleasant memories of my time working in Manchester. I think there were four of these outlets: Market Street, St Ann's Square, South Street and Deansgate.

I frequented the latter two, and on two occasions at Deansgate I found myself sitting close to LS Lowry. I believe he was very fond of these cafés.
Peter Crummett, Stockport

'This is National Treasure Island'

Tram dram

SIR: I agree with Clive Whittington's letter (Spring issue) in praise of the Manchester trams which wind through pedestrian areas.

Growing up in Ireland, I'd put a coin on the rail of the infrequent Dalkey to Dublin diesel train, and would then hunt for the squashed penny. It passed the time.

In Manchester recently, oh so close to the tram tracks, I couldn't resist…
Robert Bathurst, London SW2

We must remember them

SIR: I enjoy reading anything by AN Wilson, but I think he was unfair to Owen, Sassoon and Brooke in his 'Great war stories' piece (June issue).

Most of the First World War poets were soldiers, very young men straight out of school or university. They were writing in a now much despised genre – the Georgian pastoral – and their poems came out of direct and brutal experience.

Yes, I agree that Owen's work is sometimes clumsy, but he didn't get much chance to hone his craft – he died on the Western Front in 1918 aged 25. Personally I find his gaucheness poignant and more powerful than his more polished poems.

Yes, Brooke's sonnets seem incongruously romantic with hindsight – and not as spontaneous, from his perspective as an idealist and a classicist. But he died aged 28 before the horrors of trench warfare got properly underway.

The witness of these very young combatant poets is unique in English literature and I don't think it's fair to compare them with the likes of the middle-aged master T S Eliot, writing in the '40s.
Rhona Taylor, Rickmansworth, Hertfordshire

War bores

SIR: How refreshing to read A N Wilson ('Great war stories', June issue) debunking the reputations of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. The former wasn't even that good-looking. I had long thought I was the only person who regarded these writers as overpraised.

It is a pity that he didn't add Vera Brittain to his list. Her *Testament of Youth* is all but unreadable and one of the most boring books I have ever ploughed through. Perhaps *The Oldie* could establish a Most Boring Book of the Year Award, with Mr Wilson in the chair.

Yours faithfully,
Jane Moth, Stone, Staffordshire

'Excuse Roger - he's taking part in a group chat'

British Empire of the Sun

SIR: In his review of *The Sun Rising* (Books, May issue), Paul Lay writes '…the Scots and Irish proved themselves to be far more effective imperialists than the English ever were'.

You wanna know why? It was the weather! They were all gagging to get out from under the clouds. Basically the same reason for the whole British Empire. So now you know.
Brian Thomas, basking in Provence

Bright Spark

SIR: I did so enjoy Robin Baird-Smith's memories of Muriel Spark (Books, review of *Electric Spark*, June issue). I vividly recall reading the stories by her that used to appear in his *Winter's Tales*.

I'm not sure that I need to read another biography of Dame Muriel, but I have a suggestion for Mr Baird-Smith. Could he do something to enliven today's literary fiction? What I read of it is mostly absolutely dire!
Diana Burston, Furneux Pelham, Hertfordshire

My Persuaders cravat

SIR: Delighted to read the Old Un's reflections on Tony Curtis (Old Un's Notes, June issue).

Since *Peaky Blinders* was screened, resulting in a renaissance for the flat cap, I have always looked forward to *The Persuaders!* returning to our telly so that I can wear my cravat outdoors, along with a colour scheme comparable to Michael Portillo's.

Also, *Miami Vice* would give my jacket with rolled-up sleeves a new lease of life. I have a few shirts that would not offend Tom Selleck in *Magnum, PI*. At the tender age of 66, I feel my wardrobe should reflect not the cast of *Last of the Sumner Wine* but more Geoffrey, Rod, Jane and Freddy in the children's show *Rainbow*.

The days of our fashion choices, unlike our age, should not be numbered. I raise my glass to the tank top and Oxford bags,

'I got this for a cyber attack...'

and Gyles Brandreth's jumpers. Just don't tell my good lady.

Regards,
Vivian James, Wigley, Derbyshire

Illiterate King John

SIR: The illustration of King John, pen in hand, 'signing' Magna Carta in David Horspool's article (History, June issue) is wrong. John was illiterate and wouldn't have known what a pen was or been able to read the document. He sealed it before repudiating it.

Incidentally, how about St Alban as our patron saint?
Stephen Halliday, Cambridge

Not true, Prue

SIR: I love *The Oldie* and I'd probably love Prue Leith in real life, but how misguided was she in her comment (Prue's News, May issue) about a telephone consultation with the practice nurse not constituting healthcare?

The telephone bit may be open to debate, but I suspect that many of your readers will have benefited from the extensive knowledge and competence of their general-practice nurses.

If Prue doubts this, may I refer the honourable lady to my sign off below?
Beverley Bostock PgDip (Diabetes) MSc (Respiratory Care) MA (Medical Ethics and Law) Queen's Nurse
Advanced Nurse Practitioner Mann Cottage Surgery
President-Elect Primary Care Cardiovascular Society
Asthma Lead and Respiratory Disease Committee Chair, Association of Respiratory Nurses
Primary Care Respiratory Society Executive Committee Member
Editor in Chief, Practice Nurse Journal
Independent Training Consultant

The All-Bran hymn

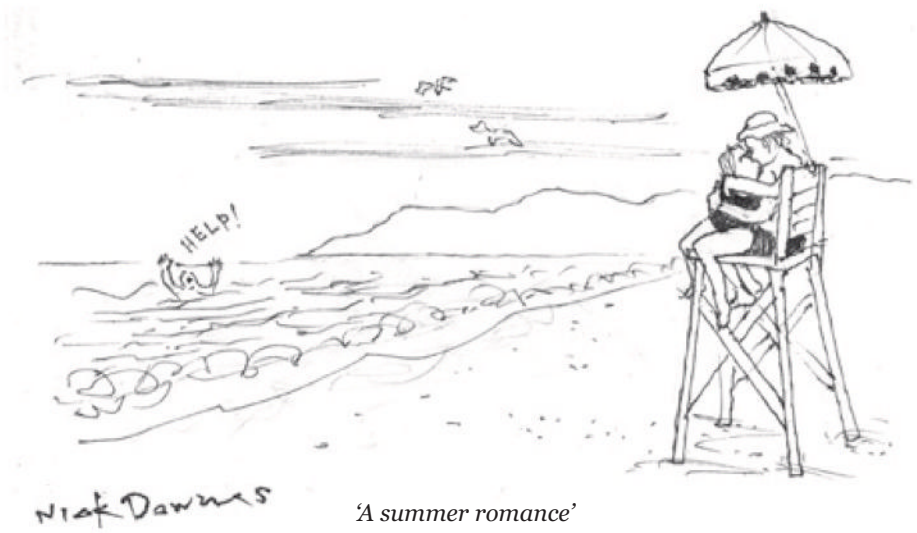
SIR: I can't remember any hymn malapropisms (ref Old Un's Notes, June issue) from my teenage years in a church choir and at school, but I do recall 'Dear Lord and Father of mankind' being known as the All-Bran hymn – 'Take from our souls the strain and stress...'
Philip Corp, Salisbury, Wiltshire

'Come on, Bozo. I know you're in there'

Gyles Brandreth's dates

SIR: I support and congratulate Gyles Brandreth (June issue) on his endeavour to see that theatre posters include the year of production, not just day and month.

As a sideline to my career in advertising I designed theatre posters, usually for productions that had little or no money (fringe, amateur, theatre schools etc) and gladly accepted tickets as my fee. I always insisted that the year be included in the design, hoping that one day in the distant future my work might be worthy of some kind of design archive.
Yours,
John Moysen, London SE21



'A summer romance'

America the Beautiful

Forget Donald Trump. The USA is way more civilised than Britain

A N WILSON

It's awful when a child goes to live thousands of miles away.

But that was 30 years ago now, when my first-born, Emily Wilson, went to Yale to do a PhD.

It never crossed my mind, at the time, that she was leaving England for ever, and the slow dawning of realisation remains a gnawing, everlasting ache.

For more than two decades, she has been a professor in Philadelphia (UPenn – Ezra Pound's alma mater) and I visit her and the children as often as I can.

That cheesy song is true – 'Every time I say goodbye, I die a little'. Or, probably, in her case, since she teaches Ancient Greek, that should read 'die a Liddell' – after Liddell and Scott.

The surprise, over the years, is the discovery that, when I head off home, I start missing the great Republic itself.

The Yanks still drive in miles, not kilometres. The trucks still resemble my old Dinky lorries. The trolley buses in Philadelphia clank towards us from the 1920s, bells ringing. The churches are old-fashioned and Prayer Booky – and the Episcopal Church in particular has delivered some wonderful broadsides against the President.

The ruder we Londoners seem to become towards one another, the more I value the conventions of American *politesse*. I find myself, without affectation, calling strangers 'Sir' and 'Ma'am'.

When Emily first went to Philadelphia, I imagined it would be only a few years before she moved to somewhere 'more interesting'. I have now come to love that city almost as much as I love London.

West Philly is a Betjemanic paradise of late-Victorian and Edwardian villas, each different from its neighbour, with its porch and balconies. Cardinals chirrup; chipmunks, raccoons, even deer frolic in the garden.

This gentle *quartier* (of, yes, clearly, a desperately poor city where many are less fortunate) has many of the shabby charms of North Oxford when Emily was growing up – an Oxford now wrecked by incoming Londoners who have inflated the house prices.

I regard her house as a sort of shrine – it was here that she sat for ten years translating Homer, in a version that is now universally regarded as the best thing since Keats looked into Chapman. (I know I am biased.)

This part of Philadelphia is much nicer than most comparable areas of London, and the houses are about a third of the price.

After a week or so in Philly, I went to New York. I hadn't been for years and I've now reached the stage of life when I ask myself, 'Will I ever do this again?'

The club where I stayed was in every possible way nicer than any club in London. It has olde-type architecture and 'service', while unobtrusively embracing the changes in modern life that are for the better.

I understand those who inveigh against 'woke', but is it not just a word for *justifiable* changed attitudes?

America led the way when it came to the civil-rights movement and the recognition of the equality of the races.

The Yanks had further to travel than the British – they had enslaved a large part of their population. So of course they felt more strongly than we did about the need to set matters right.

When I went into dinner in the Diogenes Club back in London the other day – yes, of course it was beautiful, as always – there were the same old codgers (I one of them) and a multitude of slightly troubling young, pretending to be codgers. But, in the club in New York, there were amusing young African American women dining in the company not only of their partners but of their extremely expensively coiffured dogs. The charming person waiting on me, Maxine, was trans.

> I value American *politesse*. I call strangers 'Sir' and 'Ma'am'

Who can doubt that Old Europe would have been reluctant to change had it not been for America, which led the way in the women's movement, gay rights and so many areas of cultural and artistic change? What was revolutionary in Greenwich Village in 1970 is now normal all over the world.

We are passing through a truly weird period in American history, but the efforts of the MAGA movement to put the clock back will fail – just as in Britain, the *Dad's Army* Farage version of Trumpery will fail.

The simple truth is that women are equal to men and it doesn't matter tuppence whether you are gay or straight or trans. All races and religions are equal under God. Weirdly, Europe had to learn these simple and obvious truths from the USA.

These are bigger things – because they affect actual, lived lives; bigger than Trump. He will go. These freedoms will grow, expand and teach the world.

They are the direct and ineluctable consequence of what we celebrate on 4th July – the decision by a group of extraordinarily intelligent lawyers to draft a constitution free from the constraints of throne and altar; based on the values of the enlightenment. The Georgian part of Philly, where they drafted that great document, survives unbombed, beautiful and 'undeveloped'.

As always, I flew home with a tearful heart, reciting from Auden's quatrain: 'God bless the USA, so large, so friendly, and so rich.'

The Oldie

Review of Books

Summer round-up

Reading on a sunny afternoon **John Walsh**
My disastrous novel **Rupert Christiansen**
Books for the soul **Lucy Lethbridge & Liz Anderson**

Biography & Memoir * History * Politics & Current Affairs * Art & Architecture * Music & Poetry * Fiction * Reprints * Crime & Thrillers

Could you spare an hour a week to change a child's life story?

One in four children leave primary school unable to read to the expected standard. This will have a knock-on effect on their future opportunities. Schoolreaders, a national charity, is tackling this by sending volunteers into local primary schools to listen to children read.

It's simple but life-changing. Just a little bit of one-to-one reading time each week can transform children's confidence and future prospects. The charity's research shows that 94% of children improve their reading confidence through these sessions, and many benefit from the steady presence of an encouraging adult.

Chris Dowd, a retired nurse and lecturer, spent six years as a Schoolreader. He relished being part of school life, from classroom sessions to school trips. "I loved the children's enthusiasm," he says, "and the warm welcome every time I arrived."

Schoolreaders

improving literacy • increasing life chances

To support this vital work or find out more about volunteering, visit Schoolreaders.org

Schoolreaders CIO, Registered in England and Wales, Charity Number: 1159157

The Intelligence War

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The Oldie

Review of Books

Issue 72 Summer 2025

Not forgetting important titles recently reviewed in *The Oldie*

Behind the Scenes by Angela V John

Bird School by Adam Nicolson
Affairs by Juliet Rosenfeld

When the Going was Good by Graydon Carter

Men of a Certain Age by Kate Mossman

Lost in the Forest by Caroline Heber-Percy

When the Carry On Stopped by Dave Ainsworth

Lady Pamela Berry by Harriet Cullen

Of Thorn & Briar by Paul Lamb

God is an Englishman by Bijan Omrani

The Combative Life of Douglas Cooper, Collector and Friend of Picasso by Adrian Clark and Richard Calvocoressi

The Sun Rising by Anna Whitelock

Electric Spark by Frances Wilson

Is a River Alive? by Robert Macfarlane

Buckley by Sam Tanenhaus

The Buried City by Gabriel Zuchtriegel

London Clubland by Seth Alexander Thévoz

Sceptred Isle by Helen Carr

Parallel Lines by Edward St Aubyn

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COVER ILLUSTRATION: BOB WILSON

Books for Summer

For many, summer holidays involve outdoor activity from swimming and boating to hiking, cycling and riding. But, for readers, it's more likely to comprise the joy of settling down in the shade with a cool drink and a good book. Reassuringly, this edition is full of good new books.

John Walsh picks perennial favourites for pool or seaside reading. In the wake of *Conclave* the movie and the real conclave to elect Pope Leo XIV, Lucy Lethbridge suggests some fascinating books about the papacy.

New memoirs include books on Paul and John and Yoko, Francis of Assisi, Anne Frank and William Sargant, the monstrous doctor who induced narcosis in his notorious 'sleep rooms'. New history offerings include Max Hastings's *Sword*, Tim Bouverie's lauded *Allies at War* and the second part of Christopher de Bellaigue's trilogy on Suleyman the Magnificent.

There's fiction from Colum McCann, Nobel Laureate Abdulrazak Gurnah, David Szalay and Rachel Joyce, whose *The Homemade God* is already a best-seller. There are sumptuous books on art from Blake, Turner and Constable to the Bloomsbury Group and the women in the lives of Matisse and Picasso.

In our Current Affairs pages, there's a riveting, damning account of working at Facebook from Sarah Wynn-Williams, as well as books dissecting Britain's white working-class and our anxious age of over-diagnosis and job dissatisfaction. On a happier note, there are uplifting books on pilgrimages, British walks and natural history and Lucy Mangan's *Bookish*.

'If we stop reading, we stop putting ourselves in other people's shoes', she writes. I'm looking forward to immersing myself in the imaginary, fictional lives of others on holiday. My worry? A Kindle in my hand luggage or an overweight suitcase stuffed with books?

Charlotte Metcalf

Saint Francis by Philip Fruytiers, c.1650

FRANCIS OF ASSISI
THE LIFE OF A RESTLESS SAINT

VOLKER LEPPIN

Yale University Press, 296pp, £20

The author is professor of historical theology at Yale Divinity School, and, as Nadya Williams in *Christianity Today*, wrote, he 'reminds us that the church's saints still retain a powerful grip on our hearts and minds'.

Costica Bradatan in the *TLS* explained how Francis (c.1181-1226) was born into wealth and 'was expected to join his father's prosperous textile business until, one day, struck by an encounter with the Gospels ... Francis stripped himself of everything' and 'embarked on a life of begging and scraping' becoming 'the model for a spirituality rooted in poverty, non-possession and the rejection of money'.

Bradatan thought the book 'complex, multilayered and ambitious'.'Every biographer of Francis must wrestle with the hagiographical tradition alongside more typical historical facts and methods,' continued Nadya Williams.

'When it comes to understanding a saint, a historian can only go so far. Even if we knew all the facts about Francis, they would not make him less complicated – perhaps only more.'

Kirkus Reviews found this a 'careful' account of the life of Francis 'as he may have lived it and of the saint whose influence continues in our modern day', while Steve Dixon in *Library Journal* thought it the 'most comprehensive and scholarly work ever written' on the saint.

LOOKING AFTER
A PORTRAIT OF MY AUTISTIC BROTHER

BY CAROLINE ELTON

Hutchinson Heinemann, 336pp, £18.99

'I will not be the only sibling to appreciate **Looking After**,' wrote Sara Wheeler in the *Spectator*. 'Our voices are seldom heard.' For Wheeler, the book is really about 'the experience of being the sibling of a person who is not like you.'

Elton's brother, Lionel, was born in 1949, before the concept of neurodiversity. Lionel, said Wheeler, 'is one of the luckier ones.' His mother was devoted to his needs and Lionel was able to hold down various jobs in supported environments with the help of advocacy organisations, found or even set up by his mother. He lived in sheltered housing until his final illness.

Elton, a psychologist, describes how she felt 'shame, then shame about the shame, meta-shame in fact.' Wheeler found the book's tone authentic and positive: 'Elton writes clearly, with yeasty dollops of direct speech to help the prose rise. Colloquial vocabulary seems appropriate to the intimate nature of the material ('headspace', 'double whammy' and so on); and she has a writer's instinct for specificity (Lionel crunching roast chicken bones and sucking out the purple marrow in public).

Former Chilean leader Augusto Pinochet in 1997

Alice O'Keeffe in the *Times* shared Wheeler's admiration and found the book shows 'just how profoundly challenging our world still is for autistic people and their families.'

Elton, she said, 'explores all this with warmth and the lightest of touches. **Looking After** is never dry – Lionel's glorious, messy, infuriating humanity comes first. She wants to honour and celebrate her chicken-chomping, toiletry-slathering, transport-fixated brother, and the mother who made his life possible.'

38 LONDRES STREET
ON IMPUNITY, PINOCHET IN ENGLAND AND A NAZI IN PATAGONIA

PHILIPPE SANDS

Weidenfeld, 480pp, £25

This is a legal and historical detective story of two criminals accused of genocide and crimes against humanity.

Augusto Pinochet, 82-year-old former Chilean dictator, arrived in London in 1998, having backed Thatcher over the Falklands. He expected diplomatic immunity until Scotland Yard, acting on a Spanish extradition request, arrested him.

The legal battle is woven around a second thread: SS officer Walther Rauff oversaw the development of gas lorries in Nazi-occupied eastern Europe, evaded prosecution at Nuremberg, settling in Patagonia. Arrested in 1962, he was spared extradition to Germany by a Chilean court ruling.

The eponymous address was a Santiago torture headquarters run by Pinochet's regime. Surviving witnesses recognised images of Rauff and recalled his strong German accent when speaking Spanish.

The *Guardian*'s Rafael Behr noted that 'Sands follows each twist in the double narrative with an impressive combination of moral clarity and judicious detachment. As in his previous books... there is personal investment in the story. But it is Sands's expertise in international law, coupled with a natural storyteller's intuition for structure, that gives his latest book its understated power.'

Richard Vinen for the *Literary Review* hazarded that 'his editors, keen to replicate the success of *East West Street*, have encouraged a personal approach. Sands is at his best when he sticks to the central topic and addresses the legal ramifications of the Pinochet case.'

WIKI, GETTY

CHILDREN OF RADIUM
A BURIED INHERITANCE

JOE DUNTHORNE

Hamish Hamilton, 320pp, £16.99

Siegfried Merzbacher, a German Jewish chemist, worked for the Nazis in a secret chemical weapons laboratory from 1933 to 1935 before leaving the country for Turkey in decidedly murky circumstances.

'**Children of Radium** is a family memoir that records the mazy path by which the prize-winning Welsh novelist [Dunthorne] discovered just how little he knew of his German Jewish heritage,' explained Anthony Cummins in the *Observer*. 'Hunches, tip-offs, false trails and dead ends abound in Dunthorne's quest to determine how much Siegfried knew – and when – about his work's murderous potential.'

The book 'plays out as a tangled investigation of complicity, courage and cowardice, ceaselessly yo-yoing between potential indictment and mitigation.

Dunthorne's instinctively jokey tone doesn't minimise the ever-present horror, yet he recognises, too, that the darkest aspects of his story are tricky to separate from the frisson of proximity, the fundamental thrill of the chase... By necessity, **Children of Radium** is piecemeal, inconclusive, full of pregnant silences, maybes and what ifs.'

Norma Clarke, in *Literary Review*, praised Dunthorne's 'commendably low-key' tone. 'The story he uncovers has enough drama and horror; we don't need to be told how upset, ashamed and appalled he is. When the full revelation that he is the living descendant of a man whose work helped enable a genocide comes, it is truly moving... This is a story of cumulative denialism. How far the denial was conscious and how deep Siegfried's self-knowledge went are among the many unanswerable questions.' The book is about degrees of culpability; it develops into a subtle study of how evil goes on being disavowed and perpetuated.'

Dr William Walters Sargant (1907 – 1988). The British psychiatrist at home, 1975.

ALAMY

THE SLEEP ROOM
A VERY BRITISH MEDICAL SCANDAL

JON STOCK

The Bridge Street Press, 432pp, £25

In the 1960s Ward 5 of the Royal Waterloo hospital in London was a place for the psychiatric treatment of women suffering from postpartum depression, eating disorders, or romantic entanglements considered inappropriate by their parents. Such treatment included induced narcosis – hence the book's title – and electro-convulsive therapy.

Stock's book 'reveals a scarcely credible medical scandal that unfolded within earshot of Big Ben,' wrote Joan Smith in *Literary Review*. '"Only" five patients died as a result of their experiences in the "sleep room". The doctor who presided over it like a visiting deity, William Sargant, was never held accountable. On the contrary, he was lionised and invited to speak at conferences all over the world, and made regular appearances on television and the radio.' But 'the proper word for what happened in Sargant's "sleep room" is torture'.

Ellen MacArthur arrives in England, 2001

Six women give accounts of their treatment, including the actress Celia Imrie, who was sent there aged 14 because of an eating disorder. All six 'thought him a monster', said Blake Morrison in the *Guardian*. 'So did nurses allocated to the sleep room, whose job was to medicate the patients (usually with chlorpromazine) four times a day, and who hated the spooky ambience and "dark alchemy of drugs and electricity"; it was, one said, "the sort of thing you'd expect in Hitler's time".'

Yet, as Morrison pointed out: the Royal Society of Physicians' website calls him 'the most important figure in postwar psychiatry ... He gave his patients hope.' Those women, along with many former nurses and doctors, would beg to disagree.'

STARS TO STEER BY
CELEBRATING THE TWENTIETH CENTURY WOMEN WHO WENT TO SEA

JULIA JONES

Adlard Coles, 336pp, £22

Julia Jones writes extensively about her love of sailing and now she's focused on the story of 20th century women who enjoyed freedom and independence by getting out on the water. There are more than 100 women included here, presented chronologically. Familiar names, Tracy Edwards, Ellen MacArthur and Clare Francis, sit alongside less well known, but nonetheless extraordinary figures whom she recognises for their achievements.

Ysenda Maxtone Graham in the *Daily Mail* enjoyed the 'the ingenuity and gusto of the sailors' celebrated in this 'lively book'.

'In those days when it was almost impossible for a high-born woman to get a job, sailing was an outlet for their frustrated energies. But all too often, they went to sea as "helpmeets" to their husbands or brothers.'

Jones tells us about the women who took their lives into their own hands while clad in the dress codes of the era – voluminous skirts and straw boaters – as they raced.

'It's the clothes that make this book such fun to read," wrote Maxtone Graham, remembering that 'We don't want any petticoats here!' was what the man at the Admiralty said to Vera Laughton, and admiring the example of Nicolette Milnes-Walker, who sailed solo across the Atlantic in 1971, naked whenever the weather allowed.

THE MANY LIVES OF ANNE FRANK

BY RUTH FRANKLIN

Yale, 440pp, £16.99

THE WOMEN'S ORCHESTRA OF AUSCHWITZ: A STORY OF SURVIVAL

BY ANNE SEBBA

Weidenfeld, 304pp, £22

Ruth Franklin's book about Anne Frank, part of Yale's *Jewish Lives* series, is 'part biography, part history and part literary and cultural criticism', said David Herman in the *TLS*.

The story of Anne Frank's life is 'clearly and powerfully told' and has the advantage of being 'excellent on women's experiences in the Nazi camps, a subject that has only recently begun to be properly addressed by historians'.

The second, more interesting half of the book, though, takes on the question of Frank's legacy – the 'story of how her father, Otto, the sole survivor from the annexe, returned to Amsterdam from Auschwitz and edited and published Anne's diary (the key word here is edited); and of its extraordinary success in America, first as a bestselling book, *The Diary of a Young Girl* (1947), then a prizewinning play on Broadway in 1955 and a film in 1959'.

That is the story not only of Anne's transformation into a celebrity, but of an erasure. The diary, as Cynthia Ozick put it, was 'infantilized, Americanized, homogenized, sentimentalized; falsified, kitschified'. This is, thought Herman, 'one of the best accounts of the many lives – and afterlives – of Anne Frank'.

Bart Van Es, in the *Spectator*, took a similarly complimentary view. He said this 'superb and subtle book' pivots around the scene of Anne Frank's death in the starkly titled chapter *Corpse*.

The life comes before; the literary afterlife, and complex textual history, comes after: 'At first, there was only modest interest in the book. The British publishers soon withdrew it after poor sales. But in America, where Eleanor Roosevelt agreed to put her name to a preface, it soon became a bestseller.'

Now, he noted, 'The author's photograph is so well known it has been compared with the Mona Lisa. This book does a brilliant job of accounting for that phenomenon.'

The *New Yorker* called it a 'vivid cultural history'.

Also taking on that under-addressed issue of women's experience in the camps is **The Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz.** Clare Mulley in the *Spectator* said Anne Sebba showed 'great sensitivity' in telling the stories of the agonising moral compromises and sustaining human connections it created.

'The orchestra's main role was to play marching music to hurry other prisoners to and from their forced labour each morning and evening. As a result, although themselves enslaved, some of the musicians felt complicit in the Nazi project.' Yet, 'they knew that their lives depended on their collective endeavour'.

The *Guardian*'s Kathryn Hughes thought that this account of 'music-making at the gates of hell' was 'deft', and that 'running through this fine book is Sebba's empathy for the impossible moral choices presented to these young women, who were given a chance of survival in exchange for making music'.

In the *Telegraph*, Simon Heffer saluted the author's research – 'Sebba's command of detail is superb' – and applauded her tribute to 'the resilience and courage of a group of women who refused to be beaten by evil'.

Passport photos of Anne Frank, taken at Polyfoto in Amsterdam, May 1939

Amanda 'Foxy Knoxy' Knox

FREE

MY SEARCH FOR MEANING

AMANDA KNOX

Headline, 304pp, £22

To be tried and found guilty of a crime you didn't commit, at the bar of public opinion as well as in a court of law, is a devastating double whammy.

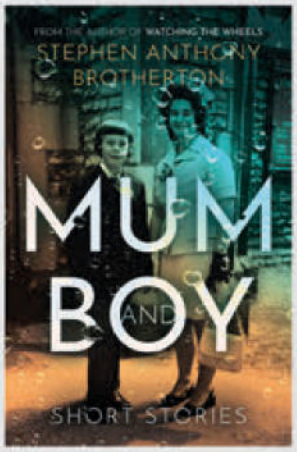
Little wonder that despite being pardoned, Amanda Fox doubted that she would ever be **Free**, the title of her new memoir. She would remain 'Foxy Knoxy,' the entitled young American involved in a sex game that went horribly wrong.

'"Foxy Knoxy", she writes, 'was not a person, she was an idea of a person that people purchased over and over because it was morbidly satisfying. And also, you know, sexually titillating.'

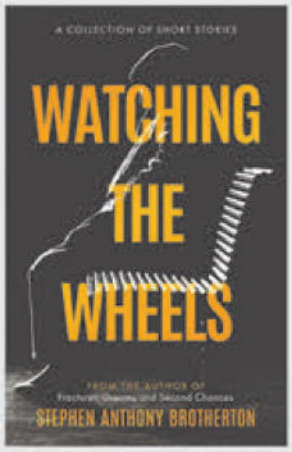
Surmising that Knox 'may never climb out from under the yoke of public opinion', *Rolling Stone*'s Rachel Brodsky quotes her as saying, '"I don't have the means to escape suffering, to find closure, to heal trauma ... but I know how to try."'

According to Fiona Sturges in the *Guardian*, 'The Knox we met in **Free** is clever, anxious, funny, contradictory, sometimes self-regarding and given to talking about herself in the third person. She is also an unfairly vilified exoneree whose impulse to disappear and live a normal life has been trumped by a desire to rewrite the narrative foisted upon her.

For Knox, being free isn't just about not being behind bars – it's about being seen and understood.'



Mum and Boy - Four individual and complex stories about human development and the psychological nature of the mum and boy relationship. They explore the potential complexity of this connection and show how it can go badly wrong. A dead boy remembering tragedy from inside his coffin; a boy dealing with the death of his mum, who died by suicide; a teenager who mistakenly kills his father; a teenager dealing with hallucinations. Each compelling story covers a range of topics from mental health, suicide and trauma. All with one thing in common - vulnerable human beings looking for survival.



Watching the Wheels - A collection of eighteen short stories – a killer created from abuse; a teenager in search of answers from his older brother who died by suicide ten years earlier; a woman trapped in a persistent vegetative state; a ghost hunter afraid of ghosts; a bullied police officer; a man in a care home wanting a great adventure; and other fractured human beings looking for answers, trying to survive.

Stephen Anthony Brotherton has been a social worker for over three decades and currently works for the NHS. He began creative writing ten years ago, and his stories explore the nature of vulnerability – from birth to death and beyond. He lives in Shropshire with a schnoodle called River and has had three books published – a novel and two collections of short stories. Stephen is also a long-standing member of the Bridgnorth Writers' Group.

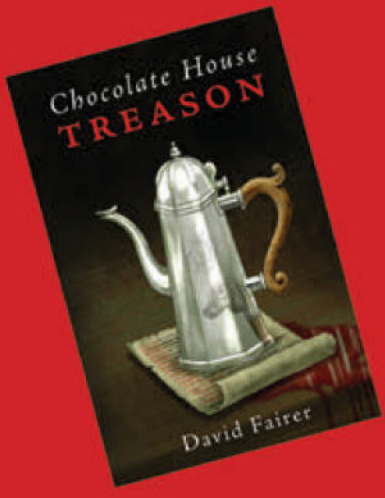
'From the heart-wrenching dedication onwards this incredible book lures you in. I was moved, shocked, heartened and totally absorbed by these uniquely compelling stories. Stephen is an incredible writer and I hope he writes a lot more.'
Paul A. Mendelson: BAFTA-nominated Screenwriter and Author

'Heartbreaking and haunting but filled with a silent strength as well, this collection is brimming with all kinds of complex emotions and yet is compelling enough to read in a single sitting. Absolutely loved it.'
Awais Khan: Author of 'In the Company of Strangers' & 'No Honour'

Available from all good bookshops
Mum and Boy: ISBN: 978-1835740019
Watching the Wheels: ISBN: 978-1915352866

THE CHOCOLATE HOUSE MYSTERIES

1708. Classic murder mysteries set in the authentic world of Queen Anne's London



"A marvellous fictional voyage that deserves to be enjoyed without any moderation whatsoever!" — *NetGalley*

Troubador.co.uk/bookshop | Bookshop.org | Waterstones

McCartney and Lennon performing at CBS Studios, 1964

JOHN & PAUL: A LOVE STORY IN SONGS

IAN LESLIE

Faber, 432pp, £25

Conservative estimates put the current Beatles' book tally well into the thousands but some are suggesting this bestseller now leads the fray, the most moving, revelatory and original account of the band ever written and proving equally compulsive for deep-end experts as for those on the periphery.

It retraces their story and scintillating song catalogue via the supernaturally close, devoted and explosive relationship between their key composers and their ability to think and write almost as one mind.

'The John-Paul duality persists,' Blake Morrison wrote in the *Guardian*. 'Heavy rocker versus cute populist. Working-class rebel v smug bourgeois clone. Tormented genius v girly sentimentalist. Leslie takes on these tired polarities by reframing the story as a volatile bromance... taking us closer to understanding it.'

'It is stunning to follow Leslie's insights into how profound their preternatural alliance was,' thought T Bone Burnett in the *New York Times*. 'This book is about soul, about grief and most of all about the love that two boys who lost their mothers far too soon have for each other and the unfathomable power of that merger. I'm sorry John isn't here to read it.'

Richard Williams in *Literary Review* wrote, 'Leslie traces his subjects through their triumphs and periods of unhappiness with careful sympathy... and sends us back to the music with sharpened ears and even more gratitude towards its makers.'

'This is a tremendous book,' Alwyn Turner of the *Times* declared, 'its structure, to centre each of his 43 chapters around a song, in the manner of a blog or a podcast series, capturing the breathless pace of their career while marvelling at the invention and creativity of the art. And there's some lovely writing – *Penny Lane* ends with "a little moan of feedback".'

John & Paul: the most moving, revelatory and original account of the band ever written

YOKO

DAVID SHEFF

Simon & Shuster UK, 384pp, £25

Is Lennon's widow a pretentious twerp who broke up the Beatles? In this three-part biography – before, during and after John – Sheff makes a convincing case that she actually kept her troubled husband in the band for its last two years, during which *Abbey Road* and *Let It Be* were recorded.

As for her art, Sheff demonstrates what a pioneer and player she was in the conceptual field, repeatedly using the *Imagine* theme long before she co-wrote the song.

But then, he's a long-time friend of his subject. And accordingly, wrote Victoria Segal in the *Times*, his depiction felt 'gentle, empathetic, committed to righting undeniable wrongs'; and a sharp reminder that Ono wasn't dangling in limbo, waiting for a Beatle'.

She also commended the account of Lennon's 18-month 'Lost Weekend' – 'not trudging through his well-documented boozy shenanigans, but examining how Ono used the time to reassert her artistic independence' – and concluded that, though the book was 'by no means as radical as its formidable subject, it successfully documented her remarkable creative resolve and resilience'.

Yoko Ono, September 1974

In the *Daily Telegraph* Neil McCormick reserved special praise for the final third of this work. He was 'rocked like a bomb' by Lennon's murder,finding the 'the grief and horror of those chapters shattering.'

Everything after 1980, he wrote, was 'aftermath and reverberation – a life lived in dust that refused to settle'.

Only Jonathan Jones in the *Guardian* sounded a sour note, judging it to be a 'polemical hagiography'. 'Biography needs objectivity,' he wrote.

But the *Spectator*'s Lynn Barber put him straight: Sheff asks at the start: '"Can a journalist tell the truth about a friend?" I think he has.'

GETTY, WIKIMEDIA

Following Pope Leo XIV's recent election, LUCY LETHBRIDGE hunts down good books about the papacy

Even the most belligerently secular branches of modern media get excited about a papal election.

The sequestered cardinals in their red garb, the black smoke, the white smoke and finally the 'habemus papam' from the balcony: it's gripping in its mysterious unchangingness; there's nothing else in modern life quite like it. A novelist who takes on the papacy has material for two or three trilogies at least.

Robert Harris, author of *Conclave,* is of course the master of recreating the lethal drip-feed of the fight for political power. And because he had researched the mysteries of papal politics with his usual thoroughness, even with the somewhat random twist at the end of its tale, *Conclave* delivered a vivid depiction of ambition in an institution in which the meek must be blessed.

Ralph Fiennes in *Conclave*, the film based on Robert Harris's novel

Before *Conclave*, the most famous pope novel was probably *The Shoes of the Fisherman* by Australian writer Morris West, which sold millions of copies and was made into a film starring Anthony Quinn and Laurence Olivier.

It was published in 1963 (the year of the death of Pope John XXIII) and contains some similar plotlines to *Conclave* – a cardinal appointed by a previous pope *in pectore* (in secret) for example, which slings a surprise candidate into the election – but West's pope is Ukrainian and he based him on two real-life cardinals from the former Soviet Union who spent years in forced labour camps.

Pope Leo XIV at his inauguration Mass in St Peter's Square, 2025

And this was two decades before the surprise election of John Paul II, the first non-Italian, let alone eastern European, pope to be elected since the English Adrian IV in 1154 and the Netherlandish Adrian VI in 1522.

West, a former member of the order of Christian Brothers, had a knack for prophecy: in *Clowns of God* (1981) his central figure was a pope who abdicated to live in retirement – 20 years before Pope Benedict XVI did just that.

A tricky aspect of the pope novel is the rather obvious dearth of women characters in the usual Vatican scenario. For a novelist in search of a papal female, Pope Joan, the ninth-century woman who allegedly dressed as a man to get elected to the throne of Peter, is a gift.

Most recently, the American historical novelist Donna Woolfolk Cross's *Pope Joan*, 'A dangerous web of love, passion and politics' has been a bestseller. Joan, it is said, even gave birth in a papal procession. So there's plenty to write about there.

The strangest, most daring of the lot however, is *Hadrian VII* by Frederick Rolfe, who wrote under the pseudonym Baron Corvo. Published in 1904, it turns on the irresistible fact that in canon law, anyone can become pope: as long as you are baptised a Catholic, you don't even have to be a priest.

Rolfe is now best known through Julian Symons's *Quest for Corvo*, a biography that turned out to be a study of biography itself as Symons chased his unreliable subject through corridors of half-truths and general weirdness.

A Catholic convert, Rolfe was thrown out of a seminary for erratic behaviour and thereafter spent his days writing stories most of which starred himself, thinly disguised and often winning battles against the mediocre minds of the ecclesiastical establishment.

He was, said WH Auden, 'one of the great masters of vituperation.' *Hadrian VII* takes the wish-fulfillment fantasy to its furthest extreme – when George Arthur Rose, a chain-smoking, failed priest living a dingy life in south London with his cat, finds himself elected pope. Pope Hadrian, opposed by the usual establishment midwits, reforms the papacy and the world and tramples his enemies underfoot.

It's surprising really, given the reach and breadth of the subject and its perhaps surprising shades and variations, that there aren't more novels about popes.

Perhaps Pope Leo XIV, the first American to take the helm of the pope mobile, will get the laptops tapping again.

FOCUS FEATURES, GETTY

Ernő Goldfinger in front of his notorious Trellick Tower, 1968

THE ALIENATION EFFECT
HOW CENTRAL EUROPEAN ÉMIGRÉS TRANSFORMED THE BRITISH 20TH CENTURY

OWEN HATHERLEY

Allen Lane, 608pp, £35

Ian Fleming famously named his villain Goldfinger after the émigré architect responsible for London's Trellick Tower, a Brutalist landmark that Fleming loathed.

But would Fleming have been surprised to learn that, as the *Telegraph*'s Rupert Christiansen related, 'the roots of the functionalist style that has been so commonly derided here... were, ironically, actually thoroughly English in being inspired by the Crystal Palace, the Arts and Crafts and Garden City movements?'

This is just one conclusion to emerge from Hatherley's exhaustive account of central European émigrés' contribution to modern British photography, painting, architecture, book design and publishing.

'Impassioned and erudite,' said Christiansen, 'Hatherley writes with panache and never becomes flat-footedly ideological ... In drawing attention to a hugely important yet neglected phenomenon that has shaped our culture for better or worse, this is a genuinely important study that deserves to win prizes.'

In the *FT*, Jackie Wullschläger agreed Hatherley is 'an exhilarating guide' to the émigré buildings and public sculptures which changed or challenged the fabric of our cities.

Kind and well-intentioned, the book lacks the rigour or comprehensive authority of a Gombrich or Pevsner, embodying rather the "leisurely muddle" that Koestler thought characterised – and perhaps redeemed – British intellectual life.'

ALLIES AT WAR
THE POLITICS OF DEFEATING HITLER

TIM BOUVERIE

Bodley Head, 688pp, £25

During World War II, 'as this terrific new book' shows in 'great and glorious detail,' wrote Tony Renell in the *Daily Mail*, 'negotiating your way through the shifting diplomatic quicksand imposed by friends and allies was almost harder than actually confronting the enemy. At least you could be sure which side Hitler was on – though the same could not always be said for the likes of the wily, poker-faced Stalin, the truculent, disruptive De Gaulle and numerous other leaders. Behind a united front lurked lies, secrets, suspicions and spats.'

Roosevelt 'loathed colonialism and wanted the British Empire gone. He feared – rightly – that Churchill was desperate to preserve it ... his most significant diplomatic achievement was to stall until the summer of 1944, fearing that a premature invasion across the Channel would end in bloodbath and defeat.'

Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin at Yalta, 1945

Renell praised Bouverie for his 'exceptional command of his subject' and found 'much to learn'.

In the *Times,* Saul David found it 'a fine reassessment of Allied politics and diplomacy during the Second World War: impeccably researched, elegantly written and compellingly argued... By concentrating on the diplomatic and political angle – at the expense of the military – Bouverie gives a fresh gloss to a familiar narrative.'

SWORD
D-DAY – TRIAL BY BATTLE

MAX HASTINGS

William Collins, 372pp, £25

'A martial, but not a military race' is how Field-Marshall Montgomery is suopposed to have described the British. This shrewd assessment could explain why, having established a beachhead on D-Day, our forces failed to attain their second objective, the capture of Caen.

Many of those who survived the landing had been sea-sick. Almost all were soaking wet. And most were in action for the first time. No wonder they felt they deserved a brew-up before venturing into hostile territory

Hastings sympathises with these citizen soldiers, who had spent the past four years 'unimaginably bored' by the vicissitudes of Army life, with its emphasis on bullshit and bull. He thinks it's unrealistic to suppose that, having got ashore safely, they felt duty bound to 'shed their own blood prodigally', as was the case with an elite corps like the Commandos.

The *Sunday Times's* Gerard De Groot commended Hasting's humanity: 'Armchair generals find condemnation easy. Hastings, a wiser man, understands these men and their predicament. We should, he feels, celebrate their deficiencies. They never matched the professional skills of the best of the German Army, but ... had they done so, they would have forfeited the spirit of the democracies, the doctrine of moderation rather than fanaticism, for which the struggle was being fought.'

ALAMY; WIKI MEDIA

FULVIA
THE WOMAN WHO BROKE ALL TTHE RULES IN ANCIENT ROME

JANE DRAYCOTT

Atlantic, 288pp, £20

'Part biography, part social history, Draycott's portrait of Fulvia is light and thorough, wide-reaching and focused, entertaining but not sensationalist.' So wrote Constance Roisin in the *FT*.

Fulvia was a shrewd behind-the-scenes political manipulator and Draycott 'deftly shows this without her narrative veering into Lady Macbeth territory. But has she succeeded in reconstructing Fulvia as 'a living, breathing, flesh-and-blood Roman woman'?

The inevitable hurdle is that Fulvia never speaks... This silence is, unfortunately, emphasised by the loudness of the men in her life, who, through their letters and poems and memoirs, prove to be funny, camp, scary, petty and vibrant.'

She was 'one of the most extraordinary women in the ancient world,' wrote Joan Smith in the *Sunday Times*. 'She gave evidence at the trial of her first husband's killer, waged war against the future Roman emperor Augustus, and was for a time the most important woman in Rome. Yet she is best known as the wife of her third husband, Mark Antony.'

Although Draycott portrays her as 'one of the most significant characters in late republican history... she hasn't entirely broken away from the double standards ingrained in modern historiography.

She tells us that Antony enjoyed a "very lively and extremely varied extramarital sex life" but that Octavian's daughter and granddaughter, both called Julia, "brought shame on his household by their flagrant adultery".'

For Kathryn Hughes in the *Daily Mail*, Draycott 'makes a persuasive case that, in the Roman Republic, any woman who dared do things differently was virtually certain of going down in history as an evil femme fatale.'

***Fulvia With the Head of Cicero* by Pavel Svedomsky, 1898**

WIKI MEDIA COMMONS

THE REBEL EMPRESSES
ELISABETH OF AUSTRIA AND EUGÉNIE OF FRANCE: POWER AND GLAMOUR IN THE STRUGGLE FOR EUROPE

NANCY GOLDSTONE

Weidenfeld, 640pp, £30

Elisabeth, who married Emperor Franz Joseph, was better known as Sisi and has been the subject of several films, while Eugénie married Napoleon III.

Empress Elisabeth, 1859

***Eugénie en Prière* by Gustave Le Gray, 1856**

'Both women, in Goldstone's vibrant, wryly witty portraits, emerge as glamorous, strong-willed, and independent,' wrote the anonymous reviewer for *Kirkus Reviews*. 'In a brisk, lively narrative, Goldstone seamlessly interweaves the women's trials, challenges, and betrayals with the world events that swirled incessantly around them. A richly detailed, entertaining dual biography.'

Becky Meloan, in the *Washington Post*, noted that 'their paths were different: Flighty and fanciful, Elisabeth had to learn to stand her ground against her controlling mother-in-law; Eugénie endured the public humiliation of her husband's multiple affairs, eventually becoming an advocate for women's rights. Goldstone's sprawling chronology illustrates the influence the two imperial women had on the course of history at a time when traditional royal pageantry belied a modernizing world.'

The *Spectator*'s Anne de Courcy found the book to be 'more about context – the turbulent years of mid-19th-century Europe – than it is about its two protagonists. Details of the many popular uprisings of the time, plus the jockeying for position of the main players and the battles and intrigues involved, are so packed into its pages that teasing out the stories of the two empresses is not always easy.'

Also, the two empresses 'had little in common, apart from the fact that each stood up for herself in an era when women tended not to (though in Sisi's case this took some time).

'And they both had a reputation for beauty and red hair.'

CROYDONOPOLIS
A JOURNEY TO THE GREATEST CITY THAT NEVER WAS

WILL NOBLE

Safe Haven Books, 288pp, £18.99

Poor Croydon: like Slough, it's a byword for a featureless concrete wasteland.

In the *Telegraph*, author Will Noble noted that even in the 1830s, Croydon was the butt of disdain: R S Surtees referred to Croydonites as "chaw-bacons" – rustics who eat their pigs'.

Noble's riposte to detractors is **Croydonopolis**, a history of and 'love letter' to the borough, said Peter Graystone, a Croydon native, in the *Church Times*.

'Throughout its history it has repeatedly aimed high, dazzled, crashed, and burned,' Graystone said.

In the *TLS*, Travis Elborough hailed 'an unashamedly boosterish survey', starting with 'Croydon being a Surrey way station for archbishops' journeys between Lambeth and Canterbury.'

It was John Whitgift, 'who helped put the place on the map', he wrote. Archbishop of Canterbury to Elizabeth I in the 1580s, 'Whitgift had many enemies, famed for his ruthlessness and "exceptional intolerance" of Puritans. He found Croydon's episcopal palace a convenient bolthole for avoiding assassination attempts.' Now he is remembered in Croydon's famous shopping mall, the Whitgift Centre.

'For those living in the town in its present parlous state — bankrupt both financially and culturally — it is an encouragement not to despair, but to rejoice in its rollercoaster history.' concluded Graystone.

SCOUSE REPUBLIC
AN ALTERNATIVE HISTORY OF LIVERPOOL

DAVID SWIFT

Constable, 320pp, £25

Liverpool, Britain's second largest city, has been, according to A J Lees in the *Literary Review*, inexplicably neglected by historians. He welcomed Swift's book, 'written with the secure touch of a native Scouser looking out over the River Mersey.'

In the *Observer*, proud Liverpudlian Frank Cottrell Boyce found it 'impossible to deny that the city has brilliantly swerved the abyss of "managed decline". The city is 'a distorting mirror where the themes of our politics are expressed louder and more vividly.'

It's now a hen-night destination, a regular stop-off for luxury cruises, a seat of learning. The Georgian Quarter, with cobbled streets shining under Narnian lamp-posts, is one of the most popular filming locations in the country.

'But Swift's account of that voyage from chaotic sailor town to imperial port, from the Beatles to the Toxteth uprising, does not look away from the dark and stormy passages ... remind yourself that in 1841, when the city was the premier port of the empire after London, life expectancy was 26.'

Lees praised Swift's 'extensive scholarship lightened with quotes ... personal anecdotes and wry asides'. He debunks some myths that have grown up around the city and its people and 'is sceptical of claims that Scousers are particularly welcoming to foreigners and dubious that most are anti-English and pro-Irish.

'He and his Israeli wife found common ground in the fact that both hailed from places "roundly despised by outsiders".'

MAKING DO
BRITONS AND THE REFASHIONING OF THE POSTWAR WORLD

SUSAN L CARRUTHERS

Cambridge University Press, 400pp, £25

After the Second World War, ex-servicemen were issued with 'demob' suits of standard design, many supplied by the outfitter Montague Burton, thus giving rise to the phrase 'the full Monty'.

'In this brilliantly researched and beautifully written book Susan L Carruthers, a professor at University of Warwick, explores how clothing enabled and even compelled individuals to forge new identities in a landscape utterly transformed by six years of global warfare,' wrote the *Sunday Times*'s Kathryn Hughes.

'The shift from veteran to civilian, camp inmate to "displaced person" and factory worker to GI bride all necessitated a change of costume. Whether internal lives could be altered to match was far less certain. Or, as Carruthers neatly puts it, postwar lives were frequently "made over, but not always mended".'

Fabric was rationed until 1949 and extra clothing coupons given to Princess Elizabeth for her wedding trousseau were scorned by some as non-royal brides had got used to forgoing a white wedding in favour of wearing their best Sunday dress.'

What's more, that "best" dress had probably been let down, taken in and patched up several times already.

Under the guidance of Mrs Sew-and-Sew, an annoying cartoon character, dreamt up by the Board of Trade, Britons had learnt how to make do and mend, whether they liked it or not.'

Toxteth, 1976

GETTY

Portrait of Suleyman by Titian, c.1530

THE GOLDEN THRONE
THE CURSE OF A KING

CHRISTOPHER DE BELLAIGUE

Bodley Head, 272pp, £22

The second volume of de Bellaigue's intended trilogy on Suleyman the Magnificent covers the Turkish king's middle years when, tiring of flamboyance and caprice, he began consolidating his rule.

However, there's still plenty of plundering and plotting – the laws of succession required frequently murdering relatives. And all as 'nonfiction novelisation', whereby the author cleaves to the historical record of characters, action and dialogue, but employs writerly techniques and contemporary idiom.

Cannily, his publishers have dubbed the series '*Wolf Hall* for the Ottoman Empire', although the headline writer at the *Times* preferred 'with sultans and eunuchs'.

The *Times*'s Pratinav Anil, thought the style 'delightfully mannered, by turns arch and camp', and 'enormously entertaining'.

The *New Statesman*'s Michael Prodger was struck by how the tale's present tense had 'a galloping feel'.

The *Guardian*'s Kathryn Hughes found an 'archive thrillingly brought to life'.

Literary Review's Katie Hickman noted the 'airy confidence' displayed in explaining 'the three-dimensional chess game that was European geopolitics in the mid-16th century'.

Nonetheless, Hickman had qualms. At times, she 'longed for the clarity of a more conventional work'.

What to Kathryn Hughes was a 'quite different' type of story-telling cut no ice with Hickman: 'As de Bellaigue, a writer much given to whimsical analogies might have put it, this is a curate's egg.'

MURDER IN CAIRO
SOLVING A COLD WAR SPY MYSTERY

PETER GILLMAN AND EMANUELE MIDOLO

Biteback, 464pp, £20

The journalist David Holden was on assignment in Cairo in 1977 when he was murdered, a crime that went unsolved.

'Nearly 50 years later two reporters have finally cracked it,' wrote Theo Zenou in Holden's old paper, the *Sunday Times*. 'What Gillman and Midolo uncovered is worthy of a Netflix series – it's that twisted and dramatic.'

It's 'a thrilling testament to the power of investigative journalism and serves as a reminder that there's nothing smart people cannot achieve if they just hang in there'.

Whose side was Holden truly on? 'The answer, as revealed in **Murder in Cairo**, is complex, offering a gripping history of Cold War espionage, plunging readers into an underworld where no one is who they say they are. Prepare to meet spymasters so devious they make Bond villains look like the good guys... Thanks to Gillman and Midolo, the mirrors have been shattered, and the truth about David Holden is finally out.'

Double act: David Holden

Writing in the *TLS*, Stephen Glover noted that 'there were many others straddling the worlds of Fleet Street and spying who never revealed their roles and weren't brought to book'. The authors, he felt, 'have shone a light on a past that most journalists would rather forget'.

Glover was 'not completely convinced by the book's conclusions, but given that most of the participants in this story are dead – having inhabited an almost impenetrable world of lies and deceit when they were alive – I doubt that anyone will come up with a more plausible theory.'

THE STRANGE HISTORY OF SAMUEL PEPYS'S DIARY

KATE LOVEMAN

Cambridge University Press, 254pp, £22

Did Max Hastings and Arnold Hunt read the same book?

From the former's review in the *Sunday Times*, you'd think the author's focus was the diarist's sex life, and her account unforgivably prim. After lingering over the grislier episodes, the old warhorse declared that academics had 'a special responsibility to consider each generation's conduct by the standard of its own time, not of ours. But

John Smith's transcription of Pepys's early diary

Loveman, from the University of Leicester, takes a more modern view'.

Then look at Hunt in the *TLS*, who wrote: 'A full study of Pepys's reading has long been needed and this new book splendidly fills that gap.'

While Hastings was 'impatient' with Loveman's 'scholarly exploration', Hunt thought its examination of Restoration book culture was 'essential reading for all bibliographers' and 'a major contribution to Pepys's intellectual biography'.

While the book devotes ample space to the great man's dirty secrets, it's more about his diary's shelf companions. By considering his library, preserved intact at Magdalene College, Cambridge, the author fills in a picture of the man, his social circle, opinions and beliefs.

In Hunt's view, all that was lacking was 'any extended discussion' of the subject 'as a collector of rare books and manuscripts'.

Luckily, though, a brief guide by 'MEJ Hughes, the current Pepys Librarian, provides an excellent companion to Loveman's book.'

JOHN WALSH is drawn back to old firm favourites for leisurely reading in the sunshine

The 1986 film of E M Forster's novel,* A Room with a View*, starred (from left) Julian Sands, Daniel Day-Lewis and Helena Bonham Carter

The sun is blazing down. The sky is a cerulean arc of tranquillity. Summer is totally, definitely here, and your holidays are hurtling towards you. But since your days of beach volleyball, power-walking in the Camargue and abseiling off the Grand Canyon are now well in the rear-view mirror, your thoughts turn to the leisure pursuit known as reading. What books should you take, to enliven the poolside days that lie ahead?

You ask the charming woman in Waterstones: what exciting new titles are coming up in June/July?

'Well,' she says, 'We expect a lot of interest in *Controlling Women: The Untold Story of Britain's First Female Police Force* by Sandra Hempel. It's out in June.'

'It's not quite what I was looking for.'

'Granta expect big sales of *Second Skin: Inside the Worlds of Fetish, Kink and Deviant Desire* by Anastasia Fedorova...'

'Tempting. But then again, not.'

'How about *War in the Smartphone Age: Conflict, Connectivity and the Crises at our Fingertips* by Matthew Ford?'

'I think I'm possibly the wrong age-group.'

'How about *Outcast: A History of Us Through Leprosy* by Oliver Basciano?'

'Goodbye.'

Your neighbour Geoffrey recommends the new Robert Harris novel, *Precipice*, a fictional re-casting of the affair between the Edwardian PM Herbert Asquith and a young socialite called Venetia. Geoff's wife recommends a novel called *Fundamentally* by one Nussaibah Younis and described as 'a witty story of Islamic State brides'.

These suggestions are kind, but you'll probably ignore them and do what you always do: fall back on those summer reads, which are tried and re-read and never fail you.

They're a mixture of literary classics and 50-year-old bestsellers, fiction and non. Like the climate, summer books are warm, breezy, exciting, reassuring and productive of nostalgic reverie. Among them are swishy biographies, page-turning narratives, intelligent love stories, family tales in foreign climates and quirky, non-boring memoirs.

Among the non-fictions are four key autobiographies: David Niven's matchless, five-million-selling Hollywood chronicle, *The Moon's a Balloon*; *Cider With Rosie*, the poet Laurie Lee's fond remembrance of his country childhood with its enchantments and lost innocence in 1920s Gloucestershire; Gerald Durrell's *My Family and Other Animals*, set in Corfu in the late 30s and crammed with laugh-aloud tales of animal misbehaviour; and Maya Angelou's record of triumph of resilience over bigotry in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

The sole history book here is Ronald Blythe's *The Age of Illusion: England in the Twenties and Thirties 1919-1940*, an enthralling collection of essays on personalities and events of the interwar years, taking in Amy Johnson's solo flights, the Jarrow marches, Lawrence of Arabia, Soho corruption, the Rector of Stiffkey and the Brighton Trunk Murders.

Many of the summer novels are stories of fictional holidays: E M Forster's *A Room With a View* examines the English upper classes *en vacances* in Italy, as the ladies struggle with art (they find the nudes in the galleries 'a pity') and young Lucy Honeychurch finds love in a field. In John Fowles's *The Magus*, a conceited Englishman called Nicholas Urfe falls under the spell of a dangerously charismatic millionaire on a Greek island. L P Hartley's *The Go-Between* finds a pubertal English schoolboy holidaying with a friend and becoming embroiled in an illicit romance between the friend's posh sister and a local blacksmith. The roasting-hot summer hangs over the action like a stormcloud. In *Enchanted April* by Elizabeth Von Arnim, four very different women find their lives changing after they rent a small medieval castle overlooking the Italian Riviera, also the setting for *The Talented Mr Ripley* by Patricia Highsmith, in which the murderous titular conman appropriates the identity of a glamorous social butterfly.

> Like the climate, summer books are warm, breezy, exciting, page-turning narratives

Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* combines an Oxbridge dream of languorous summertime with a torrid shipboard romance, while *The Great Gatsby* confronts the sophisticated, mega-dollar hedonism of the 1920s with the sordid truth that lay beneath it. *The Pursuit of Love* by Nancy Mitford is a divinely bittersweet inspection of the English upper-class families in love and at play in the 1940s. And Daphne Du Maurier's 1938 masterpiece *Rebecca* can be read a dozen times for its can't-look-away unfolding narrative of a young bride's discovery of the truth about her husband's first wife.

Which one (or two or three) will you take this year?

FILMFOUR INTERNATIONAL

Like John Conway in *Twist*, Buster Crabb was a compulsive diver. He disappeared in 1956.

TWIST

COLUM McCANN

Bloomsbury, 256pp, £18.99

John Conway, free-diving engineer, travels the world fixing undersea cables carrying data around our hyperconnected planet. Narrator, Anthony Fennell, an Irish journalist on feature assignment declares, 'others have tried to tell Conway's story, and so far as I know, they got it largely wrong.'

For the *Guardian*'s Marcel Theroux this 'intense maritime story with echoes of *Heart of Darkness*' is timely: 'Experts have been warning for a while that our globalised lives depend on these links to a degree that few have considered.'

'For many chapters,' wrote Ron Charles in the *Washington Post*, 'Anthony's obsession with Conway seems entirely out of proportion to the person we see on the page. But clearly, in Conway's rise and fall, Anthony seeks an understanding of his own plight, his own "lifetime of dropped connections."'

In the *Spectator* Chloë Ashby found **Twist** 'simply and beautifully told, even as it laps at knotty issues that more often than not come back to the idea of connection.'

For Theroux, 'McCann evokes physical activity in an intense, cinematic way.

'There are passages of extraordinary vividness. The depths of the ocean; freedivers plunging to the sea floor on a single breath; out-of-the-way cable relay stations on Africa's west coast; sea sickness; extreme weather; an internet outage that paralyses part of Cape Town: all evoked with a power that persuades you that you're either a participant or a witness. And the novel builds to a bravura climactic escapade.'

FLESH

DAVID SZALAY

Jonathan Cape, 368pp, £18.99

'Despite Booker shortlisting, six books, 16 years of good reviews and inclusion in *Granta*'s Best Young British Novelists 2013, this thoughtful, intelligent writer has never quite hit the literary mainstream,' lamented the *TLS*'s Claire Lowdon. 'His subject matter is deceptively pedestrian,' but Szalay 'writes about the big stuff, sex, mortality, money, jobs, with disarming candour.'

Flesh recounts the life of István, a 'psychogically isolated and taciturn teenager who becomes a psychologically isolated and taciturn middle-aged man,' wrote the *Guardian*'s Keiran Goddard.

We see István 'pulled along by life's undertows; an affair with a neighbour ending in tragedy and violence, a stretch in the military, the uprooting of his life from Hungary to London, a vertiginous climb up the British class strata and, ultimately, a stoic and melancholy return to the town where he grew up.'

Goddard refused to 'pigeonhole **Flesh** as about masculinity... While that is a central concern, Szalay is also grappling with broader, knottier, more metaphysical issues.'

Szalay has 'overhauled his prose style,' praised Lowdon, giving it 'a radically pared-back aesthetic' lending 'powerful immediacy to this picaresque tale... a compelling, unobvious novel from an intriguingly restless writer.'

'Szalay handles the story with patience and resourcefulness,' found Tim Parks in the *LRB*. 'Writing about the kind of figure, usually given short shrift in literary fiction, he avoids the obvious.'

THEFT

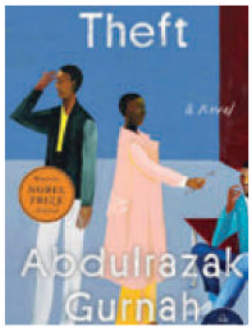
ABDULRAZAK GURNAH

Bloomsbury, 256pp, £18.99

Gurnah's eleventh novel, his first since his 2021 Nobel Laureateship, connects a trio of east African teens, moving from small-scale dramas to wide-ranging social panoramas.

Andrew Motion in the *TLS* found Gurnah's novels 'concentrate on the family ties he finds at once necessary and irritating, or even thwarting, rather than on dramatic sweeps and effects of government policy.'

The *Guardian*'s Anthony Cummins declared it 'a quietly powerful demonstration of storytelling mastery, spread over several generations, all narrated in a quicksilver style that gives you the pleasurable sense that you're putty in the hands of a warm yet clear-eyed authorial intelligence.



The conclusion – crackling with jeopardy, ultimately cathartic – moves the patiently assembled plotlines into place for a riveting denouement, both unguessable yet entirely in keeping' with the logic of the book.

The *Washington Post*'s Ron Charles praised Gurnah's narrative, with 'sentences that follow the riverbed of some ancient legend, even as he describes complicated modern lives. His lulling tone enchants with the oldest pattern of storytelling: And then this happened.'

Comparing it with earlier books, the *FT*'s John Self found **Theft** 'more contained... set on a smaller stage, but no less beautifully done.'

TRAVELNATION.CO.UK, GDR MUSEUM AND ALAMY

THE HOMEMADE GOD

RACHEL JOYCE

Doubleday, 384pp, £20

There's something comforting about Joyce's novels, wrote Melissa Katsoulis in the *Times*, 'at least in the anticipation, but when you start reading one you remember how disturbing they can be. How odd and brave.'

'Some of Joyce's favourite motifs are here: the cold or absent mother, the tension between a father and son, grief and its friend guilt, and the power of pilgrimage. However, there's a new heft and grandeur, not only in the sophisticated characters and the fancy Italian real estate, but in the hidden darkness that can exist in a family.' Katsoulis couldn't think of a better holiday read.

Joanna Quinn in the *Guardian* explained that the book 'moves between being a page-turning mystery and an astute study of family dynamics, and readers who like a book to pick a lane and stay in it may find this frustrating.

'But Joyce is a thoughtful writer,'

Rachel Joyce: 'a new heft and grandeur'

she continued, 'and the narrative gear-changes echo the novel's concerns: the gap between image and reality, the difference between who we are believed to be – by ourselves and others – and who we really are.' It's a 'sharp, absorbing and emotionally intelligent novel'.

Kirkus Reviews agreed that with the glamorous art world, juicy family discord, an Italian villa and potential murder it was hard to ask more from a summer read.

ROOM ON THE SEA

ANDRÉ ACIMAN

Faber, 176pp, £12.99

Two sixty-somethings, psychiatrist Catherine and lawyer Paul meet on their first day of New York jury service. Both are married, seemingly happily, but while they await the call for a live case, they explore just how happy each of them truly is. The chemistry between them is clear but could there be more to this '*Brief Encounter* with pastries and the hope of "retirement-plus?"' asked the *FT*'s Christian House?

House enjoyed 'a witty and moreish romcom' in this 'contemporary fairytale by the *Call Me by Your Name* author, which 'choreographs a dance of polite flirtation between two early-stage pensioners.' The novella is 'another of Aciman's what-if narratives of literate maybe-maybe-not lovers and something of an advert for the charms of New York's eateries.

'The premise is pure screwball comedy.' But, wrote Christy Edwall in the *TLS*, his 'grey-haired lovers are compelled to act. Time is not as hospitable as it is for (the younger) Oliver and Elio. In times of threat, their shared imagination retreats to Italy as a guarantor of pleasure and a confirmation of their remaining vitality.'

Praising this 'fantasy within a fantasy – an unlikely last-chance liaison underpinned by daydreams of the Mediterranean – with multiple levels of wishful thinking that might have been insufferable if it weren't for Aciman's ability to produce witty and memorable moments, House concluded 'one can enjoy this short tale rather like one enjoys cannoli: not nourishing perhaps, but certainly moreish.'

UNIVERSALITY

NATASHA BROWN

Faber, 176pp, £14.99

'Terrific' is how Alex Clark described Brown's second novel in the *Observer*. She presented us 'not merely with a portrait of a society painfully and unproductively turned in on itself but with an incisive exploration of the power dynamics of storytelling'.

The *Spectator*'s Anthony Cummins wrote that skewering journalistic pretension to authority was the main business of the novel, 'which centres on a fictitious magazine feature, printed at the start and shown in later chapters to be a tissue of deceit'. He continued: 'Although the grip on detail is shaky

Harewood House, a symbol of 'wealth, class and power'

– it's both viciously accurate and weirdly off the mark – the novel impressively sustains tension, even menace, in an ultra-targeted send-up with more than a suggestion of scores being settled.'

Johanna Thomas-Corr in the *Sunday Times* explained that **Universality** 'confirms [Brown's] fascination with English country houses as symbols of wealth, class and power. This short political satire

> 'with the glamorous art world, juicy family discord, an Italian villa and potential murder it was hard to ask for more' from *The Homemade God*

opens in a Yorkshire farmhouse owned by an unscrupulous banker and ends at a wood-panelled stately home that is hosting a cultural festival attended by politicians, chief executives and journalists, an event that "moved the national conversation".'

Brown is a 'smart observer of the class system and capitalism', but Thomas-Corr thought the book was 'bogged down by so much socio-political commentary that you lose sight of the threads connecting the characters who are no more than stereotypes and mouthpieces...What Brown succeeds in doing, however, is conveying how everyone has become a tool of capitalism, complicit in their own exploitation.'

PORTRAIT: PÅL HANSEN, ROGER KEECH

ALBION

ANNA HOPE

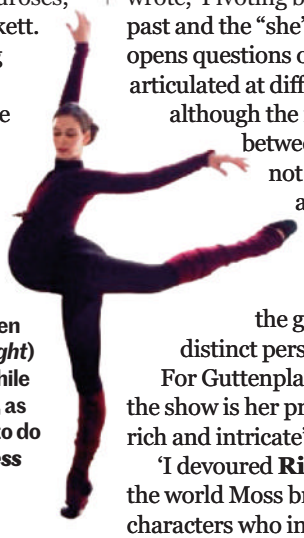
Fig Tree, 368pp, £16.99

The novel follows three middle-aged siblings dealing with the death of their father, and having to decide what to do with a 1,000-acre estate, large house and ancestral portraits.

'His funeral is not easy to plan, and the burden has been squarely placed on the shoulders of his eldest child, Frannie, the inheritor of the estate and a full bundle of neuroses,' wrote the *Times*'s Laura Hackett.

Frannie had been working with her father to rewild the estate, but a 'hefty inheritance tax bill could undo all her hard work'.

The novel only covers five days, but Hackett found it slow to build. However, the climax was well worth the wait: 'a big, fat, old-fashioned dinner gone wrong, with dramatic speeches and shocking revelations.'



Mary Helen Bowers (*right*) danced while pregnant, as Lydia tries to do in *Ripeness*

She also thought some of the characters felt like stereotypes but believed that where Hope shone was in her convincing presentations of the two opposing moral viewpoints among the siblings that will decide the future of the estate.

Lily Herd in the *Literary Review* wrote, 'Everything unfolds in the shadow of a portrait, painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds in 1789, of the estate's first owner, Oliver Brooke.' Her verdict: 'Exquisitely put together, with a tight structure and richly drawn characters.'

And Anna Bonet in the *iPaper* enthused that this 'sumptuous family drama and state-of-the-nation novel' was a 'triumphant read'.

RIPENESS

SARAH MOSS

Picador, 304pp, £20

In 1967, school-leaver Edith travels to Italy with her mother's strict instructions to see her ballerina sister through the final weeks of a mysterious pregnancy, then makes a phone call which seals the baby's fate.

Decades later, she is happily divorced and living in Ireland, when her friend Méabh receives a call from an American claiming to be her brother, plunging Edith into her own past and the story of the baby she once knew.

'Moss delicately peels back the layers of Edith's life to reveal the myriad reasons she thinks so much about who gets to belong where,' wrote Zoe Guttenplan in the *Literary Review*.

The *FT*'s Thomas McMullan, praised this 'luminous book', and wrote, 'Pivoting between the "I" of the past and the "she" of the present opens questions of how the self is articulated at different stages of life, although the relationship between youth and age is not as straight-forward as it first seems. One of the greatest pleasures is in piecing together the gulf between these distinct perspectives.'

For Guttenplan, 'the real star of the show is her prose, the writing rich and intricate', she wrote.

'I devoured **Ripeness**, thrilling at the world Moss brings to life and the characters who inhabit it. What a delicious novel.'

AUDITION

KATIE KITAMURA

Fern Press, 208pp, £18.99

In the *Literary Review*, Lucy Thynne set the scene: 'An unnamed actress meets Xavier, in a Manhattan restaurant. He is young and charismatic; she is losing confidence in herself. Two weeks earlier, he turned up unexpectedly at her play rehearsal to confess a theory he has: he is her son. This is impossible: we see in flashbacks that she is childless and has remained so.'

In the book's second half, the circumstances flip: Xavier is her son. Thynne thought the novel 'thrillingly done' but questioned whether Kitamura needed to push the narrative to such extremes: 'realism can be terrifying enough'.

'Is **Audition** a study of amnesia?' asked Anthony Cummins in the *Observer*. 'A zeitgeisty metaphor for an imminent AI hellscape flooded with untrustworthy utterance? Or perhaps something more basic, given that it ends with Xavier writing his mother a play, a monologue for "a woman who can no longer distinguish between what is real and what is not real"? Whatever the key to this joylessly evasive experiment, I ended up feeling that Kitamura could keep it.'

Yet Arin Keeble in the *FT* thought it a 'lightning bolt of a novel. One might read it alongside watching Coralie Fargeat's body horror *The Substance* or Dan Erickson and Bel Stiller's feted TV show *Severance*.

All deal suggestively with performance, and the splitting of self and identity. **Audition** demands an attentive and careful reading but is also conspicuously of its moment.'

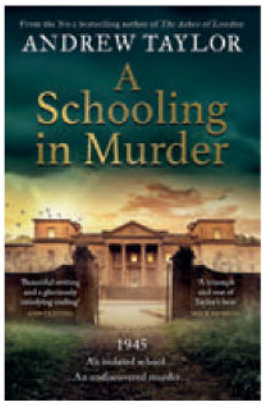
And *Kirkus Review* called it a searing, chilly, and psychologically profound story.

***Ripeness*: 'a delicious novel'. Still Life, Dutch School, 1635**

BALLETBEAUTIFUL, BONHAMS

MICHAEL BARBER

picks the best new crime novels and thrillers for gripping summer reading

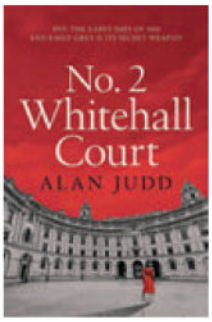


'More wisdom is contained in the best crime fiction than in all philosophy.' Andrew Taylor prefaces **A Schooling in Murder** (Hemlock Press, 376pp, £20.00), with an assertion by Wittgenstein. Since the philosopher also said, 'Whereof one does not know, thereof one should not speak', we must take him at his word. But did he, I wonder, believe in ghosts?

Taylor, a Crime Writing Association laureate, requires this of his readers, because the story is told by a spectral murderee in search of who pushed her off a cliff.

The setting is a seedy girls' boarding school near the Severn estuary 80 years ago. Annabel Warnock, a teaher there, has designs on a colleague that are thwarted by her murder. Much to her surprise Annabel undergoes a resurrection that enables her, within certain limits, to investigate. What follows is a whodunit where the intrigues that ripen in closed societies are cunningly served up with a dose of supernatural spice.

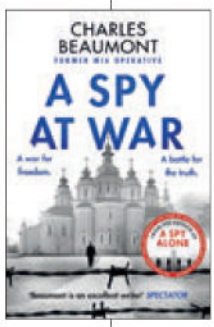
It was said of strait-laced John Buchan that he wrote books in which women don't go to the lavatory. I



was reminded of this when reading Alan Judd's absorbing new thriller, **No 2 Whitehall Court** (Simon & Schuster, 308pp, £18.99), which is set in 1915, when Buchan was writing *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, and describes a daring German plot to cripple the Royal Navy's Home Fleet at anchor in Rosyth. On arrival at the port, Judd's spirited heroine, Emily Grey, finds herself in a masculine environment which is 'not set up for ladies'.

Despite the embarrassments this entails, she fully repays the trust reposed in her by 'C', the eccentric one-legged sailor Commander Cumming (whose biography Judd has written).

In the *Literary Review*, Natasha Cooper commented: 'Veteran spy writer Judd eschews easy drama and obvious cliffhangers in this elegantly written novel. He portrays a group of agreeable, intelligent and persistent (if sometimes weird) men and women prepared to work in great discomfort and risk their lives for their country.'



Cooper was also impressed by **A Spy at War** (Canelo, 368pp, £9.99), Charles Beaumont's follow-up to his brilliant debut, *A Spy Alone*, describing it as 'well-informed, revealing and very bleak.'

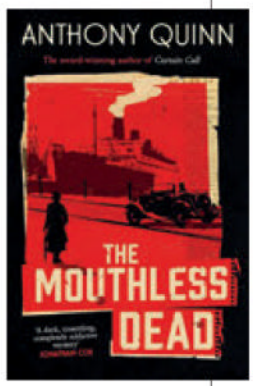
Set partly in London and partly on the front line in Ukraine, it contrasts subversion at home with drone-driven mayhem abroad as Beaumont's hero, posing as a journalist, realises that he is expendable.

The *FT*'s editor, Roula Khalaf, doubling up as a reviewer, describes Beaumont as 'a deft guide to the business of contemporary espionage – and the murky political intrigues that unfold off the battlefield. He quickly draws the reader into an informed, authentic-seeming tale, shot through with dark menace.'

Britain and America may be at logger-heads politically, but reviewers on both sides of the pond gave an ecstatic welcome to Louise Hegarty's debut, **Fair Play** (Picador, 288pp, £16.99), a contemporary country house murder mystery, set in Ireland, that manages to be both tongue in cheek and portentous. A group of old friends get together to bring Cluedo to life, only for one of them to be found dead the next morning.

In the *Sunday Times*, Robert Collins admitted, 'As soon as I finished this fiendishly elegant jigsaw puzzle of a book, I dashed back and scoured its pages to find if Hegarty had planted a glinting, hidden clue somewhere to unlock the mystery ... But when it comes to whether you're in the hands of someone phenomenally talented here, who has constructed something entirely original, there's no mystery.'

In the *New York Times*, Sarah Lyall described Hegarty's book as 'a witty, knowing homage to classic detective fiction, but also a deeply sensitive examination of the loneliness and confusion of grief – and a reminder that every sudden death is a mystery that can't be fully explained.'



Cue The Mouthless Dead (Abacus, 288pp, £20), Anthony Quinn's persuasive take on a real life crime described by Raymond Chandler as 'the nonpareil of murder mysteries.'

Set in Liverpool in 1931 it begins with the murder of Julia Wallace, for which her husband was first convicted and then acquitted. According to the *Observer*'s Alexander Larman, 'there is a Hitchcockian tension as Quinn, through flashbacks, elegantly offers a compelling solution to the killer's identity.'

Do we all have a novel in us?

***The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* by Francisco Goya, 1799**

RUPERT CHRISTIANSEN tried to write a novel, but only had the imagination for 'quite good' fiction

As a jobbing writer of 40-odd years standing, I've produced all manner of non-fiction, as well as churning out reams of journalistic fodder. Somehow I've made a decent living out of it all and I'm duly thankful.

But ever since my school magazine rejected my 'exciting' story about an escape from a prisoner-of-war camp, I have suspected that I am no good at making things up.

I could no more write a half decent poem than I could paint the Sistine Chapel; I can't conjure up brilliant puns or Dorothy Parker one-liners. I hope I don't plod, but I know I can't fly.

About ten years ago, this realisation left me in a rut. I was solidly middle aged, doing fine, but I knew if I didn't give myself a push, I might dry up altogether. I had to take the plunge and try to write a novel.

What I thought was a golden opportunity had emerged. Reading about First World War artists, I discovered that they had been supervised by Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Lee (1877-1954), responsible for censoring their work and controlling their access.

A solicitor in civilian life, he had won a DSO during the Easter Rising before being transferred to the Western Front. Although nothing else about him was of outstanding interest, he had bequeathed his diaries to the Imperial War Museum.

Immaculately typed and dry as dust, they proved unrevealing to the point of being very boring. But they also left me tantalised.

Nothing explained how or why Lee had been given this sensitive post. He clearly had no interest in art, and little beyond irritability marked his relations with the truculent personalities he tried to discipline.

The diary contained more about his vegetable patch than it did about the horrors of war. There were hints of illicit complicity with the painter William Orpen over a shared French mistress. I sensed Lee as someone touchingly Pooterish.

With so much to be supplied between the lines, I thought something could be built out of this. Lee's diary was like the life of Thomas Cromwell, a skeleton waiting for Hilary Mantel to flesh out, a story that touched on epic issues.

So I set to researching, and must have consulted 50 books about the First World War. I also tracked down Lee's son, a delightful gent still *compos mentis* in his late 90s.

He remembered his father as 'horrible' and couldn't understand why anyone should want to commemorate him in a novel, but he thrillingly confirmed various hunches I had about his personality.

At first, it went swimmingly. I landed on a strong title with *The Honourable Thing*, and invented a neurasthenic and snobbish wife for him. I enjoyed writing two buttoned-up Edwardian sex scenes. I cobbled together some plausible army types, from a gung-ho Major to a soppy chaplain.

I made great use of accounts of the daily round at the GHQ at Montreuil-sur-mer. The *table d'hôte* menus served in grand hotels, treatments for the clap, the interiors of third-class train carriages - I got all this sort of thing spot on.

But you can't research a novel into life. It's not a matter of getting the facts and brand names right, as Andrew O'Hagan, for example, egregiously does in *Caledonian Road*. You have to imagine it, out of some deeper instinctual knowledge.

George Eliot could imagine *Middlemarch* – she knew it, in a way that she didn't know Savonarola's Florence in the leaden *Romola*. And, as I said, I don't really have any imagination: I wasn't seeing the wood for the trees.

I was also overtaken by a pathology common among novelists (Dickens wrote about it) – I began losing my grip on the narrative.

There were too many comings and goings, too much sitting down and standing up – mere stage directions, in other words, which deadened the inner drama and which I wasn't sufficiently adept to eliminate.

I knew where the characters should end up, but I couldn't get them moving towards their destination. I had only given them a half life: I was outside looking in.

Time to take stock. I sent my first chapters to my long-suffering agent. A bit of me fantasised that she would be bowled over and I'd be offered zillions for film rights. Instead she tactfully delivered the *coup de grâce*.

'Oh yes, it's quite good,' she said. 'I would be interested to read more - just unsure where it's going.'

The killer verdict. I stopped then and there, and haven't written a word of it since.

So those chapters languish in the depths of my computer, alongside some other non-fictional abortions, zombies neither dead nor alive.

Last year, I dragged *The Honourable Thing* up when I was asked to contribute to a student magazine at the college where I teach.

Yes, the extract I chose looks 'quite good' in print. But I have no regrets: there are plenty of novels around, some life-changingly wonderful, and 'quite good' just isn't good enough.

Rupert Christiansen was opera critic of The Daily Telegraph

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Bloomsbury Radicals: Vanessa Bell cuts Lytton Strachey's hair, while Roger Fry, Clive Bell and Duncan Grant look on

VANESSA BELL
THE LIFE AND ART OF A BLOOMSBURY RADICAL

WENDY HITCHMOUGH

Yale, 352pp, £30

A BLOOMSBURY INGÉNUE
THE LIFE AND LOVES OF EUPHEMIA LAMB

ANDREA OBHOLZER

Unicorn, 160pp, £25

The work of the artist Vanessa Bell, founder-member and earth mother of the Bloomsbury Group, is often overlooked in catalogues of 20th century British art.

At least that is the contention of Hitchmough, whose new and sumptuously illustrated biography aims to put the record straight.

In the *Times*, Ysenda Maxtone Graham quoted Virginia Woolf's description of her sister: 'Is she not a woman at all, but a mixture of Goddess and peasant, treading the clouds with her feet and her hands shelling peas?'

As Maxtone Graham put it, this sums up 'Bell's supreme achievement as artist and runner of bohemian households.'

As curator of Charleston, the Sussex farmhouse where Bell lived and painted with her lover Duncan Grant, Hitchmough immerses us in the wildly creative domesticity that Bell inspired – and her output for the Omega workshops run by Roger Fry.

In the *Spectator*, Ariane Bankes also a Bell admirer, called her 'a role model for many, whose art, clothes, aesthetic and decorative sensibility continue to inspire generations of would-be bohemians and whose impact never dims.'

Vanessa suffered many tragedies, from childhood sexual abuse to her sister's suicide and the death of her son in the Spanish civil war. But she kept working, weaving into her work her feelings of loss and grief.

Both Bankes and Maxtone Graham were put off by some of the authorial jargon. Bankes called it 'a fog of modish artspeak' which included some 'questionable' claims about, for example 'sexual characteristics' in the artificial flowers Vanessa produced for the Omega Press.

Maxtone Graham glazed over at the 'rather hackneyed summings-up': 'I've read words like those so many times on labels at the Tate that my eyes simply bounce off them now.'

In Andrea Obholzer's new biography of Euphemia Lamb, **A Bloomsbury Ingénue**, the author had plenty of non- symbolic sex to write about.

As Bankes observed in the *Spectator*, the title couldn't be more misleading as 'an ingénue Euphemia emphatically was not.

'Annie Euphemia Forrest, a ravishingly pretty artists' model from Ormskirk, who in the first two decades of the 20th century had been drawn or sculpted by pretty well every artist of note, was, said Virginia Woolf, more or less "a professional mistress."'

Her marriage to artist Henry Lamb collapsed quickly and after that … even the Bloomsberries were awed by her jovial amorality: she out-bohemianed them all.

Bankes noted that, although not much is known of Euphemia's later life (she died in 1957), 'she did eventually settle down and became a café hostess, hobnobbing with Augustus John to the end.'

ERIC RAVILIOUS
THROUGH THE EYES OF HIS CONTEMPORARIES

ALAN POWERS

Mainstone Press, 144pp, £30

Eric Ravilious was a painter, designer, book illustrator and wood-engraver. He grew up in Sussex and was the first British war artist to die on active service in the Second World War when his aircraft was lost off Iceland in 1942; he was 39.

'This new volume is a compendium of observations by critics, commentators and friends who judged Ravilious's work as it emerged,' explained Michael Prodger in the *New Statesman*. 'Among the 30 or so pieces… are his *Times* obituary; reflections on his lithographs by John Piper; thoughts by Osbert Lancaster on his distinctiveness; reminisces by his lover Helen Binyon and friends such as Peggy Angus and Olive Cook; and essays and prefaces for early exhibitions of his work. Taken together they amount to a poignant tribute.'

Eric Ravilious's *Newt Pond,* 1932

Do we need another book on Eric Ravilious? asked Mary Miers in *Country Life*. She answered her own question with the assertion that we did, as this book proved there were still 'rich seams to mine'.

Much is revealed of Ravilious's 'character and working practices', who "restored watercolour to a place of the first importance in English painting", introduced to wood-cut engraving "a freedom, liveliness and invention that has not been equalled since the days of Bewick", revitalised industrial design and excelled among a brilliant group of war artists.'

ENGLISH HERITAGE, ERIC RAVILIOUS PRINTS

HIDDEN PORTRAITS
THE UNTOLD STORIES OF SIX WOMEN WHO LOVED PICASSO

SUE ROE

Faber, 304pp, £25

MADAME MATISSE

SOPHIE HAYDOCK

Doubleday, 352pp, £18.99

Hidden Portraits by Sue Roe, and **Madame Matisse** by Sophie Haydock explore the anguish and contortions the muses of great artists can be subjected to. Enter into a relationship with a famous artist at your peril.

Picasso shared his life with six women; two married him, three were the mothers of his children. Much has been written and said about Picasso the monster.

But from the start Roe emphasises that these relationships – working and romantic – were consensual. All willingly sat for him and, 'all women willingly succumbed to his magnetism' Roe writes.

'What sets Roe apart,' wrote Chloe Ashby in the *Times*, 'is her carefully considered, collective approach to repositioning these women who for too long have been sidelined as silent muses.'

But, she continued, 'While she doesn't shy away from his "devilish behaviour", she doesn't critique it either. If this brilliantly insightful and well-written book is lacking anything, it's bite.'

There were overlaps in his love life: while Picasso was with Marie-Thérèse Walter, he was also with Dora Maar, then Françoise Gilot, and eventually Jacqueline Roque.

Picasso was 'a serial almost-monogamist,' wrote Nicola Shulman in the *Literary Review,* adding, 'although mercurial in many ways, as a lover Picasso slid conventionally into the mould of the rich and famous man. The six important women in his life occupied predictable places on the arc of his celebrity... all were very young, all were beautiful and each was selected in reaction to the last.'

Picasso with Brigitte Bardot, 1956

Evgenia Siokos in the *Telegraph*, applauded Roe's treatment of the women: 'Roe acknowledges that victim narratives, however fashionable, risk doing these women a disservice... Picasso transformed six women's lives – and fuller disclosure reveals the complexity, richness and excitement of life with him.'

In **Madame Matisse**, Haydock also looks at three women who flourished in the artist's shadow.

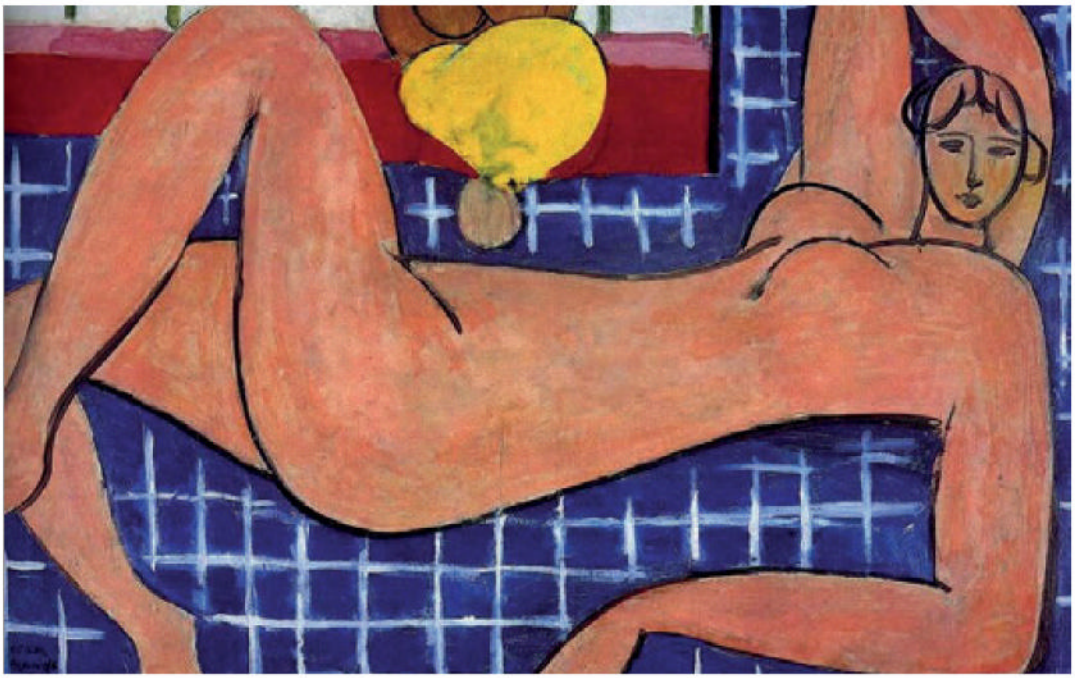
Amelie Matisse, married to him for 30 years, was understandably enraged by the arrival of a younger, and equally formidable model, at a time when her life should have been settling down. She had taken on Matisse's daughter from an earlier relationship and now found herself in a triangle of women vying for his attention.

Eithne Farry wrote in the *Daily Mail*, that Haydock has produced a 'sizzling story of the art world, where side-lined women take centre stage. It's an immersive tale of muses, betrayal, sex and bad behaviour, set in the riotous, rule-breaking 1930s on the French Riviera.'

Madame Matisse delivers her husband with an ultimatum; his wife or his new younger muse. 'It's a dilemma which forms the crux of Sophie Haydock's deliciously immersive novel about these two extraordinary women,' wrote Helen Brown in the *Spectator*.

A former journalist, Haydock is 'making it her mission to breathe life into women whose faces we know from famous artworks.'

And for Brown, she succeeded: 'Think of her as the art world's slightly spikier answer to Philippa Gregory, ... Only where Gregory was once dismissed as a romantic novelist (mostly by those who didn't read her) Haydock is lucky enough to be writing at a time when "herstories" are given more respect.'



GETTY; BALTIMORE MUSEUM OF ART

***The Pink Nude*, 1935. Matisse's portrait of his 'younger muse'**

Turner's *The Thames near Walton Bridge*, 1805

TURNER AND CONSTABLE ART, LIFE, LANDSCAPE

NICOLA MOORBY

Yale University Press, 352pp, £25

Ben Street opened his *TLS* review of Nicola Moorby's new book by quoting Frank Auerbach on the contrast between her two subjects:
'There isn't a Turner
that doesn't somehow fly and
there isn't a Constable
that doesn'tburrow.'

One of the earth, one of the air – and Moorby, he thought, has produced a 'gripping joint biography

***Willy Lott's House* by Constable, c.1812**

of the artists' who have so long been subject to this odd-couple pairing'.

Her approach, 'which allows each artist's work to be illuminated in terms of the other, provides a way of addressing what really matters in any artist's life story: the work they leave behind'.

In the *Times* Bendor Grosvenor agreed: 'The traditional assumption that Turner and Constable were rivals is understandable. Britain had waited centuries for a landscape artist of genius and suddenly in the early 19th century two came along at once.'

Moorby, however, sets out to examine the artists 'side by side instead of face to face' and helps see them in a 'refreshingly new light'.

Moorby offers a useful corrective, too, to the idea of Turner as a proto-modernist: 'for most of his career he was quite conventional, and this allowed him to navigate the rigid hierarchies of the art world more successfully than Constable.'

In the *Literary Review* Robin Simon agreed that 'the pairing of Turner and Constable is a hoary one, dating from their own lifetimes and repeatedly – even tediously – proposed since'. But 'to her great credit, Nicola Moorby manages never to be tedious'.

WILLIAM BLAKE AND THE SEA MONSTERS OF LOVE

PHILIP HOARE

4th Estate, 453pp, £22

Philip Hoare won the 2009 Samuel Johnson Prize for Non-Fiction for his quirky *Leviathan, or the Whale*.

His latest work, about the poet and artist, is 'a dazzlingly written and wildly eccentric mashup of biography, history and memoir', wrote Robert Douglas-Fairurst in the *Times*.

'Instead of a conventional narrative, we are presented with scraps of bio-graphy mixed up with lyrical descriptions of everything from Hoare's love of wild swimming to his reaction on seeing [David] Bowie's costume, stiff with sequins and pearls, from the *Ashes to Ashes* pop video.

At times, opening it feels strangely like playing a game of lucky dip. You never know quite what you're going to get. Readers who are expecting a traditional cradle-to-grave biography might find this approach baffling. Even those who already have a fairly good knowledge of Blake's life might occasionally feel a bit lost in a book that replaces ordinary chronology

> Blake is 'the Willy Wonka of art, your golden ticket to other worlds'

with a series of pinballing connections.'

Seamus Perry, in *Literary Review*, echoed this frustration with Hoare's method: 'Very few of the many pages in this book are devoted to discussing particular works by Blake. Someone who had mistaken it for a helping hand through the complexities of the Blakean universe would end up feeling warmly encouraged in the pursuit, but not exactly enlightened.

"He's the Willy Wonka of art, your golden ticket to other worlds" is a representative declaration. "Like the sea you can't be for or against him." Got that?'

Although it is 'a boisterously enjoyable read, there is an odd gap at the heart of it where a more straightforward offering might have exhibited something like expertise'.

Blake's *Elohim Creating Adam*, c.1795-1805

FINE ART AMERIA. WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

THE AGE OF DIAGNOSIS
SICKNESS, HEALTH AND WHY MEDICINE HAS GONE TOO FAR

SUZANNE O'SULLIVAN

Hodder Press, 320pp, £22

NO MORE NORMAL
MENTAL HEALTH IN AN AGE OF OVERDIAGNOSIS

DR ALASTAIR SANTHOUSE

Granta, 272pp, £18.99

Free Speech? Donald Trump addressing a rally in Ohio, 2016

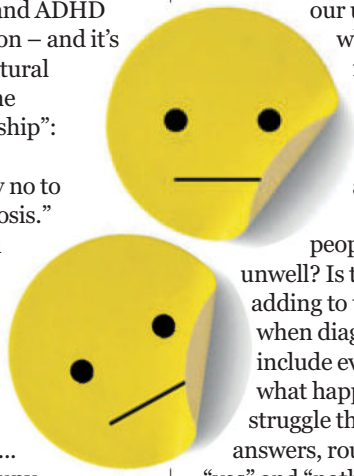
The *DSM* – bible of the psychiatric profession, whose taxonomy of mental illnesses determines (among other things) whether insurance companies will pay for treatment in the US – wrote Hannah Barnes in the *New Statesman*, has filled out a bit over the last few decades: 'The manual's first edition in 1952 listed 106 diagnoses across 132 pages.

DSM-V, the latest full update, published in 2013, contains nearly 300 diagnoses; its 947 pages are "thick enough to stop a bullet", according to one psychiatrist.'

The result has been, some believe, an epidemic of over-diagnosis, with more and more pathologies attributed to patients, and not always to advantage. Two new books seek to address this situation.

'The line,' wrote Barnes, 'between mental disorder and normal diversity has become increasingly blurred. "We are not getting sicker – we are attributing more to sickness," the consultant neurologist Suzanne O'Sullivan writes in her exceptional book **The Age of Diagnosis.**

As O'Sullivan argues, the explosion in diagnosis of autism and ADHD may be an overcorrection – and it's also a symptom of a cultural shift, "a revolution in the patient-doctor relationship": "Doctors are finding it increasingly hard to say no to those who seek a diagnosis."



Adam Rutherford in the *Guardian* warned that 'we swim in oceans of quackery', and said that with her corrective good sense O'Sullivan's voice 'deserves amplification... her excellent books occupy a space once dominated by Oliver Sacks, where individual tales of disease and distress reveal broader truths about science, medicine and people'. He lamented that O'Sullivan will find herself with unwanted allies of the 'in our day, you just got on with things' type, but said the book navigated its contentious topic with fluency and grace. 'Its overall message is clear: diagnosis is a tool to be wielded with the utmost caution, and tolerance for difference and for imperfection can go a long way in keeping us healthy.'

In the *Times*, Sarah Ditum had similar encouragement for Alastair Santhouse's **No More Normal**. 'Awareness is supposed to be good for mental health,' she said, applauding the way that 'the shame that previous generations felt about conditions such as depression, trauma and ADHD has receded'.

But as Santhouse (a consultant neuropsychiatrist at the Maudsley) argues, there is 'a downside to all this awareness'. Rather than expanding our understanding of what's "normal", medicalising difference makes "normal" into an 'ever more remote and rigid concept'. 'Are too many people being defined as unwell? Is the definition itself adding to their problems? And when diagnoses expand to include ever-milder symptoms, what happens to those who struggle the most? Santhouse's answers, roughly, are: "yes", "yes" and "nothing good" and his message is 'tough and troubling'.

Tiffany Jenkins of *Engelsberg Ideas* reviewed the books alongside each other and found that both concluded that we are experiencing 'both over-detection and an expanding definition of disease',and 'the path to healing lies not in multiplying diagnoses, but in rediscovering our capacity for resilience and meaning.'

WHAT IS FREE SPEECH?
THE HISTORY OF A DANGEROUS IDEA

FARA DABHOIWALA

Allen Lane, 480pp, £30

Free speech has always been a matter of opinion. In democracies, it is subject to the prejudices of the age. In autocracies it's considered to be potentially subversive, so subject to censorship and penalties.

But Dabhoiwala, a British lecturer at Princeton, thinks '"free speech" has been a perennially weaponised slogan, wielded as often by the powerful against the weak as by the weak against the strong.'

In the *FT*, Edmund Fawcett welcomed 'this rich and wide-ranging history which reminds us that disagreements over what may be printed or said in public has long been ferocious.'

In the *Literary Review* Jonathan Sumption, former Supreme Court judge, challenged Dabhoiwala's belief that free speech is 'dangerous' and said we should 'allow people to say things other people regard as foolish, hurtful and untrue.'

He went on, 'We cannot have truth and wisdom without accommodating error and folly because the boundary between the two is usually a matter on which people may legitimately differ.'

REUTERS

CARELESS PEOPLE
A STORY OF WHERE I USED TO WORK

SARAH WYNN-WILLIAMS

Macmillan, 400pp, £22

The author, who ran the high-minded policy-unit at Facebook (now Meta) for six-plus years, says its bigwigs don't care what damage they do – and none less than the apparently-appalling former COO Sheryl *Lean In* Sandberg.

Never mind the bullying: the algorithms are also immoral.

The *Observer*'s Stuart Jeffries wasn't alone in asking why she stayed so long – 'She might have leaned out' – while the *Conversation*'s John Hawkins wryly noted: 'Her husband's

'Careless bigwig'? Mark Zuckerberg

explanation was she suffered from Stockholm Syndrome.' Nonetheless, and largely thanks to Meta's attempts at suppression, the book has been a critically-endorsed bestseller.

In the *Spectator*, James Ball revelled in its spite, much of it 'taken up with dissections of former colleagues and their foibles.' This was 'social butchery done with gleeful savagery'.

And in the *Times*, Emma Duncan was amazed by the 'eye-opening accounts of behaviour at the top of the company and serious accusations' levelled at some executives: 'Williams is a sharp and funny writer, and it's a highly enjoyable read — a *Bridget Jones's Diary*-style tale of a young woman thrown into a series of improbable situations from which she manages to extricate herself, until she gets fired.'

That came after she alleged unproved impropriety against Joel Kaplan, one-time boyfriend of Sandberg, now Meta's president of global affairs and charged with Wynn-Williams's persecution. Tickled by Kaplan's part in her success, James Ball wrote: 'For that reason, if for no other, this book is worth a look.'

IS THIS WORKING?
THE JOBS WE DO, TOLD BY THE PEOPLE WHO DO THEM

CHARLIE COLENUTT

Picador, 400p, £20

There's no particular method to this selection of 68 vox-pops, divided into 18 categories and appended by a chapter of 'lessons'. Still, it does seem most Brits derive little pleasure or meaning from earning their crust, the best-paid least of any; and the reviewers were complimentary.

'By simply listening to people talk about their jobs, Colenutt has created something unique,' wrote the *Telegraph*'s Ian Sansom. 'It's a choral work of frustration, pride and despair.'

And in the *Times*, Christina Patterson called it 'strangely gripping... often moving'.

Meet the soldier-turned-primary-teacher who says 'it was less stressful in Afghanistan'; or the childminder who has so many files, she has to keep three cabinets in her kitchen. Sex-workers, panel-beaters and derivatives traders – they're all here – and nearly all afflicted by the modern curse of form-filling and box-ticking, driven by risk-averse administrators.

Consequently, 'workers are doing less of their actual work', wrote the *Observer*'s Ian Cobain. 'Morale is sapped and staff turnover rises.' But there are bright patches, too: the delivery-rider who loves being out on his bike; the office-cleaner who finds satisfaction in a task well done; the prison healthcare assistant who fairly skips through the gates.

As AI encroaches, even the current state of affairs may 'seem like *Paradise Lost*', observed Patterson.

But for now, it appears the key to whistling while you work is in seeing how you've made a difference (by baking bread, for example). That so few can, concluded Sansom, is what renders this book both 'utterly fascinating and thoroughly depressing'.

UNDERDOGS
THE TRUTH ABOUT BRITAIN'S WHITE WORKING CLASS

JOEL BUDD

Picador, 336pp, £20

Who exactly is working-class? According to the author, the *Economist*'s social affairs editor, 40 per cent of the country; three-quarters pale-complexioned, of whom about half are – often with reason – fed up.

But with such a huge variety of experience between them, categorisation has seemed nigh-impossible; and the *Times*'s Will Lloyd couldn't help finding the author's attempts 'fuzzy, porous and a bit weird'.

However, the *Telegraph*'s Rakib Ehsan thought Budd's three-part classification – into the inhabitants of heartlands, colonies and enclaves – 'one of the finest contributions to our understanding' of them yet... essential reading'; and the *New Statesman*'s Tanjil Rashid called the book 'outstanding journalism, [and a] definitive survey of the people behind a label, by a brilliant investigator'.

'Pale-complexioned' underdogs? The cast of Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting*, 1996

GETTY, ALLSTAR/POLYGRAM

'A masked guru for libertarians': Satoshi Nakamoto (*above*) disappeared in 2011

THE MYSTERIOUS MR NAKAMOTO

A FIFTEEN-YEAR QUEST TO UNMASK THE SECRET GENIUS BEHIND CRYPTO

BENJAMIN WALLACE

Atlantic Books, 352pp, £22

In 2008, Satoshi Nakamoto posted a digital white paper outlining 'a peer-to-peer electronic cash system' – or cryptocurrency – called Bitcoin, each bitcoin created through 'mining' – essentially, solving complex cryptographic computer puzzles.

In 2011, Nakamoto announced he was moving on 'to other things' and was never heard from again.

To this day, as Wallace shows in this 'highly enjoyable' book, 'no one knows who he really is', wrote the *Wall Street Journal*'s Steven Poole, arguing that the 'mystery of Nakamoto's identity has created a countercultural hero, a masked guru for libertarians and crypto enthusiasts.'

From Australia, through London, Oslo and Los Angeles to desert Arizona, Wallace explores Bitcoin's utopian origins and development, guiding readers through a rogues' gallery of suspects.

Wallace is 'well suited to the task', wrote Will Stephenson in the *New York Times*. 'His first article on Bitcoin appeared in 2011, only a few years into its existence. That year, he attended the first Bitcoin convention, in New York, where participants tried (and failed) to use crypto to pay for dinner ... Wallace draws up criteria for plausible candidates ranging from "coding quirks" to "emotional range." Nearly 200 pages in, he is still spinning his wheels... one begins to discern the familiar shape of a shaggy dog story.'

Poole praised this 'education in the pleasures and pitfalls of investigative journalism.' Stephenson concluded, 'if Wallace doesn't close the case, he is an engaging narrator, his book serving as a useful introduction to one of the century's true riddles.'

BROKEN REPUBLIK

THE INSIDE STORY OF GERMANY'S DESCENT INTO CRISIS

CHRIS REITER & WILL WILKES

Bloomsbury Circus, 352pp, £22

'A splendid book by authors who long ago detected Germany's fragility, aimed at readers who take no pleasure in the sight of its precipitous decline,' wrote Yanis Varoufakis on the book's cover.

One would believe that Varoufakis, the politician and economist, who negotiated on behalf of the Greek government during the 2009–2018 its debt crisis, would be emphatic that the decline of Germany is eminently not something to be wished for.

In the *Times*, Oliver Moody applauded: 'In this fledgling micro-genre, **Broken Republik** is the best polemic yet.'

Moody is taken by the example of VW which seems to have lost the plot; the exemplary manufacturers have 'slipped down global patents tables, haemorrhaged plants and workers. Terminally hammered by high energy prices, they have moved production overseas.'

The problem, according to the authors, is that after 1945 Germany failed to develop a real collective identity to replace the previous völkisch ethno-nationalism.

Instead it was "haphazardly taped together with a prosperous economy (now stagnant), welfare and social insurance (limping towards a third of annual GDP), football (patchily successful) and a renunciation of Nazism (complicated)."

Moody found 'the book's charge sheet is long and unforgiving.' The 'righteous excellence of the early chapters is inconsistently sustained through the second half,' but suspected that 'a lot of the criticisms Wilkes and Reiter level at Germany apply just as strongly to other countries in northern Europe.'

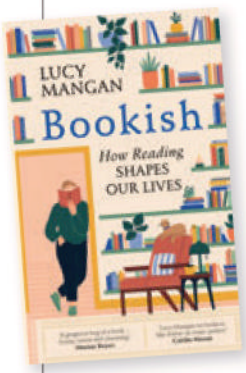
GETTY

Miscellaneous

BOOKISH
HOW READING SHAPES OUR LIVES

LUCY MANGAN

Square Peg, 304pp, £18.99



'If we stop reading, we stop putting ourselves in other people's shoes,' writes Lucy Mangan in **Bookish**, the sequel to her 2018 *Bookworm*.

'Books offer a wealth of experience; more adventures, more lifetimes.'

In *Bookworm* she showed how literature helped her navigate the mysteries of her childhood, and, in **Bookish**, how literature navigated her through school, university, a first job, motherhood and bereavement.

The *Guardian*'s Nick Duerden enjoyed the premise: Mangan is 'voracious in her tastes, and consumes everything from Victorian classics to airport thrillers to the genre that used to be called chick-lit. Each in their own way has taught her how to live.'

He appreciated her artfulness: 'She makes for a wonderfully incisive critic and can pick apart a George Orwell with the same perspicacity with which she can, say, a Jack Reacher.

'Her memoir can also be read as a comic novel, drenched as it is in Sue Townsend snark. Like Townsend, she skewers everyday events for their comedic potential.'

Miranda France in the *TLS* agreed. Her exploration is 'admirably free of the temptation to show off. There's no whisper of Joyce, Tolstoy or Proust. Virginia Woolf enters the scene only in order to praise Jane Austen.'

She added, 'Readers won't share all of Mangan's preferences, but that's part of the point – it's enjoyable enough to eavesdrop on the pleasures of a committed bookworm.'

CHANGING MY MIND

JULIAN BARNES

Notting Hill Editions, 57pp, £8.99

In the *Guardian*, Prativ Anil found Julian Barnes's essay on the virtues of intellectual flexibility less than fresh: **Changing My Mind** 'comprises five micro-essays, originally commissioned for a radio series a decade ago and repackaged here.' Alas, he added, 'the broadcast conceit doesn't translate well on the page', but concluded in a spirit of generosity: 'Who knows, though – a future reread might do the trick. Perhaps when I reach his age, in half a century, I'll have changed my mind too.'

In the *Spectator* Nicholas Lezard found himself 'wondering if it would have been published if the author were not Julian Barnes', and described the tone as varying between a 'thoughtful vicar delivering an uncontroversial sermon in a venerable church somewhere in the Home Counties' and an 'earnest and articulate sixth-former shoving in a few extra words wherever he can to fill space but without making it look too obvious'.

> If we stop reading we stop putting ourselves in other people's shoes

The *New York Times*'s David Gates complained that the book 'can't make up its mind about whether it's a single piece or, as it appears to be, a loosely connected series of ruminations [...] To its credit, **Changing My Mind** never soars into Cloud Cuckoo Land. And to its detriment.'

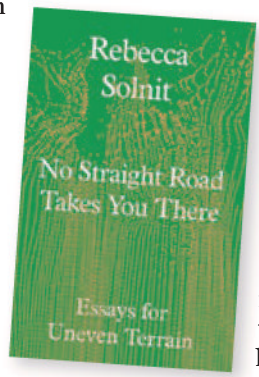
In the *Literary Review*, Frances Wilson was more generous, but found these short essays 'a surprisingly long read' not because they're boring but 'partly an effect of following Barnes's thought, with its erudite reflections and anecdotal diversions, and partly because the reader's own thoughts keep getting in the way'.

NO STRAIGHT ROAD TAKES YOU THERE
ESSAYS FOR UNEVEN TERRAIN

REBECCA SOLNIT

Granta, 176pp, £16.99

Solnit explores responses to the climate crisis, women's rights, the fight for democracy, trends in masculinity, and the rise of the far right in the West.



Beginning with a 300-year-old violin and what it tells us about forests, abundance and climate, and ending with a prisoner dreaming of the ocean, the essays first published in various newspapers bridge the political and the literary.

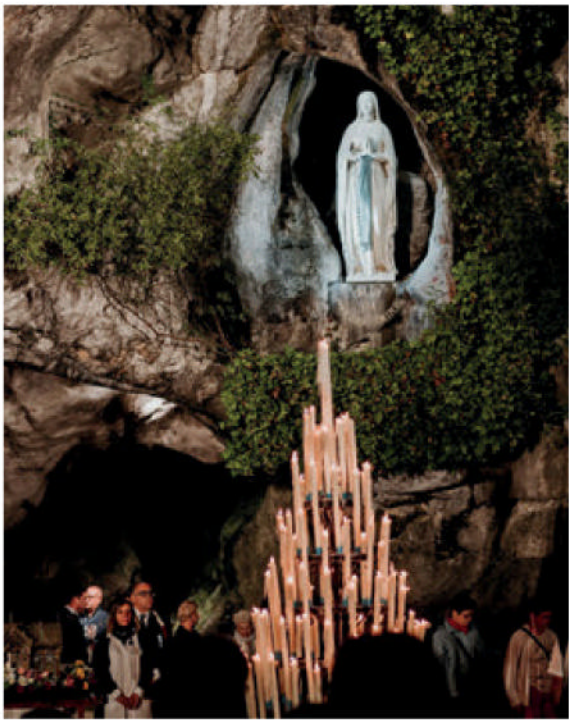
Frieda Klotz in the *Irish Independent* praised this 'rousing call to action' by a 'renowned American public intellectual'.

'If Trump's second presidency marks a moment of despair for those on the political left, Solnit's latest book of essays is a reminder to have hope. Solnit observes that despair, pessimism and cynicism are luxuries not everyone can afford. What's more, there are forces that actually want people to feel hopeless.'

Klotz enjoyed these 'powerful, thought-provoking essays – but Solnit has a message for readers: doing nothing and drowning in worry are not enough.'

Publishers Weekly however found the collection 'impassioned if tedious'. Solnit 'has a few incisive moments, among them her critiques of "unbiased" centrism and of Silicon Valley's "above the law" billionaires.' But at other times, she 'leans into a fanciful whimsy that grates. Even so, she makes a convincing case that doomerism can be defeated by offering better "theories of change" that demonstrate how "our actions... matter" in shaping history – a well-conceived thesis that she unfortunately repeats to eye-glazing effect.'

LIZ ANDERSON chooses three new books exploring religion, pilgrimage and spirituality



Pilgrims at the shrine to Our Lady of Lourdes

The Bible Society recently published a report, *The Quiet Revival*, in which it found that churchgoing among young people in England and Wales was growing.

It also reported that churchgoers are more likely to experience higher life satisfaction than non-churchgoers. And in her new book **Don't Forget We're Here Forever: A New Generation's Search for Religion** (Bloomsbury, 352pp, £22), Lamorna Ash 'decided to find out for herself what's happening to Christianity in Britain', wrote Catherine Pepinster in the *Telegraph*.

'Armed with innate curiosity, honed by her studies as an anthropologist, Ash ventured into the unknown to report back on the cultures and tribes, totems and taboos that come under the generic label of "Christianity in Britain today"'. She wrote down what she saw and the result is a 'captivating narrative of discovery'.

Alister McGrath in the *TLS* explained that her journey of exploration was 'prompted in part by the unexpected conversion to Christianity of two university friends'. He thought her 'reflections on a "new generation's search for religion" will be rewarding reading for many, and uncomfortable reading for ecclesiastical bureaucrats'.

In *The Literary Review'* Ysenda Maxtone Graham found Ash's prose 'strong and pleasingly eccentric'.

Ash described how when her mother was diagnosed with dementia she found herself 'able to pray for the first time in her life ... She used to think prayer was "tantamount to wishing for something you could not hope to get".

But now, she writes, "I discover prayer is closer to a kind of radical, active and quite literal acceptance." She emerges from her quest a changed person.'

In the *TLS*, Guy Stagg described how Kathryn Hurlock's **Holy Places: How Pilgrimage Changed the World** (Profile, 464pp, £22) charts the history of 19 different shrines and 'shows how "the activity of pilgrimage and the sites themselves have shaped society, culture and politics from the ancient world to the present day"'. He thought the best chapter was about Lourdes.

Stagg continued: 'This grouping together of disparate spiritual traditions, while overlooking specific doctrinal demands, is what pilgrimage now means to many.

'Nowhere better exemplifies this trend than Santiago de Compostela, the subject of the book's concluding chapter and "the model pilgrimage", according to Hurlock.

'The Santiago model makes pilgrimage into a cultural phenomenon, a museum trip and fitness challenge.

But if you only understand pilgrimage in cultural terms, you miss the spiritual side of the experience, as well as the personal reasons that draw people to these shrines.'

Katherine Harvey in *Engelsberg Ideas* agreed: 'While some readers may wish that Hurlock had a little more to say about piety, miracles and spiritual experience, she makes a compelling case for understanding pilgrimage as an activity in which the secular and the sacred are inextricably entwined, an insight that remains extremely relevant in today's world.'

Earlier this year, in mountainous eastern Turkey, a team of American researchers may have uncovered the remnants of Noah's Ark that may match the Bible's description of the vessel that came to rest after the 'great flood' 4,300 years ago.

The discovery came too late for Philip C Almond, who seems to have read 'everything there is on the subject' in his 'impressively erudite' **Noah and the Flood in Western Thought** (Cambridge University Press, 407pp, £35), according to Nick Spencer in the *Spectator*.

'He takes the reader through Greek, Christian, Jewish, Islamic, medieval and early modern interpretations, before concluding with the "arkeology" of contemporary creationists.

'There are glorious eccentricities throughout the voyage, and even the most accomplished cultural historian will find fresh details.'

> When her mother was diagnosed with dementia, she found herself able to pray for the first time in her life

American *Publishers Weekly* found the book 'rigorous and accessible', 'a worthy reconsideration of an ancient story', ending with 'a trenchant discussion of the story's relevance in a world that risks destruction from yet another "cataclysmic climate event" wrought by "human wrongdoing"'.

Spencer concluded, on this evidence, the fable is 'never really going to go out of fashion'.

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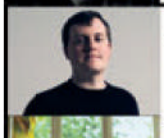

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Rural Lives: *Morning* by John Frederick, 1848

OUR ISLAND STORIES

TEN WALKS THROUGH RURAL BRITAIN AND ITS HIDDEN HISTORY OF EMPIRE

CORINNE FOWLER

Penguin, 432pp, £10.99

When Corinne Fowler, Professor of Colonialism and Heritage at the University of Leicester, co-authored a National Trust report in 2020 about the colonial and slavery connections of many of the charity's properties, she met with what she describes as a 'wave of hostility' from pundits and politicians alike.

Right-wing, populist politician Nigel Farage accused the trust of 'trashing' the nation's past. In ten walks, Fowler sets out to show,

> Many slavers, bankers and traders ploughed their assets into picturesque scenery; then became peasant-eviciting Highland landlords

through conversation and observation, how Empire transformed rural lives for better and for worse.

Many slavers, bankers and traders ploughed their assets into picturesque scenery; and then became peasant-evicting Highland landlords, commons-enclosers in Norfolk, or persecutors of pioneer trade-unionists in Dorset.

But Boyd Tonkin, writing in the *FT* appreciated Fowler's efforts not to 'finger-wag'. '**Our Island Stories** engagingly mingles chatty or lyrical travelogue with digests of scholarly research.

It aims for – and deserves to reach – a wide and open-minded readership.'

He is not uncritical: 'Sometimes she elides crucial ties with tangential links, direct causation with loose association.'

Fowler's argument is not for everyone. But Tonkin concluded that readers, with no desire to view British history 'through a prism of guilt and fear', might nonetheless enjoy this series of walks as 'Fowler and her fellow walkers relish the beauty and charm they encounter, even as they tussle with one contested legacy after another.'

BIRDS, SEX AND BEAUTY

THE EXTRAORDINARY IMPLICATIONS OF DARWIN'S STRANGEST IDEA

MATT RIDLEY

Fourth Estate, 336pp, £25

'Ambitious and wide-ranging, exploring "Charles Darwin's strangest idea" – that evolution is driven not only by natural selection but also by sexual selection,' judged Nigel Andrew in the *Literary Review*, this book is 'illuminating, incisive and a pleasure to read.'

The idea has 'faced opposition since Darwin's own time, perhaps because it involves female choice, perhaps because it seems to dilute the purity of the all-embracing theory of natural selection.'

Birds, Sex and Beauty opens with the author on the Pennines before dawn, watching the spectacle of a black grouse lek, a loud gathering of male birds; for eight months, they gather daily to strut, display their spectacular plumage and scrap with each other.

'Why, asks Ridley, do they go to such bizarre, exhausting lengths? And why do they, like many other birds (notably peacocks and birds of paradise), have such elaborate and beautiful-looking plumage? The answer is that female mating preferences have triggered 'runaway' effects in male display.'

Tom Whipple in the *Times* declared that, for Ridley, 'the results are clear. If you see something in nature that is odd, arbitrary and quite possibly beautiful, then he argues the default assumption should not be that it is there because it makes an animal better able to survive. It is that, through a beauty bug in evolution, it makes it better able to get a mate.'

Andrew found Ridley's book 'written with a pleasingly light touch, larded with literary quotations and illustrated with excellent colour photographs.'

Sex and beauty? Grouse strutting their stuff

MEISTERDRUCKE, GETTY

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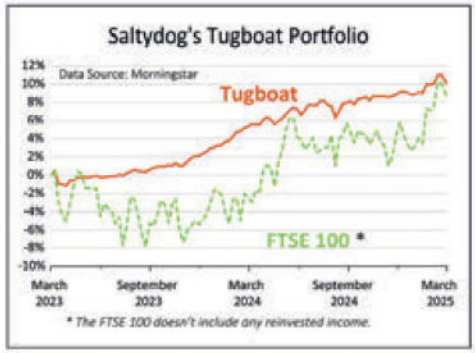

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Fighting for the past

Historical re-enactment is thrilling – but steer clear of the Nazis

DAVID HORSPOOL

A few years ago, I was chatting to a Civil War camp follower. She was a Parliamentarian, judging from her sober attire – palette black with a few touches of white.

'So,' I asked, 'are you part of the Sealed Knot?'

Stupid question. The Sealed Knot is Britain's oldest historical re-enactment society, devoted to re-creation of the battles of the Civil War, from Edgehill to Worcester. But it is far from the only one.

I was talking to a member of a completely different group of Civil War re-enactors.

'We hate the Sealed Knot,' she told me, raising the intriguing possibility of Civil War re-enactment actually leading to another civil war.

The occasion was the Chalke History Festival, that glorious annual celebration in the Wiltshire countryside of the past and our fascination with it.

It has expanded on the usual literary festival fare of talks and interviews with authors to include re-enactors and a profusion of lovingly restored old kit. Some of it is on a grand scale, including, one year, an eye-popping replica of a Second World War Typhoon.

Naturally there is something comical about re-enactment, particularly when the re-enactors take themselves so seriously.

Tim Moore's book *I Believe in Yesterday: My Adventures in Living History* is full of encounters with re-enactors, such as the man who complains about the anachronistic hats other 'Vikings' are wearing, before taking 'a sip of ale from a soapstone cup he'd found in Tesco'.

Then there is the Nazi problem. My first brush with a re-enactor at Chalke was rather more disconcerting than my Civil War one. I hadn't yet realised that the festival featured re-enactment when I walked past a man who looked like Jan Smuts, except that he was dressed in faultless Afrika Korps uniform.

True, the Afrika Korps, commanded by Field Marshal Rommel, has a (debatable) reputation as 'worthy' foes rather than SS thugs. But that wasn't what Prince Harry thought when he was snapped partying in an Afrika Korps uniform.

Battle of Ripple Field (1643) is re-enacted near Tewkesbury by the Sealed Knot

A less awful Nazi is still a Nazi: swastikas just aren't a good look.

I wonder if there is any truth in the rumour that Second World War re-enactment groups find it harder to recruit people willing to be Allied forces than the Other Side. The episode of the comedy *Peep Show* where nerdy Mark slowly realises his new, re-enacting friend Daryl, who persuades him to dress up as a German, really is a Nazi, taps brilliantly into that suspicion.

Christopher Borrelli, an American journalist who spent time with Second World War re-enactors in Rockford, Illinois, didn't find any of that. But he was told people 'played Nazis because they thought the costumes were cooler, the equipment and vehicles more interesting'. Hugo Boss has a lot to answer for.

Re-enactment has become a reliable feature of any number of 'heritage' attractions. I'm not sure the target 'family' audience is as receptive to this as the curators hope.

Up to a certain age, children generally enjoy dressing up. But being confronted by a medieval peasant or a stern infantryman can make them feel anything from bored or scornful to scared, with moments of wonder and fascination in rare supply.

Punters of all ages like being shown how things worked, or the peculiarities of past lives, by well-informed volunteers or qualified experts. But the demonstrators don't have to be wearing a tabard and a funny hat to do it.

Is there any more to re-enactment than a bit of fun? Can any serious historical insight be gleaned from it? In principle, it's possible.

Re-enactors are putting into practice one of the guiding mantras of modern historians: Leopold von Ranke's dictum that they should try to find out '*wie es eigentlich gewesen*' ('how things actually were').

In practice, a Sunday afternoon setting off Civil War artillery pieces or cooking up Viking oatmeal may not lead to any great discoveries.

More ambitious projects to recreate past objects, such as the rebuilding of a Greek trireme, come under a different, more serious-sounding heading, 'experimental archaeology'.

The benefits of re-enactment are less concrete than understanding how the ancients rowed their galleys. Ever since the Earl of Eglinton made his doomed attempt in 1839 to re-create a medieval tournament (it fell victim to the Scottish weather), the reason to do such things has been the same: to help the historical imagination; to remind us that, years ago, people didn't 'dress up' like that. It was what they wore.

As Eglinton put it, rather poignantly, and with a liberal dose of self-delusion, 'I am aware that it was a very humble imitation of the scenes which my imagination had portrayed, but I have, at least, done something towards the revival of chivalry.'

David Horspool is author of Oliver Cromwell: England's Protector

GETTY

I Once Met Sid Vicious

I met Sid Vicious in a New York nightclub in November 1978. He was out on $50,000 bail, accused of murdering his girlfriend Nancy Spungen.

I was playing the guitar in a group and had gone with the keyboard player to an edgy music venue in the East Village, CBGB, hoping to perform on a free-for-all open-mic night.

Ever since the age of 12, I've spent blissful hours playing guitar on my own or with friends. My ventures into the public arena have never been as easy.

One mishap occurred just before the CBGB visit, at the Warwick University folk club. My fellow player asked me if I'd made up the song I had been playing – 'The Curragh of Kildare' – and I found myself inexplicably saying, 'Yes.'

In fact, it was an old Irish song which had been revived by Bert Jansch.

Regrettably, it turned out that the audience were all Bert Jansch fans and, as we played 'Curragh', they started singing along. I never visited the club again.

Months on, I joined a rock group at Duke University, in North Carolina. I drove to New York with the keyboard player, Ricky, and some friends from Duke, including a wild card called Nita.

As we entered CBGB, we spotted Sid Vicious at the bar, a wispy but still menacing figure, in black leathers. My companions barrelled up to him – 'Hey, Sid!' – while I, loathing punk, hung back, bristling.

My irritation turned to dismay as the rest of my party settled themselves down at a table with Sid and his terrifying-looking 'manager'. Rockets Redglare was an outsize actor who would later play Angry Mob Member Number 4 in Scorsese's film *After Hours* (1985). He was, in fact, Sid's dealer. His moon face was obscured by huge, Janet Street-Porter style glasses, with red-glare red shades.

Sid was ravaged and silent, now described by Ricky as 'technically' alive. Aged 21, he appeared younger: he still had peach fuzz on his chin and, with a junkie's sweet tooth, drank Pepsi.

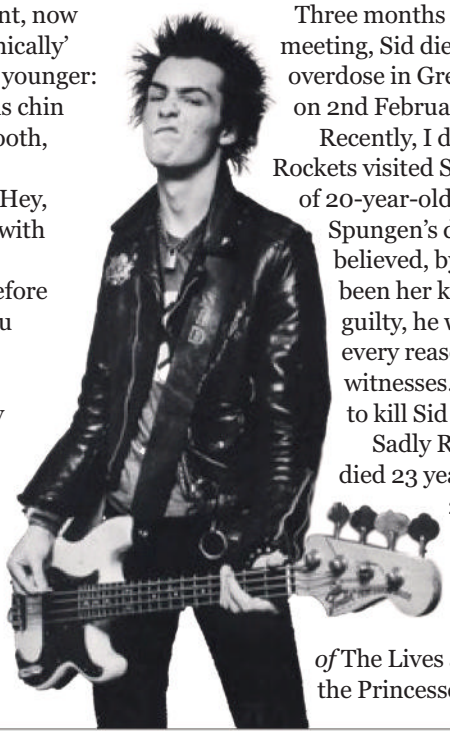
Nita was soon on a roll: 'Hey, Sid, you GOTTA come stay with us for Thanksgiving! … You GOTTA meet my family!' before turning to me: 'Hey, Sid, you GOTTA talk with Frances – SHE'S ENGLISH TOO!'

Sid side-eyed me blankly as I grappled with possible topics. 'Do you know the Roebuck?' I eventually mumbled. The Roebuck was a pub frequented by punks on the King's Road.

He almost managed a nod. Worn out by the chat, he slunk off, pursued by Nita, who returned in a state of great excitement: 'Sid's jacking up in the Ladies!'

When he returned, he seemed, to me, no more addled than before. Nita apparently disagreed. She began shouting at Rockets, accusing him – repeatedly – of trying to murder Sid.

Rockets responded badly. Going full *Goodfellas*, he jumped to his feet and, brandishing a broken beer bottle, chased us all out of CBGB.



Three months after our meeting, Sid died of a heroin overdose in Greenwich Village, on 2nd February 1979.

Recently, I discovered that Rockets visited Sid on the night of 20-year-old Nancy Spungen's death and is believed, by some, to have been her killer. If he was guilty, he would have had every reason to silence witnesses. Was he trying to kill Sid after all?

Sadly Rockets himself died 23 years after Sid, in 2001. So we'll never know.

By Frances Welch, *author of* The Lives and Deaths of the Princesses of Hesse

Movie star on fire in the *other* Holywood

MEMORY LANE

In 1977, Belfast was a boom town – for all the wrong reasons.

I was a schoolboy on my summer holidays, looking for a job. Liam Neeson was a struggling actor looking for a break.

My friend heard about a film that was being made locally. In Troubles-torn Northern Ireland, long before *Game of Thrones*, this was incredible. Films were made in Hollywood, California – not Northern Ireland.

I didn't know a gaffer from a best boy, but we could earn some money helping with the props during a few days' shooting at the Ulster Folk Museum which, ironically, was in the outskirts of Holywood, County Down.

The film, *Pilgrim's Progress*, involved lots of spiritual strife and misdirection. One of the Christians, Faithful, was to be burnt at the stake and we had a role to play in making that happen.

Our main job was to be driven to a glazier and carry a huge picture window of plate glass across Belfast and out to the film set.

This might not seem too difficult. But remember that, at this point in history, the Europa Hotel in Belfast was the most bombed hotel in the world. People said many of those blasts were organised by the paramilitaries – so they could make extra money from putting the windows back in again, through apparently legitimate businesses they controlled.

Considering that we were classic dysfunctional teenage boys, it was miraculous we got the glass to the Folk Museum in one piece.

In our absence, a bundle of wood and a stake had been erected; our glass was placed just in front of it. Wood was piled in front of the glass and set on fire. Faithful writhed in agony behind the glass, safe from harm – but convincingly made up with seared burns and melting flesh.

In the dark, late at night, this was incredibly atmospheric. Even in the Troubles, you didn't get the chance to burn someone at the stake.

And what of Liam Neeson? He was there too, playing the Evangelist.

He pointed Pilgrim to the light, showing the small gate leading to salvation, with the soft-voiced fortitude later shown in *Taken* (2008) and the sad, gentle empathy he showed in *Love Actually* (2003).

By Michael McKee, Tonbridge, Kent, who receives £50

Readers are invited to send in their own 400-word submissions about the past

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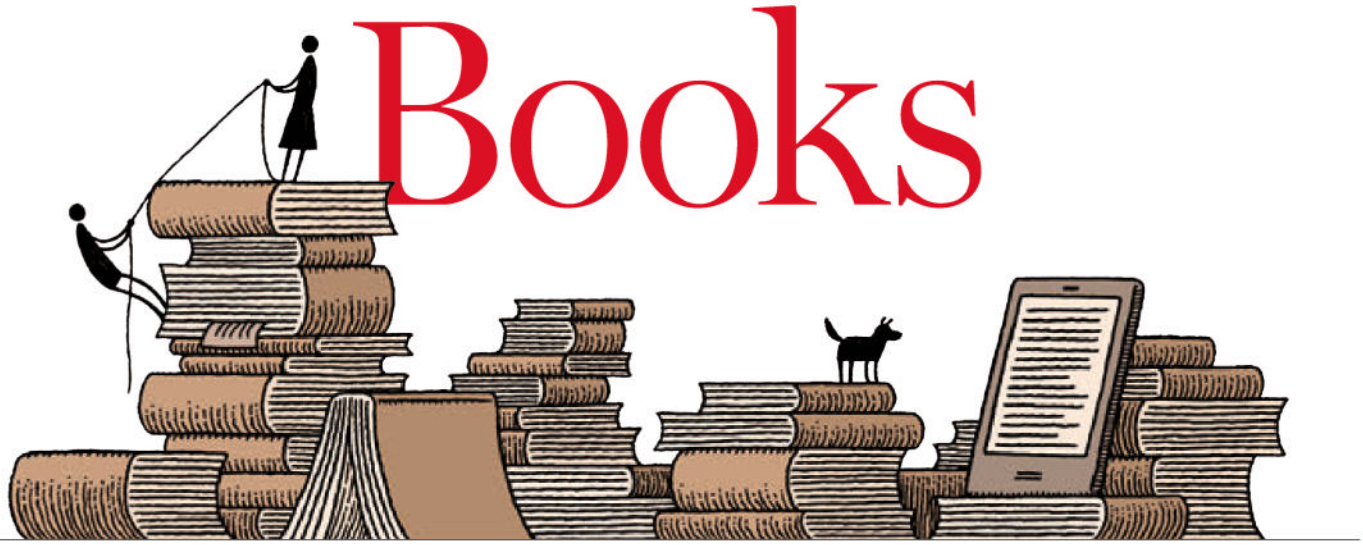

Cardinal's sins

TANYA GOLD

The Cardinal: The Secret Life of Thomas Wolsey

By Alison Weir

Headline Review £25

Thomas Wolsey's yen for magnificence is still here.

There is Hampton Court, that red-brick marvel on the Thames – almost ruined by Christopher Wren's baroque additions, but not quite.

And there's Christ Church, Oxford, mesmerising for its vastness and – by far the most interesting thing about it – its incompleteness. Wolsey fell before he could build the cloisters of what should be called Cardinal College, and no one else bothered to finish it. That is his monument: an absence, and rain.

Alison Weir wants to put flesh on Wolsey's bones: to do for him what Hilary Mantel did for Thomas Cromwell, Wolsey's lawyer and servant, in the *Wolf Hall* trilogy.

Mantel's Cromwell was haunted from the start, and she wrote a psychological study. Weir's Wolsey – 'a plump-cheeked, pleasant-faced fellow' – is less riven; less whole.

We follow him, a butcher's lad and prodigy, from Ipswich to Magdalen College, Oxford; to the court of Henry VII, a gifted king whom no one seems to like except me.

Henry says, plaintively, 'They think me a miser.' His pet monkey agrees: he eats his account book. Henry VII fears his son Harry – Henry VIII, fated to be eaten by power – is spoilt. He is right.

The Tudors, the last men standing after the Wars of the Roses, promoted non-aristocratic men. Wolsey had more power than any non-noble in British history up to that time, while Henry VIII preened and dreamt of ruling France as if it were a toy.

Along the way, Wolsey falls in love with Joan Larke, an unlikely proto-feminist, has four children by her, loses and misses them – Henry VIII is a hypocrite, and makes Wolsey send them away – and worries that he has broken his priestly vows. But not too much.

After failing to secure Harry's divorce from Catherine of Aragon – the King's Great Matter – he fell from power and died en route to London to be tried for treason. He cheated Harry of his head – he died of natural causes on the way to his trial, aged 57.

The novel's richness is in its detail: Tudor food and manners; the drip of the Renaissance into England through antick detail on fine palaces and books; powerboating on the Thames.

You can see Weir's Tudor London, but her Wolsey is less clear. He appears less cynical – and more tender – than he

Henry VIII, Wolsey and Hampton Court's pepperpot towers and crenellations

GARY WING

must, as a butcher's son, have been to get this close to power.

Unlike with Mantel's Cromwell, his contradictions are unresolved: he is a plain fellow. He is ambitious but we do not understand why. He loves God but he breaks his vows each night.

He is sensitive merging with soppy, and if that's a pleasure to read – kind Cardinal Wolsey! – it doesn't feel true. He talks to Henry VIII like a psychotherapist and to Joan Larke like a child. He worries a little that he's fat. He cries.

It's a touching portrait, but the real Wolsey – the Wolsey you sense – remains enigmatic, while the Tudor world whirls around him like ribbons.

Weir is too much of a historian to write speculative – that is, compelling – fiction. We don't know Wolsey from the documents. But the barley-sugar chimneys, pepperpot towers and crenellations at Hampton Court – the ones Henry VIII coveted so much he essentially stole them – are a clue. They indicate a love of beauty and power.

Mantel invented her Cromwell from a single document: a note of his weeping on All Hallows' Eve. Mantel knew it was the anniversary of the deaths of his wife and daughters. Her Cromwell was a fiction – and it doesn't matter.

Weir has no such confidence, and no such theory about Wolsey. Instead, she follows the documents – and though Tudor England comes to life, her leading man never does. Wolsey spends a lot of time at his desk – he was clearly a workaholic. The last third of the book has him fighting with the papacy about the Great Matter, which is hardly riveting.

Still no one else has been able to explain Tudor foreign policy without boring me to sobs, and I now have it.

That aside, the film portrayals are richer and more speculative: Orson Welles's carnal monster in *A Man for All Seasons*; Jonathan's sensitive ghost in the BBC's *Wolf Hall*. Weir leaves Wolsey in history – another buried artefact.

Tanya Gold is restaurant critic of the Spectator

The spy who loved us

THOMAS W HODGKINSON

The Spy in the Archive: How One Man Tried to Kill the KGB

By Gordon Corera

William Collins £25

After the fall of Communism, Western embassies inside the former Eastern Bloc came under siege from 'walk-ins'.

Almost everyone seemed to have secrets to sell about the dark heart of the Soviet experiment. And they were willing to hand them over in return for a one-way ticket to Idaho, a picket fence and pocket money to get them by for the first decade or so.

Most were blaggers or liggers – freeloaders who knew no more about the KGB than you or I. But occasionally, the real deal walked in — and none was more real than Vasili Mitrokhin, the crotchety Russian bean-spiller who forms the focus of Gordon Corera's fascinating *The Spy in the Archive*.

A grey-faced, nondescript figure, he exemplified a saying among spies: the trouble with defectors is they're defective. Like many servants who turn on their masters, Mitrokhin had been a true believer. Then he lost his faith, which left him rudderless.

Time was when he had wanted nothing more than to serve the KGB. As a young Soviet spook, he was poolside at the 1956 Melbourne Olympics during the brutal semifinal clash between the Hungarian and Soviet water polo teams, later known as the Blood in the Water match.

Hungary, a Soviet satellite state pushing for independence, had been savagely suppressed a few weeks earlier. The outraged Hungarian players kicked off during the game and the Soviet swimmers hit back. The result – a 4-0 win for Hungary – yielded photos of Hungarian player Ervin Zádor with a gash under his eye.

It was a PR disaster for the USSR and a career-stalling gaffe for Mitrokhin, who had been heard urging his team to punch harder.

Disgruntled, he found himself stamped as 'not suitable for operational work' and consigned to the archives in the KGB's Lubyanka building in Moscow.

There he brooded until the 1970s, when it was decided the foreign-service section would move to a new building outside the city. Mitrokhin was tasked with sifting KGB files going back decades to decide what could be thrown away and what should be kept.

What he read sickened him so much that he grew to loathe the organisation he worked for, and to ponder how he might best bring it to its knees.

The answer he came up with was a labour of hate. For years, he secretly jotted tiny notes about the contents of the files, which he concealed in his shoes.

At weekends, when his wife and son were asleep, he typed the notes up. In this precarious crusade, he was helped by the fact that he knew how the KGB worked. He knew they investigated anyone in the country seen to buy a lot of typewriter ribbons. What might they be writing? So Mitrokhin ingeniously recycled his ribbons, using concentrated fruit juice instead of ordinary ink.

In his telling of Mitrokhin's extraordinary story, Corera sometimes adopts a thrillerish style that feels overdone. The dramatic swing of his subtitle gives a flavour.

Perhaps he worried that his tale of a browned-off archivist needed gussying up. But the mundanity is central to the story—and to its le Carré-esque appeal. It was because Mitrokhin was such a drab character that he passed unnoticed.

Perhaps it was also why the CIA rejected his overtures when he entered the US Embassy in Vilnius, leaving us Brits, pleasingly, to land this fish for ourselves.

Running to thousands of pages, the Mitrokhin Archive has proved a trove for understanding the sordid workings of the Soviet machine. For example, after the ballet dancer Rudolf Nureyev defected, there was a plan – never carried out – to break his legs.

In the 1960s, the KGB ran a disinformation campaign designed

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to sow dissent among US civil-rights campaigners. The Archive also revealed the activities of several Soviet spies, such as Melita Norwood, who for decades passed British atomic secrets to the Kremlin.

As for Mitrokhin, who settled beside the Thames in Teddington, he seems to have remained dyspeptic to the end. He always resented the Americans for their having turned him away in Vilnius.

He also fell out with Professor Christopher Andrew, his distinguished co-author on the two edited volumes of his work, published in 1999 and 2005.

'Only a tiny minority of difficult people are heroes,' Andrew commented. 'But a surprisingly large proportion of heroes are really difficult people. Mitrokhin is a really difficult person. But he is also a hero.'

Thomas W Hodgkinson is author of How to Sound Cultured

Skeleton in my attic

NICHOLAS COLERIDGE

A Shattered Idol: The Lord Chief Justice and His Troublesome Women

By Tom Hughes

Marble Hill £27

For those of us with the Coleridge surname, there are really only two ancestors one is ever asked about.

The first is the opium-using poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), he of the flashing eyes and floating hair, who during my lifetime has undergone a distinct reputational upgrade.

In my schooldays, STC was generally framed as the unreliable boho sidekick to the Poet Laureate William Wordsworth.

Today, Wordsworth is increasingly recast as a bit of an Establishment pedant whose work has been steadily dropped from GCSE syllabuses, while STC's stock soars.

The other prominent Coleridge is John Duke Coleridge (1820-94), the 1st Baron, who was Lord Chief Justice for so long in the 19th century (1880-94), and hung on to the role so doggedly, that Prime Minister Gladstone eventually dangled an earldom as an inducement to step down – which he declined, preferring to remain in office.

Enormous portraits of the first Lord Coleridge in judicial wig and robes hang everywhere: in Middle Temple, at Balliol College, Oxford, in the National Portrait Gallery and in the British Museum. The two fat volumes of his *Life and Correspondence* have sat unread on my bookshelves for 40 years.

He had always appeared to me to be an ultra-respectable Victorian blowhard, who held every top judicial position over a quarter of a century.

Tom Hughes's book *A Shattered Idol: The Lord Chief Justice and His Troublesome Women* changes everything. Until I read this enthralling book, I had no idea about the *gossipfest* of scandals surrounding Lord Coleridge's public battles with his daughter Mildred and her unsuitable suitor, every twist of which was covered for several years by the newspapers.

Nor, indeed, about Coleridge's second marriage to a dodgy lady half his age whom His Lordship had met on board a cruise ship while crossing the Atlantic.

After his death, the Coleridge family did a first-rate job of suppressing every unfortunate episode, and Tom Hughes has done an equally first-rate job of raking it all up again.

Lord Coleridge was regarded by his peers as a brilliant man and an ambitious one.

'How well he looked the part as Lord Chief Justice,' noted the *Law Times*, 'with his tall and stately figure, smooth, benignant face, winning smile and beautifully modulated voice.'

He was regularly included in newspaper lists of 'England's greatest men', while it was also observed that 'Lord Coleridge is disliked by most people who know him, and by many who do not.'

Coleridge had three sons and a daughter, Mildred, who comes across as a tragic figure – frequently ill, probably hypochondriac, highly strung, unmarried in her mid-thirties and universally regarded as exceptionally plain, even by the suitor who entered her life.

Poor Mildred met Charles Warren Adams while helping out at an anti-vivisection charity. Without wanting to fall into the same slanderous trap as my distant ancestors, I can understand why the Coleridge men took an instant dislike to Adams. He sounds pleased with himself, and was unemployed and broke, 'flashily dressed with protruding silk handkerchiefs', and altogether too déclassé for the regrettably snobby Coleridges.

They quickly identified him as a gold-digger. And events took a turn for the worse when the middle-aged suitors were discovered, unchaperoned, possibly canoodling, in a semi-darkened drawing room in Lord Coleridge's large London house.

Inflammatory letters were exchanged. Lord Coleridge's senatorial and dismissive missive sent from his club, the Athenaeum, received an impertinent reply from Adams.

The eldest son, Bernard Coleridge, chimed in with an even ruder letter to his sister, allegedly libelling her suitor, who sued; a trial eventually took place in the Lord Chief Justice's own courtroom in the Royal Courts of Justice.

Every word uttered in court was reported in full by every newspaper and scandal sheet, to the fury and discomfort of 'the Chief' (as Lord Coleridge is known) and to the general delight of everyone else.

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I will not disclose the outcome of the case, except to say that the Establishment closed ranks in a most satisfactory manner from the Coleridges' point of view. And Mildred and Adams were eventually provided with a generous allowance, paid monthly, providing that they quit England and lived unobtrusively in hotels in the South of France.

Trials over (there were two), Lord Coleridge, by now a widower, met his second wife, Amy Lawford, on board the SS *Britannic*, where some said she was working as a stewardess.

Previously married and keen on the limelight, she sounds like a bit of a Meghan figure, but she caught the senior judge's eye and was soon 'his little darling'. The rest of the family was, once again, appalled and full of suspicions.

The second Lady Coleridge sat for a glorious portrait by Lord Leighton. Her husband grumpily observed, 'I shall not know what to do with the thing when it comes home,' inferring there was no suitable place for it to hang in either his London home or his Devon seat at Ottery St Mary.

By the time of his death, Lord Coleridge was estranged from all his children, who fretted constantly about his will – justifiably, it transpired; Amy got the lion's share.

I cannot say the Coleridges emerge uniformly well from this fascinating history. There is an excellent foreword by Sir Paul Coleridge, another distinguished former judge.

Sir Nicholas Coleridge is Provost of Eton College and Chairman of Historic Royal Palaces

Bust of Inigo Jones, Worcester College Library (1720), Oxford, built by Nicholas Hawksmoor and George Clarke. The library has the biggest collection of Jones's own books. The 46 books include his copy of Palladio's *I Quattro Libri Dell'Architettura* (1601), inscribed with Jones's notes. From Oxford Libraries – Architecture (Bodleian Library, £50), by Geoffrey Tyack and Dan Paton

American song lines

CHRISTOPHER BRAY

The Letters of Frank Loesser

Edited by Dominic Broomfield-McHugh and Cliff Eisen

Yale £25

This is a book of songs. And not just because Frank Loesser (1910-69) was responsible for some of the most show-stopping numbers ('Luck Be a Lady Tonight'; 'I Believe in You'; 'Heart and Soul') of the 20th century.

Nor just because the shows those songs stopped have sold numberless tickets. On its first Broadway outing, in 1950, *Guys and Dolls* ran for 1,200 performances. As for Loesser's sixties follow-up, *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*, that clocked up 1,417 days and nights.

And yet Loesser is the least-known of the men who wrote the Great American Songbook. Pretty much everyone remembers who wrote 'Edelweiss' or 'I've Got You Under My Skin'. How many of us can name the writer of 'I Don't Want to Walk Without You' or 'Baby, It's Cold Outside'?

Loesser's songs are lesser spotted because they are lesser sung. Though Sinatra would perform 'Luck Be a Lady' throughout the last 30 years of his working life, there is no 'Frank sings Frank'-type compilation.

And while Ella Fitzgerald's *Song Book*s of the work of Kern, Porter, Rodgers and Hart, Mercer etc did perhaps even more than Sinatra to alert people to America's great tradition, she never saw fit to put together a Loesser collection.

Then again, as *The Letters of Frank Loesser* makes clear, Loesser had rather more on his mind than song and dance. He was a brilliant businessman.

A couple of monumental goofs aside (he counselled would-be producers that neither Shaw's *Pygmalion* nor Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* was a 'potential musical'), Loesser's letters are infinitely astute.

Though Loesser was sage enough to know that 'an artist cannot remain an artist while creating something he has no wish to create', he was also adamant that songwriting was a craft and not an art.

And he had no time for Irving Berlin's line about there being 'no business like showbusiness'. On the contrary, showbusiness was a business like any other. As he wrote to a friend, 'A show is not a toy... It is some $400,000 worth of hard, sound business, all of it aimed at giving two and a half hours of continuous pleasure.'

At more than 600 pages, Loesser's letters take a bit longer than a couple of hours to get through. Nonetheless, they're pretty much a continuous pleasure.

Not since the publication of the Amis/Larkin exchanges has a book been so full of writerly *amuse-bouches*. A letter to the actress Ruth Gordon touches on Aristophanes's *The Frogs* – which Loesser calls 'a musical with a tragic ending. The heroine croaks.'

The bandleader Artie Shaw is dismissed as a 'self-styled intellectual who has lunched ... with Charlie Chaplin so that both could air their polysyllables'. And there's Loesser's variant on the phrase about lipstick on a pig: 'It seldom does any good to put a pink sequinned ball gown on a young lady who hasn't bathed' is both more elegant and more biting.

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Many of these letters serve no purpose but to amuse. The mocking character reference Loesser composed for his friend Stu Ostrow is a masterpiece of sly digs and broad comedy that could work as a scene in any musical.

Dominic Broomfield-McHugh and Cliff Eisen have edited these letters with a delicate touch. I was happy to have the word 'flivver', long familiar from Sammy Cahn and Jimmy van Heusen's 'It's Nice to Go Trav'ling', defined (it's 'a cheap car'). And it is useful to know that just as showbiz types call dancers hoofers, so they call songwriters cleffers.

As far as I could see, our guides fail to annotate just two key facts. The Lee Eastman to whom Loesser wrote in February 1954 was not only a 'veteran entertainment lawyer' – he was also the father of Paul McCartney's first wife, Linda, and the man Macca wanted to represent the Beatles after the death of Brian Epstein.

McCartney actually sings two Loesser numbers – 'More I Cannot Wish You' and 'Inchworm' – on his covers album *Kisses on the Bottom*. Enjoy.

Christopher Bray is author of Michael Caine: A Class Act

A Longford story

YSENDA MAXTONE GRAHAM

A Writer's Story

By Rachel Billington

Tandem Publishing £20

'Are all your family writers?' our late Queen asked Rachel Billington at Buckingham Palace in 2012, when she went up to receive her OBE.

'No, Ma'am – just the women,' she replied.

It was a crisp and accurate rejoinder to what Billington thought was a rather disappointing question ('but she couldn't be blamed for being briefed by an insensitive idiot').

They went on to have a good chat about Gallipoli, where Billington's paternal grandfather, the 5th Earl of Longford, was killed in 1915, his body never found.

As the fifth of the eight children of Elizabeth and Frank Longford, born in 1942, ten years after her eldest sibling, Antonia, Rachel never felt particularly clever in that family of high-achieving parents and children. 'Placid' was how her mother described her in her diary.

Rachel was simultaneously obsessed with ballet and her pony, and lapped up non-highbrow novels from Boots library, in the cottage of the daughter of the ex-cook at their house in Sussex.

Now, in her early eighties, looking back at her life, Billington is justifiably proud of having (in spite of her childhood lack of confidence) published 25 novels, 11 books for children and four works of non-fiction. She was President of English PEN in the late 1990s, and joined the first editorial board of what became the monthly paper *Inside Time* – the voice of prisoners, still going strong 34 years later.

She feels blessed to have been married to the delightful, kind and acclaimed English film director Kevin Billington. They had four children. Their eldest son, Nat, died of cancer aged 44 in 2015. Kevin died of cancer aged 87 in 2021. The tranquillity of their lockdown in Dorset was smashed by his terminal diagnosis.

She hates the word 'widow', and writes movingly about what happens when your beloved dies:

'Grief and bureaucracy – hard to spell, hard to face. They walk on stage at the same time from two ends but quickly move to the centre spotlight and thereafter are linked indissolubly.' She knows that, one day, the bureaucracy will be sorted. 'And then what? He will still be gone.'

To enjoy this whimsical and charming memoir to the full, you need already to be pretty interested in the Longfords and Frasers, which luckily I am. Then you won't mind the slightly self-indulgent aspects, such as the extracts from her novels, interspersed in italics through the book, and the descriptions of her glamorous travels for travel-writing journalism.

I liked hearing how embarrassing her father could be. Lord Longford 'ignored the opinions of the world'. 'A photograph on the front of *Private Eye* of him sitting on a football as if he were laying an egg gave me pain.'

He turned up for the Garter ceremony at Windsor Castle in 2001 with 'dried egg and Bovril' on his clothes, with 'an insalubrious sweater over a dirty tie and trousers held up by another tie'.

'But, Dada, you can't go like that!' Rachel protested.

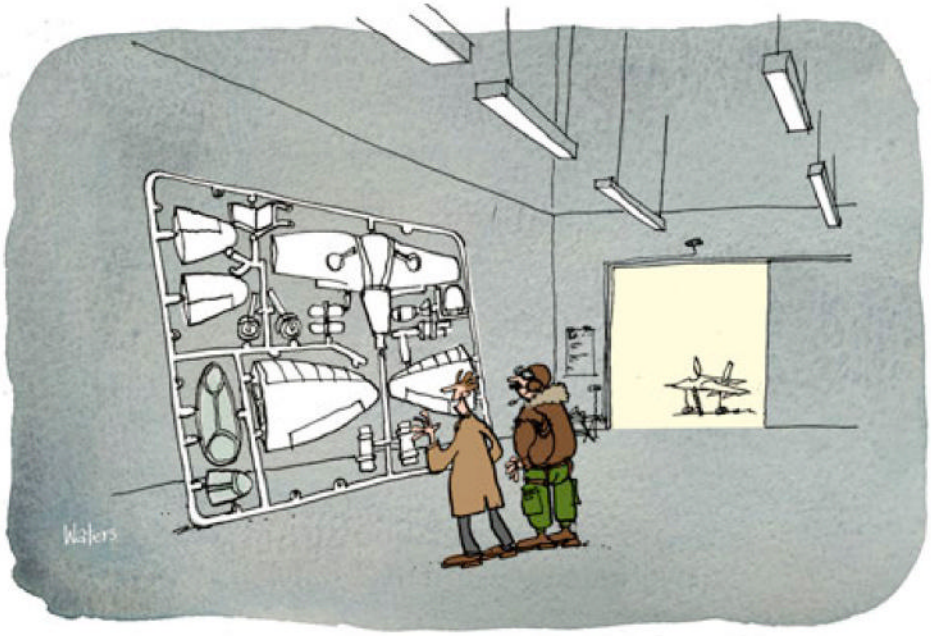
'Don't worry,' Frank said. 'When I arrive, they give me a cloak and hat. I'll be quite covered.'

All went well till the ceremony ended and everyone started filing out. 'My father stood up. He was carrying a stick in one hand and a plastic bag in the other – doubtless filled with letters from prisoners. Disaster struck immediately. As his cloak swung open, his trousers slid inexorably over his bony hips and down his legs…'

Still, Longford's mantra – 'Hate the sin, not the sinner' – guides her to this day. When meeting prisoners to report on projects in prisons for *Inside Time*, she never looks up what they're in for.

It was at the Billingtons' party in Notting Hill in 1975 that her sister Antonia met Harold Pinter and he spoke the famous words, 'Must you go?'

Kevin had got to know Harold – not as the playwright, but as an actor in his 1970 film *The Rise and Rise of Michael*



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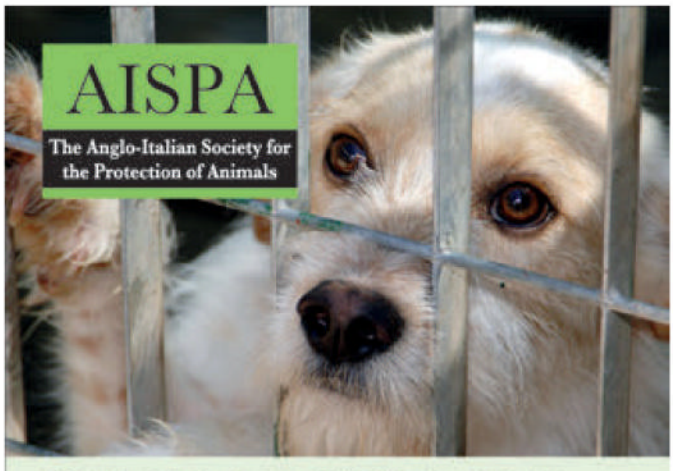

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Rimmer. Like Harold, Kevin came from a working-class background.

Just as Antonia treasures Harold's East End childhood, Rachel is fascinated by Kevin's childhood in Warrington – a place she'd never heard of when she first met him. While, as children, she and her siblings played Europe-inspired war games in their Sussex garden (her first German word was *Achtung!* and her first French word L'Attaque, the board-game name), Kevin was playing Catlics and Protedogs on the streets of Warrington.

Rachel still can't quite forget – though she does now forgive him for it – Pinter's remark on the evening of the birth of her grandson Claudio in 2004. She arrived at the restaurant in Notting Hill, full of excitement, and said, 'This is such a happy day! Rose has had a beautiful…'

'Today,' Harold interrupted, 'George W f***ing Bush has won a second term in the White House. It is the *worst* day.'

'If that's how you feel, I'm going,' said Rachel, and walked out of the restaurant, Kevin following her.

Harold sent her a warm note of apology the next day. She later concluded that 'it was just his strength of feeling about political injustice that led him to join protests, walk out of grand dinners, and write deeply moving plays'.

Written in short chapters, this book is good company. Billington notes down pithy remarks she's never forgotten. One was Malcolm Muggeridge's 'Travel narrows the mind.' Another was her mother's 'It's not a sin to be unhappy, darling.'

I won't forget Evelyn Waugh's advice to Rachel's beloved late sister Catherine Pakenham, who would be killed in a car crash aged 23. Waugh was Catherine's godfather. She'd written to him on her 18th birthday, asking for life advice, vaguely hoping for a cheque.

He replied, 'Of course, there is only one true calling for a young woman of your age: you must become a nun.'

And there was no cheque enclosed.

Ysenda Maxtone Graham is author of Jobs for the Girls

OLDIE NOVEL OF THE MONTH

The Domino effect

MICHAEL BARBER

The Lady in the Park

By David Reynolds

Muswell Press £10.99

'The idea of a lone gumshoe working on his own is a romantic fantasy dreamed up by writers like Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett.'

So says ex-Detective Chief Inspector Jim Domino, the very model of a modern private eye.

Jim works out every day and knows 'that tingle in my arms that means a thrill and danger'. But, unlike Philip Marlowe or Sam Spade, he wouldn't dream of confronting a villain without back-up. He can read a spreadsheet, but employs a bookkeeper to unravel the esoteric chicaneries of money-laundering.

And, although he left the Met under a bit of a cloud – for bending the rules to get a result – he's on good terms with his former colleagues at Peckham, the local nick.

Jim says police work is 'social work, with aggravation thrown in'. And this is not a bad description of what follows, involving as it does a house full of orphans, a family of Sudanese refugees, two asylum seekers from Belarus, a corrupt copper, a cannabis farm in the Thames Valley and a drug baron's deceptively obliging wife.

A neighbour of Jim's, an unconventional mother of six by three different fathers, is attacked and left unconscious after being dealt a single blow to the head by an unknown assailant in a local park. His six-year-old grandson, Danny, goes to school with some of the victim's children. One of them, a teenager called Ruby, appeals to him for help, and so Jim becomes involved in the fall-out from the crime.

The victim, Caroline, was a militant eco-activist from a well-to-do background who didn't lack for enemies. Yet there's something odd about her injury, as if the perpetrator had second thoughts and abstained from finishing her off on the spot.

To begin with, suspicion falls on Gary, one of Caroline's ex-consorts, a user who has form. But Ruby convinces Jim that Gary, for all his faults, would never kill her mum. She reveals that Caroline's most recent row was with the negligent owners of a puppy farm, whom she accused of cruelty.

Jim decides to follow this up, an investigation that, despite the precautions he takes, very nearly ends in his demise. He gets a result, but it's not the one he expected.

It's Danny, Jim's observant grandson, who identifies the clue that solves the murder.

I'm giving no secrets away by revealing that the weapon conforms to Chandler's belief that it should be 'the means at hand' and not something bizarre like a duelling pistol.

I should also point out that this is not, strictly speaking, a whodunnit, since you couldn't possibly work out whodunnit because there are no clues to guide you. Some readers may regard this as a swizz, but there's more than enough interest here to keep you turning the pages.

One of the founders of Bloomsbury Publishing, David Reynolds intends this to be the first in a series featuring Jim.

We know what Jim does. But what else do we know about him? Well, he's a long-standing widower with a troublesome ulcer and two grown-up daughters.

One of them, Charlotte, is a hospital doctor. We don't hear much about her. The other, Danny's mum, Laura, is a jazz singer. She and her husband are separated – so Jim often baby-sits and takes Danny to school; hence the connection with Caroline.

Jim has a girlfriend called Vic, a lawyer, who shares his taste for chilled Peroni and a decent bottle of wine.

He reflects on their relationship: 'We get on so well and we have a lot of fun… But would it be the same if she was always there? Life has highlights; they don't often endure but, if you're lucky and don't push at it too hard, they – or something similar – might last, or come round again. That's what I feel at the moment, anyway – and I think Vic does too.'

Jim's a football fan; some of his other likes seem rather outré for an ex-copper. He reads the *Guardian*, quotes Rupert Brooke and Lorca and is moved to tears by the paintings of Joaquín Sorolla.

Will the adventures of such a humane protagonist be enough to whet readers' appetites for more? I hope so.

Crime fiction has more than its fair share of blunt instruments wielded in the name of the law.

Michael Barber is author of Anthony Powell: A Life

BACKING BRITAIN: WHY NOW COULD BE THE TIME TO INVEST IN THE UK

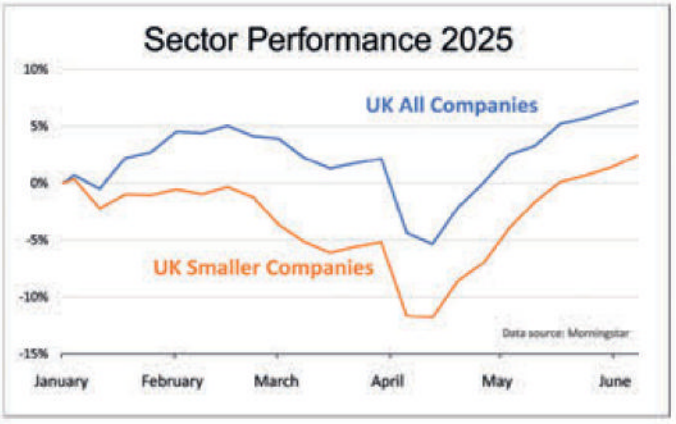
For the past few years, the UK stock market has been the unloved corner of global investing. But recently, there have been signs of change.

The UK economy grew by 0.7% in the first quarter of the year, outpacing both the Eurozone and the US. Inflation appears to be under control, interest rates have started coming down, and the political backdrop looks more stable than it has in a while. The UK has also signed new trade agreements with the EU, India and the United States, which is helping to boost confidence in the economic outlook. All in all, there is a growing sense that the tide may be turning.

You can see it in the numbers. Although the FTSE 100 rose by 5.0% in the first quarter, helped by large international firms, the FTSE 250, which is more focused on the domestic economy, was down by 5.6%. But that trend has reversed in recent months. In April, the FTSE 250 rose by 2.1% while the FTSE 100 slipped. In May, both indices moved higher, but the FTSE 250 gained 5.8% compared to a 3.3% rise in the FTSE 100.

UK equity funds have followed a similar pattern. Over the past four weeks, both the UK All Companies and UK Smaller Companies sectors have performed strongly. The smaller companies have just edged ahead in the short term, but over six months, the All Companies sector has done better overall.

Douglas Chadwick, founder of Saltydog Investor



For UK-based investors, there are practical advantages to investing closer to home. Being more in tune with domestic politics, economic conditions, and well-known companies can help boost confidence and decision-making. Currency risk is another factor. Overseas investments are vulnerable to fluctuations in exchange rates, which can either enhance or erode returns. By contrast, UK equity funds that invest in sterling assets provide a more straightforward link between company performance and investor outcome.

The UK market itself is broader than many realise. It is home to global giants, promising smaller businesses, and sectors ranging from financials and consumer goods to healthcare and technology. Skilled fund managers with a UK focus are often better placed to spot hidden opportunities, especially among smaller, less-covered companies.

And of course, there is a certain satisfaction in supporting the domestic economy. While global diversification remains important, there is a strong case for maintaining meaningful exposure to your home market, especially when valuations are attractive and momentum appears to be turning.

At Saltydog Investor, we keep a close eye on movements like this. Our weekly analysis highlights which sectors are improving and which funds within those sectors are leading the way. It is this level of detail that helps investors react quickly when momentum begins to shift.

We currently hold funds from both these UK sectors in our demonstration portfolio. They have started well and we hope the current upward trend continues.

This is not about predicting the future, but reacting sensibly to what the market is doing now. UK stocks still trade below historical averages, and if the economic recovery continues, there could be more upside to come.

Saltydog was set up to help private investors take control of their portfolios, without having to rely on guesswork or gut feeling. We track fund performance, group sectors by volatility, and present the data in a way that is easy to understand. Our aim is simple: help our subscribers be in the best funds when the market is rising, and move to safer waters when it starts to fall.

If you are thinking of increasing your exposure to the UK market, now could be a good time to start. We have already adjusted our sails. For more information, or to take our two-month free trial, visit **www.saltydoginvestor.com**.

saltydog investor

To receive our **free guide** *An introduction to Successful Trend Investing*, or to sign up for our **two-month free trial**, please go to our website **www.saltydoginvestor.com**.

With our easy-to-use trend investing method you could protect your savings from downturns and still achieve excellent returns when conditions are favourable.

Commonplace Corner

There is no such thing as the pursuit of happiness, but there is the discovery of joy.
Joyce Grenfell

The ladder of success in Hollywood is usually a press agent, actor, director, producer, leading man; and you are a star if you sleep with each of them in that order. Crude, but true.
Hedy Lamarr

He may have hair upon his chest but, sister, so has Lassie.
Cole Porter

Good advice is always certain to be ignored, but that's no reason not to give it.
Agatha Christie

You only have one go at life, which is thrilling. Only you can make yourself into who you want to be. Don't blame anybody else. You are entitled to free fresh air, and that's it. Do the rest yourself.
Joanna Lumley

Childhood is, generally speaking, a preparation for disappointment.
Seamus Heaney

Alcohol has its own well-known defects as a medication for depression,

Joyce Grenfell (1910-79)

but no one has ever suggested that it is not the most effective anti-anxiety agent yet known.
Joan Didion

If you asked Christ or Buddha, Epicurus or Zeno, 'What do you think of life?', the answer would in all cases take the form: 'A pretty rubbishy affair.'
Conrad Russell

I don't believe that if you do good, good things will happen. Everything is completely accidental and random. Sometimes bad things happen to very good people and sometimes good things happen to bad people. But at least if you try to do good things, then you're spending your time doing something worthwhile.
Helen Mirren

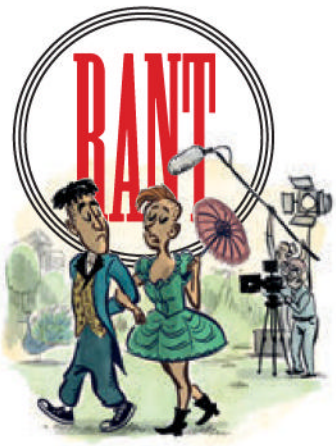
Harold Lloyd was not a comedian. But he was the finest actor to play a comedian that I ever saw.
Hal Roach

My philosophy of my life is that I am deeply, deeply serious about my work and for the rest I like to have a few laughs.
Maggi Hambling

To say of a picture, as is often said in its praise, that it shows great and earnest labour, is to say that it is incomplete and unfit for view.
James McNeill Whistler

Being tall is very good for reaching high shelves and seeing in a crowd. Sadly, it has also given me the inability to dance. There's too much of me to look neat, which is most disappointing.
Miranda Hart

Do not the most moving moments of our lives find us without words?
Marcel Marceau



TOM PLANT

Period dramas

Period dramas are crammed with anachronistic clothes, cars, homes, vocabulary and hairstyles. Here are my ten golden rules for utter ineptitude in capturing the past on screen:

1 Always assume periodisation is rigid. The roads of 1965 should be packed with recent model cars, with no vintage Austin A40 Somersets or Standard Vanguards.

2 Similarly, 1970s homes were always furnished with the latest designs rather than with five-year-old sofas and outdated radiograms.

The protagonist should also live in a house built no earlier than the decade of the narrative's setting.

3 Slow the narrative to a sloth-like crawl to display how elaborate, and expensive, 'period detail' can substitute for character development.

4 Bonus points for a Land Rover appearing in the Second World War.

5 Employ the Period Laugh, as described by Clive James, for a costume drama: 'Nha-ha-ha-ha!'

6 Follow the example of Virginia Mayo's Lady Edith in *King Richard and the Crusaders* (1954) and pay no attention to authentic contemporary dialogue. 'War, war! That's all you ever think about, Dick Plantagenet!'

7 Hairstyles are essential for creating that inauthentic setting, not least Roger Moore's Brylcreemed *Ivanhoe* (1958) and Richard Burton's remarkable coiffure in *Where Eagles Dare* (1968).

8 Epic miscasting key: think of John Wayne as Genghis Khan, or *Land of the Pharaohs* (1955), with James Robertson Justice as Vashtar, the pyramid architect, and a mortified-looking Jack Hawkins as Pharaoh Khufu.

9 Newsreel footage illustrates how Britons in the late 1950s and 1960s often resembled Thora Hird or Sam Kydd. Instead, ensure period-drama characters look like Greek gods off to the Goodwood Revival.

10 Inept exposition: 'The last National Serviceman has been demobbed, and that *Please Please Me* LP sounds groovy. London really will start swinging now!'

ANDREW ROBERTS

SMALL DELIGHTS

Discovering that the last person to use the kettle has refilled it.
MAGGIE COBBETT, RIPON, NORTH YORKSHIRE

Email small delights to editorial@theoldie.co.uk

Arts

FILM

HARRY MOUNT

DARLING (15)

Sixty years ago, *Life* magazine declared 1965 to be 'the Year of Julie Christie'.

In that year, she starred in the smash hit *Doctor Zhivago*. But, aged 25, she won her Oscar and Bafta for her other 1965 film, *Darling*, rereleased in cinemas and on Blu-ray for its 60th anniversary.

Christie is perfect as Diana Scott, the astonishingly beautiful, half-ingénue, half-knowing model, cutting a swathe through swinging London. Empty London, too – oh, to live in the days of Diana's deserted Piccadilly and Heathrow Airport.

The plot of John Schlesinger's film is simple enough. Diana betrays her young husband as she moves seamlessly from older man to older man: from arts TV presenter Robert Gold (melancholy, world-weary Dirk Bogarde) to advertising executive (smug, slick Laurence Harvey).

Diana is a sympathetic Becky Sharp, as her rake's progress ultimately lifts her all the way up to a philandering Italian prince (José Luis de Vilallonga, a genuine Spanish marquess). And so, in a spooky vision of the future, she becomes Princess Diana, trapped in a loveless marriage.

Julie Christie is happily still with us, at 85 – though, sadly, her husband, Duncan Campbell, the writer, *Guardian* journalist, crime expert and *Oldie* contributor, has just died at 80.

Also happily still with us is the screenwriter Frederic Raphael, 93, who won an Oscar for his understated, spare screenplay for *Darling*.

The subtle undercurrent of his script is the grim, seamy price Diana and her lovers pay for their amoral self-indulgence.

Her gilded life starts to become wearily repetitive. She lies on the phone to her first husband to be with her first lover. She then uses her second lover to deceive her first lover with the same kind of telephone lie.

Utter darlings: Robert (Dirk Bogarde) and Diana (Julie Christie)

During her moral descent, Christie's beauty remains pristine: plump lips wrapped around that ever-expanding ear-to-ear smile; deep shadows pooling under cheekbones; the glittering eyes becoming even lovelier when she's crying, the croaky, breathless voice just breaking.

But her divine features become ever more twisted by neurosis, those eyes wildly rattling from side to side.

Diana's words and behaviour grow gradually more debauched, too, even as she retains her pleading, innocent qualities. After her abortion, a lover asks how she feels and Diana just says, flatly, agonisingly, 'Empty.'

All the while, her modelling career goes from strength to strength; not least, in a nice, ironic touch, winning an advertising contract as 'the Happiness Girl', just as her sadness is deepening.

Tragic threads run through the film. Christie and her friends start bullying her goldfish, filling their tank with gin, soda water and meatballs until the poor things die.

The word 'darling' is dropped regularly into the script. It's first used, charmingly and innocently, of Diana as a little girl. It's then applied, indiscriminately, as a term of fake endearment in Diana's waspish, camp, artistic set. And then, finally, her unfaithful Italian prince calls her darling, just as he's rushing off to see his mistress.

Things fall apart for Diana in an undramatic and therefore convincing way. 'Thank God, it's never too late,' she says when she comes back to Robert Gold – for ever, she thinks. In fact, enraged by her betrayals, he's just having a one-night stand with her as revenge. It *is* too late for her to make amends.

And then there's the final irony, as Diana's debauchery destroys her. 'I could do without sex,' she says, 'I don't really like it that much.'

THEATRE

WILLIAM COOK

IN PRAISE OF LOVE

Orange Tree Theatre, Richmond,

On stage until 5th July

Online, 8th to 11th July

***Le vice anglais*: Sebastian (Dominic Rowan) and Lydia (Claire Price)**

GARY SMITH

'Do you know what *le vice anglais* – the English vice – really is?

'Not flagellation; not pederasty – whatever the French believe it to be. It's our refusal to admit to our emotions. We think they demean us.'

That stirring *cri de coeur* sums up the essence of this profound, neglected play – and the essence of its profound, neglected author, Terence Rattigan (1911-77).

From the 1930s to the 1950s, Rattigan bestrode Shaftesbury Avenue like a colossus. Knighted for his service to the stage, he still enjoys an avid following among theatregoers of a certain age. His masterpiece, *The Deep Blue Sea*, has just been playing to full houses (and admiring reviews) in the West End.

Yet for most people under 50, his name is hardly known. How come? Because, when 'kitchen sink' playwrights such as Harold Pinter revolutionised British theatre in the 1960s, Rattigan became a bête noire. His devoted audience never deserted him, but the cognoscenti did.

With his well-cut suits and well-made plays, to them he summed up everything that was tired and stale about the English stage: a plummy Old Harrovian writing complacent, bourgeois dramas about complacent, bourgeois people.

This critique was entirely wrong and terribly unfair. Rattigan's work elucidates something central to the English psyche – our compulsion to keep a stiff upper lip, and the emotional damage that ensues.

Rattigan's greatest hits still command a certain recognition, but *In Praise of Love* isn't one of them. It's rarely revived, yet it's among his finest plays. So hats off to this fabulous theatre for resurrecting it, when it would have been far easier to dust down *The Browning Version* or *The Winslow Boy*.

As with a lot of Rattigan's plays, the storyline is fairly simple, yet its execution is ingenious, with just enough twists and turns to keep us guessing. As always, dramatic irony is his watchword. We know more about these characters than they know themselves and that's what entertains us, even in a play whose theme should make it intolerably grim.

Lydia, an Estonian refugee who survived the Nazis *and* the Soviets, is dying from an incurable disease. She doesn't tell her husband, Sebastian, an irascible literary critic, because she thinks he couldn't cope. Instead she tells their best friend, Mark, an obscenely wealthy author of obscenely successful thrillers, with whom she nearly ran away, long ago.

The play's central conceit is that even though Sebastian treats Lydia dreadfully, he loves her very deeply. A more perceptive examination of marriage would be hard to find.

Reviewing the première, in 1973, the great *Sunday Times* theatre critic Harold Hobson called it 'a play of unostentatious courage', but he was an exception. Most notices were lukewarm, or worse. 'The product of a spirit languishing in the glow of a former heyday,' wrote Michael Coveney in the *FT*. 'Witless junk, paraded under the banner of a reputation.' Ouch!

Coveney was (and is) one of our shrewdest critics, and his conclusions are invariably spot-on. So what accounts for the chasm between the show he saw and the show I've just seen?

I didn't see the first run (though, with Joan Greenwood and Donald Sinden in the leading roles, it can't have been all bad). I can surmise only that this insightful play was simply out of time.

What seemed witless in the groovy seventies would have been bold and daring if Rattigan had written it 20 years earlier, in his heyday.

What's more surprising, and rather wonderful, is that it seems bold and daring today. The sexual revolution has been and gone, leaving us to pick up the pieces. This astute assessment of the contradictions of mature love provides solace for all us oldies, wrestling with the challenges of marriage in later life.

Thankfully, director Amelia Sears makes no attempt to update this wise, reflective drama. She presents it as a straight period piece, and it's all the better for it. Played in the round, in a compact auditorium, it's intensely intimate. You feel as if you're in the room with these people, listening in.

Claire Price is magnificent as the dying, death-defying Lydia – so fragile yet so full of life. Dominic Rowan does very well indeed as the spectacularly unsympathetic Sebastian.

I still think Lydia should have run away with Mark (a warm, attractive portrayal by Daniel Abelson). But I ended up in no doubt that, for all his faults, Sebastian really does love her with all his heart.

RADIO

VALERIE GROVE

I'm glad Radio Oldie's *Top of the Pods* recommended *This Cultural Life* with John Wilson.

Wilson's well-prepared interviews are superior to others in a crowded field. The chosen episode (my choice too) was the pianist James Rhodes, whose terrible story was re-told. He was raped from the age of five by a gym teacher, Peter Lee, now dead, at his London prep school.

Now 50, Rhodes spoke with enthusiasm of his recovery via rediscovery of Bach's Chaconne from Partita no 2. Might it have been on Radio 3? While I respect Richard Osborne's cogent demolition in *The Oldie* of Radio 3's 'ignorance of its past' and obsession with 'soothing, mind-numbing music', jewels are still found, even on 3's 'immersive mix-tapes'.

Since most programmes now woo podcast audiences, only stolid adherents to old habits discover the particular skill of broadcasting, ie dealing with unexpected encounters. Sarah Montague on *The World at One* confronted the odious Trump associate Sebastian Gorka. Trump's $400m jet from Qatar didn't look much like 'draining the swamp', she suggested.

Gorka turned vicious. She was 'utterly and completely biased' by 'Trump derangement syndrome'. She obviously knelt at the altar of left-wing ideology. Her question about a humanitarian crisis in Gaza was 'fake news, garbage, rubbish' and he would walk out if she persisted.

Calm under fire is one of the tests for news presenters in this mad and rather vile world. Explosive little eruptions like the Trump-Musk break-up inject news bulletins with mirthless laughter.

I have seen many *King Lear*s, starting with a production starring Paul Scofield, the great Lear of my A-level year.

My favourite Lear was Joss Ackland, reading from his wheelchair, directed by Jonathan Miller for charity, one Sunday afternoon – with all the ladies whipping off their reading glasses to kiss their husbands. I have even seen Warren Mitchell (Alf Garnett) as Lear – terrible.

The latest Radio 4 version, from Clive Brill, with a first-rate cast (David Tennant, Toby Jones, Tamsin Greig, Greta Scacchi) promised well. At first, dear Richard Wilson, almost 89, sounded like Victor Meldrew putting on Morningside airs, enunciating Miss Jean Brodie vowels. But he redeemed himself on the blasted heath.

Underfoot in Show Business by Helene Hanff was dramatised, with Rosalie Craig as the New Yorker whose wisecracking letters to mild-mannered bookseller Frank Doel of 84 Charing Cross Road made her name.

'Dear Madam,' Doel wrote.

'I hope madam doesn't mean over there what it means here,' Hanff rejoined.

84 Charing Cross Road became a West End hit play and a film (Anne Bancroft as HH) – but Hanff was then 60, previous life little known. This play logs her stage-struck decades of struggle to have a play produced – at 22, she won a competition previously won by Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, but there ended the promise.

Eventually, she was a spotter of optionable novels for Paramount. She was PR on *Oklahoma!* (whose exclamation mark, added as an afterthought, kept her up all night altering the flyers).

She always said Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, 'Q', was her 'private education'. It was Q who first advised, in a Cambridge lecture in 1914, 'Murder your darlings.' (When tempted into fine writing, write it and then delete.) It's a cliché now, and was lately misattributed, on Radio 4, to Carlyle.

Just had our golden wedding – *Conversations from a Long Marriage* made flesh, without the drama of Roger Allam's long-lost son. Much looking back, *chez nous*. I'd forgotten, until *The Archive Hour*, that the big movie of 1975 was Spielberg's *Jaws*. Or that Ewan MacColl wrote *The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face* (my '75 song) for Peggy Seeger, now 90.

And we all laughed at an old Barry Fantoni cartoon, mentioned in *Private Eye*'s *Page 94* podcast: a visiting plumber saying, 'No, the guy before did a really good job – very little for me to do here.'

TELEVISION

FRANCES WILSON

'Humankind cannot bear very much reality,' said T S Eliot.

The most unbearable reality show on television, by a country mile, is *Couples Therapy* (BBC2).

This award-winning series is so much more real than real life that it can be watched only from behind the sofa or between the fingers. It must never, in any circumstances, be watched by couples.

Instead of the usual self-preening narcissists who wash up on these tell-all programmes, on this one people mired in cycles of misery inflict maximum damage on one another.

'Most people who come into therapy,' explains Dr Orna Guralnik, the Manhattan analyst who has become the unlikely star of the show, 'have a story they tell themselves that helps them make sense of their life. The therapist is recruited to be the witness to that narrative.'

Why on earth would anyone agree to have their sexual inadequacies, petty arguments and financial problems anatomised week after miserable week for public entertainment?

Cynics might argue that it is because, instead of paying for their therapy, the couples selected are paid to receive it.

This is not the reason. The producers, Josh Kriegman and Elyse Steinberg, say the aim of the series is to demonstrate the benefits of the therapeutic process – but this is disingenuous.

In each season, we watch four couples wage their power battles on a brown Swedish-style sofa, surrounded by wooden bookshelves and a one-way mirror, behind which cameras record everything.

Season 4 has for some reason been divided into two parts. The first was shown last year. The second is airing now.

One of the couples in the first part was a 'thrupple', composed of a man and his two polygamous girlfriends. The new couples include Rod and Alison. Rod is the quiet type and Alison is a motormouth with a wardrobe of sequinned sweatshirts. There are hidden cameras in the waiting room as well, and so we hear Rod and Alison prepare for a session.

'I need an intimate life,' says Alison, looking at a book on the shelf called *How to Have an Intimate Life*.

'You need a lobotomy,' says Rod.

'You're such an asshole,' Alison replies. 'That's, like, *mean*. It's like when you get nervous you do these like obnoxious things. I am not being obnoxious to you.'

'No, you're not,' Rod agrees.

'I was not being obnoxious all day,' Alison continues.

'How about last week and last night?' counters Rod.

'OK,' says Alison, foaming at the mouth, 'let me ask you something. What about you? Have you been a walk in the park?'

A gay couple, Kyle and Mondo, discuss whether they should 'open [their] relationship up'. Kyle, who is deaf, likes having sex with other deaf men. Mondo, who adores Kyle, wants him to be happy and wishes he was monogamous.

'Why do people have open relationships?' Dr Guralnik asks her therapeutic adviser, Dr Virginia Goldner. Is it because, through the 'introduction of someone else, you break a sort of symbiotic lockdown'?

Dr Guralnik has insight and empathy, while Dr Goldner is the wisest woman in New York. On one occasion, after Dr Guralnik has described a particularly

Bob Wilson

'When did you first suspect you were being followed?'

difficult client, Dr Goldner explains that 'he's reporting the vicious facts of life as lived by him'.

The most vicious couple in Season 4 are Boris and Jessica. Boris is a control freak who won't let Jessica, herself a psychotherapist, buy tomatoes because she once bought the wrong ones.

Boris doesn't like the version of himself being analysed on the sofa. 'I come across like a monster,' he says, disbelievingly. He wants to prove how long-suffering he is. But things don't pan out that way and so, the next week, Boris and Jessica drop out of the show.

The reason people agree to go on *Couples Therapy* is that they want the world to see what they have to put up with. Each party thinks they are in the right, and tries to win the audience to their side.

This was made clear in the very first episode, where a husband announced, 'I am the easiest person to deal with.'

'Says you,' snapped his wife.

'What I want,' he continued, 'is to have zero responsibility and all the sex I want without any, any work on my part, of any kind. Zero work; zero thinking about it, and it has to be both spectacular and enthusiastic, and genuine.'

You can't say fairer than that.

MUSIC

RICHARD OSBORNE

MYRA HESS: NATIONAL TREASURE

Not the least of the pleasures of the recent 80th-anniversary celebration of VE Day was the publication of *Myra Hess: National Treasure*.

Jessica Duchen has written a meticulously researched and superbly narrated biography of the woman who masterminded the legendary National Gallery lunchtime concerts throughout the Second World War.

'No other musician had such status in Britain,' Elgar and Finzi biographer Diana McVeagh, now in her 99th year, tells Duchen. 'She was like Churchill: "We will never surrender."'

How odd, then, that the BBC's celebratory royal concert, broadcast live from Horse Guards Parade on 8th May, made no mention of Myra Hess (1890-1965) or the concerts. On an evening rich in spoken recollections and wartime film footage, the programme junked classical music entirely in favour of raucous modern rock and easy-listening nostalgia.

This is ironic. More than 800,000 people turned up at the National Gallery at lunchtime, throughout the war, to hear Myra Hess and a matchless galaxy of fellow musicians. As she joked, 'Everyone was so busy with the war, there was nobody to tell the people that this sort of music was over their heads.'

Since there was none of the prejudice against German music in the Second World War that there had been in the First, most of the music was German – Mozart, Schubert, Brahms and a complete run of the Beethoven string quartets.

As Kenneth Clark, Director of the National Gallery, later wrote, 'It's what everyone had been waiting for – an assertion of eternal values.'

And sandwiches. Take the Friday morning in 1940 when the volunteers

Myra Hess (*centre*) with Joyce Grenfell and composer Howard Ferguson, 1940

produced 1,700 sandwiches, before the bread ran out.

'We were absolutely whacked,' recalled Myra's posh young friend Joyce Grenfell. 'Still, it was the Brahms Horn Trio – heavenly music – and that did the trick.'

Perhaps it's because of those concerts that Myra Hess has become a figure frozen in time. Yet this is the last thing she should be. As a free-spirited, radically minded woman of Orthodox Jewish heritage, she won early international fame in United States in the 1920s – her beguilingly unostentatious playing making an interesting contrast with that of other young lions such as Vladimir Horowitz.

As we can hear on her many live and studio recordings – Duchen's biography has an excellent discography – it was a well-settled method, learned from her teacher Tobias Matthay. Above that trademark deep-struck bass sit cleanly layered middle voices and a top of exquisite delicacy and poise.

It's there in her 1953 recording of Beethoven's Piano Sonata No 31, Op 110 – a desert-island performance of a desert-island work if ever there was one.

You can hear it, too, in her 1928 recording of that gem of a piece Schubert's Sonata in A D664. It's just been reissued online by Biddulph, alongside famous pre-war Hess recordings of piano trios by Schubert and Brahms that are also on CD.

The Brahms was recorded in 1935, the year after Hess was subjected to two unnecessary mastectomies in a specialist women's hospital in America. The surgery risked damaging important back and shoulder muscles. Yet it was around this time that she took up Brahms's mighty Second Piano Concerto – evidence of that 'strong element of the old trouper' which so impressed Kenneth Clark during those wartime concerts.

The violinist on both recordings was Myra's charismatic chamber-music partner, the Hungarian-born Jelly d'Arányi (1893-1966), whose own 1928-31 Columbia recordings have also just been released by Biddulph.

The great-niece of Brahms's friend and collaborator Joseph Joachim, d'Arányi was a teenager when she fell in love with the Australian-born, Old Etonian composer and gold-medallist Olympic oarsman F S Kelly, killed on the Somme in 1916.

She never married. Nor did Myra, partly because of the tribulations suffered by other close women friends – the gifted Matthay pupil Irene Scharrer, for instance. She married an Eton housemaster, who later left her for a younger model. (Eton sacked him, though the school's most recent history, *Eton Renewed*, extols his success with women.)

Myra had entanglements of her own, not least with the composer Arnold Bax, whose volatile long-term mistress was the pianist Harriet Cohen.

Duchen's biography introduces us to a whole troupe of the companionable women on whom Myra endlessly relied, among them Vera and Judy Compton-Burnett, sisters of the repressive, music-hating novelist Ivy.

And there are lots of men, too, including the providers of her three most cherished mementos: a Toscanini baton, a Paderewski visiting card and a cigar belonging to her beloved Pablo Casals.

A chain-smoker herself, she once accepted a cigar from Casals. Fritz Kreisler snipped the end; the great Russian bass Chaliapin proffered the flame.

Some pianist; some woman; some life!

GOLDEN OLDIES

MARK ELLEN

LIVE AID, FORTY YEARS ON

I got the phone call and had to lie down.

The Old Grey Whistle Test, the BBC's late-night rock show, was to front an international live broadcast. The old lags in Neil Young T-shirts with a modest audience of three million were going to present a 'global jukebox' from Wembley Stadium to every corner of the earth with a TV set.

We were called to the office to plan what they ironically called 'this small TV extravaganza'. Bob Geldof had asked the BBC to screen Live Aid and they'd simply fielded their 'rock-music experts' but, as our producer nervously declared, 'It's like getting Radio Cambridge to cover the election.'

But that amateur spirit was part of the fabric of the whole event, which had all the shambling hallmarks of a village fête with the whole world looking on. America's broadcast was slick and 'showbiz' and introduced by big guns such as Chevy Chase and Jack Nicholson, while everything at Wembley was charmingly cobbled together.

The presenters clambered up perilous metal gantries to reach the sweltering commentary box in the stadium roof. Elton John, wearing a pinny, declared his backstage barbecue open and slapped on a veggie burger for Freddie Mercury. Tony Hadley brought along his grandad to watch Spandau Ballet from the wings.

Geldof switched the running order to make sure Lady Di saw the Boomtown Rats. Cat Stevens, wandering about and billed to appear, never made it onstage, and the scheduled TV link to Ian Botham at Trent Bridge collapsed.

Up in our vertiginous bunker, news arrived that the audience was now over two billion – though no one was sure what a billion was. Assorted celebrities were rushed onto the air to help fill the gaps, including one 'who just looked like a rock star', though no one actually knew who he was (Ian Astbury from the Cult).

Bono jumped down into the crowd to waltz with a startled girl and, for five minutes, the rest of U2 couldn't see him and had no idea whether he'd return.

Elvis Costello scrawled the lyrics to 'All You Need Is Love' on his hand in case he forgot them, and the assembled stars rehearsed the finale by candlelight as their Portakabin lights had failed.

And all this beneath a stunning, cloudless backdrop – which was the most significant thing about Live Aid. Had it rained, it would have been dismal TV that only the most devoted would have watched, but the blue skies made it look glorious. People who'd thought they were too old for rock concerts started going again, and the stadium circuit never looked back.

The careers of those almost-forgotten 'old-timers' – Queen, Elton, the Who, McCartney (the oldest at 43) – were rebooted and still flourish today. And so were launched the notion of 'rock nostalgia', a music-magazine boom and a thriving CD market where people re-bought the records of their youth.

Man with a plan: Bob Geldof

And all from an event that was exquisitely makeshift and patched together; in fact, uniquely British in every respect. Apart from the weather.

EXHIBITIONS

HUON MALLALIEU

KIEFER/VAN GOGH

Royal Academy, 28th June to 26th October

In some shows, a contemporary artist is included to make an older one somehow 'relevant'.

This is not one of those shows. The connections between Anselm Kiefer and Vincent van Gogh are long and deep.

The exhibition is a close collaboration between the RA and the Amsterdam Van Gogh Museum, where a show of Kiefer's work has just closed.

Kiefer, happily still with us at 80, was born in Germany just two months before the end of the war in Europe, and his boyhood was spent among ruins. The detritus of war is a constant in his work.

Then, at 18, he was awarded a travelling scholarship to follow the path of Van Gogh's career from the Netherlands to Arles.

As he has said, 'The drawings that I made on this journey were clearly influenced by Vincent van Gogh; it's an influence that is still very much present.'

Indeed, those early drawings could almost be by Van Gogh.

While Kiefer is no colourist, and Van Gogh did not incorporate natural materials into his paintings, their landscapes have much in common.

***Top: Die Krähen (The Crows),* Anselm Kiefer, 2019. *Above: Field with Irises near Arles*, Vincent van Gogh, 1888**

Wheat was an important motif for both. Kiefer's 2019 *Die Krähen (The Crows)* is almost a large-scale reworking of Van Gogh's 1890 *Wheatfield with Crows*.

Crows are also the subject of Kiefer's 2014 *Nevermore*, the title a nod less to Poe than to Van Gogh, and also to the horrors of war.

Sunflowers are important to both, with Van Gogh declaring, 'The sunflower is mine.' He used it as a symbol of inevitable decay, like a *vanitas*, and of friendship.

For Kiefer, there is a connection between the flowers and the cosmos – another of Van Gogh's major concerns.

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Pursuits

GARDENING

DAVID WHEELER

SWEET PEAS

Several decades ago, there was an intriguing sight on the Assembly Rooms steps in Presteigne, Powys, on Saturday mornings in high summer.

A green-fingered widower, golden retriever snoozing at his feet, sold bunches of highly fragrant sweet peas. You'd find his doppelganger almost anywhere throughout the land then. A pensioner, delighting in the growing of just one genus, blooms lovingly picked and bunched on a Friday evening ready for brisk trade the following day. Proceeds to charity.

Graham's presence attracted loyal followers. Even fellow sweet pea-growers would support him. He generated conviviality. People stopped to jaw, pat the hound and drop coins into his tin.

They would then wander off, sniffing their posy along the high street in the hope the butcher and baker had not yet sold their best cuts and loaves.

Sweet peas touch our souls. Is it their pastel hues? Their perfume? Their fragility? Their fleeting magnificence? Perhaps they refresh memories of childhood when, seemingly, everyone's papa or pipe-smoking grandad grew them up a run of canes among their prize edibles.

People who normally *never* buy cut flowers delve into their purse for a few joyous stems on a July or August morning.

As English as it sounds, the sweet pea, *Lathyrus odoratus* (I like the old word 'vetchling'), found its way to our shores from southern Italy, Sicily and the Aegean islands.

There's a first written reference to it by botanising monk Franciscus Cupani in 1696. Three years later, Cupani sent seeds from Palermo to horticulturist and cleric Robert Uvedale in Enfield. A pressed herbarium specimen of a flowering stem, dated 1700, is in London's Natural History Museum.

Today's interest in these charmers and their 160 or so cousins prompted no less a body than the Royal Horticultural Society to publish a 'complete guide' to the genus in 2021. It exceeds 500 pages.

Sweet peas are (mostly) annuals and, as with broad beans, gardeners have strong opposing views on when best to sow the seeds – autumn or spring?

My maternal grandfather was Henry Eckford, a naval officer devoid as far as I know of any gardening interests. However, his namesake (1823-1905, of Wem in Shropshire) was reputedly the sweet pea's most famous breeder.

Are we related? I await my genealogical DNA results from Ancestry.

Sweet-pea Eckford is remembered for increasing the vigour of certain cultivars. He improved the length of their racemes and the number and size of petals, coining them Grandifloras.

Eckford's near contemporary, one Silas Cole (head gardener to the 5th Earl Spencer), brought about a 'big change' in the pea's flower development.

His variety, 'Countess Spencer', was shown at the National Sweet Pea Society's first exhibition in 1901. Its 'large wavy petals' are to this day found in the group known as Spencers. Seeds are available from several suppliers.

Sweet peas for the cut-flower trade require strong fragrance, long stems and, yes, overall flower power. Among those gilded with the coveted RHS AGM (Award of Garden Merit, given for superiority of vigour, disease resistance, colour and sniff) are the Spencers 'Gwendoline' (white flushed lilac), 'Jilly' (cream), 'Lauren Landy' (rose pink) and 'Tahiti Sunrise' (bright orange pink).

If scent and colour are equally paramount, try 'Matucana', disputedly thought to be the original Sicilian sweet pea or a more modern invention. Whichever, it's celebrated for strong fragrance and striking bi-coloured flowers of magenta and deep purple. Seed is available from most UK suppliers.

Sweet peas are made of this

The RHS says you can sow any time from October to February, neatly settling that 'when to' dilemma.

David's Instagram account is @hortusjournal

KITCHEN GARDEN

SIMON COURTAULD

MINT

Mint has a mind of its own. A plant of Moroccan mint given to me a few years ago would, I hoped, provide a few leaves for tea. But, last year, having spread and multiplied, it almost overwhelmed the ageing asparagus bed.

The mint known as lemon balm has become so well established in the garden and is so prone to self-seeding that new plants appear every year in different places among the flower-beds. This mint is said to relieve stress and improve one's mood, but it has the opposite effect on me.

On the other hand, our favourite culinary spearmint, which is contained within an area of gravel, had a

disappointing season last year and now grows better in a large pot. However, I am hoping that its roots do not suffer next year from being too confined.

Spearmint is one of the best for mint sauce. Also suitable are apple mint and the similarly hairy-leaved Bowles's mint, named after the distinguished gardener and botanist E A Bowles, great-uncle of the Queen's ex-husband.

There is a variety of mint, with dark green leaves and pink flowers, called Lamb Chops. I know of no other country that favours roast lamb with mint sauce, made by the addition of red wine vinegar and brown sugar to the chopped herb. In France it is 'considered positively barbaric', according to Elizabeth David. Nor will the French accept redcurrant jelly with lamb, allowing it only with a breakfast croissant.

The French are happy to use mint in vegetable soups and, in Corsica, in an omelette with cheese. Mint has been used in Middle Eastern cooking for centuries, and it enhances a green sauce or salsa verde, combining with other herbs such as basil and parsley, capers and mustard. With added olive oil this will make a good dressing for new-potato and other salads.

Various scented mints – lime, banana, eau de Cologne, pineapple – are popular with a summer Pimm's, and I am also partial to the Spanish *rebujito*.

This is made with dry sherry, mint, plenty of ice and lemon-lime soda. Very fashionable in Andalusia.

COOKERY

ELISABETH LUARD

BACK TO BASICS

'We have more than enough masterpieces,' wrote the great Jane Grigson, author of *English Food*. 'What we need is a better standard of ordinariness.'

Quite so. Happily for the revival of simple cooking, Mrs G's *Good Things* (1971), a collection of personal favourites, has just reappeared from Grub Street as a handsome hardback.

Ingredient-based, seasonal, her choices are often surprising – six recipes for snails (*à la bourguignonne* et al), seven for chicory (braised, curried), eight for venison (civet, soup).

Naturally for a Gloucestershire Midlander, her pastry-and-pies section includes a hot-water crust for a raised pork pie, and a classic English, all-purpose lard-and-butter shortcrust.

Mrs Grigson's shortcrust pastry

To line and top a 2-pint pie dish or loaf tin, rub together 1lb plain flour and ½ tsp salt with 4oz lard and 4oz butter till crumbly. Mix to a firm dough, using as little water as possible and leave in a cool place for an hour at least. Roll out as a lid and a lining to fit the container. Bake at 300°-325°F for 45 minutes to 2½ hours, according to the filling.

Cornish leek pie

Bacon improves the flavour, says Mrs Grigson, but is not essential. For a Welsh leek pie, put a layer of pastry above as well as below the filling. Francatelli, Queen Victoria's chef, prepared it as a turnover, like a leather purse. Serves 4.

10oz prepared leeks, sliced
2oz butter
½ pint Cornish or double cream
1 egg and 1 egg yolk
4oz back-bacon rashers, cut into ¼-inch-wide strips
Short pastry made with 4oz flour (a quarter of the shortcrust recipe)

Cook the leeks gently in the butter for 10 minutes, in a covered pan, without browning them. Remove from the heat, add the bacon strips, and turn into an 8-9-inch pie dish or plate. Mix cream and eggs well together, season – allowing for the bacon's saltiness – and pour over the leek mixture. Cover with a pastry lid. Brush with beaten egg or cream and bake for 20-30 minutes in a moderate oven at 350°F. Serve warm rather than hot.

Camembert ice cream

'This unusual recipe from the thirties,' says Jane (and, yes, we were indeed friends – so first names are appropriate), 'makes a good ending to a meal.' Enough for 4-5 (it's rich).

1 Camembert, soft and mature, not overripe
¼ pint each double and single cream
Cayenne pepper or Tabasco
Cracked ice
Water biscuits (crackers), hot

Mash up (or liquidise) the cheese with the two creams. Season well with cayenne pepper or Tabasco, and salt to taste. Freeze until just firm, but not hard. No need to stir. Serve sliced on a bed of cracked ice cubes, with the heated water biscuits in a separate dish. The ice and hot water biscuits are an important part of the recipe.

Quince ratafia

Take 3 large quinces, fully ripened to yellow. Rub the grey down off them with a cloth, rinse and grate, peel and core included. Put into a 2-pint bottling jar. Pour in granulated sugar to come about a third of the way up the bottle. Add ¼ teaspoon each cinnamon, ginger and mace, then fill the jar with brandy or vodka. Ready after a week – but better after a month or three.

RESTAURANTS

JAMES PEMBROKE

DINNER ON MOUNT OLYMPUS

In the pantheon of British restaurant immortals, Auguste Escoffier is Jupiter.

Madame Prunier is Juno. Vulcan is Rowley Leigh. Elena Salvoni is Minerva. Neptune is Rick Stein. Apollo is Jeremy King.

And Mercury? Giorgio Locatelli.

After serving his apprenticeship at his uncle's restaurant on the shore of Lake Comabbio, in northern Italy, Giorgio arrived in London in 1986, aged 23, where he worked in the kitchens of the Savoy.

He then moved to Paris to work at Tour d'Argent but was soon drawn back to London, not least by Plaxy, his future wife and business partner.

Depressed by the mediocrity of the dishes at the spaghetti tree of London restaurants planted by Mario and Franco at Trattoria Terrazza in 1959, they opened Zafferano, which could genuinely claim to serve the Real Thing.

No more congealed spaghetti carbonara at the fun spots of San Frediano, San Lorenzo and La Famiglia, but dishes that Giorgio would expect to eat on his home turf.

He opened Locanda Locatelli on Portman Square in 2002, and for years that was my treat restaurant. Going there was like entering a very smart restaurant in Milan: the service, the buzz, the food – and, also, the man himself.

When he sped round the tables, his charisma and passion transformed even the dullest businessmen at lunch. With the gesticulation of a conjuror, he thrilled them with how he had tenderly nurtured each dish, as if boasting about his children.

ELISABETH LUARD

And if you were lucky enough to have him stop by your table, you had to cling to the ladies as he regaled you all in that unique voice: part Italian footballer, part London cabbie and part altar boy. On the telly he was a natural; at his best with Andrew Graham-Dixon.

Well, the Locanda has closed, but his legacy can be found at Bocca di Lupo and, phew, at the National Gallery, where he has just opened his eponymous restaurant.

He knows you won't want to stay there all afternoon. despite the calm of the neutral design. So the menu is reassuringly short. I had the pappardelle with broad beans, pecorino and rucola, followed by the best ever rib-eye steak.

The wine list is solely Italian. So start with a glass of Franciacorta which will smash any Prosecco out of the ground. I confess to dish envy when I saw a *frittura mista* arrive at the next-door table. So I'll just have to go back. *Molto presto*.

Eating alfresco in the capital is often fraught with weather anxiety but when it works, I feel as if I've won on nought on a roulette wheel.

On a recent sweltering Friday in this everlasting summer, I went to Richmond, because I had heard Scott's of Mayfair have opened a restaurant slap bang next to Richmond Bridge. Like you, I'm nervous of chains, but the chance of a three-course lunch for £36 on their second-floor terrace with that view was unmissable. Citrus-cured salmon, roast sole and rhubarb ripple ice cream, with a bottle of rosé for £38. Yes, please.

While writing this, I've been pondering who can claim to be the Aphrodite of the restaurant pantheon. And, of course, it's Sally Clarke, who, at 70, modestly gets lunch ready in her Kensington restaurant, as she has done for 40 years.

The polar opposite of a celebrity chef, she should be celebrated.

DRINK

BILL KNOTT

BOOZE CRUISE IN A MINI

Le Welsh is, geographically speaking, a strapping mongrel of a dish.

A brasserie staple throughout the Nord-Pas-de-Calais, it consists of a thick slice of bread slathered with a mix of local *bière brune* and Galloway, an industrial Scottish Cheddar, seasoned with Worcestershire sauce and Dijon mustard, then baked until brown and bubbling. And its name honours Wales.

Add some Parma ham, wash it down with a pint of Guinness and you'll have the Six Nations on a plate.

I was in the north of France in search of wine, not beer. Vineyards might be thin on the ground (although Belgium apparently has a burgeoning winemaking scene), but wine isn't – at least, not in the vast wine stores in Calais's suburbs.

Both the Calais Wine Superstore (calaiswine.co.uk) and Calais Vins (wine-calais.co.uk) not only offer keen prices but will pay for (or at least subsidise) your ferry crossing.

You can also reclaim 15-per-cent French sales tax, and duty-free allowances are generous: 24 bottles of still wine, 12 bottles of fizz (or four litres of spirits) and a whopping 42 litres of beer per person.

Twenty-four 25cl bottles of 5% crisp, pleasant Saint-Omer lager will set you back around £7.64, or 32p a bottle.

The stores offer oceans of mass-produced, brand-name wines at eye-wateringly low prices (£1.69 for Banrock Station red, anyone?) and there are some decent offers on Champagne and fine wine.

For me, though, the sweet spot is at the £6-to-£10 level – Muscadet, Mâcon Blanc-Villages and Loire reds, for example – priced as they were in the UK about a decade ago. You can taste many of the wines before you buy.

Anyway, Mrs K and I fired up the Mini and treated the whole exercise as a grand excuse to fund a couple of nights *de vacances* in the aforementioned Saint-Omer, a pretty town just a 35-minute drive south of Calais.

To the north and east of the town is the Marais Audomarois, wetlands that are both a nature reserve and a network of market gardens. There are breweries both in and around the town, and the produce of both gardeners and brewers can be found on menus and in beer pumps at Saint-Omer's plethora of very jolly restaurants and bars.

I sampled a sweetly fruity, Triple Secret des Moines from Brasserie Goudale (made with wheat and dry-hopped; 8%) and a similarly powerful St Bernardus Tripel, from just over the Belgian border.

And I was particularly taken with the beers from the Brasserie du Pays Flamand in Merville, in which Anosteké's range of strong, hoppy, Belgian-style beers is brewed. They have won many prizes at the World Beer Awards, I later discovered.

I was delighted to see some of them for sale when we stocked up the car en route back to dear old Blighty, loading as many crates as I could onto the back seat.

But not our full 84-litre allowance, sadly. A minibreak shouldn't break the Mini.

SPORT

JIM WHITE

STRANGE DEATH OF FOOTBALL

I've just been granted a vision of the future – the very near future.

I was at Stamford Bridge, watching Chelsea in a Premier League game. Next to the press box is the family stand, at the back of which is a refreshment bar.

And there three consoles had been installed by the company backing a bestselling football computer game, to advertise their latest edition; to provide a bit of half-time distraction.

But midway through the second half, being of advancing years, I took a quick diversion to the lavatory. I passed a group of kids still playing on the screens – even though the game had been underway for some time. A small crowd had gathered round each screen, with a couple of youngsters peering over the shoulder of the player.

It seemed absurd. I couldn't help pointing out to one of them that if they wanted to watch football, the real thing was taking place just over there.

'Yeah,' he said. 'But this is more fun.'

Club World Cup 2025 trophy

I imagined each kid's dad, who had spent large amounts of money to inculcate a love of the game in his offspring, sitting next to an empty seat, forlornly staring out at the action, alone.

Here writ large was the challenge football – indeed, all live sport – faces. The next generation of potential fans prefers to engage with a computerised facsimile rather than with reality. Sadly, the reaction by those in charge has been thus far entirely counter-productive.

The blazers running FIFA, UEFA and the FA seem to believe that, to see off the ready availability of a computer game, the best way is to make football constantly accessible. Filling every moment with live action is their strategy. So this summer we have the absurd Club World Cup taking place in America. It's a pointless confection foisted on the calendar.

It's advertised as featuring the 'best 32 club teams in the world', but it's just ten of the best European sides battling a bunch of second-raters from the Middle East, Asia and the USA. It will go on for a month, doing little more than draining the world's elite players when they should be recuperating and recharging.

That's just the start. Next season, the top practitioners, already exhausted by the demands of their domestic competitions, will face a hugely expanded Champions League programme, before heading off to a 48-country World Cup, a tournament so bloated it will drag on for six weeks in the summer of 2026.

The consequence of this expansionism will be the exact opposite of the intention. Instead of making the live game more compelling, it is stripping the meaning from its processes. At the 2026 World Cup, we will have been obliged to sit through a fortnight of pointless irrelevance, after which only 12 of the 48 competitors will have been eliminated, before the first hint of proper competitive jeopardy arrives.

Our game should follow the example of American Football. Just as under fire from digital competition, the NFL has steadfastly refused to dilute its offering.

The playing calendar has not been expanded or elongated. Teams still play just the one game a week, across a three-month season. They believe less is more. It means, thanks to rarity value, that every fixture is an event.

With our football, overkill is the presiding organisational philosophy. When the real thing is becoming increasingly pointless, you can hardly blame the young computer enthusiasts for preferring their own version.

MOTORING

ALAN JUDD

LIFE IN THE VERY FAST LANE

The Millbrook Proving Ground is a 700-acre site in Bedfordshire where most drivers may not go.

Founded by Vauxhall and now owned by a private company, it is a testing site used by all manner of vehicle manufacturers, British and foreign.

It comprises: enclosed crash facilities, into which you may not even peep; various circuits, including a two-mile banked bowl; a hill circuit with corners that hurl you sideways; flat circuits with varying surfaces, cambers, cobbles and kerb heights; pot-holed (ie normal) roads; skid pans; and a straight mile to test you and your car's control under rapid acceleration and braking.

Entry is normally restricted to industry insiders, but it is bookable by private individuals wanting to thrash their new toys.

I went some years ago, courtesy of the Aston Martin permanent test facility. Entry was strictly controlled, cameras were removed and we (the other guests were new Aston buyers) were forbidden to ask anyone what they were doing.

That was because they were all doing interesting things such as driving disguised test mules or hammering production cars 24/7 until they broke. There was a lorry doing nothing but accelerate and brake all day. Meanwhile, on the bowl, a mysterious blonde did fast laps in a new but very dirty Bentley, stopping every so often to take notes before powering on like the proverbial bat out of hell.

Who was she and what was she doing? We weren't allowed to ask or even to look for long, but she lingered in our minds like some fabled, unattainable Snow Queen.

I concentrated on Aston's V8 and V12 Vantages with manual gearboxes. In the V12, on the straight mile, it was almost indecently easy to reach 162mph using second to fifth, up to 6,500rpm.

The instructor ordered drop anchor at the three-quarter-mile point, because the straight ends in a banked turn. In better hands, the car would have coped with this but, as he pointed out, this wasn't a flying lesson.

The bowl is something else. The mysterious blonde having accelerated to other regions by then – perhaps skyward – we had it to ourselves.

With hands off the wheel and using only the throttle, it provided a vivid demonstration of understeer and oversteer in a rear-wheel-drive car with 50-50 weight distribution.

As you accelerated, the car moved higher up the bowl into the next lane and as you decelerated, you descended.

Doing 100mph in the third lane, hands in your lap, is eerily easy. For speeds above 130mph, you have to wear a helmet.

Skid pans are always fun, but it's chastening to switch off the electronic traction and stability gubbins and see what it's like when it's up to you rather than to the car. More reassuring was the emergency stop from 100mph, when you weave through traffic cones to see how ABS enables you to steer while braking.

But it's the hill circuit, with its swoops, humps and hollows, that really tests you. It's all about equilibrium, maintaining a balance of forces to achieve constant speed through corners on the throttle. You focus not on the apex, but ahead to where you want to be when you've left the corner.

I had to learn not to turn in too early or to twitch the steering while cornering.

A day was instructive, but I reckoned I needed a week to make a serious and lasting difference.

If you can afford a high-performance car, it's worth spending extra to find out what you and your car are capable of. It'll make you safer, too.

Look up Total Car Control Millbrook and tell them what you want.

BIRD OF THE MONTH

Spoonbill

BY JOHN McEWEN * ILLUSTRATED BY CARRY AKROYD

The spoonbill (*Platalea leucorodia*) is from the Ciconiiformes family – as are the heron, bittern, stork, egret, ibis and flamingo.

It is a fen-, estuary- and sea-marsh-dwelling summer migrant from West Africa. Until this century, it had not bred in England since 1668. Its enjoyment of the once marshy old world is demonstrated by a plethora of local names, among them shoveler.

It was Rev John Ray (1627-1705), 'father of natural history', who named it spoonbill and transferred the name shoveler to the spoonbill duck. Ray pioneered the concept of species.

Eighteenth-century sea banks and drainage, particularly in East Anglia, caused the spoonbill's disappearance, except as a bird of passage.

A lesser reason was its popularity as a table bird, especially the young branchers (birds that crawl around on branches before they're able to fly), today nicknamed teaspoons. Hunting, now banned, was a longer-lasting problem in Europe, but habitat conservation also ended migratory decline.

At the Earl of Leicester's Norfolk estate, the publicly accessible Holkham National Nature Reserve – 4,000 hectares, of which 500 are reclaimed grazing marshes – was established solely for birds from 1987.

Within six years, it became a wetland of national and international importance owing to its numbers of wintering wildfowl and breeding waders.

Spoonbills bred again in the UK, when two birds fledged in 1999 at Ribble Estuary, Lancashire, a one-off nesting.

The Holkham reserve includes Decoy Wood, with its tree-nesting colony of herons, cormorants and little egrets. 'Where herons go, spoonbills likely follow,' says Andrew Bloomfield, senior warden and founder of the UK Spoonbill Working Group.

Holkham started to attract a few spoonbills from the 1990s onwards. Since 2010 they have bred, increasing to 46 pairs, producing 90 young in 2023. It was the first colony to re-form in the UK.

Holkham's private enterprise has benefited public RSPB reserves. At Suffolk's RSBP Havergate Island, for want of trees, there are the UK's only ground-nesting spoonbills. RSPB Fairburn Ings, Yorkshire, has had a growing colony since 2017.

Even Orkney has witnessed one successful breeding. Warmer winters mean Poole Harbour, Dorset, boasts the largest wintering flock – mostly migrants from Holkham.

Study of Holkham's spoonbills has revealed complexities of sexual behaviour. Both genders have display crests. A Dutch ringed male bird with a splendid crest arrived and mated at Holkham. When it displayed days later in Fairburn Ings, it came as 'a complete shock' to observers (British Birds, June 2021).

A five-foot wingspan enables spoonbills to fly long distances speedily. Straight-necked in flight, they make a spectacular sight. Males – and exceptionally females – fight, using their eight-inch bills as swords.

July and August see spoonbills in pre-migration abundance, with fledglings dispersed and feeding with parent birds.

At Deepdale Marsh, east of Holkham, the landowner, Andrew Crean, has since 2009 returned farmed land to marshland. Mark Andrew, its warden, says it now acts as a 'nursery' for Holkham spoonbills.

He invited this column's illustrator, Carry Akroyd, and me to see a family group, scything to feed in the shallow, nutrient-rich, regained marsh water.

Matthew Webster: Digital Life

Real life takes place in the flesh

There was a very welcome lack of digital interference in the papal conclave that elected Pope Leo XIV.

Before entering the Sistine Chapel, all the cardinals had to surrender anything electronic – phones, laptops, iPads.

Voting was done using pen and paper. Even the traditional means of passing on the news, white or black smoke, showed a complete disregard for modern technology, the internet or dreaded artificial intelligence.

I wonder how much this contributed to the speed with which the decision was reached (only a couple of days) and what we can learn from it.

I regularly attend the meetings of several organisations as a trustee, and these days they are almost always online.

I have noticed a shift in emphasis. The chairman often insists at the start that all our cameras should be left on during the meeting. This means it's obvious when anyone disappears or nods off, and so to some extent ensures everyone's attention to the matter in hand.

This approach is supported in law; for example, it is illegal for parish, town or county council meetings to be held online. There was a temporary relaxing of this rule during COVID, but that has expired. Now they must all be held in person to be valid.

This is all to the good. By all means, livestream events that are public anyway. But those responsible for making actual decisions should be there to look one another in the eye and judge the consensus.

The cardinals' admirably swift process proves this. In the absence of any electronic support or distraction, they just got on with it.

That's not to say the internet has not seeped into many areas of religion.

It is now perfectly normal for regular church services to be broadcast online, if the vicar has the technical know-how; and cathedrals do it as a general rule.

Most crematoria have the means to live broadcast funerals. It is a popular innovation, especially for those of us too far away or too infirm to attend in person. Memorial services are also frequently broadcast.

Obviously one can take part in an online communion service only as a spectator. So it is with a wedding, which is not legal unless both parties, the officiant and at least two witnesses are physically present at the ceremony.

A good thing, too; just think of the possibilities for fraud and coercion if those getting hitched could attend online.

A live act of communal worship in a beautiful building has more to recommend it, both spiritually and aesthetically, than watching it on a laptop in your kitchen.

But each to his own, and the internet certainly has its place in the church.

I am especially in favour of well-maintained websites for all places of worship which provide, or should provide, much useful stuff. If there is one thing the internet can be good for, it is making information available. Our village parish magazine is still printed, but it is also online, which many prefer.

So let the cardinals show us the way, at least as far as making decisions is concerned. Their ancient ritual obviously works, and firmly supports a growing view.

Online meetings have their place – especially for imparting information and making public events accessible.

But if you are part of a group making serious decisions involving other people's money, destiny or freedom, you should turn up and be counted.

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Neil Collins: Money Matters

Warren Buffett, the Midas of Wall Street

Even by the standards of *Oldie*-readers, Warren Buffett has had a pretty good innings.

For the last 60 years, he has been running Berkshire Hathaway, and even now he is not really retiring. At 94, he has admitted for the first time that even he is not immune from *anno domini*. Apparently this feeling started only once he hit 90, and he fears that it is irreversible.

As every *Oldie*-reader will know, he is probably the most successful investor of all time. Berkshire has made him, and those clever enough to follow him early enough, absurdly rich, compounding invested capital at an average rate of 20 per cent a year, or twice the US market average.

Berkshire also upended the idea of dividends. It paid out only once, and then Buffett decided that they just reduced the capital he could invest – so he never paid another. If you wanted to eat, dear Berkshire shareholder, you had to sell stock to pay the bill. Many fund managers dream of doing the same, since none likes to see money leaving his or her control.

Indeed, you could say that control was Berkshire's USP. Buffett and his long-standing partner Charlie Munger were owners – not hired hands.

They liked businesses with lovely cash flows. American Express was an early investment. Its traveller's cheques were

effectively an interest-free loan from the customer, who also tended to buy more than his or her immediate needs.

The same investment logic was applied to trading stamps. In the UK, Green Shield stamps seemed to offer a nice little reward for no cost to the householder collecting them. But the retailer had to buy them first, and they were redeemed months later, if at all, from easily-lost little books.

As Berkshire grew, the logic would allow the takeover of whole insurance companies, where premiums arrive long before the claims (if any) are paid out. Terry Smith, a man who knows a bit about investing, described this process in a fine analysis in the *FT* as the use of 'float'.

By the time of the 2008 financial crisis, Berkshire was big enough to go into the bank-rescue business, exacting terms from Goldman Sachs that reflected both Berkshire's strength and the desperate times in the markets. It is tempting to think that the next Warren Buffett is out there, waiting to be discovered and allow a long-term investor to make his or her fortune.

Sadly, I would have to agree with Smith that we shall not see his like again.

Neil Collins was the Daily Telegraph*'s City Editor*

Last flights of the Zeppelin

William Cook visits the German refuge of the hot-air balloons

As my sleek 1930s ferry glides across Lake Constance, scattering a squadron of indignant cormorants, I notice something moving across the pale blue sky above.

I look up and see a Zeppelin floating silently overhead. It's a strange, surreal sight, and it's also supremely fitting – for this vast and lovely lake is where these ghostly airships were built.

Lake Constance (or the Bodensee, as locals call it) is one of Europe's unsung glories. A gigantic bulge in the River Rhine, 40 miles long and eight miles wide, it's both a border and a thoroughfare, the ancient crossroads of Central Europe.

The northern shore is German, the southern shore is Swiss, and the Austrians own a narrow enclave at the eastern end of the lake.

It's popular with German, Swiss and Austrian visitors, but it's never overrun, and every town along its shores has its own appeal, its own character. For Brits, it's a novelty to traverse three countries, all within a three-hour cruise.

The topography is pleasant rather than spectacular – a verdant tapestry of gentle hills and lush meadows. Most of the main sights are along the northern (German) shore, while the southern (Swiss) shore is charming, and the stylish Austrian port, Bregenz, feels like a slice of old Vienna, transported to the waterfront like the landscape of a dream.

I'm sailing to Friedrichshafen, the lakeside town where Graf Ferdinand von Zeppelin built his eponymous hot-air balloons (in fact fuelled by an explosive mix of hydrogen and methane).

In 1900, his groundbreaking Zeppelins took their first test flights over this enormous stretch of water. One flew from here to Rio de Janeiro.

Zeppelin LZ 1, Lake Constance, 1900

Commercial Zeppelin flights began in 1910. In the First World War, they bombed England fairly ineffectively. There were 51 raids by 84 Zeppelins – only 54 returned home. Still, they killed 557, spreading fear and panic.

Zeppelin production ceased in 1940 but the company continued, switching to aircraft production. This stopped in 1945, before being revived in the 1990s. Zeppelins are now being built and flown in Friedrichshafen once again.

Ferdinand's factory is long gone, but the modern Zeppelins still fly from here – tiny compared with his original dirigibles, but still impressive. Friedrichshafen's main attraction costs only a few euros – its magnificent Zeppelin Museum, housed in a striking art-deco building.

I'm here for the opening of a new exhibition, Bild und Macht (Pictures and Power), showing how Zeppelins were portrayed in the German media between the wars. There's some atmospheric film footage, and lots of moody photographs – eerie and otherworldly. But, as this show makes clear, these images were shrewdly stage-managed, presenting Zeppelins as a symbol of German economic might.

The permanent display is even more intriguing, covering the whole Zeppelin story in colourful, dramatic style.

The highlight is a life-size recreation of

Left: **Lake Constance today**
Below: Hindenburg **disaster, New Jersey, 1937**

the plush passenger quarters of the *Hindenburg*, flagship of the Zeppelin fleet, whose catastrophic combustion in New York in 1937 brought the golden age of airship travel to a crashing halt.

Consequently, the Zeppelin factory switched to building aeroplanes, and this was Friedrichshafen's undoing.

During the Second World War, the RAF bombed it flat. It was subsequently rebuilt in a bland, uninspiring modern style. If you're at all interested in aviation history, the museum is fascinating; the best way to see it is on a day trip from one of the far prettier towns around the lake.

Every visitor to Lake Constance has a favourite base, and mine is Lindau, a quaint, antiquated port on an island in the lake. Like most other towns around the Bodensee, it came through the war unscathed.

The *Altstadt* (old town) is a picturesque cluster of handsome baroque houses, full of quirky cafés, homely restaurants and old curiosity shops. There's no shortage of sightseers, but it's not a tourist trap. Locals do their shopping in the outdoor market. Children play in the cobbled streets.

Getting here is easy. I flew to Munich, and travelled on by train. Three hours later I alighted at Lindau's grand and gloomy station, then walked across the street to the delightfully old-fashioned Bayerischer Hof.

I last stayed here 20 years ago. It feels good to be back. My hotel bedroom overlooks the historic harbour. As I watch the ferries chugging past, against a backdrop of snow-capped peaks, I plan my voyage round the lake.

I first came to the Bodensee 35 years ago, on an Interrail trip. Like most Brits, I'd never heard of it.

I've been back many times since then, and on each occasion I've discovered new things. This time, I'm feeling fragile, in need of nurture, not adventure. I want to revisit my most cherished haunts, lest this turns out to be my final trip.

I set off on the boat, zigzagging across the cool, clear water. You can see the Swiss Alps in the distance, sparkling in the sun. We stop off at medieval Meersburg, sailing on to Mainau, an island transformed into a garden, surrounding an ornate *Schloss*.

We dock in Constance, the biggest conurbation on the Bodensee, which gives this lake its English name. Its university lends it a youthful air, while the townscape is largely 18th and 19th century, free of modern eyesores.

Constance is a backwater today (and it's all the better for it). But for four years in the 1410s, it was the centre of the Western world. Western Christendom had wound up with three popes. So the Catholic Church met here to pick one of them. Remarkably, the robust hall where they slugged it out is still standing. Today it houses a lively waterfront restaurant.

The conference dragged on and on, from 1414 to 1418. A merry time was had by all – apart from Czech reformer Jan Hus, who was burnt at the stake for heresy. This theological shindig is commemorated by a seductive statue on the quayside, depicting a colossal courtesan, holding a midget Pope and Holy Roman Emperor in the palms of her outstretched hands.

Jan Hus was imprisoned in a tower in the Dominican monastery in Constance. That monastery is now a smart hotel, part of the upmarket Steigenberger chain. It was the Zeppelin family home – Ferdinand von Zeppelin was born here in 1838.

I end up at Weingut Röhrenbach, a vineyard on a sunny hillside above the lake. Rebecca Röhrenbach is the fourth generation of winemakers here (the baby on her hip may be the fifth).

We taste some of her light and subtle wines – a delicate Müller-Thurgau, a fresh and fruity Spätburgunder. As I sit on her sunlit terrace, I see another Zeppelin drifting past.

What makes Zeppelins so beguiling? Maybe it's that they represent a false start, a historical 'what if?'. Obsolete yet futuristic, they seem like something out of vintage science fiction, a spooky fantasy by Jules Verne or H G Wells.

Or maybe it's that they're a relic of the best and worst of times, when – for the few who could afford it – life had never been more glamorous or exciting. How thrilling it must have been to fly across the Atlantic in just three days – twice as fast as the speediest ocean liner!

As I board my ferry back to Lindau, I realise this suave, streamlined vessel is just as old as the *Hindenburg*. Unlike those absurd and splendid airships, this 1930s pleasure boat is still going strong.

Doubles at the Bayerischer Hof in Lindau (www.bayerischerhof-lindau.de) from €252, including breakfast

Queen of Clean Machines

Abbey Mills Pumping Station was the sublime solution to London's sewage problems after the Great Stink of 1858

LUCINDA LAMBTON

Abbey Mills Pumping Station, 1868. ***Below:*** **Sir Joseph Bazalgette (1819-91)**

With its Russian Orthodox-style, domed lantern of a grand cupola and its elaborate detailing, Abbey Mills Pumping Station is proudly and justifiably called the Queen of Sewage.

It was built between 1865 and 1868, of yellow brick with blue- and red-brick architectural detailing, at Newham, in the East End of London. And it's one of the early-19th-century fine pumping stations built in answer to London's grimly inadequate drainage system.

The engine house was of stupendously rich decoration and so elaborately built of ornate ironwork that your head is sent spinning with delight at its degree of fancy work. Thanks to the exterior of arched towers and spires fit to decorate the grandest palace, you are set fair to faint with admiration at the mere sight of the building.

It was created by three heroic figures: civil engineer Edmund Cooper, architect Joseph Charles Driver and the biggest noise of all, civil engineer Sir Joseph Bazalgette.

Bazalgette was a brilliant, distinguished and magnificently mustachioed man of superlative architectural sensibilities. He created the sewerage system of central London, relieving the city of its cholera epidemic.

In 1849, 14,137 Londoners had been killed by the disease. In the Great Stink of 1858, during the summer, the smell had made it impossible even to walk the reeking streets of London.

Bazalgette's solution was to build vast pumping stations and a network of 82 miles of enclosed, underground brick sewers to intercept sewage outflows. He added 1,100 miles of street sewers to divert the raw sewage flowing freely through the streets of London to the river. The River Thames was little more than an open sewer, empty of any fish or wildlife.

The system was opened by the Prince of Wales in 1865, although the whole project was not finished until 1875. Incidentally, there is a magnificent mausoleum to Bazalgette in the churchyard of St Mary's, Wimbledon, as well as the finest of stone monuments to him on the Victoria Embankment.

He designed the Albert Embankment, the Victoria Embankment and the Chelsea Embankment. Then there was the wealth of London bridges executed by his hand – Maidstone Bridge of 1879, Putney Bridge in 1886, Hammersmith

SHUTTERSTOCK / GETTY / ALAMY

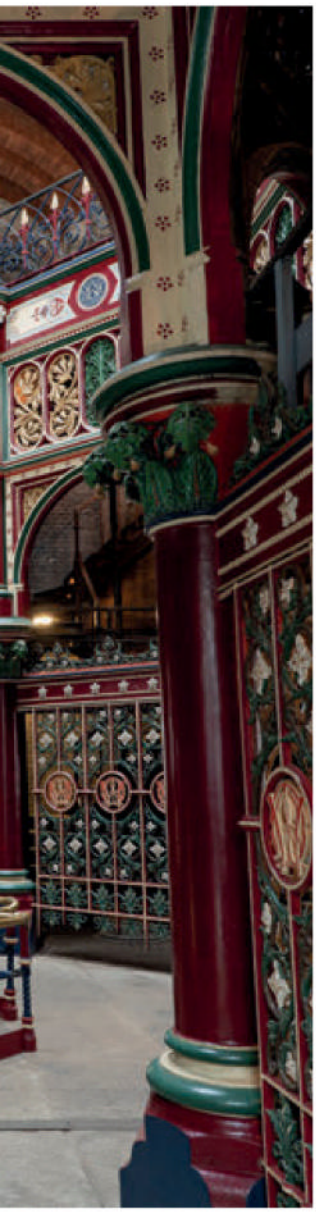
Lastly, we read of 'Celtic' in the 'beautiful great brass and copper florets on the east-wing doorway'. What an assessment and a half!

The methods of dealing with sewage of course evolved over the years, with a major pumping station at Deptford and another at Crossness on the Erith marshes – both on the south side of the Thames. Another was north of the river on the Chelsea Embankment.

The Abbey Mills machinery consisted of eight power-condensing rotary beam engines. The steam was provided by boilers. The electricity era developed in 1933 with eight electrically-driven pumps, with an overall capacity of 224,000 gallons a minute.

Clockwise from left: **beam steam engine; roof detail; Victorian cast ironwork**

Bridge in 1887 – particularly picturesque – and Battersea Bridge in 1890. It would seem, in fact, that he built a good deal of London!



Championed by fellow engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel, Bazalgette was promoted to chief engineer of the Metropolitan Board of Works.

His fame had become considerable; he was knighted in 1875.

A wealth of decorative detail embellished his pumping stations. There are two levels of ornate ironwork, with pillars, arches, brackets, overhead balustrades and balconies galore.

Even the grills underfoot are cast as little petalled flowers within circles, every inch of them painted the most brilliant of shades. Bright green palm fonds cluster together around gold and white flowers, all encircled by picturesque trefoils. Golden stars shine throughout the ceiling to add to the glitter.

The exterior of Abbey Mills is nothing short of beautiful, with the layout of a Greek cross and all the appearance of a magnificently arched and pillared Italian palazzo.

Two site chimneys originally towered above the engine house. At 200 feet high and looking like minarets, they earned the pumping station the nickname 'the mosque in the marsh'. Unfortunately, as an air-raid precaution, these were demolished.

Originally the interior was decorated with bronze and gilded work and also brilliantly coloured. It sadly faded, but over the years a paint analysis was carried out and the original work was restored.

The pumping station shows off six styles of architectural endeavour, built on the site of Stratford Langthorne Abbey. A contemporary critic wrote that 'Italian Venetian' was 'visible in the style of arched-over windows and the Venetian corkscrew twist incorporated into the rainwater drainpipes'.

There was 'French Gothic' reflected in 'the internal iron pillars and the tops of the access towers to the beam engines'. 'Flemish' was seen in 'the steeply pinched mansard roofs'. 'Byzantine/Moorish' was shown in its venting chimneys which looked 'similar to minarets'.

Abbey Mills originally lifted most of the sewage from lower-lying areas of north London. It also had to ensure that the sewers would be self-cleaning.

To this day, Abbey Mills provides essential services to London's houses – a magnificent 150 years on the go!

It now helps transfer waste from homes and businesses across the capital to Beckton Sewage Treatment Works, Europe's largest, three miles away.

On an average day, 230,000 litres of sewage passes through the site, the equivalent of around 100 Olympic-size swimming pools. On wet days, volumes can increase fourfold with the majority of the storm water flowing into the Lea Tunnel sewer.

Newly restored, the pumping station has a richly appreciative public. Today, you can even book tours to go round this magnificent building.

A peculiar little detail is that Bazalgette's grandfather was the tailor for the Prince of Wales, the future George IV.

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The rhino of Fleet Street

Michael Crick, the tough political reporter, has written biographies of Jeffrey Archer, Alex Ferguson, Nigel Farage and Hezza. By *Louise Flind*

Did you grow up in a political household?
My parents met at Cambridge University in the '50s in the Socialist Club, which was to the left of Labour, between the Communist Party and the Labour Party.

Why did you join the Labour Party when you were 15?
I joined the debating society at school when I was 11 and reported for the school newspaper. When I was 14, at Manchester Grammar School, I started reading the newspaper every day. For the 1974 elections, when I was 15 and 16, I helped the Labour Party.

Why did you turn down the chance to become an MP?
There was a possibility of applying to be a candidate on Merseyside. I discussed it with my wife, Margaret, and she didn't fancy it. Also, I regard myself as a Mancunian – and I was 32 and having a lot more fun being a journalist.

Why did you choose journalism as a career?
Initially I saw journalism as a kind of stepping-stone into politics. I love the whole process of curiosity, and discovering things that nobody else knows.

Who did you most enjoy working for?
Channel 4 News, ITN and *Newsnight*.

Which story did you find most satisfying to report on?
I had a lot of fun doing Jeffrey Archer.

Was Jeffrey Archer, whose biography you wrote, the biggest liar in British politics you've seen?
It was partly lies, and partly fantasy.

What do you think of MPs?
There are some wrong 'uns and it astonishes me how party leaders can never tell who the wrong 'uns might be in their party, such as Jeffrey Archer and Tulip Siddiq.

Do you have a political hero?
The Labour MP Leo Abse (1917-2008). He was never a government minister, but he was involved in homosexual-law reform and other reforms in the 1960s.

ALAMY

You wrote Nigel Farage's biography. What makes him tick? Will he become PM?
I think there's a 20-per-cent chance he'll become Prime Minister, and a one in four chance that he'll become Deputy Prime Minister.

You can see the possibility of a Conservative/Reform coalition forming the government after the next election.

He loves the limelight, and appearing on television and he's very, very good at it.

You wrote Michael Heseltine's biography. Was he the best Prime Minister we never had?
I think you could say that Denis Healey and Roy Jenkins were pretty strong candidates for that as well. But certainly Heseltine was the most effective minister, particularly his early years in charge of environment and defence.

Could Alex Ferguson, another of your biographical subjects, have been a great politician?
Ferguson could have done any job. He's a very clever man, and a good judge of character. Incredible energy, able to inspire. The one job he couldn't have done was being a diplomat.

What makes you so tough? Do you mind it when interviewees are rude to you?
I mind it a little bit. If an interviewee is rude to me, that's nothing compared with what journalists covering a war have to put up with.

Do you travel light?
Pretty light. I work out how many nights I'm going be away, make sure I have enough underwear for every day, and then fewer shirts than that.

If I'm going overnight, I'll just take my brown bag. I have a brown shoulder bag I carry everywhere and it's got everything I need: passport, nail-clippers, pens and cards. And I always have to have something to read.

Why do you support Manchester United?
When we moved to Manchester in 1967, a boy in the playground asked me what football team I supported.

In Northamptonshire, where I was born, my father took me to the rugby – so I didn't support any team. And this boy said, 'Right, you support United, then' – so I did.

What's your favourite destination?
We spend about six or seven weeks a year in Crook in the Lake District. I always say that when I finally get a peerage – in other words, never – I will be Lord Crick of Crook.

What are your earliest childhood holiday memories?
I've got triplet sisters who were born a year and ten months after me. On our first family holiday to Bognor Regis, we all stayed in one room. I would have been five at the time.

My father took me to a magician show, and afterwards bought me a magic kit. There was a trick where a playing card disappeared, and I burst into tears because I thought I'd lost it.

My mother, a French teacher who knew France well, told me that they still used the guillotine. Before we went to France once, there was a scare because a couple had died of typhoid when some cans of meat had been left in a stream.

We stopped at the side of the road. I went and had a pee in a corn field. For days, I lived in terror that, as a result, somebody would die of typhoid...

Iain Dale: All Talk with Michael Crick, Sir John Curtice and Brian Taylor *is at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival on 5th August*

Genius crossword 454

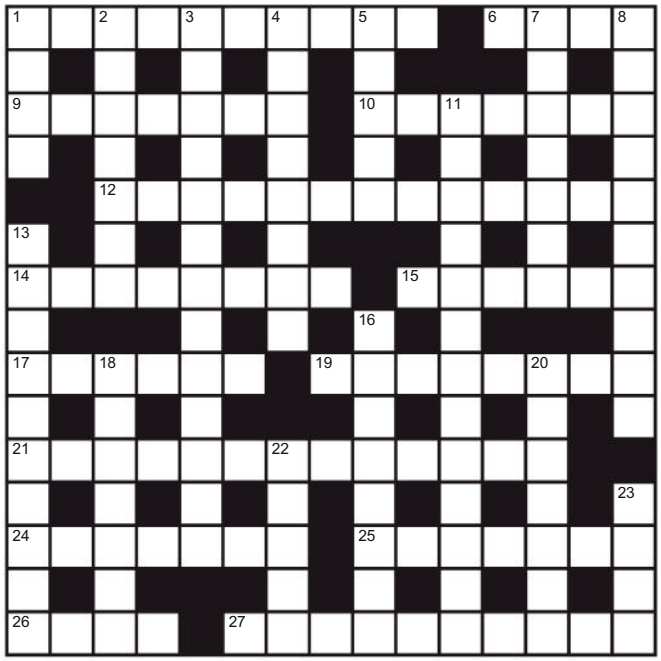
EL SERENO

Across

1 Electronic device filling nurse with fear? (4,6)
6 Side that's wrong about politics, initially (4)
9 Seasonal producer of plants - a criminal (7)
10 Stays to grab points as well (7)
12 Campaigning body urges proper reforms, including rejection of America (8,5)
14 Common alpine cultivated around borders of Belize (8)
15 Row with hell's angel protecting Conservative? (6)
17 Setter's job or duty (6)
19 Spirit of sailor then is destroyed (8)
21 Disregarding instructions turning barn inside-out (13)
24 Stumbles across church army feature! (7)
25 Elected leftie must welcome one anthem (7)
26 Work-gang held back by power cut (4)
27 Accommodation allowance including fare originally between New York and LA (6,4)

Down

1 Actors in musical with a twisted tail (4)
2 Deterioration of electronic circuits covered by engineers (7)
3 Remiss about gripping, entertaining book (13)
4 Means to change 1 Across, but one forgets (8)
5 One smoulders as people in club must be naked (5)
7 A way to secure former standing within group? (7)
8 Curious type leaving front of car sticking out? (4,6)
11 Mean to accept I'm unable to fail ultimately in a noticeable way (13)
13 Go for Independent Sufi rumoured to be looking on the bright side (10)
16 Some foreign aid is boldly raised as result of volcanic activity (8)
18 Voice I don't know I've supported (7)
20 Source of trouble or life rolling in clover (7)
22 Step up seeing jockey has a change of heart (5)
23 A little bird may be doing something (2,2)



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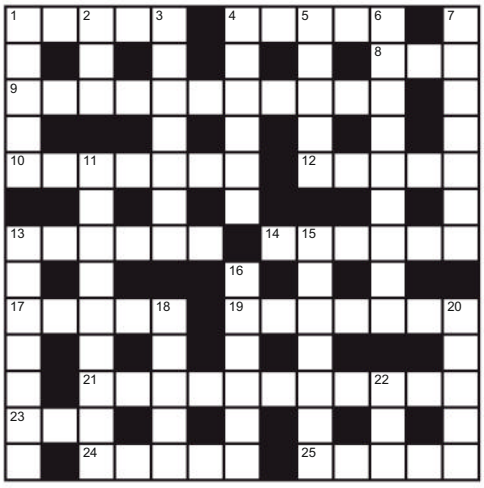
Moron crossword 454



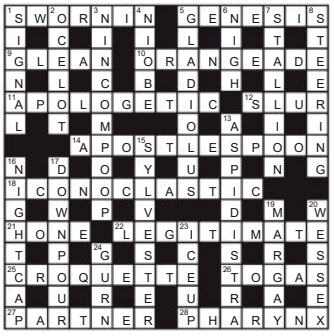
Across

1 A sudden short attack (5)
4 Care for; shark (5)
8 Afternoon meal (3)
9 Hard work, effort (5,6)
10 Mexican spirit (7)
12 Simply ages! (5)
13 Hairy (6)
14 S. American wild cat (6)
17 Monsters (5)
19 Infuriated (7)
21 It's the charm (anag) (11)
23 Polynesian garland (3)
24 Cerebral board game (5)
25 Gradually get narrower (5)

Down

1 Fast; ships (5)
2 Massage (3)
3 Gaping wide open (7)
4 Usual, conventional (6)
5 Prepared for action (5)
6 Forever (9)
7 Give parents a night off! (7)
11 Sort of equation (9)
13 Soon, in a while (7)
15 Competition (7)
16 Waltzes (6)
18 Frighten (5)
20 Show reluctance (5)
22 Little rascal (3)

Genius 452 solution



Winner: Fred Peeling, Soham, Ely, Cambridgeshire

Runners-up: Trevor Mills, Beverley, East Yorkshire; Deborah King, Rossett, Wrexham

Moron 452 answers: Across: 3 Soda, 7 Feud, 8 Outs (Sowed a few doubts), 9 Menus, 10 Magi, 11 Locate, 13 Glossary, 15 Pass, 16 Slab, 17 Belittle, 18 Recede, 21 Left, 23 Ninja, 24 Tear, 25 Trek, 26 Pelt. **Down:** 1 Deva, 2 Admissible, 3 Sane, 4 Disloyal, 5 Aura, 6 Assessment, 10 Magistrate, 12 Capitulate, 14 Ambience, 19 Claw, 20 Knot, 22 Flex.

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RANTS AND RAVES FROM THE INTREPID DUVET LADY

QUITE THE BUZZ

Picture the scene. Me and my 3 dogs pottering around the garden, me with gardening gloves and secateurs. Suddenly, the bucolic peace was shattered by a loud buzzing as a large beetle crash landed, kamikaze-style, on the back of Cal, my giant mountain dog.

Cal, all 60kgs of him, took off in alarm as he tried to dislodge the imposter. The beetle, equally alarmed, decided to take refuge in Cal's thick double coat and started to burrow down into the mass of white fur.

Having haled from Africa, I am highly respectful of unidentified insects since many can sting, bite or are just poisonous to handle. So, determined to avoid a potential visit to the vet, I took off after Cal, in an attempt to free him from his uninvited passenger. The two younger dogs misconstrued this panic. Deciding that Cal and I had invented a new game, they joined in with the random dashing about, all of us with our fur apparently on fire. If this was on video I thought, I could just edit the clip to include the theme tune from the Benny Hill Show and I could, with complete confidence, begin writing my Oscar acceptance speech.

As Maremma mountain dogs are not built for endurance, especially on a hot summer's day, I finally managed to grab Cal for long enough to extract the beetle. The insect was in a state of hysterical meltdown but I managed to get a good look at it before it buzzed off from whence it came.

Mr Google told me it was a Melolontha Melolontha, a harmless frequent garden visitor in summer and a favourite snack for our local bats. I would rather remember it as the beetle who has, on speed dial of course, a repeat prescription for sudacrem.

You see, Mr Google also told me that this beetle's common name is ..., err, ... yes seriously, ... Cockchafer.

Jessica

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They say you shouldn't meet your heroes. But when I met – and frequently played against – Peter Weichsel of California, now in his ninth decade, I was not disappointed.

Fortunately, I was not overawed either, and recall taking him for 800 at the two-level on a part-score deal when neither my partner at the time (this was back in the eighties) Oliver Segal nor I had a fourth trump.

Weichsel was a Vietnam veteran who partook in the 1960s San Francisco counterculture. His recent autobiographical book, *Bridge's First Hippie*, is a fascinating read for bridge junkies and non-junkies alike.

Here is Weichsel at the helm from over 50 years ago. Plan the play in 4♠ on ♥K lead.

Dealer West North-South Vunerable

North
♠ J5
♥ J6542
♦ Q876
♣ 82

West
♠ 97
♥ K8
♦ AJ1095
♣ A765

East
♠ 86
♥ AQ10973
♦ 32
♣ Q109

South
♠ AKQ10432
♥ -
♦ K4
♣ KJ43

The bidding

South	West	North	East
	1♦	Pass	1♥
4♠	end		

Pleased to have avoided a spade lead (rendering the game unmakeable), you desperately need to get dummy to lead a club towards your king-knave.

You need East to have one high club and guess which one it is – but it's surely more likely to be the queen, not the ace, given West's one-opener.

Our ex-hippie ruffed the heart and found the key play of leading the four of diamonds. This put West in a lose-lose dilemma: rise with the ace and declarer has two diamond tricks; playing low (as West did at the table) enabled declarer to win dummy's queen and play a club to the knave. West won the ace and switched to a spade, but it was too late.

Declarer won in hand, cashed the king of clubs, ruffed a club and merely conceded a diamond and the fourth club at the end. Ten tricks and game made.
ANDREW ROBSON

Competition

TESSA CASTRO

IN COMPETITION No 320 you were invited to write a poem called *Ripe*. It was a tasty glut of an entry. Clare Morris wrote in the voice of a ripe Somerset Brie: 'Come, pierce my soft, suppliant crust,/ To spill my contents, as indeed you must.' Ian Higgins described the inside of a pomegranate as 'a wasps' nest/ Flush with shrapnel and juice'.

Claudette Evans celebrated Wimbledon strawberries: 'No berry, no summer, no *love* in the game.' Gillian Pugh was among those with a common complaint in the supermarket: 'My fruit just isn't ripe.'

Commiserations to them and to Robert Best, Michael Turner, David Bailey, Steve Keightley, D A Prince, Bill Webster, Sue Smalley, Alan Bradwell, Bob Morrow, Bill Greenwell, Anthony Young and Jenny Jones, and congratulations to those printed below, each of whom wins £25, with the bonus prize of *The Chambers Dictionary* going to Julie Wigley.

Two medlars at the orchard's edge
Short and stocky, late to blossom,
Slow to grow, strange fruit indeed.
The 'open arse' or 'monkey's bottom',
Middle English suits them well.
In Chaucer's tales and Shakespeare's plays
They lend their names to bawdy rhyme,
Or serve to symbolise decay.
No ordinary fruits are these
But of a most unusual type,
Full firm when in October plucked
Then left to blet till overripe.
'Tis on a par with alchemy:
Pure gold for taste buds and the belly.
Hubble, bubble, strain and bottle,
Then – hey presto – medlar jelly!
Julie Wigley

It's a most accessible apple tree
And glowing with the reddest, ripest fruit
That ever grew at the right height to suit
A passing apple-fancier, like me
Provided, that is, he be not unmanned,
By a palpably law-abiding road,
From lessening one branch's luscious load
With a surreptitious swipe of his hand.
I'm not and, impervious to all shame –
Ripe and ready to heed the Tempter's call –
I sneak a quick look around me and … fall,
Old-Adam-like but with no Eve to blame!
Well, I won't say that pair weren't injudicious,
Let themselves be too fruitily advised,
But after one crisp crunch, I'm not surprised:
Ripe, O, ripe – the apple's utterly delicious!
I White

January in a chilly British shire,
Cloud cover total and the forecast dire,
I'm eating sunshine by a roaring fire.
Seville ambrosia on toasted bread
Scooped up with an apostle spoon and spread
By Sheffield steel. I chose the orange shred.
I might have had the tangerine, the lime,
Or any variant of the drug that I'm
So much addicted to, come breakfast time.
A continent away, a treasure-trove
Of fruit is ripening in a sunny grove,
To grace a tablecloth in Hawick or Hove.
Winter waves engulf the promenade.
The snow queen and Jack Frost are on parade.
I'm staying in here, eating marmalade.
Peter Wyton

I've eight decades behind me:
That's quaintly known as 'ripe'.
To tell it plain, my aged brain
Is down the sewage pipe.

They say that age brings wisdom.
But that's deceitful hype.
It chiefly brings confusing things,
Like total memory wipe.

No matter how I struggle
To be the stoic type,
My self-control is up the pole.
I kvetch, complain and gripe.

Will I be glad or sorry,
Or of an urbane stripe,
When Thanatos becomes my boss
And rips the 'e' off 'ripe'?
Basil Ransome-Davies

COMPETITION No 322 Is the Last Night of the Proms moving, or embarrassing? Please write a poem called *The Last Night*, in any sense. Maximum 16 lines. We cannot accept any entries by post, I'm afraid, but do send them by e-mail (comps@theoldie.co.uk – don't forget to include your own postal address), marked 'Competition No 322', by Thursday 24th July.

Swimming with the dog on the Tyne

PATRICK BARKHAM

Googling 'wild swimming Northumberland' conjured up a promising-looking place called Featherstone Castle.

Checking the OS map on my phone, it also seemed like a decent spot for a stroll because I could walk up the west side of the river, cross a footbridge and return on the east side.

The map also showed 'Sewage Farm (disused)' – that's all right, then – and, more mysteriously, 'Campsite (disused)'.

What was a disused campsite? An apocalyptic scene of fraying pole-and-ridge tents and ivy-covered caravans, abandoned since the '60s? I had to find out.

It had been grey all day as I travelled north, but the forecast implausibly predicted glorious sunshine by the time I reached Hadrian's Wall.

The forecasting gods were correct. The clouds parted west of Newcastle and another heart-wrenchingly beautiful May day sprang forth. Orange tip butterflies bounced along the verges, hawthorns were pillowy with blossom and the mellow, descending notes of willow warblers filled the air.

I parked in an informal lay-by close to the River South Tyne and crossed to the west bank. The footpath rounded a mine-water-treatment scheme, preventing old mine water from polluting the river, and crossed a series of pungent, sheepy pastures. Twin lambs craned their necks beneath their mum, tails wagging with delight.

The river was broad, braided and interesting, winding beside boggy alder woods adorned with the white flowers of greater stitchwort and delicate creamy spikes of ramsons. A flowering bird cherry hummed, a city of a million insects; alders and ash trees were still pushing forth their first tender leaves.

I entered a little wood via the most picturesque old pedestrian gate, silvered by lichen and made from timbers that had not been straightened but curved and wobbled. Above it, another hawthorn flowered madly.

It was just as the Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh wrote: 'A gap in a hedge, a smooth rock surfacing a narrow lane, a view of a woody meadow, the stream at the junction of four small fields – these are as much as a man can fully experience.'

GARY WING

My rapture lessened slightly when I encountered two putrid dead rabbits, but then I heard the noise I had been waiting for – SPLASH! The unmistakable sound of a joyous wild swimmer leaping from riverbank to water.

I pressed forward, only to discover the belly-flopper was a black Lab chasing a stick down the South Tyne.

By the time I crossed the footbridge, admiring the weir with its customary 'Swimmers Will Deservedly Die for the Idiotic Risks They Take' notices, the Lab had scampered on and I had a sandy river beach to myself.

I was soon swimming in a dark channel beyond my depth, little fish leaping around me and a grey wagtail bobbing on a rock. The brown-green water was sweet and deliciously cool.

I was reluctant to leave the river, but pulled on my clothes and wandered off along the east bank to the old campsite.

Featherstone Castle is a castellated stone mansion set back from the river in old parkland. I took a tarmac track splintering down the river cliff, passing a gatepost and an old plaque. This marked the entrance to POW Camp 18, where thousands of German officers were held from 1945 to 1948.

The sign commemorated army interpreter Captain Herbert Sulzbach, a German Jew who fled to England in the 1930s, for 'dedicating himself to making this camp a seedbed of British-German reconciliation'.

I paused and pondered the Nazi officers, camped here beside this magnificent river, coming to terms with their lives' taking an unexpected meander. The relics of this fascinating place were unkempt brick buildings with black, glassless windows, no doors and flat roofs, used periodically since as sheds for sheep and old farm machinery.

A pair of noisy oystercatchers circled and cried out, the gorse and broom flung yellow scent to the breeze and I followed the river upstream, back to the car.

Park at Diamond Oak Bridge (What3Words usage.pipe.cherished) or at Lambley Viaduct car park. Take footpath north up west side of the river; cross river at Featherstone footbridge and south down the east bank for a 90-minute ramble

Summer the oldie way by Charlotte Metcalf

Let's enjoy a smug moment as we settle into proper British summer. We've long known that jostling on a sweltering beach is nothing compared with a leisurely visit to a garden centre or a gentle ramble amongst birdsong and wildflowers followed by a picnic.

A perennial delight is the variety of culture on offer, much of it alfresco. There are outdoor theatres, opera and concert venues all over the country, from Holland Park Opera, Shakespeare's Globe and Regent's Park Theatre to operas at Garsington and Grange Park, and the spectacular Willow Globe in Powys and Minack theatre, hewn from a Cornish cliff.

National Trust properties stage summer performances, welcoming us into their exquisite gardens – often providing lunches and cream teas, too. Many stately homes, from Houghton to Chatsworth, have sculpture parks or fascinating exhibitions.

Where else in the world can you take in a traditional village fête in the afternoon and an old-fashioned circus like Giffords or an opera in a stately home at night?

We may not have the longest summer – perhaps that's why we know best how to make the most of our great outdoors.

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VIRGINIA IRONSIDE

Joy of marital sex

Q When I read about the woman who has refused sex with her husband ever since they were married (Spring issue), I got very cross! He says they've always been close – does she know what that implies? I wonder.

'Not interested in sex?' What does she think marriage vows are about? This poor suffering man is shut out of intimacy because SHE has decided. She's selfish and mean. Love means sacrifices, sometimes.

What's wrong with sex occasionally – caring and loving, careful sex? Men have needs, and this poor chap has been forced to go elsewhere to satisfy a basic human need by sordid (in his mind) secretive encounters, and feels guilty.

She is jolly lucky this kind man hasn't left her. Why is loving closeness and all that that implies so distasteful to her? Has she ever really addressed her problem?

C W, West Yorkshire

A The truth is that neither has addressed the problem. I think they should attend marriage counselling together. True, she may never be able to face sex – perhaps because of some childhood trauma – but surely they should at least be able to address the problem openly, even if full sex never happens.

A cure for stinginess

Q I have an old friend, whom I have known since prep-school days, and with whom I go regularly to a cinema in London's West End. Because I am a member of this particular cinema, I agree to get the tickets (he benefits from the discount I get), on the understanding that he will reimburse me for the cost of his ticket.

Increasingly, my friend 'forgets' to pay me for the ticket, and I have grown tired of reminding him! How do I continue to see films with him, at the same time as getting paid for the tickets I have bought on his behalf?

B P, London NW4

A Unless he's absolutely broke and you're prepared to subsidise him, then be upfront!

All you have to do is hand over the ticket with the words 'That ticket cost X. So if you'd pay me now, before the film starts, I'd be grateful. I keep forgetting to ask you and then you forget to pay me!'

If he still 'forgets', say, as you part, 'You've done it again! Next time, remember that you owe me X.'

Don't stop. And if he still 'forgets', persist. 'We've got to sort this out! As far as my calculations go, you owe me for X tickets since the beginning of the year. I'd love to subsidise you, but I can't afford to – and, anyway, when you don't pay, it makes me feel resentful. Might it be best if in future you got your own ticket?'

He knows perfectly well what he's doing, and is just relying on your sensitivity about not asking for money as a way of not paying.

Be honest. He owes you.

Not saying 'I love you'

Q I've got a lovely granddaughter and she's always telling her parents she loves them.

Similarly, my daughter often ends her phone calls to me with the words 'Love you, Mum.' Of course I like this very much, but it also constantly reminds me that my own parents never told me that they loved me – and very rarely cuddled me.

I can't help blaming a lot of problems I have now on this lack of affection. We were a happy family and went on lovely holidays together when I was small and they always came to school concerts and dramas. But I'm tormented by this lack of affection in my childhood.

Sandra, by email

A There was a moment in my life when I felt the same as you. But I now realise that hardly anyone of our generation experienced overt affection from their parents – unless we were Italian, perhaps.

But we British kept a stiff upper lip, until recently. And it was only with the Americanisation of everything that it became the norm to say 'I love you' to our parents or even our friends.

The first time a woman friend said 'I love you' to me, I practically curled up and died of embarrassment. Even now I'm not sure I'd welcome it – though even I might just manage to choke it out on a best friend's deathbed.

Influenced by an American self-help book, I did once tell my father I loved him in a letter – and got back a tormented admission he thought the reason he and I got on so well was because of 'shared genes'.

Probably true, now I look back, but a bit of a slap in the face at the time!

Don't worry. Your parents loved you very much. It's what they do or did – not what they didn't say – that matters.

Please email me your problems at problempage@theoldie.co.uk; I will answer every email – and let me know if you'd like your dilemma to be confidential.

The Oldie

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