AN WILSON ON GOETHE

JOHN CRAXTON'S CATS

The Oldie

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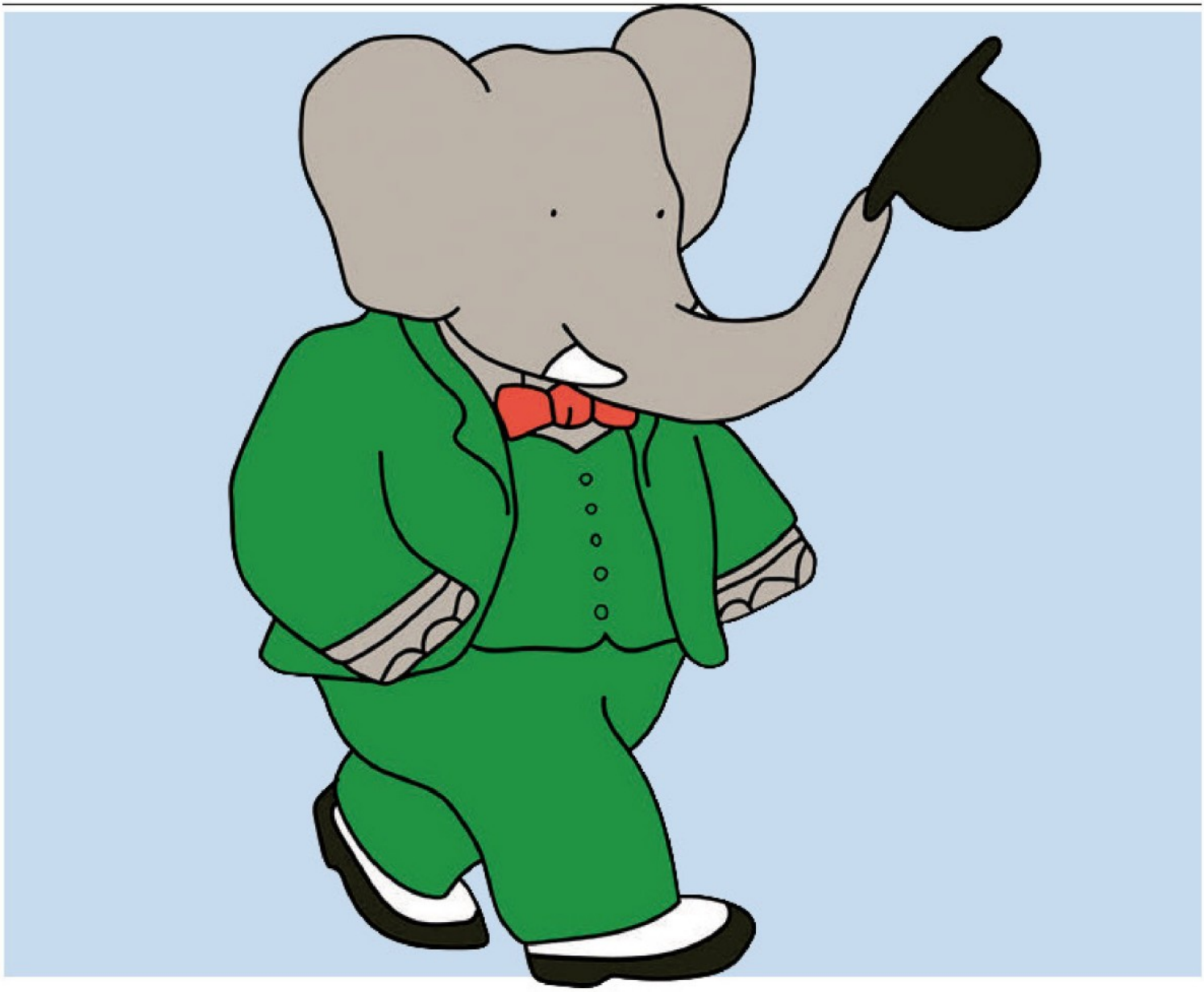

Babar, King of the Elephants

by Charlotte Metcalf

A Bridge Too Far? – Edward Fox on the 80th anniversary of Arnhem

Britain's new Centre for Illustration – Quentin Blake

Marie Antoinette's secret sex life – Antonia Fraser

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The Old Un's Notes

'You expect me to talk?'

'No, Mr Bond. I expect you to *die*!'

Even those who wouldn't normally watch a James Bond film can quote that exchange from *Goldfinger* (released 60 years ago, in September 1964).

It is spoken as Bond follows the progress of a laser beam pointed at that portion of his body most required for his continued success as a womaniser.

The film's other takeaway images are those of a nude young woman killed by being smothered in gold paint, a mute Korean assassin with an unusually lethal bowler hat and an all-female flying circus spraying nerve gas over Fort Knox. It's all accompanied by the magnificent belter of a title song from Shirley Bassey – composed by John Barry and with lyrics by Leslie Bricusse and Anthony Newley.

If *Goldfinger* isn't the best of the 25-odd James Bond films, it's the one that can stand as a surrogate for all the others.

It's also important as a link between the more modest first two Bond outings, *Dr No* (1962) and *From Russia with Love* (1963), and the later big-budget extravaganzas. With an immediate $42 million ($630 million today) haul at the international box office, the producers could be sure 007 was good for the long haul.

Goldfinger – like many of Ian Fleming's books – wasn't pure invention.

It was inspired by the swashbuckling exploits of the Anglo-Canadian spymaster William Stephenson.

His wartime scheme to relieve the collaborationist Vichy French government of their bullion reserves held on Martinique had come to Fleming's attention when he was a young operative with British naval intelligence.

Sadly, Fleming succumbed to a heart attack, aged 56, 60 years ago, on 12th August 1964, just weeks before *Goldfinger*'s release.

Always impeccably mannered, he spoke his last words to the crew of the ambulance taking him to hospital: 'I am terribly sorry to trouble you, chaps. I don't know how you get along so fast with the traffic on the roads these days.'

Midas touch: Sean Connery in *Goldfinger* (1964)

Among this month's contributors

Edward Fox (p17) was in *The Go-Between* (1971) and *Day of the Jackal* (1973). He played Lieutenant General Sir Brian Horrocks in *A Bridge Too Far* (1977). He was our Oldie Stager of the Year in 2022.

Quentin Blake (p22) has illustrated more than 300 books, including 18 by Roald Dahl. He has illustrated books by Sylvia Plath and Dr Seuss. He founded the Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration.

John Craxton (1922-2009) (p28) painted renowned pictures of Crete, where he lived for many years. He illustrated books by Patrick Leigh Fermor. *Craxton's Cats*, by Andrew Lambirth, is out on 29th August.

Daisy Dunn (p59) is author of *The Missing Thread, Not Far from Brideshead, In the Shadow of Vesuvius* and *Catullus's Bedspread*. She wrote the *Ladybird Guide to Homer*.

Fashion note: Jeremy Corbyn has taken to wearing a man bag in the Commons.

The former Labour Party leader, now an independent MP, was to be seen recently with a holdall over his right shoulder. It could almost have been a bus conductor's satchel.

Usually, it is only female MPs who take bags into the parliamentary chamber – and the sight prompts the Old Un to reflect that these days one seldom sees men carrying briefcases.

It was once common for commuters to carry their paperwork and daily

NOT MANY DEAD

Important stories you may have missed

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essentials in smart leather cases, sometimes monogrammed or with elaborate combination locks.

These days, everyone seems to have brightly coloured rucksacks with loose-hanging straps and sporty branding. Was there not something agreeably Pooterish about briefcases?

They may often have contained little more than a pack of egg sandwiches and your household keys, but at least you looked businesslike.

The painter Mabel Nicholson (1871-1918) has finally come out of the shadow of her husband, artist William Nicholson (1872-1949).

A show of her work is on at Grange Gallery, Rottingdean (until 26th August): Prydie: the Life and Art of Mabel Pryde Nicholson. And a new book, *Mabel Nicholson*, by Lucy Davies, salutes her brilliance.

Davies writes, 'Mabel's story slipped from history's grasp amid the blizzard of death brought by the Great War (she died of Spanish flu in the conflict's final months), and the artistic successes of the men in her family: her husband, William Nicholson; her sons Ben (the pioneer of British abstraction) and Kit (a modernist architect); perhaps also her brother, James Ferrier Pryde (a once voguish painter of shadowy interiors).'

Mabel Nicholson's 1911 *Family Group* (*below left*) is of three of her children, Tony, Nancy and Kit, with their nursemaid. It shows quite how accomplished she was – and that she was every bit as sophisticated as her husband, William Nicholson, whose 1893 portrait of her, *Lady in Yellow*, is depicted alongside.

'I've reduced. I've reused. I've recycled. What more do you want?'

The late Knight of Glin (1937-2011), President of the Irish Georgian Society, did much to protect great Irish buildings from the wrecking ball.

He saved them – and now, Nesta FitzGerald – his daughter – is painting them. This picture is from her new exhibition, *Dublin Façades*, at Dublin's City Assembly House (until 23rd August).

Guinness is good for you: Iveagh House by Nesta FitzGerald

How splendidly broad are the Georgian houses of Dublin. And one of the broadest is this one (*above*), Iveagh House, on St Stephen's Green. It was built in 1736 by Richard Cassels and redesigned by brewing heir Benjamin Guinness in 1862.

His grandson Lord Iveagh gave it to the Irish state in 1939 – and it is now home to the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs.

A new Netflix show, *House of Guinness*, is to tell the story of Benjamin Guinness (1798-1868) and his children after his death. Here's hoping that lovely Iveagh House figures prominently.

House of Commons officials have for most of the time ditched their ceremonial wigs, but they still bring out the 'syrups' (to use the old rhyming slang) on special occasions.

One such was the State Opening of Parliament in July, when the Clerk of the Commons, Tom Goldsmith, sat bewigged at his table just below the Speaker's chair.

Mr Goldsmith, it has to be admitted, did not look terribly comfortable. The chamber was hot, as was he. He pushed the wig to the back of his head until it looked like a pork-pie hat worn by a distinctly harassed point-to-point bookie.

A work acquaintance says, 'Tom is never the tidiest of dressers, but we weren't convinced it was actually his wig, or the right size.'

Mabel Nicholson's *Family Group*; Mabel by William Nicholson

'You're deliberately trying to provoke me, aren't you, Gerald'

No prizes for spotting Einstein in the picture (*below*) of the great man at the Oxford Union in June 1933. His crazy hair – as well as his planet-sized brain – always made him stand out in a crowd.

Professor Branestawm goes to Oxford: Einstein, 1933

The picture appears in Andrew Robinson's new book, *Einstein in Oxford*.

After visiting Oxford in 1931 to receive an honorary degree and to lecture on relativity and the universe, Einstein liked it so much that he returned in 1932 and 1933.

His visits were so hallowed that one blackboard on which he chalked equations and diagrams was preserved at Oxford's History of Science Museum – where it's one of the museum's most popular items; a museum spokesman has called it a 'relic of a secular saint'. Einstein, though, in modest fashion, didn't want the blackboard preserved because he didn't think quite so much of his enormous brains.

While at Oxford, Einstein was given plum college rooms – once occupied by Lewis Carroll, author of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

However, not everyone quite understood how brilliant Einstein was.

Roger Davies, Emeritus Professor of Astrophysics at Oxford, says, 'In Oxford, the dons greeted Einstein with an esteem bordering on deification but were mostly bamboozled by relativity.'

Leaving aside political arguments, the looming abolition of the last hereditary peers will rob us of the eccentric by-elections whereby the upper house topped up its quota of hereditaries after one of them had fallen off his or her perch.

Candidates were obliged to submit personal manifestos. Rosa Monckton, recently taking her seat as a life peer, recalled the manifesto of her late father the 2nd Viscount Monckton, a career soldier and Arabist. It read: 'All cats to be muzzled outside to stop the agonising torture of mice and small birds.' The Viscount was not elected.

The 5th Lord Biddulph (b 1959) was no more successful when, in his 14-word manifesto, he said he was 'happy to serve if requested'. It sounded more like the sort of thing you might say on a mixed-doubles tennis court.

A certain Lord Pender opted for a gritty single word: 'Duty.'

Lord Seaford presented himself as 'a small and happy bison farmer with aspirations above his station'.

Lord Napier and Ettrick said, 'Having retired after 25 years as private secretary to Princess Margaret, I am now available.'

As John Inman's television shop assistant Mr Humphries used to say, 'I'm free'.

'Good news, Mr Perkins. We know you hate flying – so we cancelled your flight'

The red-haired, green-eyed Edna O'Brien's deliciously scandalous reputation as a *femme fatale* was well founded.

The Irish novelist, who has just died at 93, once left a party on the arm of Mikis Theodorakis, composer of the *Zorba the Greek* theme tune,

Scarlet woman: Edna O'Brien (1930-2024)

and the pair vanished into the night. When the *Times* review of Theodorakis's concert appeared two days later, it mentioned that Theodorakis had appeared somewhat 'tired', causing much mirth at Edna's publishers, Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

The writer Craig Brown was once accosted on the steps of Piccadilly station by an Irish tramp, who asked him, 'Excuse me, but would you be having Edna O'Brien's phone number?' As a friend of her son Carlo Gébler, Craig did in fact have her number.

This story amused Edna greatly, when she was told, and she jokingly speculated, 'Maybe that tramp was the answer to my life. He was Irish, I suppose? You know I am still hoping for love and romance.'

Of her seductively soft voice, she said she always answered the telephone in a startled whisper:

'When anyone rings me – including the tramp – I am affronted because they always say, "Have I wakened you?" as if I lead this totally reclining life. I say, "No, I always talk like this."'

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Edna O'Brien's naked attraction

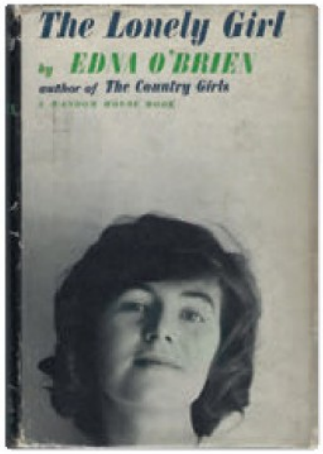
When I took her round my school, 60 years ago, she was lost in admiration for a nude teenage boy

Around 20 years ago in Dublin, I was chatting to the eminent Irish psychiatrist Dr Anthony Clare – the one we remember from *In the Psychiatrist's Chair* on Radio 4.

I was asking Anthony about an old friend of mine who, when I had first known him, had had difficulty with the truth. He simply couldn't tell it. In his twenties and thirties he had been a habitual liar, even when he had no need to be.

I said to Dr Clare that, now my friend was older, I thought he had changed.

'I hope so,' said the psychiatrist gently, 'for his sake and for yours, but don't rely on it. People can and do change with time, but as a rule they don't.'



Touching: Edna O'Brien

I thought about my conversation with Dr Clare the other day when I heard the news of the death of the great Irish novelist Edna O'Brien. I first met her in the 1960s when she was in her early thirties and I was a schoolboy. I was tasked with escorting her around my boarding school (Bedales in Hampshire) because she was thinking of sending her son, Carlo, to the school.

I was honoured and excited to meet her, of course, though I am ashamed to say I noted in my teenage diary at the time, 'She is so Irish, so gentle and fey and pixie-like that you do want to give her a good kick up the backside.'

According to my diary, when I told her that *The Lonely Girl* was the bestselling novel at the school's paperback bookshop, she simply closed her eyes and stroked my hand. I remember taking her into one of the boys' dormitories where, on the far side of the room, standing by his bed was a boy of about 14.

He was stark-naked, except for a strategically placed guitar.

Instead of sparing the poor chap's blushes and retreating, Miss O'Brien stood transfixed. 'Is there a more beautiful sight on God's earth than that,' she murmured; 'a pure, hairless boy, with soft brown skin, on the very edge of manhood…'

The reason Anthony Clare came to mind when she died was simply that the last time I saw Edna O'Brien was on Valentine's Day this year.

She was 93 and very frail, and when she saw me, she closed her eyes and stroked my hand – exactly (but exactly) as she had done 60 years before.

'Oh, you beautiful man,' she murmured.

She was so Irish. And brilliant, beautiful and funny. She didn't change.

I thought of Anthony Clare again when I popped over to Paris in early August for a happy 48 hours at the Paris Olympics.

I am glad I went. The French police (who seemed to be on every street corner) had been instructed to be friendly to us foreigners and – *sacre bleu*! – they truly were.

Everyone was friendly. Everything was well-organised. Everyone was happy. Even the competitors who came away without medals were merry. Even the spectators who got drenched in the rain were in high spirits. Why?

Because, in the case of the competitors (according to Dr Clare), being tested in life – being challenged – is a key element in finding happiness.

He told me, 'You very rarely find people who are sitting around not doing very much who are happy.'

As for the spectators, they were happy not simply because they were seeing athletes at the top of their game, but because most of them were there because they have a passion for sport.

To be truly happy, you need to cultivate a passion – something (usually outside your work) that excites, absorbs and delights you.

Whether it was archery, taekwondo, hockey or handball, in Paris I met people for whom their chosen sport was their everything.

What's your everything?

I have a passion for words and language and I love the way language keeps evolving.

'Spilling the tea' (meaning sharing the goss), I can tell you I've had a 'hot girl summer' (it's a unisex expression for feeling confident and carefree).

Nothing 'ick' (distasteful) or 'mid' (average) has come my way since I began chatting to Alexa (the machine that sits on top of the fridge in my kitchen) and asking her to share with me her favourite Gen Z words and phrases.

'Rizz' (meaning charisma) and 'to slay' (meaning to perform well) I already knew, but what about 'the math is mathing'? That's how you describe something that's incorrect and doesn't add up.

At the Olympics, by the way, I met a lady from Bhutan.

She told me that Bhutan is the only country in the world where women are allowed to have more than one husband.

Can that be true? Since I heard it, I haven't been able to think of much else.

In fact, as the latest lingo has it, it's a fascinating fact that now 'lives rent-free in my head'.

Gyles Brandreth is author of The 7 Secrets of Happiness

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I sit and watch TV, as tears go by

Our Olympic champions stirred finer emotions than rioting thugs

MATTHEW NORMAN

As one of Earth's top-ranked hypochondriacs, I found one of the best things about the recent Olympiad was its efficacy as a diagnostic tool.

Among the many ailments of which I live in fear is Sjögren's syndrome. This auto-immune disease has various effects, such as joint pain and fatigue, that could be confused with typical signs of ageing. But one symptom that couldn't is the inability – due to inflammation of the lachrymal glands – to cry.

Having spent a recent fortnight drenched in a Niagara of Olympic-inspired tears, I am reassured there.

Without a tally of exactly how often events in Paris had a hand in my reaching for the Kleenex, suffice it to report this: the frequency rendered the average 15-year-old boy a feckless dilettante.

But why? On what imaginable grounds would a sad little middle-aged man sob remorselessly for 17 days at the efforts of complete strangers playing games in which by and large he has no interest?

Had the paroxysms been reserved for the likes of Keely Hodgkinson gliding to 800m gold, it would be less embarrassing. To be moved to tears by a stellar global achievement might even be sited on the outskirts of normal.

To be driven to deranged weeping by a bronze in the women's park skateboarding is something else. Not that I've a thing against it. Along with boxing, running and javelin-throwing, it memorably featured in history's inaugural sports report, Homer's account of the funeral games for Patroclus.

'And then did Odysseus of the many wiles dry himself with vine leaves on emerging from the wine-dark sea, where he came a disappointing sixth in the butterfly – and took to his trusty skateboard, where after nailing the switch backside 360 he scored 93.26 to pip mighty Ajax to the gold.'

Who doesn't remember that, along with Achilles annihilating the world record for tent-sulking, from the penultimate book of the *Iliad*?

Yet, for all park skateboarding's ancient lustre, a third-place finish for Great Britain's Sky Brown, a charming Anglo-Japanese 16-year-old, shouldn't necessarily be the catalyst for uncontrollable crying, shaking and the contortion of the features into an impression of Nigel Farage's mad donkey face when he's braying hysterically at the wilfully unamusing.

That reaction had nothing to do with the sport, or its competitors. It was driven solely by the flag.

Patriotism, if that's the word, may or may not be the last refuge of the scoundrel, but it's unquestionably the first refuge of the emotionally inadequate.

So it was that, even while the Union flag was being sporadically hoisted in Paris, it was starring in a less wholesome way back in Blighty. I assume that by now, a couple of weeks after the time of writing, the Scapegoating Olympiad held across England and Northern Ireland has also concluded.

Unlike such fellow freedom fighters as members of the apartheid-era ANC, our Neo-Nazis seem too easily chastened by the prospect of prison time. They revere their sovereign, but not enough to relish a few years as his house guest in the Palace of Belmarsh. Unlike Sky Brown, they lack ultimate commitment to their sport.

But they do love their flag. They and their sofa-bound compadres append it to social media profiles with such inevitability that, on Twitter and elsewhere, it packs the visceral sucker punch of the swastika.

> Patriotism is the first refuge of the emotionally inadequate

This morning, the head of the Police Federation, last survivor from the golden age of the great trade-union baronies, was on the radio lauding the constabulary's success in dealing with these creatures. The British police, she declared with a lurch into fearsome originality, are the best in the world.

How does she know that? Has she spent these last decades forensically analysing the performance of the police forces of Iceland, St Lucia, Vanuatu, Singapore, Moldova, Suriname, Guinea-Bissau and all the other 190 UN-recognised sovereign states, and scientifically concluded that ours is better than the bleeding lot of them?

In some areas of police work, to be fair, she may be right. When it comes to Activating Sirens To Get To KFC In The Nick Of Time Before It Closes, not to mention Doling Out Crime Reference Numbers For Insurance Claims After Burglaries It Has Not The Vaguest Intention Of Investigating, they may well stand atop the podium.

But to call anything the 'the best in the world' solely because it is British, when it hasn't been tested against the rest as Sky and Keely have, is another version of nationalism posing as patriotism – the same force that had some of us weeping at the world's worst anthem because a man whose name we would forget within the hour won a shooting event we wouldn't watch if it was held in the garden; and had others taking to the streets to terrorise the already tragedy-stricken holed up in Holiday Inns.

Perverted love of country is a disorder that presents with various symptoms, some absurd and others pernicious. On balance, being all cried out, I think I'd rather have Sjögren's.

OLDEN LIFE

WHAT WERE proverbs?

Like most children of my generation, I was brought up learning proverbs – not the Biblical ones, but the 'More haste, less speed' kind.

At school, we ploughed through countless exercises which required us to fill in the gaps, eg, 'A rolling ____ gathers no ____' or 'Waste ____ , want ____.'

We had to make equivalences. Did 'Look before you leap' mean the same as 'Don't count your chickens before they're hatched' or 'Don't cross the bridge before you come to it'? And was its opposite 'He who hesitates is lost' or 'Strike while the iron is hot'?

I wonder now whether the formal inculcation of these precepts was moral pedagogy. Or an attempt to instil memorable phrases which, incidentally, encapsulated ancient lore. Was the intention to improve our characters or to widen our vocabulary? Perhaps both.

Today's national curriculum assigns little importance to proverbs and to the improving lessons they enshrine. Few children today learn that 'A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.'

There is common sense in 'Many hands make light work.' Still, I recall experiencing, as a seven-year-old concerned to do her best, some confusion when I was also expected to internalise 'Too many cooks spoil the broth.'

And the confusion was not always one of principle. 'A stitch in time saves nine' – nine what? I wondered for years.

Those who thought up these sayings seemed to have it in for felines in particular. 'Curiosity killed the cat' – and there's apparently more than one way to skin the poor beast once you've let it out of the bag.

'Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater', was, for a child with a baby sister, decidedly alarming. Equally perplexing was 'Blood is thicker than water' – especially when applied to sticking up for my sister in the playground.

As familiar to us as multiplication tables and the ABC song, did they have a lasting impact on our behaviour?

Looking back now at these pieces of wisdom, I am struck by how punitive many of them are.

'People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.'

'The road to hell is paved with good intentions.'

'Fine words butter no parsnips.'

'As you sow, so shall you reap.'

Some also had a brutally vivid visual quality.

'You made your bed; now you must lie in it' brought to mind bad women who had made their bed to share it with men who were not their husbands. It served as a terrible warning of sleeplessness resulting from shamelessness.

'Marry in haste; repent at leisure' conjured a reckless, romantic flit to Gretna Green, followed by a lifetime of remorse, poverty and a lack of respectable friends.

As an urban child, I liked the idea of not putting all my eggs in one basket or the cart before the horse. And the metaphors did, I am sure, make the lessons stick.

Still, the evident falseness of some of these precepts – 'Every cloud has a silver lining' and 'Practice makes perfect' (oh, those piano scales!) – did not encourage faith in the little sayings.

The formal inculcation of proverbs has disappeared. Still, don't cry over spilt milk.

Susan Hamlyn

MODERN LIFE

WHAT IS Temu?

Temu is an online shop, operated by the Chinese e-commerce giant PDD Holdings and headquartered in Ireland.

It features prices so implausibly low, and adverts so accurately targeted, that you can't help wondering if witchcraft is involved. 'Shop Like a Billionaire' is the tagline.

To the best of my knowledge, billionaires do not tend to order knock-off Crocs of mysterious provenance after being lured with a free £80 voucher on Instagram.

And yet it's hard to argue with those prices. There's a heptagonal purple box for storing your weekly pills for 28p. A stainless-steel tongue-scraper for 58p.

An erotic fishnet, open-crotch bodystocking? 99p. The reviews of the bodystocking are great too: 'Perfect, sexy, partner loved this,' writes Scott Grant, UK. Because nothing says 'I value and respect you' like 'It was only 99p'!

How does Temu offer such a priceless consumer experience? According to Temu, it works directly with 'tens of thousands' of manufacturers, enabling it to offer goods to consumers at wholesale prices. Products are shipped directly from the factories, thereby bypassing costly import tariffs. So we can amend that to *Chinese* wholesale prices.

All of this ought to raise serious concerns about the working conditions of the people making this crap.

Labour MP Alice Kearns believes that Temu is exploiting slave labour. 'When you look into where Temu gets its goods from and where in China it is producing them, you can see that these are areas where we know that there is the use of forced Uyghur slave labour,' she told the BBC last year. Temu has stated that it 'compl[ies] with all regulatory standards and compliance requirements'.

My favourite theory is that Temu is revenge for the mid-19th-century Opium Wars. Under the terms of defeat, China was forced to cede control of its ports to the British, who promptly flooded the country with opiates, creating millions of drug addicts to exploit. The Chinese have never forgotten this national humiliation.

But have you ever noticed how we in the West are now helplessly, hopelessly, humiliatingly addicted to cheap consumer goods flooding in from Chinese factories?

You think you're immune. But then you see a blanket that looks like a tortilla wrap which would make a hilarious gift for a grandchild. It's only £6.31 and the shipping is free.

Richard Godwin

WE'VE GOT TIME FOR ANYTHING THAT'S OLD AND INTERESTING

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Charlotte Metcalf salutes Babar's creator and his son Laurent, who has just died

King of the Elephants

The stories of Babar are embedded in many an oldie's childhood memory.

But it wasn't until Laurent de Brunhoff died this March, aged 98 (his father, Jean, the Babar creator, died from TB in 1937, aged only 37), that I realised how little I knew about Babar's creators.

At the time, my youngest daughter and I were downsizing from a three-storey house to a two-bedroom flat. I'd had to rid myself of most of my books – a painful process which I've written about in these pages.

I'd sold some paintings and distributed the rest amongst friends.

Yet one artwork, a poster of Babar, survived the savage cull, along with a couple Babar books and a cuddly Babar, from whom my daughter (now 20) had never been parted.

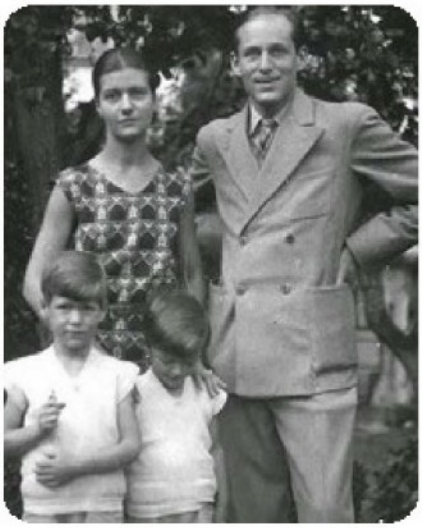
Her Babar wears his green suit and felt crown and has travelled with her all over the world, stuffed into already bulging suitcases for holidays and providing a consoling presence in her spartan university digs.

During a conversation in the *Oldie* office, our sub-editor, Penny Phillips, mentioned that she and her husband have a poster above their bed depicting Babar and Celeste having breakfast in bed. It then transpired that Babar also holds a cherished place in the hearts of both our publisher and our editor.

On discovering this, I hurried home and went to my daughter's bedroom to reread the books. There was her Babar propped up against the pillows beneath her Babar poster, loyal, dignified and also a little ludicrous, making him achingly huggable. He has been squeezed and wept into during countless bouts of homesickness, anxiety and teenage heartbreak. No other teddy bear or cuddly toy has stood the test of time.

So who was his creator?

Babar is arguably the invention of Laurent's mother, Cécile de Brunhoff (1903-2003), a concert pianist. Laurent was five and his brother, Mathieu, four when Cécile began making up bedtime stories for them about a little elephant.



The de Brunhoffs: Cécile, Jean, Laurent and Mathieu, c 1930

Allegedly, Mathieu was sick and the stories were designed to cheer him up. The place was Paris, the date 1931.

So enchanted were the little boys that they asked their artist father, Jean de Brunhoff, to illustrate them. Later that year, a family-owned publisher, Le Jardin des Modes, published *The Story of Babar*.

Jean de Brunhoff wrote only five more Babar books (six, if you count *Babar's ABC*) before his premature death. He hadn't written the last two (posthumously published) works, *Babar and His Children*(1938) and *Babar and Father Christmas* (1940) as books at all, but as black-and-white drawings for the British newspaper the *Daily Sketch*. Jean's brother, Michel, was Editor of *Vogue Paris* and arranged for them to be coloured and published.

Laurent was 13 by then and helped with the colouring.

Laurent went on to study at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière and followed in his father's artistic footsteps. After the war, he began working on his own Babar books, in strict imitation of his father's style.

His first Babar book, *Babar's Cousin, That Rascal Arthur*, was published in 1946 when Laurent was 21. Nearly 50 more followed. Babar became a global cultural phenomenon and one of the world's most recognised children's characters. Today, there are over 30,000 Babar publications in 17 languages. Laurent's *Babar's Yoga for Elephants* alone has sold more than 100,000 copies in America. Total Babar book sales are eight million.

Laura Bush recommended reading Babar stories when she set up her national reading initiative.There are 78 episodes of a TV series, broadcast in 30 languages in over 150 countries, making *Babar* one of the largest distributed animation shows in history. Yet none of the later books by the son has the resonance of those first six by the father.

Right near the beginning of *The Story of Babar,* Babar's mother is shot and

killed by a hunter, forcing young Babar to flee to the city (which looks very much like Paris).

There he is befriended by the kind Old Lady who clothes, houses and educates him.

When his two younger cousins, Arthur and Celeste, naughtily find their way to the city, he returns to the jungle with them, becoming engaged to Celeste on the way.

Meanwhile, the King of the Elephants eats a poisonous mushroom which kills him, leaving the way for Babar to be crowned King, on the basis that he has 'come from the city and learnt a great deal from men'.

In *The Travels of Babar* (1934), Celeste and Babar set off on honeymoon in a hot-air balloon which crashes, marooning them on an island where Celeste is tied up and nearly eaten by cannibals. They are rescued by a whale and later an ocean liner, on which they're handed over to a circus-owner and forced to join a circus. They escape and find the Old Lady's house, and she joins them in the jungle.

In later books, a beautiful city, Celesteville, is built. Celeste gives birth to triplets, Flora, Pom and Alexander, while life continues to be full of risk. The elephants go to war with the rhinoceroses and their tyrannical leader Lord Retaxes. The Old Lady is bitten by a snake, Flora nearly chokes to death on her rattle, Pom flies over a cliff from runaway pram and Alexander is almost gobbled up by a crocodile.

In today's world, where we mollycoddle and protect our children more than ever, while exposing them to the horrors of the internet, some parents find Babar's story too traumatic for small children, particularly with his mother being shot so early on. Some book reviews practically carry safety warnings.

At the same time, the woke police argue – as they did with Tintin – that the authors are making a case for colonialism. Look at the educator Herbert Kohl's essay *Should We Burn Babar?* or Ariel Dorfman's *The Empire's Old Clothes*.

In 2012, *The Travels of Babar* was removed from the shelves of a Sussex library in response to complaints about African stereotypes. There is no doubt that King Babar rules autonomously, albeit benevolently. Yet to view Babar through an anti-colonial lens is to miss the reasons we feel affection for his world.

The combined genius of the de Brunhoffs was understanding how we all yearn for a sense of order, stability and safety to counteract life's turbulence. How perfect Celesteville looks, like an idealised version of Paris, with its rows of neat little houses and beautiful parks. Babar's Kingdom is ultimately a utopia.

What we remember is not so much the dangers and tragedies Babar and his family face, but the kind strangers (human or otherwise) who rescue them and the multiple, resourceful ways Babar and those close to him overcome near-disaster.

Celesteville looks perfect. Babar's kingdom is ultimately a utopia

Besides, as children, we love the idea of wild animals with human qualities or those that can interact with us. Witness the enduring popularity of *Ant and Bee*, Hugh Lofting's *Doctor Dolittle* and Judith Kerr's *The Tiger Who Came to Tea*.

Babar represents a father figure – wise, fair, capable, educated, generous, gentle and kind. But it's his playfulness, occasional hot-headedness and fretfulness that add a complex dimension to an otherwise unrealistic, unattainable virtuous paradigm. He can even look pompous in his spats and waistcoat. It's precisely these flaws that render him vulnerable, human and utterly lovable.

It's extraordinary how few words Jean de Brunhoff used to create Babar.

His image continues to provoke wistful, affectionate smiles everywhere – and a nostalgic yearning for a return to childhood.

***Above: Babar's Travels* (1932). *Right: The Story of Babar* (1931)**

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My role play in *A Bridge Too Far*

On the 80th anniversary of the Battle of Arnhem, *Edward Fox* recalls his briefing from Sir Brian Horrocks – the officer he played in the film

In 1976, the producer Joe Levine and director Dickie Attenborough had to cast Lt General Brian Horrocks, the heroic commander of XXX Corps at Arnhem for *A Bridge Too Far*.

Joe was American and rough; he probably wanted an American actor. That really was going a bridge too far. He knew as much about a Sandhurst-trained British officer as I do about playing the ukulele.

And so they sought Horrocks's opinion. They sent him down a list of actors: five American and one British – and that was me.

Brian didn't know any of them. So he asked his Somerset farmer friends – who also didn't. But then one of them came back and said, 'You play him yourself, General. It will be like *Dad's Army*.'

Another said, 'My wife Margaret says that fellow Fox is all right.'

So Horrocks said, 'Good. Well, I'll tell them it's Fox, then.'

I knew of Horrocks because I had watched his wonderful TV series *Men in Battle*, in the '60s. He met me at Castle Cary station. I felt eyes regarding me keenly from beneath his cloth cap – a soldier's scrutiny.

We got back to his house, and he said, 'Do you want me to talk, or do you want to ask me questions?'

And I said, 'I would like you to talk.'

'Very well,' he said. 'I will talk to you about the war in Arnhem before lunch; then we will have lunch, and then we will come back in here and I will talk to you some more about Arnhem.'

And we became friends. It was tremendously lucky for me.

He was very modest. Brian later wrote, 'If we were slow, then the fault was mine because I was the commander.'

Colonel Waddy, who was also at Arnhem and a consultant on the film, told me emphatically, 'Horrocks couldn't get there.'

I am certainly not militarily knowledgeable but, to my thinking, it was the unknown strength of the gathered German forces collected in the Arnhem area and crucially those around the bridges of Eindhoven and Nijmegen that, from the start of XXX Corps's advance, was the unalterably decisive factor.

Above: **Lieutenant General Sir Brian Horrocks, 1944.** ***Inset:*** **Edward Fox as Horrocks in a *A Bridge Too Far* (1977)**

The intent of Market Garden was daring, gallant and magnificent in courage. It was to get into Germany by the end of 1944. Colonel Frost's lightly armed battalion of 743 men was to take and hold Arnhem bridge for no more than four days. General Horrocks was to reach and relieve Frost within the time frame. Both parts of the plan had to go right; neither did.

They had no real knowledge of the Panzer divisions. They had to rely on reports from Dutch resistance but, Brian told me, 'We couldn't really be certain that we could trust the reports.' He then said, 'We could in fact have trusted them more than we did.'

> The film was not nearly pro-British enough

My briefing speech in the film about punching a hole in the German line and seeing XXX Corps as the cavalry was all Brian. His audience were informally dressed in corduroy trousers as if they were going to lunch – not in uniform like the Dutch crowd extras.

There is a wonderful line: 'Gentlemen, I won't say this is the easiest party I have attended, but I still wouldn't miss it for the world.'

Of course, he knew all those officers. They were personal friends.

Undoubtedly, the film was pro-American and not nearly pro-British enough. The producers were keen to paint the British staff officers as effete and unserious, which none of them was.

Brian went to see it in the local flea-pit at Shepton Mallet with his wife quite a while after it was out. I rang him and asked, 'What do you think?'

And his answer was 'I didn't have any idea what was going on – and I was there!'

His ADC, Rupert Nevill, told me that his policy was to go to the front lines at the beginning of the day and work his way back. In the jeep, he would say, 'You get in the back seat, Rupert. You are younger than me. I'll drive.'

The driver would always be the more likely target. So if a shot had been fired at them, Horrocks would have got it – not the younger man.

Some things in life remain with you, and some things quite necessarily leave. The important things stay.

It is always people, too. It is all about people.

Market Garden's silver lining

Jan Karpiński salutes his father's death-defying contribution to a crucial operation

Sometimes, good people have to join together and risk their lives to stop aggression and gangsterism. Here is a small example from 80 years ago.

On the morning of 21st September 1944, 114 Douglas C-47 transport planes of the US Army Air Force took off from airfields in England with 1,543 Polish paratroopers on board.

Some of the planes had been nicknamed by their crews. My father, Captain Stanisław Karpiński, was on board a plane called *The Wild Hare* – echoing the title of the first Bugs Bunny film, released by Warner Brothers in 1940.

Captain Stanisław Karpiński (1900-69)

The Poles were on their way to the Battle of Arnhem, part of Operation Market Garden – an ambitious Allied Second World War offensive. The plan was for a spearhead of British tanks to race across 100 miles of German-occupied Holland, over a carpet of American, British and Polish airborne troops – who were, in particular, to capture three great bridges at Grave, Nijmegen and, lastly, Arnhem.

My father never talked much about what happened, but it affected him deeply. He lost friends and comrades, he saw Operation Market Garden as a disaster and he worried about the fate of *The Wild Hare* and her crew.

Father died in 1969. I wish I could have told him what I now know: that Market Garden was not a disaster and that *The Wild Hare* got safely back to England.

Certainly, the British airborne troops tasked with capturing Arnhem bridge did not succeed, despite heavy casualties – hence the title of Cornelius Ryan's bestselling 1974 book, *A Bridge Too Far*, and the 1977 epic film of the same name directed by Richard Attenborough.

The 'bridge too far' trope has been so compelling that subsequent writers have found it difficult to look behind it or beyond it. They have put the Battle of Arnhem up there with the Charge of the Light Brigade and the first day of the Somme as a great British military omnishambles.

But take a step back. After the war, Kurt Student, a German general, said Market Garden had 'proved to be a great success. At one stroke, it brought the British 2nd Army into the possession of vital bridges and vital territory. The conquest of the Nijmegen area meant the creation of a good jumping board for the offensive that contributed to the end of the war.'

General Student could speak with authority. He had commanded the first – and arguably the most successful – strategic airborne assault ever, the capture of Crete in 1941. The army he commanded in 1944 was cut in two by Operation Market Garden.

Seen in its proper context, Market Garden was a necessary and useful step in the long, costly and miserable

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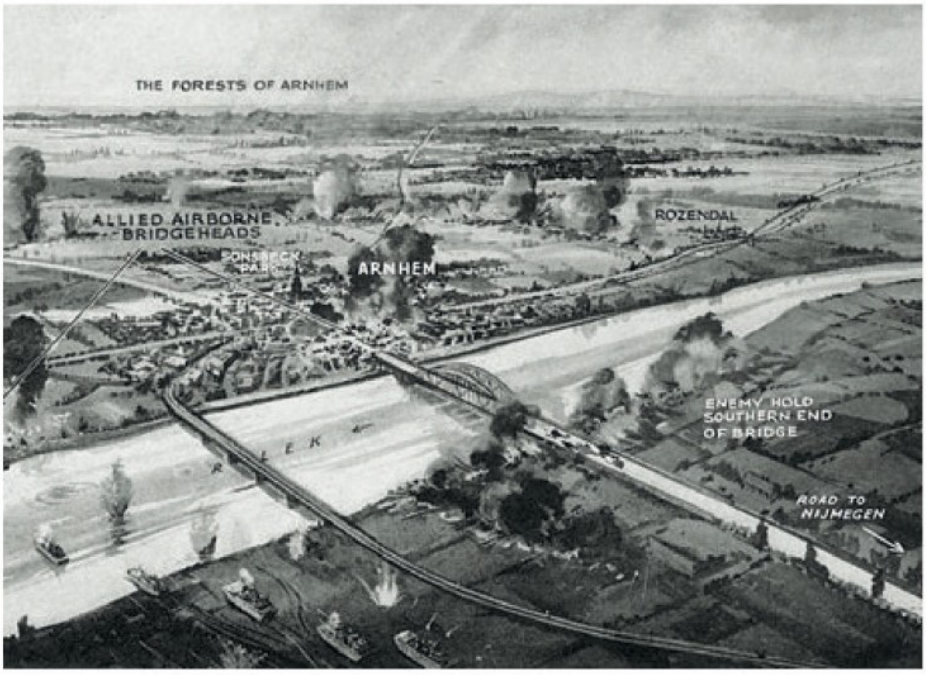
process by which the Nazis were prised out of power.

So what of *The Wild Hare*? Father left behind a short written account.

He recalled that *The Wild Hare* got lost and was badly hit by German anti-aircraft fire. One engine was knocked out. There were large holes in the wings, leaking fuel so the plane was in danger of catching fire at any moment. At some point, the Poles parachuted out.

On landing, Father 'looked at the sky and saw, with the corner of my eye, how our wounded *Wild Hare* unsteadily and, with a visible effort, disappeared behind a knoll grown with forest; perhaps seeking its last burrow? I never got to know *The Wild Hare*'s fate – the official message was "missing in action".'

My father certainly tried to establish what had happened to *The Wild Hare* but



Left: **Allies fire a Vickers machine-gun, Battle of Arnhem, September 1944.** ***Above:*** **the Arnhem bridge**

– whether through the fog of war or otherwise – never found out. Why did this trouble him?

Some years ago, we discovered that *The Wild Hare*'s co-pilot, 2nd Lieutenant Bud Hertig, had also left an account of the flight. It was in the form of a talk given in 2002 to the 8th Air Force Historical Society of Minneapolis, which had been filmed and posted on YouTube.

According to Hertig, after *The Wild Hare* had been hit, the pilot set course back to England but was told by a Polish officer, as Hertig put it, 'You got to go back where we got shot because we want to drop into that territory.'

These were not my father's words, but it would have been his decision. He was the senior officer. It was the airborne equivalent of marching to the sound of the guns.

It was the right thing to do, but would have reduced the chances of the crew's returning safely. Father must have worried that he had sent four young men to their deaths.

Thanks to Hertig, we know that *The Wild Hare* got back to England and landed at an airfield near Gravesend, overshooting the runway and ploughing through a field of cabbages.

He added, 'We pilots used to say that any landing you could walk away from is a good landing.'

I am proud that, 80 years ago, my father went to Holland to fight Nazism. And I'm glad that *The Wild Hare* found cabbages, not a last burrow.

Desperately seeking Robbie

Mark McCrum was a ghostwriter for the elusive Robbie Williams

In 2001, Robbie Williams, at the very height of his fame, wanted a break.

His managers struck a deal with him. If he would agree to a book, they said, he could have a year off.

I was signed up to write it, but I didn't meet the man himself until I was at Heathrow. Suddenly there he was, large as life. Despite my best intentions, I found I was weirdly starstruck, barely able to speak.

'Let's get together for supper in Stockholm,' he said kindly, before retreating into his protective entourage.

That supper never happened. No sooner had we checked into Stockholm's gorgeous Grand Hotel than I got a call from Rob's diminutive minder, Josie. Rob had crashed out. Perhaps we could do lunch tomorrow.

But when the time came, Josie had just rung Rob and his reply had been 'Eugughgh.' After the gig that evening, at a party in Stockholm's ritzy Café Opera, his bandleader and collaborator Guy Chambers put me at my ease with two pieces of advice. 'Don't call him Robbie, and don't try to be his friend.'

A pattern was set. I would be near my subject and star, watching him joke with his security guys and band and of course his huge audiences, but actual one-to-one interviews were rare.

'D'you know what?' he said, 20 minutes after I finally sat down with him alone before the gig in Copenhagen. 'Could we do this tomorrow?'

It was a tricky time for him – I knew that. After years of famous drink and drug benders, Rob had now got clean, encouraged by his manager David Enthoven, a legendary character who had worked with Roxy Music, King Crimson and T Rex. It was said that T Rex was called that only because David couldn't spell Tyrannosaurus.

David had fought back from his own drink and drugs hell and was on a mission to reform Rob. But it meant that when the band went out, post-gig, to party in the VIP suites of swanky clubs, Rob stayed in his hotel room, drinking Evian and playing parlour games and Uno, a children's game he loved to win.

My agent rang daily with news. Publishers were fighting over the book and the advance was three ... four ... five hundred thousand (of which I was getting a quarter). I was in a recording studio in Hamburg, watching Rob and Guy compose a song, when David went up to Rob and whispered in his ear the final number.

'Would you like to be my best friend?' Rob joked, getting off his stool and giving me a very public hug. 'You're being paid more than I am, mate.'

It was £800,000. But I still wasn't getting the interviews I needed. I was doing my best, going along with whatever I was asked, including wearing a black T-shirt that read CRUMMY to match the one saying SCRUMMY that the book's photographer, Diana, had been made to wear (after David had declared she fitted that description).

One day, Diana was no longer there. I nervously approached the tour manager, Franksy, known to the crew as the Prince of Darkness, and asked where she'd gone.

'Back 'ome,' he growled.

'Er – why?'

'Too old and too posh.' Words that sent a chill up my spine.

Back in London, I stuck to Rob like a crazed leech. I flew to Paris with him on the private plane. He leafed through celebrity magazines and told me he had some ideas for the book's title, which he then shared with the band, to laughter.

Finally, a fortnight before my final deadline, I went, in desperation, to Roger Taylor's house in Chelsea, where Rob was staying. Josie had set up a meeting for 5pm, but – you know what? – Rob wasn't there. He was out buying a dog, Chris the drummer told me.

Finally, he appeared. With his security guard and a Rottweiler. The dog was called Mr Bojangles, Rob said, and wasn't that amazing, because it was the title of one of his favourite songs ever. 'What are you doing here, Mark?'

'I was hoping to interview you. For the book.'

'I'm hungry. Anybody fancy a meal?'

Over burgers in his favourite café, we played yet another game, 'Best and worst moments of the day'. I told him my worst was waking up. 'Realising this book will never get written,' I was about to add – but he stopped me.

'D'you get depressed in the morning?' he asked, with serious eyes.

I nodded, dutifully.

'So do I.'

Something had clicked. Back at Roger's, he took me down into the garden and I switched on the tape. After an hour and a half, I had – at last – what I needed.

'Don't worry about that depression thing,' he said, giving me a hug on the doorstep. 'It'll pass.'

When the book, *Somebody Someday*, went to number 1 and stayed there for 16 weeks, the *Independent* asked Robbie what he thought of his magnum opus.

'I haven't read it,' he said. 'It's full of words.'

Robbie on the day he signed his £80m record contract, 2002

DAVE HOGAN / GETTY

Mark McCrum's Murder on Tour *(Bloodhound), a whodunnit set on a rock-and-roll tour, is out now*

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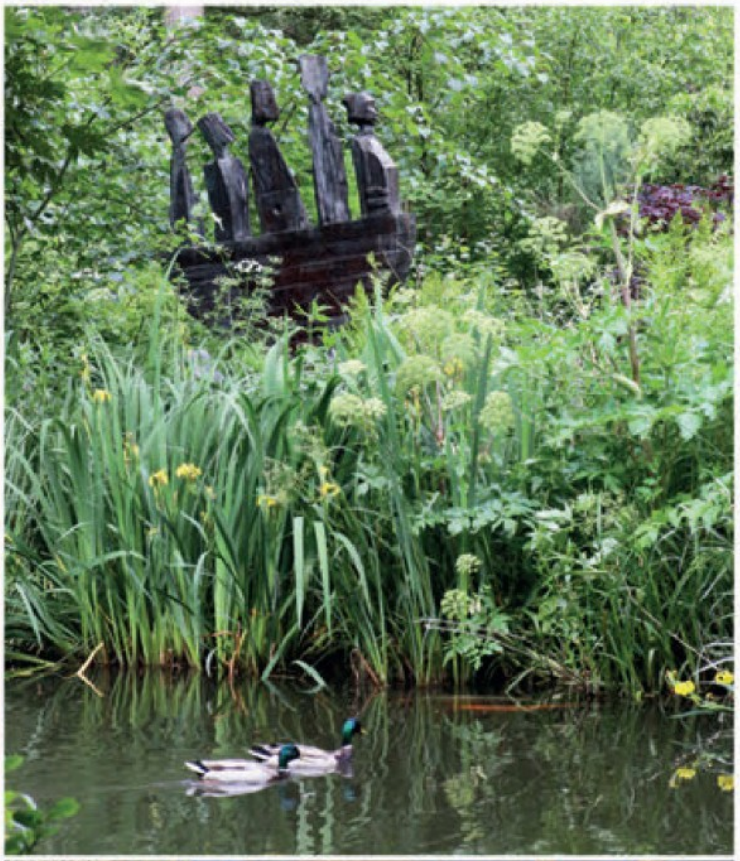

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Harry Mount visits Britain's first illustration centre. Drawings by *Quentin Blake*, who founded and funded it

Welcome to the House of Fun

At last, Britain is to have a gallery devoted to illustration!

Named after Quentin Blake – and generously endowed by him – the gallery will open in 2026. It will be housed in forgotten Georgian and Victorian industrial buildings in a lost corner of Islington.

For 250 years, from the days of Gillray, Rowlandson and Cruikshank till now, we've had some of the greatest illustrators and cartoonists. And yet we've always treated them as the second-rate cousins of so-called 'fine artists'.

When Ronald Searle (1920-2011) – the finest British cartoonist of the last century, creator of the immortal Molesworth and the St Trinian's girls – died, he left his complete works to the Wilhelm Busch Museum in Hanover.

There was no equivalent British place to bequeath his archive to. There is now.

Searle told me, in an interview to mark his 90th birthday, 'I've always felt that I was pigeonholed as the St Trinian's chap. In among all this ghastly business of being 90, suddenly this generosity – from fellow cartoonists being so gracious with their praise – is absolutely lovely.

It's the first time in my life that I'm getting a reaction.

'I've always felt before that my work just dropped down a well, that I was working in a vacuum.'

All that will change with the completion of the Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration.

The £11.5m cost of the building has been partly met by Sir Quentin, 91. There is also a £3.75m grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund to restore the derelict buildings. The organisation is raising the last £1m of the costs through a public appeal. The site will be open to the public, with new galleries, a café, gardens and places for school visits and practising illustrators.

Blake's archive of more than 40,000 works, created over seven decades – including his hallowed Roald Dahl illustrations – will be housed there.

Blake has long yearned for a permanent national centre for illustration. 'New River Head will be the most extraordinary home for the art of illustration,' says Sir Quentin. 'The building could not be more appropriate if we'd designed it specially, and its setting is especially charming and sympathetic.

‘One day, it will show some of my archive of several thousand original drawings but, much more importantly, it will be an international centre for the display, discussion and celebration of the extraordinary wealth of illustration.

‘We’re thrilled and thankful to have the National Lottery Heritage Fund’s support behind us.’

In 2002, Blake set up the UK’s only charity for illustration. From 2014 to 2020, it was housed in a temporary exhibition centre – the House of Illustration, in King’s Cross. The new development will be Britain’s first permanent illustration centre.

And what a site it will occupy – in the enchanting old buildings of the New River Head in Islington. I’ve biked past its entrance for most of my 52 years but I’ve never seen the buildings before, cut off by gates and walls from the surrounding metropolis for centuries.

The centre will be housed in an 18th-century windmill (the earliest surviving one in London, *pictured below*) and a Georgian/Victorian pumping house (*left and above right*) and its old coal sheds. They are being adapted by Tim Ronalds Architects, a local practice which also converted Wilton’s Music Hall, Ironmonger Row Baths and Hackney Empire.

The buildings were used to pump water from the New River – a remarkable 17th-century madcap venture which blossomed into a golden bonanza.

As London boomed during the 17th century, there were frantic worries about how to get water to the city.

Since the 13th century, conduits had carried water from rural springs to central London. Conduits from Hackney, Hampstead and Muswell Hill were built by the City Corporation after a 1543 Act.

Left: **Quentin Blake’s drawing of his Centre for Illustration (*also above right*)**
Below: **1740 London view, with Upper Pond and New River Head windmill, *centre***

When a plague killed 30,000 Londoners in 1604, James I granted to Captain Edmund Colthurst, a Bath army officer, a charter to bring ‘sweet’ spring water from Hertfordshire in a specially-cut channel. The New River was born.

Sir Hugh Myddelton, a London goldsmith and merchant, took over the scheme in 1609, carving a channel ten feet wide and four feet deep in a canal that fell by a gradual and constant five inches over every mile.

Nearly 40 miles of meandering canal covered the distance of just over 20 miles, as the crow flies, from Hertfordshire to Islington.

In 1611, after opposition from landowners worried about flooding, James I took on half the costs of the project in return for half the profits – which turned out to be enormous.

By 1700, the New River was one of the three richest companies in London, alongside the Bank of England and the East India Company.

On Michaelmas Day 1613, Myddelton hosted a ceremony to mark the New River’s completion: ‘The flood-gates flew open, the streame ranne gallantly into the cisterne, drummes and trumpets sounding in a triumphall manner.’

Soon after, water was gushing along wooden pipes (later replaced by lead ones) in the north and west of the City of London.

New River Head – where Myddelton led the water to – lay 30 feet below the crest of Islington Hill. The water was later pumped up to the Upper Pond (still there but covered and surrounded by Claremont Square) on the hilltop – so that gravity could take it down to the City of London.

That’s where the 1709 windmill – which will be part of the Illustration Centre – came in. It powered the water-pumping until the addition of a much more powerful 1768 engine house.

> ‘An extraordinary home for the art of illustration’ Quentin Blake

That was enlarged through the late-18th and 19th centuries, with the coal stores and boiler houses added in the 1840s – all part of the new Illustration Centre.

In the engine house, you can still see the retro-chic postwar panels of switches – like something out of *Moonraker* – that controlled the water supply until as late as 1954.

Astonishingly, the site still plays a big part in providing London’s water. Buried beneath it, there is a small pumping station and deep access shaft, part of the London Ring Main, finished in 1994. Thames Water ran its operations at New River Head until 1987.

The old central offices and water-testing laboratory at New River Head were turned into flats in the early 2000s. That left untouched a sleeping beauty – the pump buildings, now awakening to a new artistic life.

To help with the £1m appeal for the Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration, visit qbcentre.org.uk

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By Gary Quick, Director of Financial Planning, Charles Stanley Exeter

Many may think they don't need to worry about Inheritance Tax (IHT) because it doesn't affect the majority of estates, but with significant growth of property and other financial assets over the last 40 years, it has started to impact more families.

History of inheritance tax in the UK

The roots of IHT can be traced all the way back to 1694 when a "Probate Duty" was introduced on all estates valued at more than £20. This duty was fixed at a rate of 5 shillings. The concept of IHT or Estate Duty, as it's also been called in the past, has evolved over time to tighten up loopholes and reflect the ever more complex financial landscape. Major reforms were made in the seventies and eighties by both Labour and Conservative Chancellors. All went quiet on the IHT front until 2007 when the fixed exemption allowance on the first £325,000 of an individual's estate was introduced, along with the ability for married couples to inherit their partner's exemption. Then in April 2017 an additional allowance was introduced for homeowners which currently adds a further £175,000 for each partner. This potentially gives married/civil partner couples a total of £1 million exemption from IHT.

However, the homeowner exemption tapers away for estates with a value greater than £2 million. For every £2 of value above £2 million, the additional allowance is reduced by £1, meaning an estate of £2.35 million would see the additional exemption lost completely.

How to plan wealth transfer

Find out your inheritance tax liability: The starting point is to establish the size of the liability both now and projected forward to the date of your expected longevity. A financial planner using financial forecasting software can establish your position now, and at the point where IHT is most likely to be paid, based on measured assumptions and life expectancy estimates.

Once we know the potential size of the challenge, we can begin to consider the actions we could take to mitigate the liability. This could involve several planning strategies such as gifting assets, setting up trusts or investing in assets that benefit from a form of IHT exemption known as Business Relief – or a combination of more than one method.

Before deciding what options are suitable for your circumstances your financial planner will take time to understand your wider needs and objectives for your financial assets. For example, large financial commitments that are planned, income requirements, and ensuring a provision for potentially expensive care fees in later life. Once the bigger picture is known, the detail can then be considered, and this will involve a number of factors depending on individual circumstances, the balance between access and control of assets, the need to generate income, and family dynamics.

Use gifts and trusts: You could simply make outright gifts during your lifetime. There are a range of relatively modest gifts that are immediately treated as outside of your estate. Everyone can gift £3,000 per tax year in this way, and there are other exemptions such as gifts for weddings and small gifts of below £250, which can be made without limit, providing they are to different people and those recipients haven't benefitted from any other gifts from you in the same tax year.

Making regular gifts out of excess income is also allowable and results in the gift being immediately outside of your estate for IHT purposes. However, it is important to keep good records of these gifts and ensure that you can demonstrate the income is genuinely surplus to your requirements.

Certain types of trusts can result in the capital being removed not only potentially from your estate for IHT purposes, but also from your control. This is why it is crucial to account for all eventualities before determining whether this course of action could be taken without any future detriment to your lifestyle.

To successfully remove capital from the IHT net, you may have to survive a period of up to seven years beyond the inception of your plan. You should also consider the impact of gifting larger amounts in terms of what may happen if a recipient were to go through a divorce and how the gifted asset may be distributed in this event.

Explore more flexible options: There are other methods of achieving IHT relief without losing control of your assets, such as placing funds in a Gift and Loan Trust. You can still access the original capital sum and it is still part of your estate for IHT but any growth or income received by the investments is immediately excluded from your estate for IHT purposes.

There are other methods that achieve relief in a shorter time frame. An example of this is investing in assets that qualify for Business Relief. Not only do you retain ownership of the assets, but IHT exemption can be achieved in just two years rather than seven. However, these assets are considered higher risk and you would need to be comfortable that you could tolerate the associated short- term losses. This would be something to discuss in detail with your financial planner prior to making any decisions.

In summary, IHT is a tax that although not widely publicised, is growing and affecting many more families. The area is complex and careful planning is required to ensure all options are considered.

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Happy 70th, Wimpy!

The first British Wimpy Bar opened in 1954, 20 years before the first McDonald's. *Wynn Wheldon* salutes the home of the plastic tomato

I never had anything on my Wimpy hamburger, other than the onions. The fried onions were a must. McDonald's never had fried onions.

Seventy years ago, the first Wimpy Bar opened inside the Lyons' Corner House at Oxford Circus. That was long before McDonald's first appearance in Woolwich, 20 years later, in October 1974 – 50 years ago.

Brian Salmon, one of the younger members of the Salmon and Gluckstein family who ran Lyons, was managing Lyons' Corner Houses.

He and his brother, Neil, on a trip to Chicago came across one of 17 Wimpy restaurants serving hamburgers, quickly, across the United States. They contacted the owner of Wimpy, Edward Vale Gold, who turned out to be interested in an investment.

It took some months to convince the elders of Lyons' board that it was worth at least an experiment with this new way of eating. They had been reluctant to get involved in the lowly world of this new 'fast food', but the younger members saw huge potential. Meat-rationing ended in July that year. Lyons had their own bakers and ice-cream makers (ice-cream milkshakes and 'fries' were also offered at Gold's restaurants). In America, Wimpy's rivals were beginning to generate serious custom.

The first trial grill was put into the Ideal Home Exhibition at Olympia. An astonishing 10,000 hamburgers were sold in the first week. Next came Wimbledon, and then the Chelsea Flower Show. Not common-or-garden events.

So successful were these trials that, at the end of the 1954 season, the first permanent Wimpy was installed at Oxford Circus. The following year, a Wimpy outlet was opened in the Coventry Street Corner House. It was soon selling 35,000 hamburgers a week. Even in the USA, such numbers were unmatched.

Tempted by a Wimpy burger: Dudley Moore and Peter Cook, *Bedazzled* (1966)

The Americanness of hamburgers was a part of their appeal. At the end of *How To Marry a Millionaire* (1954), the humble hamburger represents a more authentic way of life for Marilyn Monroe, Lauren Bacall and Betty Grable as they tuck into burgers. You can't get much more glamorous than those three.

In Britain, a decade later, Peter Cook as the Devil tempts lovelorn Wimpy cook Dudley Moore in *Bedazzled* (1966).

The name Wimpy was itself derived from the movies. The cartoon series *Popeye the Sailor* featured a gluttonous character named J Wellington Wimpy, whose catchphrase was 'I'll gladly pay you Tuesday for a hamburger today.'

American visitors were snooty about British hamburgers. In 1970, the *New York Times* declared that 'Americans, desperate for a hamburger, have wound up at Wimpy's.'

Lyons did introduce its own invention, the Doozle Dog, a frankfurter curled to fit inside a Wimpy bun.

Will Self later described it as 'a frankfurter bent and crenulated so that it resembles a porky laurel wreath'. Initially, the desire was to call it a 'doozy', an American slang word meaning 'outstanding'.

But this was thought too common – so the *l* was inserted. The Doozle Dog soon became a Bender. A great loss to our native culinary vocabulary.

I know about Doozle Dogs because my uncle, Ken Clarke (no relation), who has just turned 97, was one of four company managers at Wimpy (he doubled as meat-buyer).

He remembers the first Wimpy franchise being sold to two Greek brothers in Weston-super-Mare. He remembers the horror and panic of two American gentlemen demanding – and being given – raw meat in their buns.

He recalls, too, that a Lyons baker, who developed that slightly sweet bun, was sent throughout the land to teach local bakers his mystical craft. He even remembers how it was decided not to buy into KFC. Lyons saw no future in fried chicken. Too awkward for fast food.

There was something indefinably British about Wimpy bars. They were not bars – they were restaurants. Was a Wimpy a snack or a meal? While you could take your hamburgers away, it was more usual to eat them at a table, with a knife and fork, and ketchup dispensed from a large, plastic tomato.

For the young, with two or three bob to spend, they were a first experience of eating out, with a comfortable casualness.

Although no longer a part of Lyons, and a much-diminished feature of our high streets, more than 60 Wimpy Bars are still dotted about the country. They are mostly at seaside resorts, such as Clacton, Felixstowe and Southsea. The last one in central London is in Shadwell.

Enjoy!

***Above: Cat stealing fish*, Greece, 1990. *Below:* John Craxton (1922-2009) painting *Two Cats*, 1955-57**

The cat's whiskers

Artist John Craxton told *Andrew Lambirth* how much he loved painting his pets

The writer and artist Oswell Blakeston once described cats as the A to Z of the spiritual life.

If they were not quite this for John Craxton, they were certainly an index of moods and states of mind, and a splendidly apposite vehicle for his visual and verbal wit.

Craxton loved cats and lived with them, on and off, for most of his life. The cat image came readily to mind and hand, whether he was planning a taverna scene in Crete, or doodling during a telephone conversation.

Cats permeate his art, weaving their way through his paintings, drawings and prints, bringing humour and mischief to his images, as they did to his daily existence.

Affectionate and faithless, they were like so many casual lovers, no better than they should be and gloriously on the make. In many ways, they are a

fitting leitmotif for his own happy-go-lucky life.

The idea for a book emerged as I got to know John in the 1990s, and noticed how many cats found their way into his paintings and drawings.

John's love of cats was so deeply ingrained that when I suggested putting together a volume dedicated to his depictions of them, he agreed immediately. This was unusual: perhaps out of modesty, or self-doubt, he tended to resist the idea of books about his art – but he welcomed the cat project.

***Clockwise from right: Cat and skull*, 2003; *Marmalade cat in the mirror*, 1994; *Cat*, 1958**

Speaking at John's memorial service, his old friend and collector of his work David Attenborough said, 'He had a robust sense of humour and an almost unforgivable taste for puns. He produced a series of linocuts for his Christmas card based on that favourite animal of his – the cat.

'One showed a cat sitting on a column with the caption "catàpillar". There were others – which I will leave to your imagination – captioned "catàstrophe", "catàpult" and, regrettably, "catstration".'

Attenborough recognised that cats for Craxton were a source of endless entertainment: his delight in their antics was both infectious and life-enhancing.

Craxton's Cats *(£14.99) by Andrew Lambirth is published by Thames & Hudson on 29th August*

Fear and loathing in Seattle

The American election has turned my neighbour against me

CHRISTOPHER SANDFORD

Joe Biden once told me he got into the 2020 presidential race because 'I want to make a difference.'

I was one of a crowd of people milling around the Boeing aircraft assembly line in Seattle when he swung by to announce his candidacy five years ago.

After saying that, Biden paused briefly, as if to ask himself what the formula really meant.

'You can argue that it's all about the great national issues, but it's also about restoring a culture of civility,' he said. 'It's about all of us coming together as Americans, and treating each other with respect, whether you agree with people's opinions or not.'

Fine words, even if a cynic might argue that they qualified as one of Joe's more articulate pronouncements on the nature of his office, given his meandering performance in this June's presidential debate, which led to his standing down in the next election.

I found myself mulling over Biden's words earlier this summer, following a distressing incident involving one of my neighbours.

After we'd rubbed along together for 20 years, watering each other's plants or taking in the paper if one of us was away, he informed me brusquely that we were now 'done'.

He put a letter on my doormat advising me that I was a rat and that he'd consigned the six of my books I'd given him to his bonfire.

My offence? A few days earlier, I'd written a story in the local paper about my recent experience of driving from my suburban home to downtown Seattle. I'd got halfway there when two highway patrolmen on motorbikes suddenly emerged from a side street to form a roadblock in front of me.

The officers were soon joined by several others, and one of them blew a whistle and shouted at my fellow drivers and me that we were to pull over to the side of the road and turn off our engines. Biden was once again among us. We watched as his caravan of cars streamed down the road at a clip ordinary motorists could only dream of.

A phalanx of state highway patrol motorcycle officers led the column, which included several large black SUVs with tinted windows, sundry vans and ambulances and, at last, the President's two speeding Cadillac limousines – one a decoy – outfitted with small American flags. Also in the motorcade were four tank-like vehicles sporting blinking lights and vertical black rods, a dozen or more police cruisers and numerous other cars and limos, while a helicopter swooped overhead. Biden was in town for two hours to raise funds for his (doomed) 2024 re-election campaign.

All highly impressive, and I said as much in my story in the paper. What moved my neighbour to apoplexy was the bit about the irony of a nation founded on its distaste for the excesses of monarchy having come to accept that its chief executive should move around in a way that might have raised eyebrows in imperial Rome.

Although it wasn't a partisan piece, I also allowed myself the thought that Biden had used his brief time in Seattle to remark on the pitiable state of our homeless population, among other social issues. Again, I noted, all true, although it seemed only fair to add that around here it's Biden's own Democratic Party that has long controlled all the levers of power. They run both the Seattle City Council and the Washington state government. They write the laws.

> It was enough to light the blue touchpaper in my quiet street

'And it's hard to see how Donald Trump, whatever you think of him, can be blamed for our city's current malaise,' I wrote, committing the faux pas of mentioning the T word without the necessary note of revulsion.

'Instead of constantly asking what's wrong with the world, perhaps our officials should be asking, "What's wrong with Seattle?"' I concluded.

Hardly the stuff of a blood feud, but it was enough to light the blue touchpaper in my quiet, middle-class street. My neighbour and I haven't spoken since; he now ostentatiously turns his head to one side if I pass him.

Until now, I'd thought this was something that happened only to Edwardian cads, but the gesture is alive and well on the streets of what's often called America's most progressive city.

All this happened before Biden's decision to step down – and his third bout of Covid, which, fairly or not, only compounds the impression of him as a decent but sadly enfeebled senior citizen. It also happened before the attempt on Donald Trump's life.

Whatever you make of Trump, money couldn't buy the image of him leaving the stage after being shot, his face bloodied but his fist raised, with the American flag flying in the background. As any advertising executive will tell you, news photos like that resonate most strongly when they manage to capture or reinforce what the public already believes.

Emotions are raw, and my own petty rift with my neighbour reflects the widespread turmoil surrounding a contest that threatens to tear the country apart in a way not seen since the Vietnam War.

I predict fireworks when polling day comes around – on, somehow aptly, 5th November.

Christopher Sandford is author of 1964: The Year the Swinging Sixties Began

The dream pub – in my backyard

Driven out of his local by soaring prices, *Adam Edwards* has set up his own perfect boozer

Before the pandemic, I was a regular at the pub.

Once or twice a week I, and my elderly mates Boot, Mason and Riley would gather at our Cotswolds local and gas away over a couple of bottles of wine.

And then Covid arrived.

So we moved our pub to Zoom. At first, connecting our respective homes via the internet was a technical nightmare.

Boot's erratic volume control and the crunch of his pork scratchings made many a conversation inaudible.

Riley's lip-synching delay was blamed on his erratic connection, while Mason couldn't get his iPhone to stay upright despite experimenting with Blu Tack.

Adam's beer-mat

However, once the techie troubles were sorted, we would link up digitally at six every evening, open our respective bottles of wine and gossip in the virtual tavern we christened the Lockdown Arms.

After the pandemic, it was decided to continue as we had done pre-lurgy. But rather than return to the pub, we started to meet at my converted cart-house I called the Potlickers Arms.

Over the following year, we four musketeers were joined by other like-minded pub refugees. In addition to Boot, Mason and Riley (everyone is addressed by a surname or a nickname), they include an international rock star, a successful novelist, a City slicker, a former SAS officer, a retired businessman and a sculptor who refuses to wear shoes.

We meet at the cocktail hour on a Tuesday, a day when wives and partners seem to pay no mind to their man sugaring off. No women, no guests and no dogs – with the exception of Mason's lumbering Labrador – are allowed. You bring your own booze and choice of nibbles. Smoking is encouraged.

Early conversation-starters – as everyone is in their late sixties or early seventies – are almost always to do with ailments. Smutty jokes come from the ex-SAS soldier, Boot pipes up on politics, and Mason – a gentleman farmer – disagrees with global warming and is pessimistic about everything rural.

Other regular topics include hating travel, laughing at cancel culture and damning our woke children. Every week, one person's bad luck is teased. There is also talk of the strange sex lives of the residents in the nearby town.

Potlickers (now a moniker like, ahem, White's or Boodle's) is our reimagined public bar. It has become a delightful politically incorrect club. Interestingly, there is a similar club in the next valley, where local farmers meet in an unconverted barn – a speakeasy that began life during lockdown.

The old adage holds that if two or more Englishmen are washed up on a desert island, their first action will be to start a club. My desert island is a land of second homes and weekenders that's devoid of an old-fashioned country pub.

What is called 'the pub' around here is a grandiose gastro bar with bentwood brown furniture and sotto-voce Delta blues muzak, serving £20 burgers and £30 bottles of wine.

These 'pubs' no longer sell cooking whisky (Bell's or Famous Grouse) or sheets of Big D peanuts – the ones where, as the packs are removed, more of the curvaceous blonde is revealed – or sliced white-bread sandwiches.

They are no longer suited to a quiet pint and a smoke and, more importantly, they are not suited to the loud-mouthed and the politically incorrect.

Nowadays, that is left to clubs like Potlickers.

Adam Edwards edited ES, *the* Evening Standard *magazine*

Age cannot wither the greatest minds

Titian, Verdi and Goethe all excelled in their eighties

A N WILSON

The older I grow, the more aware I become of those writers who did not die fashionably young, like Keats or Novalis, nor retire, like lazy old E M Forster.

Instead, they continued to work into their old age, raging against the dying of the light, and refusing to enter the President Biden Twilight Home of the Faded Imagination.

Slight jitters assail me, as the day approaches when my book on Goethe will be published. On 20th September, there will be a concert to celebrate it – and Goethe – at the Wigmore Hall, and there will be a presentation at the British Library.

The great German is not much read in England now, but he is worth celebrating: a scientist, a politician, the greatest of poets, a disturbingly brilliant novelist – what could he not turn his hand to?

I feel emboldened to mention him in these pages since he belongs to that select band of people whose most illustrious work was produced deep into their old age.

My book is called *Goethe: His Faustian Life*. This is because not only does his most famous work, *Faust*, echo the life of its author; also he spent his entire life writing it, and many of the best bits were composed when he was over 80. Faust was over 100 before he eventually let go.

Think of Titian: deep into his eighties when he painted *The Flaying of Marsyas*, the myth of the satyr musician who outsoared Apollo and was punished by the god by having his skin removed.

Dante rather unsparingly describes the satyr as being drawn out of the vagina of his limbs by the cruel deity. He saw it as an emblem of the artist's life, the absolute stripping that true artistic integrity, in whatever medium, always requires.

Or Verdi. After a glorious lifetime of writing the best Italian operas, he exceeded even his own genius by staging *Falstaff* – at the age of over 80. No decent actor in *Henry IV, Part 2* can fail to bring out the pathos of the fat knight being rejected by Henry V, who turns his back on all the fun they had together when he was Prince Hal.

Verdi draws out Falstaff's poignancy better than anyone, while retaining – for the opera incorporates *The Merry Wives* – Falstaff's farcical status. It is also, surely, the best musical score Verdi ever composed.

As for Thomas Hardy – I often thought of him when I was writing my Goethe book, since, deep into old age, the German genius, like Hardy, found himself still capable of breaking his heart over women.

I look into my glass,
And view my wasting skin,
And say, 'Would God it came to pass
My heart had shrunk as thin!'

For then, I, undistrest
By hearts grown cold to me,
Could lonely wait my endless rest
With equanimity.

But Time, to make me grieve,
Part steals, lets part abide;
And shakes this fragile frame at eve
With throbbings of noontide.

It was a bit of a shock to discover that the Wessex poet was only 57 when he wrote the poem. This does not mean that real oldies do not often live through such tragic feelings. Likewise with Betjeman's *Late Flowering Lust*, which feels like the lamentations of an oldie, and was in fact composed when the poet was in his forties!

So much for the poets. Even in my own, humbler profession of journalistic hackery, there are examples of fine exponents of the genre soldiering on deep into old age. One thinks of Rebecca West, who was over 90 when she died. Still a comparative spring chicken aged 88, Hunter Davies continues his columns and writes a book a year, an example to all of us.

I suppose the English poet who best exemplifies the phenomenon of late-flowering genius, though, is Tennyson. And, rather than 'inappropriate' thoughts, such as Hardy's, he had his eyes focused on the Thing Itself.

He wrote *Crossing the Bar* when he was 80, in October 1889, crossing the Solent at Lymington, to return to his home in Freshwater, Isle of Wight. Incidentally, some clever people think the 'Pilot' is the angel of death, because when Dante was on the shores of Purgatory, he watched an angel ferrying souls across and described him with this word.

But Tennyson himself wrote, 'The Pilot has been on board all the while, but in the dark, I have not seen him... The Pilot is that Divine and Unseen Who is always guiding us.'

Goethe is in every more obvious way a greater poet than Tennyson, but I'd say that even Goethe himself never wrote anything, quite, to match the perfection of this lyric:

Sunset and evening star,
And one clear call for me!
And may there be no moaning of the bar,
When I put out to sea,

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,
Too full for sound and foam,
When that which drew from out the boundless deep
Turns again home.

Twilight and evening bell,
And after that the dark!
And may there be no sadness of farewell,
When I embark;

For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crost the bar.

Goethe: His Faustian Life *by A N Wilson is out on 26th September*

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Dream pupil – the bad boy turned good

So here we are again. Another year over, another set of students shuffled off and the longed-for hiatus between this set and the next. The cycle continues.

It hasn't been a good end to this year, I must admit. I am wondering if I am beginning to run out of steam in the worst way of all – just not caring.

This is probably because I haven't had any Year 11s this year. So the annual cycle has been a bit like Turnip Townshend working with only three out of his four crops. I'm not sure that lying fallow has rejuvenated me in the way the clover and turnips do the earth.

Add to that the effect of my two Year 10 groups. Two bottom sets and no 11s does make for a very marking-free year, and in no wise am I denying the joy in that.

My Year 10s find English very hard, but some of them balance that by trying very hard. Most of them, however, are still confused as to who is killed by Macbeth, and the difference between a verb and a noun.

With these sets, I feel the battle is for them to achieve fours or fives (a pass and a good pass), rather than hoping for eights and nines as in previous years.

I know that I will be *re*teaching every text at a most basic level as they head into Year 11, rather than pushing them into deeper, more nuanced understanding of ideas and language. And, in the weird, mysterious swings and roundabouts of timetabling, I have no Year 10s next year.

I suppose what I am moaning about is the lack of excitement. No one ever said teaching is a particularly exciting profession, but it turns out that you notice the lack of it when it disappears.

This year, I have been missing out on surprises. There was a mildly raised eyebrow to be found in my Year 7s – an age group (11/12) that normally drives me mad with boredom.

I suppose I should like keenness, but I'm too contrary. I hate the eagerness, the neatness and the endless dull questions and the trying to be sweet, in which so many of these entrants to secondary school indulge.

'Your mother might think that face is fetching but it does absolutely nothing to me,' I snarl. This year, though, I had a genuinely hard-working, engaged, humorous class, who fought over reading Shakespeare aloud and soon realised that the way to please me was to become more independent. Enjoyable, then – but not really exciting.

And then I realised that something rather wonderful had happened. One of my Year 10s was a boy I had taught for the two previous years – something that doesn't usually happen, as we like to switch teachers and students around a bit for the good of all.

When I saw his name on the list, I felt slightly despairing – he is a nice enough boy but doesn't have a ready answer for hello. I spent most of last year trying to seat him out of the sightline of his inamorata to stop their endless yearning eye contact – 'My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,' as Donne would have it.

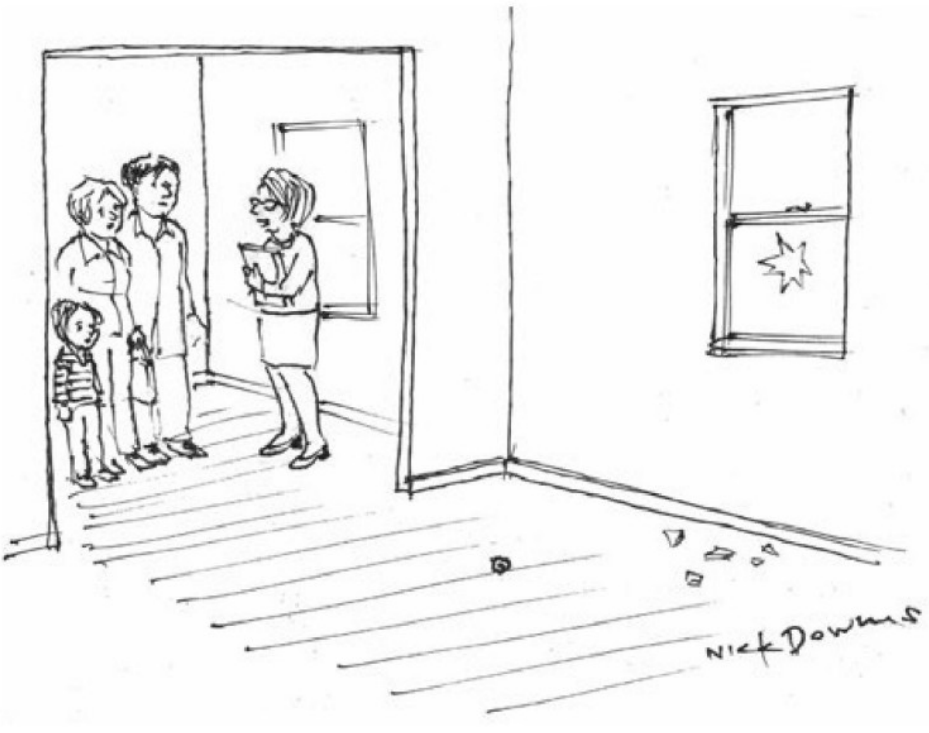
His catchphrase was 'So what are we doing, then, Miss?', accompanied by a smile of singular sweetness. I did not think there was an iceberg's chance in hell that he would ever get a GCSE.

Until he came back in September with a changed spirit, and a new glint in his eye. Until he asked for help at every possible turn, trying again and again to pin down the knowledge and the skills he needed. Until his scrawled two sentences turned into first two paragraphs, and then a page. Until the sweet smile began to indicate a dawning understanding, rather than an apologetic return to the world around him.

And, best of all, until he came top of the class in his end-of-year exams, with a grade five. I literally cried with joy.

So, yes, there are still surprises, and there is still hope. And, after six weeks off, I too may return with a glint in my eye.

And it will begin again.



'And it's only a stone's throw from the school'

I Once Met

Ronnie Kray

It was in the summer of 1985 when my dad, who was Ronnie Kray's solicitor, asked me to come with him to Broadmoor Hospital. I was a teenager doing work experience in his legal firm and he needed me to take notes.

The journey to Crowthorne in Berkshire took about an hour in his new Mercedes Coupé.

'Let me do the talking,' Dad said as we drove through the gates and on to security, after telling the guard that we were here to see 'Ron'.

The building was less intimidating than I had hoped. There were no inmates screaming behind bars and no chains, just a faint whiff of Milton fluid in the air.

We followed the guard, who was carrying an enormous set of keys, through a corridor of linoleum flooring and easy-to-wipe, high-gloss walls, painted in an institutional shade of baby sick.

He led us into a large room that looked like a cross between a church hall and an American speakeasy, with green velvet curtains, a stage at one end and several round, dark wood tables and chairs. The guard said that the staff put on shows for the inmates there.

Killer queen: Ronnie in 1967

He pointed to a table; we sat down and waited until Ronnie Kray walked slowly into the room. He was in his early fifties but seemed much older.

I realise now that this was because, having been in prison for 16 years, he had become completely institutionalised. His movements were laboured and his wiry hair was badly cut.

Despite his obvious frailty, the guards treated him with reverence. The translucent skin on his hands exposed arthritic knuckles. Those hands, I thought, had held the gun that killed George Cornell at the Blind Beggar pub in 1966.

'Hello. You must be Ralphie's daughter,' he said in his East End accent. His voice was slurry. 'Would you like a tin of salmon? It's very good, you know.'

The prison guard then offered me a ten-ounce tin of John West pink salmon. When I was born, Ronnie had sent me a rabbit-fur koala bear which I loved; I wasn't sure of the etiquette for this particular gift – so I politely refused.

He turned to look at me. 'Are you sure you don't want a tin of salmon?'

My father's expression gave no clue as to whether I should accept, so I paused.

Ronnie asked, 'What about something else?'

The guard now brandished an enormous wicker fruit basket with one of those redundant reedy handles, but without the bow and cellophane. It was filled with a selection of cuddly toys.

'They make them in here, you know,' said Ronnie, 'Which one would you like?'

I looked into the basket and chose a tawny-coloured kangaroo with a white chest and legs that spun round. Mumbling a thank-you, I put my new toy, my unused notepad and pen and, after the third offer, the tin of John West salmon, into my bag, and we drove home.

Daniella Lawson

MEMORY LANE

Mrs Thatcher's brothel tour

In November 1979, I joined Express Newspapers and became a copytaker in their Manchester office.

There were 22 of us and, supplied with headphones and sit-up-and-beg typewriters, we typed other people's stories at the speed at which they spoke.

This was not as daunting as it sounds, primarily because not all our callers were compos mentis when they rang.

We could also use various abbreviations, thereby pre-empting the dawn of text speak by about 15 years.

I soon learned the mantra 'I'm doing this off the top of my head.' It was intoned by journalists covering an ongoing – usually a sporting – event.

'Could we just go back to the paragraph before last?' we would ask.

Copytakers were invariably blamed when phone lines started to crackle. A colleague was taking a report from a *Daily Star* writer at an important football match in Europe when it became impossible to continue. A few minutes went by, while she doggedly held the line. It suddenly cleared – and she heard him bad-mouthing her.

When he realised this, he mumbled a less-than-heartfelt apology. 'Oh, er ... sorry about that, love.'

She replied, 'That's quite all right, my dear. I do understand. I have a little boy of my own at home.'

Spasmodic phone lines were not uncommon, and it was essential to spot glaring errors before the copy reached the news desk.

A friend was saved from embarrassment after taking a call from a political correspondent on a bad line. She read through her copy and realised that Mrs Thatcher was to visit Brussels, not brothels.

Journalists covering sporting events were expected to file their copy in situ. One writer ignored this and instead phoned from the Crown & Kettle, adjacent to the Express building.

Unfortunately for him, the copytaker also wanted to go to the Crown in time for last orders at 10.30pm.

There were five minutes to go. He cut the caller off and sprinted down to the pub, where the first person he saw was the reporter who was supposedly at Old Trafford. They downed their pints without acknowledging each other.

Sadly, copytaking became a redundant occupation when Express Newspapers closed its Manchester office in 1989.

It was the best job I ever had.

By Judie Krebs, Prestwich, Manchester

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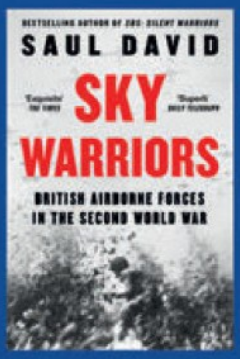

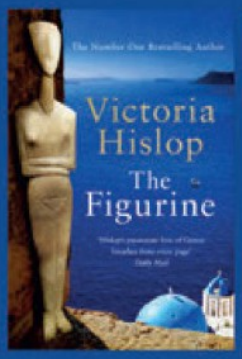

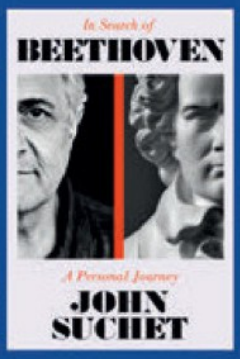

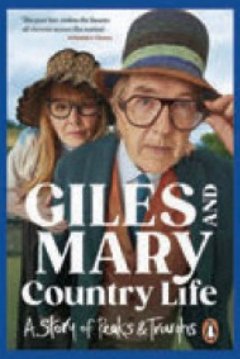

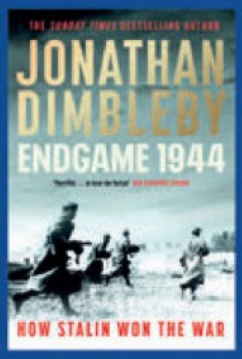

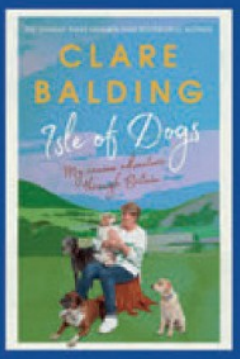

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You've got to have a pocket or two

Designers are still reluctant to make useful dresses

Considering how useful the pocket is, it's not nearly widespread enough in modern clothing.

Pockets have been helping us for thousands of years. A perfectly preserved mummy of someone believed to have lived between 3350 and 3105 BC was found in the Ötztal Alps, in Italy, with an intact pouch containing useful items and tools sewn into his belt.

In the 16th century, pockets had to be concealed under clothing to outwit pickpockets and were sewn into belts and girdles.

It wasn't until the late-17th century that pouches were rationalised into more functional pockets. These began to be sewn into men's garments, but not women's.

Women still usually had to fasten something to a belt under layers of skirts and petticoats, making such pouches much less accessible and therefore less practical. Sometimes they were even tied to clothing via ribbons – more precarious, as the ribbons could be cut.

> Women were suspected of using hidden pockets to smuggle potions

And when clothing changed and became slimmer-fitting, it was not possible to hide the pouch under clothing: hand-held purses or reticules became the early handbag.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, women were suspected of using hidden pockets to smuggle potions and herbs to practise witchcraft.

Men were naturally alarmed to think that a love potion might be whipped from a pocket and administered to turn their heads and excite an ardour that might not have arisen spontaneously.

During the French Revolution, women were banned from having pockets at all, as they would be able to hide revolutionary material in them. Pocket-free women were less likely to be political activists.

During the world wars, women's clothing had to become more practical, and pockets as we know them today were sewn into uniforms as standard. Both land girls and suffragettes had pockets and they became a symbol of feminism and autonomy.

Meanwhile, men's suits evolved and had many different discreet pockets designed into them: a pocket for the watch and tickets, with deep pockets for coins and wallet. The Italian suit is famous for having sewn-shut pockets because a filled pocket spoils the silhouette.

Despite pockets' usefulness, today's designers stubbornly resist including them in women's dresses.

Dua Lipa's vintage Chanel dress at the Met Gala 2023 had pockets. And designer Christopher John Rogers sent chunky, knitted sets with enormous pockets down the runway just days before.

They are slow to materialise in non-celebrity milieus. However, pockets are making a comeback with Toast, Sophie Dundas and Boden, whose pocketed dresses have become a talking point this summer.

We don't need purses, wallets or address books any more, as everything is on our phones. So if a dress has enough pocket depth for keys, a lipstick and a mobile, then we can go hands-free.

The sense of liberation when you can get in and out of cars without groping for a bag, and leave a room without staring at all the surfaces trying to remember where you left your bag, recalls the glorious freedom of being a schoolgirl. And this is quite apart from the fact that without a handbag you are much less attractive to a mugger on a motorbike.

And, talking of schoolgirls, the uniform at my school in Northern Ireland involved two pairs of pants.

The inner, more lightweight pair were white and designed to be washed regularly. The outer pair were navy blue and heavyweight to protect our little pelvises from the pre-climate-change biting cold. In those days, we wore knee socks, not the heavy black tights that are now de rigueur for almost every schoolgirl during winter.

These outer pants contained, as standard, a small pocket designed for the child to carry money and a handkerchief.

We all had them, and groping under our tunics to access the contents of our pockets was easy to do in a gainly manner.

School-uniform pants no longer come with integral pockets. But even if they did, they wouldn't be big enough for anyone over size 10. Doesn't some designer have the wit to bring out a range for adults?

I am certain they would be snapped up.

Dua Lipa's vintage Chanel dress with pockets at the Met Gala, 2023

Town Mouse

Strange death of letter-writing

TOM HODGKINSON

I've just published *Idle Thoughts*, a humble collection of 40 letters. They were written and addressed to the readers of the *Idler*, the magazine I edit, over the last few years.

While assembling it, I reflected on the lost art of letter-writing. Letters were for millennia – and till very recently, when they were ruthlessly attacked by the overlords of Silicon Valley – at the beating heart of artistic and commercial production.

Letters are a wonderfully elastic literary form. They can be chatty or formal. They can be any length. And they can include gossip, moaning, expressions of love, poetry, travel tales, confessions, anecdotes, philosophical reflection, advice, moral admonishment, jokes, drawings, diagrams, financial advice...

The letters in my book are open – intended for a wide audience. They're newsletters, but written as if to a single person.

It's a tradition that goes back a long way. The Greek philosopher Epicurus wrote in letter form. Then there were Seneca's *Letters on Morals to Lucilius*. These letters, written around 65 AD, are high-quality literary productions, as you'd expect from a philosophical man who was trained in rhetoric. They're addressed to a young friend and are appropriately avuncular in tone. They contain nuggets of Stoic and Epicurean philosophy, all intended to make Lucilius happy and free of anxiety.

In Roman times, there was a lot to be anxious about: as well as the fear of poverty and disease, Seneca says people were quite worried about the savage punishments doled out by the state – 'jail, the cross, the rack, the hook, the stake driven up through the middle of a person and coming out through the mouth, the limbs torn apart by chariots driven in different directions'.

Seneca's letters were intended to be read by many: 'The work that I am doing is for posterity,' he wrote.

And so it seems for many letters. My own bookshelves groan with collections. Letters I have loved include Sylvia Plath's, Maynard Keynes's, Dr Johnson's, William Godwin's, Keats's... Jane Austen's are hilarious. Bernard Shaw was a great letter-writer, as were members of the Bloomsbury Group.

As for personal letters, my friends and I wrote letters to one another non-stop in our teens and twenties. When we were 16, a new girlfriend and I wrote to each other every day for a week when I was away. Sadly I've lost them all.

Modes of address and of signing off have changed over the centuries. In the ancient world, you started your letter with your name and the name of the addressee followed by a hello. If I were writing to the editor of this magazine, I would write, 'From Town Mouse, to Harold, greetings.' And then I would sign off with the simple word 'Farewell'.

By the 18th and 19th centuries, you would always start a letter with 'Dear' or My dear'. Sign-offs included 'I am, sir, your well-wisher and humble servant'; 'Yours with sincere and perfect affection'; 'I am sir yours etc'; and 'Yours truly'. I was taught to sign off formal letters addressed to someone anonymous with 'Yours faithfully' and letters to a named person with 'Yours sincerely'.

Sign-offs given by a 19th-century instruction manual in letter-writing include 'Your loving daughter', 'Yours very respectfully' and 'Your obliged and affectionate friend'. These elaborate courtesies, officially called 'the complimentary close', should, I think, be brought back.

Emails, by contrast, are often brusque to the point of rudeness. They might start with the informal 'Hi' and end with something like 'All the best' or, if you're lucky, 'With kind regards'. Some oldies may deplore the fashion of adding an 'x', even when the addressee is not held in high affection. And what about the habit of starting an email with simply the addressee's name? Brutal.

We're still fascinated by brilliant letters, as is proved by Shaun Usher's popular book *Letters of Note*, and his event series of the same name. He tirelessly brings amusing epistles to the public's attention, and gets celebs to read them out loud on festival stages.

Another example is *Love, Nina* – a collection of Nina Stibbe's letters home, written in 1982, chronicling her life as nanny to the eccentric literary patron Mary-Kay Wilmers, and were a big hit.

I worry about the future of collections of letters by writers, simply because everyday correspondence takes place via electronic means. Will they exist? Who will edit them? Will they be titled *The Emails of Zadie Smith*, *The Collected WhatsApps of Salman Rushdie* and *The Texts of Kazuo Ishiguro*? Sad days.

Tom Hodgkinson's Idle Thoughts: Letters on Good Living *is out now*

Country Mouse

Hannibal Lecter has exceedingly good taste

GILES WOOD

This year, I have cut no corners in the preparation required for growing my own gourmet vegetables.

I doubt sincerely that there is an economic argument for growing them, once you have factored in the vast amounts of bought seed compost, alpine grit and vermiculite required to grow them in modules, when once they were sown directly in the ground.

Fertile pits and enriched trenches were dug by this hobby grower in a festival of vernal activity. I backfilled with best greensand-derived grade-one topsoil, which has had 35 years to 'heal' itself from its former intensive, high-input mono-crop system.

I solemnly sowed my broad (aka fava) beans in line with the slow food/slow life market-town lifestyle, where hand-grown vegetables and their consumption are almost fetishised.

And, for all my toil and trouble, I ended up with what? All told, a mere bucketload of pods. My Alcatraz-like fortress of chicken wire to keep out the woodpigeons backfired as it stunted their growth.

This month, a tabloid straw poll revealed that at least two out of three British adults and most children seem to dislike the beans' rubbery skin, the shape, the texture and finally the 'mouth feel'. The connection with Hannibal Lecter, who boasted of enjoying fava beans as a side dish to a victim's liver, didn't help the beans' reputation.

And yet Britons are own-goaling by rejecting the beans, claims the tabloid. 'Beans could banish the nation's blues (due to naturally high levels of happiness-promoting L-DOPA), as well as making Iranian women's armpits less hairy.' Cue the Silly Season.

I used to store the toughest beans in a kilner jar, to rehydrate for broths on wintry evenings. Half a dozen went a long way. According to Lawrence D Hills, whose vegetable reference books are fine enough to be read as literature, 'these are the beans that beanfeasters ate with the bacon and boiled beef of Old England'. He maintains that the flavour of dried broad beans is different, and once the skins have been removed, they make an excellent addition to Brown Windsor soup, a dish once the butt of so many jokes.

I have been thinking about the advice that then deputy PM Oliver Dowden gave the general populace back in May, to prepare the nation's store cupboards – just as we did for Covid – with enough bottled water, tinned food and batteries for a long weekend, to deal with incoming asteroids or unspecified other events.

As a fan of YouTube, particularly for vegetable-growing tips, I sometimes get distracted and find myself watching the like of head-butting compilations because the algorithms have thrown them up for me. Andy the Gabby Cabby seems a decent bloke. In a short video, he connected Dowden's prepping-lite advice with the proposed return of National Service.

On to former MP Andrew Bridgen, who told me via YouTube that we were 'already at war with Russia' but we don't know it yet. And that Rishi had called a general election early because he had warned his military generals that he hadn't got the stomach to be a wartime Prime Minister.

My youngest daughter has since told me that most people have developed a 'filter' in relation to social media. As a newcomer to the internet, I find the idea of a filter a relatively advanced concept.

But I digress – my relationship with the broad bean has been going on for decades. Recently, I found in a drawer an old heritage variety of bean called Gloster Bounty. I used to belong to the Henry Doubleday Association's commendable seed-sharing scheme to protect rare, landrace and heritage varieties. The Bounty was a substitute for the coveted Martock bean, which was out of stock at the time.

The Martock was rediscovered, preserved in the kitchen garden of the Bishop of Bath and Wells. The oldest vegetable variety in the world, it hails from Martock in Somerset, where it was grown as far back as Roman times.

There is another connection. I once found a Sestertius coin from the reign of Hadrian while cultivating the ground for the beans.

The bean was also used for the Roman voting system: black beans for 'no', and brown beans for 'yes'.

The dried seeds of the Martock keep for many years and eventually turn black. They can be dried and stored for the winter.

By growing them, you can be sure you have enough food for Dowden's mystery 'emergency', and be safe in the knowledge that you haven't been tricked into the sort of panic-buying that characterised the Covid emergency – the one that conspiracy theorists allege was generated as an artificial stimulus for the sluggish retail sector.

By the way, Martock beans cost a mere £2.99 a packet.

'That's not how you spell "mansplain"'

Rude Dr Ruth shot me down

Mary Kenny hated the sex therapist's bad manners more than her dirty talk

Have you ever felt you were in the wrong place at the wrong time, and you were taking the wrong direction in your life?

This epiphany occurred to me on the night of 9th November 1989 – the date the Berlin Wall fell.

I was on my feet at the Oxford Union, debating against the famous sex therapist Ruth Westheimer, known universally as Dr Ruth.

She has just died, at 96. She was known for the frank advice she doled out to folks with anxieties about doin' what comes nat'rally.

The motion involved the joys – or drawbacks – of sexual liberation and I was, of course, to lose the debate. The 2,000 undergraduates wildly cheered Dr Ruth (4 ft 7 in) for her frank advocacy of orgasm, erotic fantasy and, if need be, dildos and vibrators.

In another part of the building, people were watching the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the end of Communism. How I wished I could have been with that historic TV audience rather than engaged in smutty talk with the awful Dr Ruth!

And I had reason to consider her awful. Two weeks before, I'd been on a family break, with husband, children and friends – and their children – visiting the journalist George Gale and his wife, Mary, in bucolic Northumberland.

But the jolly gathering had been constantly interrupted by phone calls from the US; indeed, from the British Embassy in Washington. The Embassy spokesperson put me through long interviews about every aspect of my life and career.

I had no idea why I was being quizzed by a Government source like this, but I complied. There were at least three inquisitory calls, and I worried for days whether I had committed some offence and why I was being interrogated so closely.

Then the truth emerged: Dr Ruth had persuaded the Washington Embassy to call me, and find out everything about my profile. This was her way of 'research'.

I was furious and humiliated when I discovered this: she had no consideration for my private time with family and friends. She ruined a Northumbrian idyll, which I was never to revisit. She also quite inappropriately manipulated the British Foreign Office for her own ends.

When her death was announced, the media went into hype about the wonderful Dr Ruth and her happy sex talk. I could only recall her selfish pushiness.

Incidentally, my argument in that Oxford debate had been that sexual permissiveness can bring unhappiness, exploitation and damage, as well as freedom. The #MeToo movement belatedly illuminated that point nearly 40 years later.

Not a lot of people know (I didn't) that the modern submarine, the portable defibrillator, the induction coil (an important component in electrical transformers), the stethoscope, the hypodermic syringe and colour photography were all invented in Ireland.

A Dublin doctor, Francis Rynd, made the first hypodermic syringe in the 1840s. John Philip Holland, from County Clare, invented the submarine for the US Navy. Arthur Leared of Wexford gave us the stethoscope in the mid-Victorian age. Frank Pantridge, Belfast cardiologist, launched the portable defibrillator in the 1960s; and a priest in Co Louth, Nicholas Callan, invented the induction coil in 1836. A Dublin journalist, Ben Scallan, even discloses that radiotherapy cancer treatment was developed by an Irish physicist, John Joly, who also perfected colour photography.

I used to hear jokes about 'Irish science' – being something fanciful and fey – but science is flourishing in the Emerald Isle, and there are historical precedents!

It's 80 years since the liberation of Paris on 25th August 1944. It's well-described in Patrick Bishop's fascinating book *Paris '44* as 'the greatest day of its modern history'.

After more than three years of occupation, the Nazi commander of the city, General Dietrich von Choltitz, surrendered to the French forces of General de Gaulle, and the Resistance.

In that riveting earlier book (and movie) of the 1960s *Is Paris Burning?*, Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre portray von Choltitz as almost heroically defying Hitler's orders to destroy the French capital rather than surrender it. The Prussian knew that Paris symbolised cultural civilisation. In the movie, Gert Fröbe plays him – minus the monocle – engaging in reflective conversation with Orson Welles as the Swedish envoy Raoul Nordling.

Patrick Bishop doesn't believe the preservation of Paris is because of von Choltitz's dedication to culture: more likely, it was a combination of logistics and self-serving craftiness. Although he did know Hitler was quite mad by 1944.

The liberation of Paris, enabled by the Allies, was surely a joyous dawn. And yet, only a few days previously, the SS were still rounding up French Jews and their families for transportation to death camps. Nazi-hunter Serge Klarsfeld records that officers Helmut Knochen, Carl Oberg and Heinz Rothke were all carrying out deadly orders with dedicated thoroughness until almost the moment von Choltitz signed the surrender.

TOBY MORISON

I'm ready for my PopMaster close-up

And Julian and Sandy in Wardrobe loved my cool TV look

JEM CLARKE

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

For a man with a Costa café on my corner, and a desire to seek afternoon refuge from my increasingly demanding parents, something terrible has happened to me.

I have fallen out of love with coffee.

Noel, who works in a medical centre as something approximating a receptionist with some patient-referring powers (a half-nurse, I suppose), sits at an adjacent table in said café. He always irritates me by staring at his croissant with intense loathing, as if he hadn't actually ordered it.

Normally, I can relax into my own roasted-beans brew only once he has gulped it down in three protracted, tortoise-like bite-and-swallow sessions.

But today I indulged him with a smile and a nod. I casually mentioned my aversion to coffee and enquired if there was any health-related reason for such a sudden change in tastebuddery.

Noel wondered if I had banged my head recently. I do not know whether he meant in relation to the left-fieldness of the question or whether that was like a diagnosis – well, half-diagnosis, bless him.

But I think he might be onto something. Back in the early '90s, I was rendered unconscious by being thrown caber-like across a dance floor by an overly exuberant rugby-player. It was back when dwarf-tossing was a recent novelty and a zany column-filler in the tabloids. Nick, the dwarf-tosser and still a pal today, had no malice. And a then seven-stone me was a happy participant in his absinthe-fuelled arseholery.

The next day, nursing concussion in the very bed I still lie in, I could not tolerate the taste of cheese (and no longer detested the voice of Elvis Costello).

Such was my despair at saying goodbye to cheese just as my diet entered thepeak pizza years – and, worse, finding my toe tapping to *Oliver's Army* like a

STEVE WAY

Radio 2-playing truck driver – I wondered if a similar head injury might revert me back to previous tastes.

However, frenzied, half-concussed attempts to go round a small town's nightclub offering, demanding that bouncers find a rugby-player to toss me, ended in failure.

So Noel filled my head with more questions than answers. He refused my suggestion to give the raisin swirl a try if croissants weren't hitting his happy button any more. And he huffed off to read a large-print medical dictionary – out loud, probably – and left me alone.

There is no sadder sight than a solo diner stirring a dusty breakfast teabag in the world's smallest mug.

I wondered if my loss of love for coffee was an extension of a general downbeatedness. The LARGE-size shirts I bought the summer before last no longer fit. And I can no longer find a local seamstress to take out my clothes.

'It would be easier to have yourself taken in,' Father said, gently nodding towards my spare tyre.

I feel ever more like a man who has woken in a Kafka nightmare with my tiny head sewn onto the body of a late-20th-century darts-player.

When volunteering to appear on cult TV quiz show *PopMaster TV* recently, I wasn't worried about who last had a hit with *You're Sixteen* (Ringo Starr). I was more concerned by the fact that we had to bring four different looks to please the wardrobe department.

As I didn't have a wardrobe department – or even a wardrobe, to be honest – I took to a retail department. I bought four flowy, flowery shirts from their summer collection.

As if we were still in the early 1960s, a real Julian and Sandy arrived from Wardrobe. They fawned and cooed over my shirts. 'Ooh, hasn't he got some lovely clothes?' 'What do you think – blue to match the eyes? Or brown to compliment his corduroys?'

Being fluffed up was exactly what I needed. When I saw a playback of the episode, my extreme body-consciousness fell away. I saw a cheerful, kind and kind of cuddly fella display a decent amount of pop knowledge to the public.

Well, a few members of the general public, as it was broadcast on More4 – to the relief of Mother. She said, 'Thank goodness for that. The only people who watch More4 are canal boaters, amateur architects and people who've lost their remote.'

The showrunners sabotaged me with a pre-shoot snack – a cheeseboard and craft coffee – and by providing me with zero Elvis Costello questions.

Still, I am happy to report that, in a year of general elections, and European Football Championships, I did what all true-blue Englishmen aspire to.

I came second.

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I feel it in my gut. My husband is greedier – and healthier – than me

I'd heard all about Dr Tim Spector's fashionable theory: what matters more than calorie-counting is the bacteria in your gut.

I cook from scratch, don't buy junk and eat lots of veg. So I'd resisted joining Zoe, Spector's personalised nutrition programme, to find out about my microbiome and how to improve it.

It looked to me too much like a neat way to part body-obsessed rich young women from their money. But I thought I should maybe put my prejudices aside and at least read Spector's book, *Food for Life*.

I heartily recommend it. Spector, who is a serious epidemiologist and medical doctor, doesn't make extravagant claims – just perfect sense. He tells you what, when and how to eat, spells out foods' nutritional benefits – or lack of them – and explains how to identify and avoid ultra-processed food (UPF), which he damns as designed to be addictive.

His enthusiasm for pulses, pickles and fermented foods, such as sauerkraut and kimchi, is catching. And the author's easy style makes reading it a pleasure.

So, cheered on by my office staff and our gardener (four young women, none of them rich narcissists and all Zoe fans), I gave in, signed up and roped in my husband John.

The Zoe app gets its information from a thingy attached to your upper arm for a fortnight. It tracks your blood-sugar levels, telling you how well you cope with different foods. Along with constantly scanning the device on your arm, and sending Zoe a poo sample, you must eat a couple of truly disgusting cookies (one over-sweet, the other full of fat) to test your reaction to sugar and fat.

Left: **Davina McCall, a Zoe fan** ***Below:*** **Tim Spector's book**

We then received a personal analysis of the state of our gut bacteria and a list of foods scored out of 100. The closer to 100, the better the food is for you and the more you can eat of it. I thought my results would show I'm healthier than John – he's addicted to ice cream, loves cake, snacks all day and will eat anything with custard on it. But it turns out I have more bad bacteria than good, while John has a terrific gut microbiome. Grrr…

Sadly, we're too busy to get the most out of enrolment in Zoe. It isn't cheap, at £299 upfront to cover the testing phase and £35 for the four-month rolling plan.

Zoe has confirmed what I guess we already knew. We both need to eat less meat and more pulses. And I need to cut right down on cheese and cream, which I adore, and John needs to stay clear of bread and sugar.

Zoe's personal analysis has somehow worked. Not that I'm off trifle altogether, mind. But at least I'm no longer hoovering up the remains in the serving bowl as I do the washing-up.

Prue Leith presents *The Great British Bake Off*

God

SISTER TERESA

Christ's lesson on blind faith

In these days of modern medicine, do we have the right to ask for miraculous cures?

I have no intention of answering this question. I prefer to go to John 4:48 – Jesus's somewhat astringent answer to the court official's request that Jesus go to his house to cure his son who is on the point of death.

Jesus says, 'Unless you see signs and wonders, you will not believe.'

As we know, the son is cured. The rebuke is not directed so much to the anxious father, but rather to those standing by. This applies not only to the contemporaries of Jesus, but also to all subsequent generations, including ours.

One should not assume that true faith cannot find any place for the miraculous. But faith that cannot believe in God without a miracle is sadly deficient and perhaps not very grown-up.

As adults, we have no business to be treating God like the manager of a department store who doesn't have the merchandise we are looking for.

Jesus heals the man born blind

I was reminded of the great and vivid narrative of the man born blind, which occupies the whole of chapter 9 in John's Gospel: 'Ever since the world began, it is unheard of for anyone to open the eyes of a man who was born blind; if this man were not from God, he could not do such a thing.'

When I had eye cataracts removed recently, I could not but think that were such operations a rarity, they would be hailed as miraculous. At least eight of these procedures are done daily by a single surgeon in the eye clinic at the Thetford Healthy Living Centre. So there is a constant stream of people leaving such places with their sight saved.

The competence and the kindness of all those involved at such clinics are miracles in their own right. The humdrum needs to become a constant source of wonder.

The story of the man born blind links sight (light) with life itself. And light brings judgement with it. We have a formerly blind beggar standing before his betters, who try to bully him into denying the one certainty he has. He is cast out.

It is not only the beggar who is cast out, but also Jesus, the son of God and the light of the world.

There is a tendency in all of us to revile anyone whose idea of religion is not our own. It is vital to us as well as to others that we allow light to shine on our prejudices. We can then recognise them and rid ourselves of them, thereby calling a halt to myopic criticism and, worse still, condemnation.

Memorial Service

Lord Hindlip (1940-2024)

Television presenter Kirstie Allsopp gave the eulogy for her father, Lord Hindlip, former Chairman of Christie's, at the Grosvenor Chapel in South Audley Street.

Hindlip was a skilled auctioneer, who sold Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* for £24m in 1987. In 1997, he sold Princess Diana's dresses for charity. As he said, 'I placed a perfunctory hand on her shoulder' – although photographs showed his hand somewhat lower down. He was also one of the few interviewees who got the better of Sacha Baron Cohen's spoof interviewer, Ali G.

Charlie Hindlip

The service sheet announced, 'The congregation stands for the arrival of The Queen, also representing The King.' Camilla's ex-husband, Brigadier Andrew Parker Bowles, was also there.

Six of Charlie Hindlip's grandchildren – Oscar Andersen, Charlie Fletcher, Coco Fletcher, Jasper Allsopp, Elsie Allsopp and Bay Andersen – read from *The Glory of the Garden* by Rudyard Kipling.

Sofie Fletcher read *Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night*, by Dylan Thomas.

Hindlip's son, Henry Allsopp, read an amusing spoof letter from Nigel Johnson-Hill to David Miliband, asking how much money he could claim from the Government for not breeding pigs, once published as a Christmas Cracker by John Julius Norwich.

The Rev Stephen Coleman gave the welcome and opening prayer and the blessing. The Rev Roderick Leece gave the homily. The Rev Dr Alan Piggot led the Lord's Prayer.

Hymns included *Lord of All Hopefulness, Lord of All Joy*, *Dear Lord and Father of Mankind* and *I Vow to Thee, My Country*. Anthems included *Faire Is the Heaven* by William Harris. *The Blue Bird* by Charles Villiers Stanford, set to the words of Mary Elizabeth Coleridge, was played.

The service ended with Bach's Fugue in E-flat major ('St Anne').

JAMES HUGHES-ONSLOW

Biden's decline is in the lap of the gods

With the right genes, you can defy your age – look at Mick Jagger and Verdi

DR THEODORE DALRYMPLE

Diagnosis by video clip is always hazardous, especially for conditions such as dementia that develop over time.

But few people can have observed the sequences of President Biden losing his drift in mid-sentence, being unable to find his way off a stage or freezing, without some degree of pity for an old person who is clearly past his best.

Others of his age are as sharp as a tack. Second childhood and mere oblivion are not the inevitable accompaniments of great age.

President Biden is 81 – the same age as Mick Jagger, who is still touring the world in rude health. It is salutary to remember that Verdi composed *Otello* when he was 80.

Where there is such variability, of course, the question arises as to what causes it, and whether there is anything people can do to eliminate or reduce their chances of becoming demented as they advance into old age.

Although genetic inheritance affects a person's chance of developing Alzheimer's disease, there is not much – at least, so far – that anyone can do about those genes that are known to be associated with the disease.

There are three rare genes that are known invariably to cause Alzheimer's disease relatively early in life. The children of such cases have a 50-per-cent chance of developing it themselves. But only one in ten people with Alzheimer's disease develops it under the age of 65, and of those only one in ten has one of the three genes.

Nevertheless, the children of those with early-onset dementia who carry one of those three genes face a tragic dilemma as to whether to have themselves genetically tested or not. To this question, there can be no universally correct answer.

The most common gene associated with Alzheimer's disease is the APOE ε4 gene. People with two copies of the gene not only make up one in seven of people with the disease, but also have a very high chance of developing it. People with only one copy of the gene are at higher risk than those without it, but the risk is highly variable and impossible to predict.

Yet more than half the people who develop Alzheimer's disease have no known genetic predisposition to it. What can such people do to reduce their chances of developing dementia?

Alzheimer's disease is not the only cause of dementia. Small blood vessel disease in the brain is the most common other cause.

But alcoholism, Parkinson's disease, repeated cerebral trauma such as that sustained in boxing (*dementia pugilistica*), football and rugby, multiple sclerosis, Huntington's disease, untreated hypothyroidism and other endocrinological maladies may cause it.

Severe depression in old age may imitate it closely, and occasionally there may be fraudulent and sometimes successful attempts to imitate dementia to avoid or evade punishment.

It is pointless, of course, to tell people above a certain age that the avoidance of repeated head injury in a boxing ring is essential to reduce the chances of developing dementia.

For those developing symptoms of dementia (though more fear that they are doing so than are actually doing so), a screen of tests is advisable to ensure that there is no remediable cause.

The list of things to do or avoid doing reads like a hypochondriac's vade-mecum. You should not put on weight, drink too much or smoke. And you should control your blood pressure and blood sugar. You should exercise, have a good social and family life, sleep well but not too much, maintain an intellectual or cultural interest, avoid deafness and correct it as far as possible. And possibly you should have a dog.

When all is said and done, however, the universe is not a vast court of justice that rewards and punishes according to desert. To change the metaphor somewhat, sometimes things are in the lap of the gods.

'There's been a mix-up in the hospital kitchen. Your new kidney is no longer available'

READERS' LETTERS

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Stupid Iris Murdoch

SIR: In his column in the August issue, A N Wilson says that if private schools are done away with, the only people left will be (his words) 'stupid people'. To bolster his case for cleverness he mentions Iris Murdoch, 'who would have loathed the private-school tax'.

Well, I knew Iris pretty well and she was pretty stupid. She thought Barbara Windsor was a relative of the Queen. She thought Proust's novel opened with Marcel getting up early, instead of going to bed early. There was a lot like that.

My late cousin Jeremy Lewis had a frightful time editing the cock-ups out of her novels at Chatto – the London Underground system and topography would be all to pot; chronology never made sense.

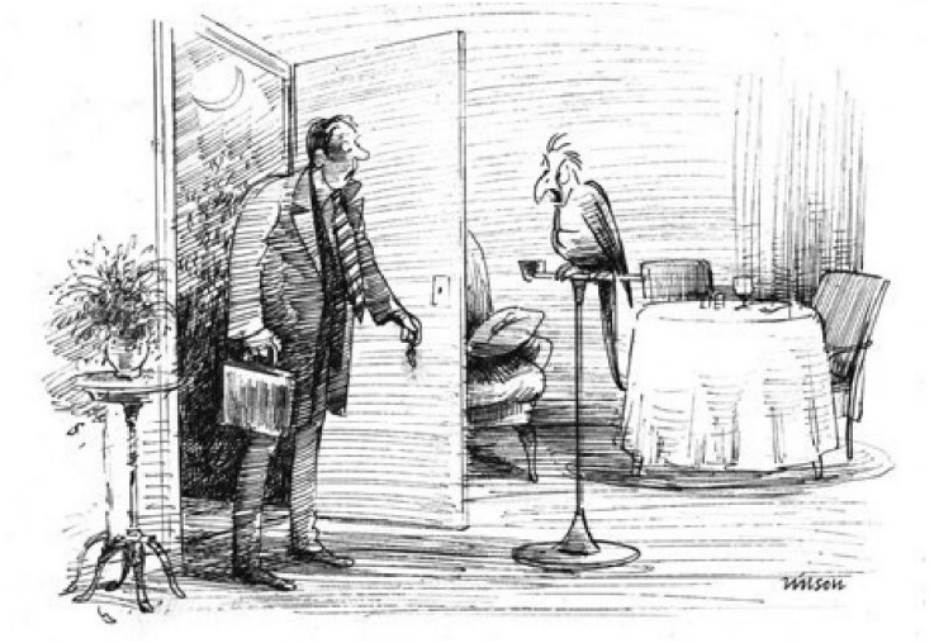
But my point is that of course to impose VAT on private schools is not 'utterly evil'. It is utterly necessary – and how dare they claim charitable status?

We'll never have equality of opportunity in this country with a two-tier educational system. As an impecunious author, I myself couldn't possibly have afforded to educate my children in the private sector, especially as the purchase of good wine always came first. And though my siblings went to private school, I went to the comprehensive in Newport, because I detested the idea of endless compulsory games.

No doubt this all made me the stupid person you see today.

Yours faithfully,
Roger Lewis, Hastings, East Sussex

'I've invented the homeware range'



'Your dinner is in the good-looking guy next door'

Latin is good for you

SIR: In your July issue, Sophia Waugh (School Days) suggested that public schools should be made to contribute to state schools by offering (inter alia) Latin lessons. Many public schools do in fact do this already, but a much better approach would be for her and/or a colleague to apply for a grant from Classics for All (CFA). This would pay for training her to teach Latin alongside her main subject.

CFA is a charity which aims to get the teaching of Classics, especially Latin, back into the UK's state schools. It is only 14 years old yet has already had great success, training nearly 5,000 teachers from more than 1,300 state schools across the country. We provide not only the training but also follow-up mentoring, sometimes via a local public school, more often via the nearest of our 14 regional co-ordinators.

The feedback has been highly encouraging from pupils and teachers alike. Offering Latin as well as their main subject allows teachers to add a life-enhancing new string to their bow. For pupils the subject has proved not only enjoyable but educationally valuable in raising their standards of literacy, building their cultural capital and, perhaps best of all, raising their levels of ambition. Moreover, their Latin-learning pupils often perform better in their other subjects. Despite CFA's short life, scores of pupils from schools that previously offered no Latin have gone on to Russell Group universities – often to read Classics.

CFA's approach allows a school to embed Latin into its curriculum. By contrast, Latin parachuted in from elsewhere often remains only skin-deep, lacking continuity and sustainability.

Any interested teacher or school should visit the Classics for All website.

Yours faithfully,
Nicholas Barber CBE, Hon President, Classics for All, London WC2

Dress up, dons!

SIR: I sympathise with Candida Crewe (July issue) in her lament for the well-dressed don in some of the colleges of Oxford. When I was recently a lecturer at the city of dreaming spires, I saw many examples of cultivated dressing down among college fellows. Students were better dressed than some dons – in their woke T-shirts and barely concealed distaste for anything not left-wing.

The sad thing is that, in attempting to mimic students half their age, these academics are guilty of condescension and end up inviting mockery and a lack of respect for their subject from most of the young people they try to impress.
John Davie, Thurlestone, Devon

Swarfega's criminal use

SIR: The piece by Martin Plimmer about Swarfega (August issue) took me back to the mid-1980s and Louth Police Station. As a solicitor in general practice, I often met clients in the Victorian-era nick. There, suspected burglars and shoplifters and others 'assisting with inquiries' were fingerprinted, after which a visit to a filthy ancient sink, cold tap and a tin of the green gunge preceded a grimy towel and release for some, the cells for others. Happy days (and some nights)!

Sincerely,
Patrick Purves, Louth, Lincolnshire

No sex please and no picnics

SIR: Your article on the picnic (July issue), while fascinating, nevertheless brought to mind the words of the late Christopher Hitchens, who wisely opined that 'The four most overrated things in life are champagne, lobster, anal sex and picnics.'
Bob Frost, Deal, Kent

Lights out for the territory

SIR: The opposition to the introduction of seat belts in the '60s recalled by Michael Duffy (Letters, August issue) was widespread, and I was initially reluctant to install them in my old Austin A50 – until I saw the evidence of injuries avoided in accidents.

I do, however, find the current trend of having lights on all the time, even in bright sunshine, somewhat irritating. The justification seems to be that you will be seen better, but surely if drivers can't see a distant vehicle without lights they shouldn't be driving anyway.

It doesn't seem so long ago that we used to 'flash' anyone who had left their lights on during the day.
Derek Faulkner, Stourbridge, W Midlands

'This is Catherine and her bitter half'

Keir Starmer's pin-ups

SIR: I am sorry to say that the Old Un is incorrect in stating (August issue) that Attlee moved from being a minister in the wartime coalition to becoming Prime Minister in 1945. The wartime coalition was dissolved in May after the victory in Europe, and Attlee was Leader of the Opposition for two months before winning the subsequent general election and entering Number 10.

I think Sir Keir Starmer's reason for excluding Ramsay MacDonald from his list of former Labour PMs was that he never won a parliamentary majority. His two minority administrations of 1924 and 1929-31 were both dependent on Liberal support.
John Dearing, Reading, Berkshire

Mary Killen talks dirty

SIR: Mary Killen's article ('Grime is good', August issue) put me in mind of an incident related to me by my grandfather (1868-1943), a GP in Manchester. (His medical experiences covered the reigns and partial reigns of five British monarchs.)

One morning, the attendees at Grandpa's surgery included a woman whose attention to her personal hygiene was patently considerably lacking. Asked how much she washed herself, she replied, 'I wash as far as possible'.

My grandfather responded, 'Well, from now on I want you always to wash possible.'
David De Saxe, Lambourn, Berkshire

Grease is the word

SIR: I was pleased to read (August issue) Mary Killen's doubts about modern fads for cleanliness. I have long mused that many people rigorously wash off the oil and grease that Nature designed for human skin, replacing it very often with the less suitable oils from other species.
Dr N P Hudd MA FRCP, Tenterden, Kent

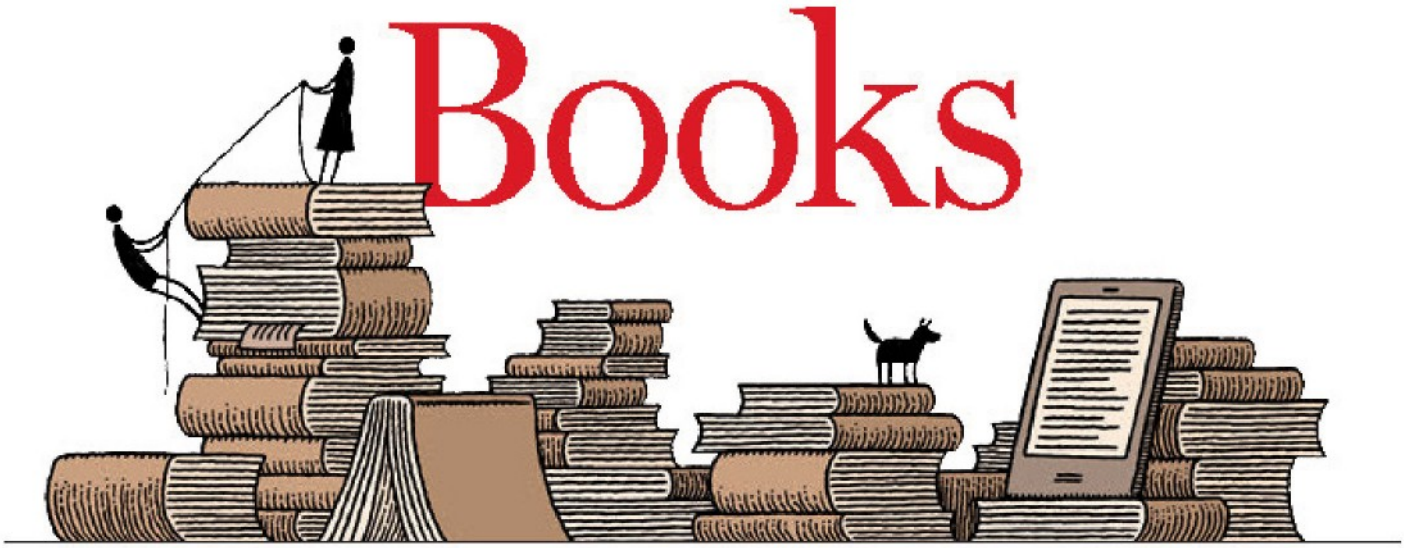
'On second thoughts, I'm not ready for a commitment'

Private schools not all 'elite'

SIR: Giles Wood, like most people who pontificate on private education, is wrong about seven per cent of the population being educated in 'elite' schools (August issue). It's more like one per cent, the other six being no better off in reality than those at the local state school.

Where elite schools do score is in music and sport. So if they could be cajoled into making these facilities available to other schools, more would be achieved than by slapping VAT on their fees – which won't bother the one-per-cent elite anyway. I know because, having benefited from attending a direct-grant school myself, I foolishly wasted a lot of money on a private school for my son and daughter which had lost its direct-grant status.
Stephen Halliday, Cambridge

Books



Best Western

SIMON O'HAGAN

Trelawny's Cornwall: A Journey Through Western Lands

By Petroc Trelawny

Weidenfeld & Nicolson £22

Mine of information: Petroc Trelawny

GARY WING

Petroc Trelawny's popular breakfast show on Radio 3 provides a refuge from the *Today* programme. And one of its most endearing features – unlikely though it might sound – is the weather forecast.

That's because Trelawny doesn't tell the listener what the temperature is going to be solely in major cities. We also hear that it's going to be, say, 17° in Oban; 18° in Hartlepool and Ludlow; 22° in Bognor.

Such names speak of a very Trelawnyan set of values: that nowhere is to be overlooked, that even the farthest-flung and most hidden away places are worthy of respect and equal treatment.

And this is very much the spirit that infuses his literary debut – a vivid and often moving memoir-cum-history of his home county, the farthest-flung of all.

Holidaymaking is what largely determines the idealised image people have of Cornwall. But to grow up there, as Trelawny did, is different, and he's channelled that experience into a blend of personal history, social history and reportage that makes for an enlightening and deeply pleasurable read.

While Trelawny is firm about the extent to which, over the centuries, Cornwall's citizens have suffered at the hands of more powerful forces – and there are telling descriptions of communities hollowed out by the proliferation of second homes – the book falls short of being a rallying cry for Cornish independence. Such politics would, you feel, be too simplistic for a writer this thoughtful.

For all the blessings bestowed on him by his name, Trelawny is no 'professional Cornishman', and on one level the book isn't about Cornwall at all, but in fact about family, and about the shadows cast over his childhood.

As the youngest by some margin of five boys, Trelawny occupied a singular position in the household, and his separateness was emphasised when, unlike his much older brothers, he found himself educated not privately but by the state.

Trelawny was 12 when his mother died from cancer, leaving him to cope not just with her loss but with the challenges of the awkward, distant relationship he had with his father. It's no criticism of Trelawny that he declines to make as much use of this material as more confessional writers might have done.

We get a glimpse of the dynamic in a passage describing a scene at the funeral of one of Trelawny's brothers, who has also died from cancer.

'I looked across to Dad sitting in the front pew. His face was set firm and revealed nothing, the model of a stiff-upper-lipped ex-Army man, determined to keep his emotions to himself. Now I understand his mastery at building walls to keep his feelings safely contained … I

suspect some close to me would say I have inherited that skill.'

Perhaps it goes hand in hand with Trelawny's skill as a journalist. Constructing the book out of a tour of Cornish landmarks of particular significance to him, he has a natural curiosity and an eye for a story.

He talks to people, and he loves to bring key figures in Cornish history to life – from the pioneers of Methodism to telecommunications entrepreneurs to the captains of doomed ships.

I especially enjoyed reading about 'voice of Cornwall' Brenda Wootton, a 1970s-era singer of traditional Cornish songs whose work Trelawny's listeners will be familiar with.

Wootton might be regarded as somewhat quaint. But, in her own way, she was the real deal, and distinguishing between the ersatz and the authentic is an underlying theme of the book.

There's a fascinating chapter on the Floral Dance, a celebration of spring with pagan origins that belongs fairly and squarely to Helston, the town where Trelawny went to school. We are reminded of perhaps the most egregious rendering of the tune –'dire', Trelawny calls it – by his one-time BBC radio colleague Terry Wogan; from this rendering 'Helstonians kept a respectful distance'.

In many ways, Trelawny's Cornwall is a lament for what the county has lost – its tin mines, much of its fishing and especially its railways. For train-loving Trelawny, not only were the railways exciting in themselves but also they represented the dream of escape.

Ambitious to make it in broadcasting, Trelawny did escape, and he's now one of the BBC's most eminent voices. But he's never forgotten where he came from.

In remembering it, he has produced something that could have been merely a love letter but is a whole lot more interesting and valuable than that.

American beauty

JASPER REES

Tell Me Everything

By Elizabeth Strout

Viking £16.99

If you haven't read a novel by Elizabeth Strout, where's best to start?

Probably with *Olive Kitteridge* (2008), which tells of a crotchety pillar of the community living by the sea in Strout's home state of Maine. She proved so popular that she returned in *Olive, Again*.

Or you could dive into *My Name Is Lucy Barton* (2016), about a novelist based in New York who survived a dire childhood in rural Illinois. Lucy proved so popular that she too came back in three further books.

Now it's the turn of Bob Burgess, who first co-starred with his big-shot older brother, Jim, in *The Burgess Boys* (2013). They also had an awful upbringing in Maine, but both escaped as lawyers to New York.

Bob's now settled back in Maine, where we rejoin him 15 years into his second marriage to a unitarian minister who, he suspects, gets a little too high on her own goodness. In Stroutland, people often are good in intriguing ways, or at least strive to be.

But hold on – in the town where Bob now lives, two local residents are none other than Olive Kitteridge, twice widowed and 90, and Lucy Barton, who like Strout (b 1956) is in her late 60s.

This means that *Tell Me Everything*, which might be the title of any Strout book, is the grand, glorious confluence of three distinct novel sequences. It should probably be called *Olive and Lucy and Bob, Again* if that didn't sound like a story for pre-schoolers.

It's not always clear who is narrating these episodic novels, which conceal their craft in rambling folksiness. 'And then this happened,' they frequently say.

Here it's more unclear than ever who is in charge of the story. Whoever it is, they remind the reader of what happened in previous books with little Wiki entries.

'It may be helpful at this point to speak briefly of Bob's background,' they say early on, 'and of Lucy's.'

To get a grip on the full history, actually it would be better just to take a deep breath and dive into the two Olives, the four Lucys and the one Bob book first. They're so bingeably appealing that a total Strout immersion promises only pleasure.

On the surface, her world can feel like a tolerable place to hang out. Maine's seasons turn; the leaves sprout, go golden and fall.

'It might be fair to say,' says Strout, 'that people who have lived there for years take this beauty internally.'

While clanging world events – from the Holocaust and Vietnam to Covid and now Ukraine – are never far from her mind, Strout's people manage to coexist in a watchful, Garrison Keillorish quiescence. Then, every so often, she goes and punches a kidney.

Her characters somehow sweat the big stuff – marital betrayal, ungrateful kids, alcoholism, cancer, poverty, grief and sexual abuse – because, as Bob says with a grouchy sigh, 'that's life'.

'People are shits,' reckons Charlene, a friend of Lucy's who votes Trump. 'People are people,' adds Lucy, a pixieish magus who tunes curiously into the lives of others.

But then she is a writer, who's been read by everyone else in these books. 'I thought your memoirs were a little self-pitying, myself,' Olive tells her, blunt as ever.

The latest character to fall under Lucy's spell is poor old open-hearted Bob, who since lockdown has been going on regular strolls with her. No one hears him like her, so that he must quietly conclude he is head over heels. Perhaps she is, too, but this is Bob's book.

With a low sperm count and childless, looking like crap in baggy jeans and shaggy white hair, Bob is fated to be avuncular to a whole town. Lucy calls him a 'sin-eater' because he helps all around him atone.

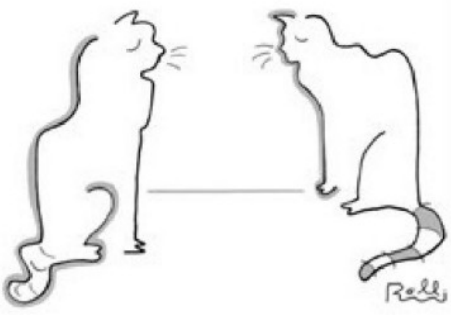
He delivers food and watered-down gin to an old lady, whose five children never visit and who asks him to mark her underpants with a big B so she knows back from front. Then, in what passes for a main plot, he takes on the legal defence of a harmless loner accused of murdering his toxic mother.

Strout being Strout, her interest is less in criminal law than in the wellsprings of crime. It's the same nose for narrative that brings Lucy to Olive's retirement home, where they trade stories about the baffling, beguiling weirdness of ordinary humanity.

'All these unrecorded lives,' Lucy wails, 'and people just *live* them.'

They're not unrecorded any more. One day, Strout will start bumping her lead characters off. Until then, we must relish them telling us everything – about themselves, about us all.

Jasper Rees is author of Let's Do It: The Authorised Biography of Victoria Wood



'I tolerate you, too. With all my heart'

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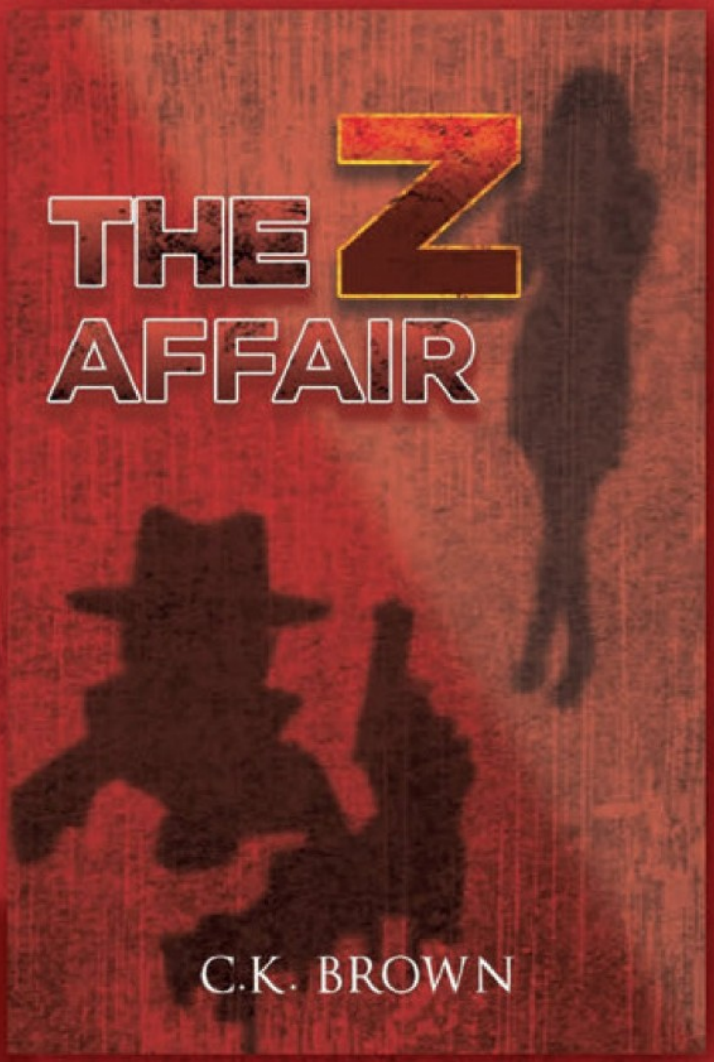

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A Life in Books – Lady Antonia Fraser

Sex education of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette

I never expected to find myself considering the subject of male impotence while researching in the British Library.

Then an extraordinary coincidence took place, involving that research in the British Library and a cricket match in Berkshire.

It all began with poor Marie Antoinette, sent away from Austria to France far too young. The wedding night of two teenagers – the future Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette – was witnessed by savage courtiers, and found distinctly wanting.

Naturally, I had to probe the unfortunate failure of the young Louis and consider the various theories that might explain it.

Was it in fact the fault of Marie Antoinette? That seemed a bit unfair, considering her extreme youth. Or was it, as seemed far more likely, the failure of the royal French bridegroom?

Louis happened to leave various indications of medical trouble, carrying with them the possibility of serious infection. It was at this point that the word *phimosis* crossed my path. Phimosis is a narrowing of the foreskin opening so that it can't be retracted.

In the morning, in the British Library, I read of the possibility that Louis was a sufferer. In the afternoon, at a cricket match, I sat next to an agreeable doctor, who happened to be an expert in the subject. An appointment with him followed. The doctor explained how phimosis could not have been Louis XVI's problem. Good for cricket!

The next step was to consider that if phimosis was not the culprit (Louis's diary revealed an athleticism that did not fit chronologically with this condition), then what was?

This took longer. In the end, I reached the stage, tracing the young queen's career, of understanding that both the king and queen were psychologically wounded when it came to sex.

The day finally came when the king 'made it'. And the queen lay back in her beautiful bed at Versailles and said, '*Encore!*'

At least I'm sure she must have said something like that.

Antonia Fraser is author of Marie Antoinette

Brill quills

CHRISTOPHER HOWSE

The Medieval Scriptorium: Making Books in the Middle Ages

By Sara J Charles

Reaktion Books £16.99

A red pillar box outside 78 Banbury Road, Oxford, was installed by the Post Office in 1885 specially for James Murray, the first editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, so voluminous was his correspondence with contributors.

For his dictionary staff, he built a big, corrugated-iron shed, damp, dark and full of fumes, half-sunk in the ground, which he called the Scriptorium.

How different, we may think, from the lofty, stone-arched scriptoria where monks produced dazzling copies of manuscripts for centuries, till Gutenberg and his chums spoilt everything with printing. On a wonderful plan of a monastery, drawn in about 820 AD at St Gall (Switzerland) on parchment 44 inches wide, the little, enclosed world is laid out and labelled: the church and guesthouse, the cemetery and beehives and, beside the east end of the church, a library with windows in two walls and a caption – *Infra sedes scribentium*, 'Writing seats below'.

Yet, on page 133, Sara J Charles, a librarian and historian of the medieval book, asks of the Scriptorium, 'Did it exist?' She answers, 'Well, sort of.' Rather than one room being built for the task, work might have been done in the vaulted cloister round the quiet garth, perhaps in individual carrels.

Nicholas of Clairvaux, an associate of St Bernard in the 12th century, used the diminutive form *scriptoriolum* for his writing compartment, or called it *domunculum*, 'little house'. There, in permanent lockdown, he communed with the best scholars past and present, and with the word of God.

'I hear the blackbird verse high/ quavering lines on vellum leaves,' one Irish scribe in about 845 AD wrote in the margin, 'Dear Lord, thank you for your word/ I write well beneath the trees.' But a French scribe in the ninth century exclaimed, 'How hard it is to write! It strains the eyes, breaks the kidneys, tires all your limbs at the same time.'

The kindly Sara Charles finds such complaints 'relatable' – but what would that man have done if he hadn't become a monk? Plough the muddy land or cut firewood in the dark forest, probably. The cloister was no colder than the Bodleian Library in the early-19th century, which had no heating for fear of fire.

I suspect that more frustrating than keeping to a scribal task all day on a hard seat might have been interruptions every couple of hours to sing the Psalms, in the monastic church, for the seven-times-daily office. Or perhaps the two tasks each made sense of the other.

Another ninth-century Irish monk left celebrated lines on his cat, Pangur Ban: 'Hunting mice is his delight,/ Hunting words I sit all night.' But a professional scribe writing 600 years later noted a robin keeping him company after his cat strayed: 'It is a wonder: the robin staying with us, and the cat fleeing from us.'

Some scribes decorated the holes encountered in the parchment; one drew a mole-like head emerging. Others darned holes with multicoloured silks. Holes would have originated in a nick made by the workman skinning the calf from which the vellum came, or in an insect's puncture of the living beast's hide.

Sara Charles is particularly good in describing the manufacture of parchment, inks and colours (including the deadly, arsenic-based yellow – orpiment). I had not realised that sheepskin has an anti-tamper quality. Unlike calfskin, which allows ink to be scraped off and new words written instead, sheepskin, because of its structure, becomes a mess if you try to scrape writing away. That is why it was used for deeds and contracts.

Another of the author's virtues is care in briefly explaining terms such as uncial and minuscule. The typeface you are reading here takes its form from a deliberately antiquarian Renaissance Humanistic hand adapting the Caroline minuscule developed at the court of Charlemagne around the year 800 AD.

In 1492, the polymath abbot Johannes Trithemius defiantly declared, 'Printed books will never be the equivalent of

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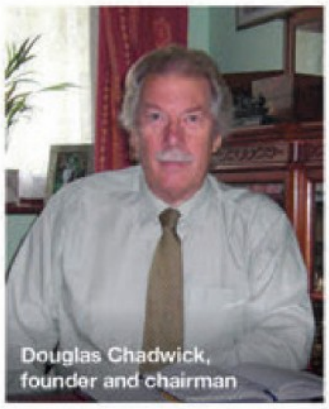
Douglas Chadwick, founder and chairman

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handwritten codices, especially as printed books are often deficient in spelling and appearance.' He was right. We have no experience of the marvellous co-operative transformation of local materials, hide and oak gall and earths, into a beautiful, integrated codex to last a thousand years.

Christopher Howse is author of
AD: 2,000 Years of Christianity

Kings of Fleet Street

CHRISTOPHER BRAY

The Newsmongers: A History of Tabloid Journalism

By Terry Kirby

Reaktion Books £20

Years ago, when I was a young sub-editor on the *Mirror*, the boss called me over and asked if I'd done the stars for the Saturday just gone.

Yes, I had.

'Well you put *next* Saturday's in, Chris.'

I winced. 'I'm just warning you,' the editor said. 'The next sub to f**k up the stars is out the door.'

Knees knocking, I returned to my desk. An older colleague, who'd been with the paper for years (and was paid about four times what I was, for working half the hours), piped up, 'You know, back in the day, if you'd cocked up, you'd have just told the gaffer, "I was pissed," and he'd have said, "Ah, right. That's OK, then," and that'd have been the end of it.'

I was reminded of this sorry incident while reading Terry Kirby's *The Newsmongers*, a history of tabloid journalism through which booze swills like blood through an abattoir.

At the *Daily Mirror* under Hugh Cudlipp, executives were drinking as soon as they entered the office – although until 11am only beer was on offer. After that, the Chablis and Sauternes came out, and then it was on to lunch to grease the great and good with aperitifs, more wine, brandies etc.

At one such lunch, the paper's poetry editor, Kingsley Amis (those were the days), rendered himself so incapable that the taxi driver booked to get him home would take the job only once Mike Molloy, the *Mirror*'s then editor, had agreed to buy him a new cab should Mr Amis mess up his present car.

Kirby, a senior lecturer in journalism at Goldsmith's, doesn't tell that story. But he shares many others in a book that, while being as breezy as it ought to be, keeps a weather eye on the moral wreckage the red-tops have wreaked.

True, *The Newsmongers* starts slowly, with an overly long account of the penny dreadfuls of the Victorian era. But it soon finds its feet amid the antic hay of the Murdoch/Kelvin MacKenzie era.

'Hop off, you Frogs'. 'Eastbenders'. 'Stick it up your Junta'. Your inner roundhead so wants to disapprove. But we are all of us cavaliers too, and I'll wager you remember what stories those *Sun* headlines referred to – and that you smile while doing so.

At one point, when I was reading the book, my wife asked me why I was giggling so much and I shamefully confided that I couldn't stop looking at a reproduction of the paper's appalling/appealing/appalling Falklands War splash, 'Gotcha!'.

By the time Kirby reminded me of the page-3 strap 'The Sun Says Knickers to Argentina' (not to mention Lord Longford's description of the paper as 'Antipodean erotica'), I was on the floor.

Certainly you don't get headlines like those in the serious papers. Does it follow that MacKenzie was right when he told Alan Rusbridger that he (MacKenzie) and his boys could get tomorrow's *Guardian* out, no trouble, while Rusbridger's team couldn't put a *Sun* together if they had all week?

I think it does. To be sure, the redoubtable Trevor Kavanagh notwithstanding, the *Sun* of MacKenzie's heyday would have been hard-pressed to find anyone able to write a political column as snakily subtle as those of Peter Jenkins or Hugo Young.

But, on the straight-news front, a tabloid production team could knock up a broadsheet in the time it would take the broadsheet boys to realise that, on a tabloid, you write the headline first and build the page around it.

As for being able to cut and shape a stringer's long, rambling court report into a two-para nib, even those *Guardian* hacks who've read Michael Frayn's *Towards the End of the Morning* (with its unimpeachable advice to would-be subs – 'Cut the first and last sentences and any adjectives. And remove all attempts at jokes') wouldn't know where to start.

Kirby quotes Donald Zec, one of the *Mirror*'s star feature-writers in the fifties, remembering how the intro to his first news story – 'Firemen were called to extinguish a blaze' – was poeticised by a sub into 'Clad only in her scanties, a blonde, 22-year-old nightclub hostess climbed along a 30ft parapet in a Soho fire last night to rescue her pet cat, Timothy.'

Even if you can imagine Rusbridger et al doing something similar, you sure can't see Katharine Viner's team at today's *Guardian* pulling it off.

On the other hand, Viner would surely approve of Kirby's frequent nods, when discussing blondes and scanties, to 'the male gaze' – a reference to the kind of feminist film theory the tabloids might have been invented to laugh at.

Christopher Bray wrote
Sean Connery: The Measure of a Man

Prosper & gamble

IVO DAWNAY

On the Edge: The Art of Risking Everything

By Nate Silver

Allen Lane £30

You need to be a statistician or maths geek to get full value from Nate Silver's latest book. But then you can get a considerable percentage of value even if you are not.

In fact, that is what the book is all about: percentages, probabilities and what is a good bet – the abstruse concept of 'positive expected value' (+EV).

Silver was a poker-player who evolved his methodology through baseball bets and his FiveThirtyEight website which predicted Congressional races with alarming accuracy.

In 2016, he gave Donald Trump a 29-per-cent chance of winning; Hillary Clinton scored at 71 per cent. Most pollsters and commentators before the vote said his figures showed he was an idiot. They gave Trump a much lower chance of success.

In the event, the Donald won, of course, but if you had taken a bet on Silver's odds, you would have received disproportionate returns of five times your stake.

Yes, it's complicated; and this barely O-Level mathematician was lost half the time. But more interesting than the numbers, probability formulas and game theory that run like a numbing seam through these dense 472 pages are Silver's sociological observations.

He believes that the world divides into risk-takers – whom he calls, rather pretentiously, The River – and the rest of us, named The (implicitly plodding) Village.

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of us peasant Villagers. They include Elon Musk (Tesla/X), Peter Thiel (PayPal) and Sam Altman (AI) – and most of the denizens of Silicon Valley and their fat-walleted buddies in the venture-capital community: capitalism's Great Disrupters.

It is by knowing the odds on the unexpected that these people get rich. Above all, it is their willingness to take risks – quite often to fail – and then to try again.

The book is full of fascinating insights into actuarial calculations made on the basis of probabilities. For example, US government agencies value a human life at $10m. So if spending $100m to remove asbestos from Manhattan office buildings would save 20 cancer deaths, then, at $5m a head, that is a bargain. If it would save only five lives, not so much – and the asbestos stays.

The chapter perhaps most comprehensible to the layman comes in the middle of the book when Silver sums up the qualities of successful risk-takers. They are 'conscientiously contrarian', abhor mediocrity, are comfortable with losing, play the long game and are insanely competitive.

In short, they are gods and we are Untermenschen and, hence, their playthings.

To the Riverians, incremental change – politics, for example – is entirely uninteresting. Long odds are another matter. An example comes in poker. In a chart, Silver shows that a prudent player has a 3 in 5 chance of making a small profit; a skilled bluffer, just 1 in 4.

But when it comes to winning the jackpot, the prudent punter (a Villager, no doubt) has just a 1-in-4-billion chance, whereas the Riverian skilled bluffer's chances are 1 in 1,400.

The risk-takers are less interested in wealth than in winning – money is merely a way to keep the score (against their Riverian rivals, of course – Villagers are not even also-rans).

It's hardly surprising, then, that this is a book that could only ever have been written by an American. It explains the USA's extraordinary commercial primacy, and also its fondness for crude, one-dimensional materialism.

One chart tells it all. While across the world, outside the US, there are 219 'unicorns' – new private companies valued at $1bn or more – there are 654 across America, 290 in the San Francisco Bay area alone.

This explains too the astonishing inequalities that characterise our age. At no point does Silver question whether it is desirable that these deeply unattractive people now dominate the world. His Manichaean vision is all survival of the cleverest and, implicitly, to Hell with the rest of us.

In his conclusion, Silver envisions new values for the Brave New AI-Powered World that lies before us.

In place of the French Enlightenment's *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* he offers fuzzy concepts about Agency, Plurality and Reciprocity – a distinctly Riverian rule book. But one has the distinct impression that if these are values that suit Silicon Valley, they are unlikely to be much use to us Villagers.

If we accept Silver's general analysis – and, as he is obviously astonishingly clever, I fear we must – then the big question is how do we control these maniacal tyros?

According to Oxfam, the richest one per cent have grabbed nearly two-thirds of all new wealth ($42 trillion) created since 2020 – almost twice as much money as the bottom 99 per cent of the world's population.

My rather British, sour-grapes response to these serial wealth-generators is not to ask how we join them, but to wonder how we stop them before they take the lot.

Ivo Dawnay was Washington bureau chief of the Sunday Telegraph

The Cromwell Road

PAUL LAY

Oliver Cromwell: Commander in Chief

By Ronald Hutton

Yale £25

Those of us who have written about Oliver Cromwell and the extraordinarily dramatic period of British history he dominated can still be surprised at just how contentious a figure he remains more than 350 years after his death.

And this is despite a slew of recent, acclaimed studies that have sought to bring nuance to this period that threatens – at last, and rightly – to usurp the Tudors as the focus of British popular history.

Publishers, it seems, have caught up with the age that saw the rise of a nascent British Empire and the creation of Britain's modern army; that unified, albeit by force, the constituent nations of these islands; that established the political and ecclesiastical divisions that mark the country to this day; and that offered Britain's only experiment in republicanism.

If history is an 'endless argument', as Leopold von Ranke claimed, then Cromwell is the perfect subject. And Ronald Hutton, Professor of History at Bristol University, is a peerless guide.

Hutton impressed with the first volume of his biography – *The Making of Oliver Cromwell*. That succeeded in surmounting the challenge all biographers of Cromwell must confront: that the first 40 years of his life left little more than 'a sparse collection of legal and official documents, with a few letters and a single speech'.

Hutton made a virtue of this tentative, uncertain but enthralling process, inviting the reader into a shared experience of discovery, as Cromwell trod the path from obscure provincial to national figure.

By 1647, the beginning of this second volume – every bit as good in its vivid narrative as the first, though much more richly sourced – Cromwell has established himself as a 'front-rank politician as well as a general, one of the great cavalry leaders of English history, equivalent to Joachim Murat in the Napoleonic Wars and Jeb Stuart in the American Civil War'.

Though second-in-command of the parliamentary army to Lord Fairfax, it is Cromwell who was and is the more compelling figure. He assumes, through sheer force of personality, the mantle of mediator between the king and the army – just as he did with Parliament and the army, though Hutton's Cromwell, no intellectual, is more concerned with religious liberties than with constitutional matters. Those are left to his gifted deputies, John Lambert, Henry Ireton and Thomas Harrison.

This is the period when, exasperated by the outbreak and bloodshed of a Second Civil War, Cromwell plays a key role, along with his beloved Ireton – who was to die in the Irish campaign, a bitter loss to the future protectoral regime – in the trial and execution of Charles I, 'that man of blood'. Charles I was a figure who, in his certainties and bold strokes, mirrors, according to Hutton, his nemesis, Cromwell.

Hutton, who sometimes goes overboard in describing Cromwell's tendencies towards religious fundamentalism, but who concedes that he mellowed with time, declares his own prejudices to the reader:

'The king's violent, and unprecedented, end has traditionally been viewed in two opposing ways. One, echoing those who brought it about, has been to represent it as the outcome of his own folly and perfidy. The other, echoing the royalists, has been to see him as

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a martyr. The present book tends more to the latter view.'

The most daunting prospect Hutton faces in this second volume is how to deal with the massacres at Drogheda and Wexford during the conquest of Ireland in 1649-50. The events have stained Cromwell's reputation, especially among Irish nationalists, ever since.

Hutton deals judiciously and exactingly with the conflicting, contradictory evidence of Cromwell's nine months in Ireland, absorbing recent scholarship. He concludes, correctly in my opinion, that 'the extent of Cromwell's own severity was subsequently grossly exaggerated in nationalist tradition'.

Cromwell, according to Hutton, had a 'normally cautious way of proceeding in politics', very different from his ruthless decisiveness on the battlefield. His emphasis on 'divine will' or providence – we might call it sheer good luck – was another characteristic, 'as is his evasion of personal responsibility for a key decision'.

Cromwell was, as with the example of his late arrival after Pride's Purge, which reduced Parliament to a Puritan rump, 'practised at not knowing', as the historian Blair Worden so brilliantly put it.

We will no doubt see much more of this slippery, evasive Cromwell in a third volume focusing on the Protectorate, established in 1653, from when Cromwell ruled as a king in all but name.

I cannot wait.

Paul Lay is author of Providence Lost: The Rise and Fall of Cromwell's Protectorate

OLDIE NOVEL OF THE MONTH

Massacre at Mycenae

DAISY DUNN

The Voyage Home

By Pat Barker

Hamish Hamilton £20

'Men begin and end their lives as helpless lumps of flesh in the hands of women, and all the years between – power, success, wealth, fame, even victory in war – are merely a doomed attempt at escape.'

In a sentence, Pat Barker skewers every last achievement of Agamemnon, King of Mycenae, who led the Greek army to victory over Troy in Homer's *Iliad*.

The Voyage Home is the dramatic sequel to *The Silence of the Girls* and *The Women of Troy*, Barker's bestselling novels inspired by the Trojan War.

While those books reimagined the events of that conflict from the perspective of the women entangled in it, this one is concerned with the homecoming of its most ardent commander.

After ten years on the battlefield, Agamemnon is returning to his wife, Clytemnestra, his ship creaking with spoils, among them the Trojan princess-priestess Cassandra.

Outwardly, Agamemnon is triumphant, boasting of his success over the citadel: 'I didn't just take it – I f***ing pulverised it.'

That he is overcompensating for an inner turmoil becomes increasingly apparent. The king is, in short, a mess. Racked by nightmares about his daughter Iphigenia, whom he sacrificed for the promise of a prevailing wind for his voyage to Troy, he is also aimless without a war.

Like most of the Greek warriors in Barker's trilogy, Agamemnon vents his frustration on the women around him.

Some of the most stomach-churning passages in the book tell of his sexual exploits. He is rough, experimental, grotesque in body and act. He enters the baths and 'His swelling cock breaks the water like a seal.'

Barker relishes portraying the foulness of the world he has helped to create. Her pages are saturated with memories of rape, and depictions of physical incontinence and blood.

In Barker's previous book, Achilles's sex slave, Briseis, faced the prospect of giving birth to 'Achilles himself, miniaturised, reduced to the size of a homunculus'. Now, it is Cassandra's turn to contemplate what it means to carry the 'brat' of her late father's enemy. Mentally, she is more stable than she appears.

Her story is told by her middle-aged slave Ritsa, an ingenious invention who dazzles with intelligence and lustiness. To enjoy this book you need not have read Barker's previous books, but if you have, you may remember Ritsa as a confidante of Briseis. Her initial struggle to warm to her new mistress – and their slowly developing friendship – are brilliantly drawn.

While Cassandra believes wholeheartedly in her gift of prophecy, Ritsa is prey to Apollo's curse, which dictated that nothing Cassandra said should ever be believed. The image of her own body lying beside that of Agamemnon haunts the young priestess from the beginning.

'I don't not believe you,' Ritsa tells her, 'I just don't understand ... Is what you see fixed?'

Cassandra does not know, but we do, and Barker fully exploits the dramatic irony of this. Her main source this time is not Homer, but Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, a tragic trilogy first performed in Athens in the mid-fifth century BC. We know early on that Agamemnon and Cassandra are destined to die at Clytemnestra's hands. How Clytemnestra feels about her soon-to-be victims nevertheless fascinates.

Is Clytemnestra jealous of the younger woman her husband has taken into his bed? Ritsa initially thinks so. For all the hatred she feels towards Agamemnon, Clytemnestra looks unsettled when she sees him lead his prize concubine into the palace. Cassandra, too, presupposes envy on the part of the beleaguered queen.

Yet there is something else. Cassandra is the age Iphigenia would be, had she lived. Is Clytemnestra reducing herself to her husband's level by killing her?

The plot of *The Voyage Home* is in many ways more exciting than that of the preceding two books. And while I found the quotation of English nursery rhymes – 'Ladybird, ladybird, fly away home', 'There was an old woman who swallowed a fly' – in place of Greek aphorisms jarring, the prose more often delights. Oh, to envisage the sun as 'no more than a rheumy eye peering through gaps in a bank of black cloud'!

Barker had Aeschylus's three tragedies at her fingertips, and centres most of her narrative on the events of the first, *Agamemnon*.

I cannot help but wonder whether she will pursue the story further. Orestes and Electra, the orphaned children, receive comparatively short shrift in this novel.

This is not to say that the ending is not satisfying – it grows wings as it departs from the Aeschylean prototype. There would certainly be scope – and no doubt demand – for another book or two.

Daisy Dunn wrote The Missing Thread: A New History of the Ancient World Through the Women Who Shaped It

'How about you suck your own blood tonight?'

We still like to be beside the seaside

Soaring Mediterranean temperatures will revive British resorts

DAVID HORSPOOL

Have we spoiled Europe?

By 'we', I mean the British. And by 'Europe', I mean the bits we visit on our summer holidays. Mass protests against tourists have been taking place in Mallorca and Barcelona.

Ever since the advent of mass tourism, and the orgy of dodgy development that accompanied it, we've been told, 'You should have seen the place before we got there – it was so "unspoiled".'

For anyone who's visited Torremelinos (once an Andalusian fishing village, now a city of roughly 70,000, crammed with high-rises) or the gimcrack developments in parts of the Canaries, it's hard to disagree.

But superior Brits have been telling their less-well-travelled compatriots that it's all too late for a long time. Lucy Lethbridge, in her book on Britons abroad, *Tourists*, mentions the Rev Henry Christmas, who in 1850 advised that 'Those who wish to see Spain while it is worth seeing must go soon'.

The supposed casualty of the rise of the foreign package holiday was the British seaside resort: too cold and wet, with none of the easy charm of the Mediterranean. After a brief comeback for staycations during pandemic travel restrictions, it seemed normal service would be resumed. But now that the Mediterranean summers have become so lethally punishing – as witnessed in the tragic death from heat exhaustion of Dr Michael Mosley on Symi in June – the attractions of our milder if occasionally wetter climate might be reviving.

One benefit for the British seaside from the flight abroad to the sun was that, frequently, we avoided a similar outbreak of ugly development.

Not that our seaside towns are in some prelapsarian, unblemished state. Many are just as much the creation of commerce and entrepreneurial gambles as anything on the Costa del Sol, but the development happened earlier, and has left fewer of them buried under concrete.

Princely Regency town: Tenby

Take the Pembrokeshire resort of Tenby. It still looks much as it did two centuries ago, with its fine Regency buildings painted in pastel colours. A 1961 block of flats, Croft Court, is as far as post-war Brutalism got.

Tenby as a tourist destination was the brainchild of one man, the Carmarthen MP Sir William Paxton, a businessman who had made his fortune in India and adopted west Wales as a new home. In 1802, he began buying up land in Tenby, then a dilapidated and mostly deserted town, and set about filling it with the sort of villas and bathing establishments he hoped could attract a wealthy clientele.

Paxton was tapping into a fashion for sea bathing, long deemed to have healthy properties – and taken up in his day, crucially, by those at the top of society.

He opened a sea-bathing house next to the harbour. It has long since closed for its original purpose, but still retains, on a plaque, the Euripides motto that Sir William chose for it, later adopted as the motto of the town itself: '*Thalassa kluzei panta t'anthropon kaka*' – 'The sea washes away all the ills of men'.

Paxton's gamble worked. Tenby became a fashionable resort. As recorded on another Tenby plaque, Lord Nelson stayed as part of his celebrated *ménage à trois* with Lady Hamilton and her husband, another Sir William. The seaside's reputation for naughtiness goes back a long way.

Paxton himself was following a royal model. Weymouth owed its rise to the regular visits of George III, while Brighton, of course, had George's son, the Prince Regent, to thank for its adoption by the aristocracy and Indo-Islamic buildings.

The key to a seaside town's retaining some of its 18th- and 19th-century cachet is a drop in popularity around the time of the rise of the cheap foreign holiday.

But not everywhere was so lucky. Margate was cursed (or blessed, if you're a fan of modern architecture) with uninterrupted popularity. So it was deemed ripe for the exciting modern development heralded by the construction of Arlington House, a block of flats with a promised 'park and buy' commercial development at its base. What could be nicer?

With its lifts decked out in Carrara marble, Arlington House was aimed at a more pretentious clientele than the day-trippers celebrated in Chas and Dave's hit *Margate*: 'You can keep yer Costa Brava/ I'm tellin' ya mate I'd rather/ 'Ave a day down Margate with all me family.'

Today, the best place from which to enjoy Arlington House is inside it, where every flat promises a sea view, and you can't see the building itself.

Artists have taken over from royalty in giving their seal of approval to Britain's seaside resorts. Margate has Tracey Emin, Tenby is associated with the photographer Martin Parr, and Weston-super-Mare had the dubious honour of a Banksy themed 'bemusement park', Dismaland.

Seaside artistic associations go back further. Tenby was the birthplace of Augustus John, and Margate was home to Turner. If Weston lacks an artistic pedigree, further west, St Ives began attracting artists in the 19th century, reaching a zenith with the St Ives School of Barbara Hepworth, Ben Nicholson et al.

Whether we go for art, architecture or air, the historic charms of the British seaside haven't faded yet.

WHITCOMBERD / GETTY

Commonplace Corner

Who really enjoys life? Kids when you get down to it – kids are the only ones who really get a kick out of being alive.
Nell Dunn

I'm the shyest megalomaniac you're ever likely to meet.
Kate Bush

What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?
Henry James

Euthanasia is against my religion so I decided to murder her.
Joe Orton, Loot

One must keep a few smiles aside to laugh at oneself on joyless days.
Charles Trenet

... the satisfaction of finding someone else to take control of things.
Evelyn Waugh, Officers and Gentlemen

In any moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing, the next best thing is the wrong thing, and the worst thing you can do is nothing.
Theodore Roosevelt

The printing press is the greatest weapon in the armoury of the modern commander.
Lawrence of Arabia

Shyest megalomaniac: Kate Bush

You miss 100 per cent of the shots you don't take.
Wayne Gretzky, ice-hockey player

The human heart, at whatever age, opens only to the heart that opens in return.
Maria Edgeworth

I must confess that I lead a miserable life. For almost two years, I have ceased to attend any social functions, just because I find it impossible to say to people, 'I am deaf.' If I had any other profession, I might be able to cope with my infirmity; but in my profession, it is a terrible handicap.
Beethoven

I pretended to be somebody I wanted to be until finally I became that person. Or he became me.
Cary Grant

We do not remember days; we remember moments.
Cesare Pavese (1908-50)

I became famous, I think, really because of the interpretation of other people's songs, way back when, and that's what I enjoy the most. And I'm a lazy bugger.
Rod Stewart

A great city, whose image dwells in the memory of man, is the type of some great idea. Rome represents conquest; Faith hovers over the towers of Jerusalem; and Athens embodies the pre-eminent quality of the antique world, Art.
Benjamin Disraeli

Ambition can take the place of everything – even sex.
Bruce Forsyth

Wealth – any income that is at least one hundred dollars more a year than the income of one's wife's sister's husband.
H L Mencken

TOM PLANT

Builder's tea

Chai? Camomile? Ayurvedic masculine support?

No, thanks; just ordinary tea, please.

Oh dear. Here we go again. Eyebrows raised, lips pursed – my hosts are looking as if I've asked to borrow their haemorrhoid cream.

But no, all I want is a cup of tea. And yes, I have tried the other stuff and some of it is quite nice. Mostly though, I prefer ordinary tea. Or tea, as it used to be called.

The kettle-owners then struggle to process my inexplicable position. What can I mean? I am, they used to think, not quite an idiot. Finally, they rationalise my madness as follows: 'Aah,' they say knowingly, 'builder's tea!'

They seem to think I am, like Marie Antoinette, playing at being a peasant. Or perhaps I am my own post-modern art installation: 'Sentient being in the south of England drinking ordinary tea!' I am obviously being ironic. Next I shall be walking about with a pencil behind my ear.

'There you go,' they grin, in on the joke now and feeling the world has regained its axis. 'Builder's tea!'

But, look, this is absolutely not builder's tea.

Builder's tea, if you want to know, starts with a cheap, 'brown label' tea bag made with a high proportion of Kenyan for a strong, bitter flavour. Traditionally brewed in a blue-and-white-striped, chipped enamelware mug that holds at least a pint, it has between three and eight heaped teaspoonfuls of sugar and is whitened with sterilised milk. That is – or was – builder's tea.

What I am drinking, on the other hand, is what is now commonly known as 'breakfast tea' – a blend of fine, mainly Indian teas, such as Assam and Ceylon. Made with fast-boiling water and fresh milk, it really is very nice.

As for my silly hosts, it is time you all got over yourselves. If I want tea, can I please just have tea, without being sneered at or accused of changing my occupation?

Thank you. That was lovely.

ANTHONY WHITEHEAD

SMALL DELIGHTS

Pulling out a weed and the whole root comes out.
ELIZABETH SADLER, WALTON-ON-THE-NAZE, ESSEX

Email small delights to editorial@theoldie.co.uk

Arts

FILM

HARRY MOUNT

TWISTERS (12A)

Clever oldies will remember disaster films from *Titanic* (1953) to *The Towering Inferno* (1974).

They never really went away – there have been six *Titanic* films alone in the last 70 years. But they have gone out of fashion a bit.

So *Twisters* is a welcome return to edge-of-your-seat, heart-in-your-mouth disaster films – as well as being the imaginatively named sequel to *Twister* (1996), written and produced by Michael Crichton.

It really isn't much more than the tale of tornado-chasers – either being scooped up into the air to certain death by an Oklahoma twister or dodging them by the skin of their teeth in their battered pick-up trucks.

A conventional love story is laid on top of the horror scenes. Kate (north-London girl Daisy Edgar-Jones, pulling off a very convincing American accent) is a tornado scientist. She thinks she's found a way of collapsing tornadoes by seeding them with chemicals, and then sees her boyfriend killed by a twister. So she's horrified when Tyler (charming Glen Powell), a 'tornado wrangler', makes a mint through selling disaster T-shirts and posting tornado videos on YouTube.

It's all pretty formulaic stuff. You know that formula will involve the two best-looking members of the cast, Edgar-Jones and Powell, hating and then snogging each other. And early on there's a lot of dialogue (the writers include Michael Crichton again) praising or criticising the tornadoes with a limited range of expletives – all to a dreary, thudding soundtrack.

But, still, somewhere along the way, you're gripped by the sheer terror brought on by tornadoes. Disaster-film producers realise that real-life horrors – such as the *Titanic* sinking – are much more affecting than fantasy ones.

Remember the ludicrously unscary appearance of *The Thing* (1982), a shape-shifting alien, or *The Blob* (1958), a carnivorous, amoeboid alien?

Perhaps all keen filmgoers are also from childhood for ever traumatised by the scene where a tornado whisks Dorothy's home from Kansas to Munchkinland in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). Thus Judy Garland's wise, bathetic line to her dog after the tornado, 'Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas any more.'

Kansas, like Oklahoma – where *Twister* and *Twisters* were set and filmed – is in the heart of Tornado Alley, a vast stretch of land running down the middle of America from North Dakota to Texas. There are more tornadoes in America than anywhere else in the world. The weather is tragically ideal, with cool air hitting warm air, sparking off thunderstorms.

The apocalyptic scenes in *Twisters*, where whirlwinds cut swathes through Oklahoma towns, are not an exaggeration. Already this year there have been more than 800 tornadoes in America, killing 37 people.

And so the tornadoes in *Twisters* are half-chillingly, half-deliciously convincing. Director Lee Isaac Chung and cinematographer Dan Mindel cleverly build up the power of successive tornadoes throughout the film until the final big one in El Reno, Oklahoma.

It's no coincidence that it's set there. El Reno is where the biggest tornado ever recorded struck on 31st May 2013. 2.6 miles wide and whirling at 313 mph, it killed four tornado-chasers – an inspiration for the opening scene of *Twisters*, where the chasers are whisked to their deaths.

In an echo of another real tragedy, the *Twisters* denouement takes place in an El Reno cinema, ripped apart by a tornado – just like the one that neatly, brutally plucked out the screen of a cinema in Mayfield, Kentucky, in 2021 and killed 76 people.

Watching a cinema being peeled open in Oklahoma while I was sitting comfortably in an intact cinema in Soho was strangely disturbing and reassuring at the same time – which I suppose is the point of a good old disaster film.

In a whirl: Kate (Daisy Edgar-Jones), Tyler (Glen Powell) and Javi (Anthony Ramos)

THEATRE

WILLIAM COOK

A CHORUS LINE

Touring, until 5th October

Fifty years ago, American choreographer Michael Bennett came up with a great idea for a backstage musical. Rather than going behind the scenes at a Broadway show, why not focus on the auditions? And rather than telling the stories of the leading players, why not focus on the chorus line?

Bennett's concept was inspired. As TV shows like *Britain's Got Talent* prove, we all love to eavesdrop on the ruthless culling of the casting process – and unknown wannabes are far more appealing than self-entitled stars.

What made *A Chorus Line* unique was that Bennett based this musical on a series of tape-recorded interviews with jobbing dancers, in which they revealed the hardships and heartaches of their working (and private) lives.

Directed by Bennett, with music by Marvin Hamlisch (fresh from his triumph with *The Way We Were*), *A Chorus Line* was a colossal hit, winning countless awards and running for a record-breaking 15 years on Broadway.

When the show became a box-office sensation, those workaday dancers who'd shared their stories with Bennett were aghast. Foolishly, they'd signed away their rights for a single dollar. Thankfully, Bennett subsequently gave them a share of the royalties (about $10,000 a head per annum at the peak of the show's popularity – but that was just a fraction of the millions he made).

A Chorus Line has since had several highly successful revivals, but the only version I'd seen was the tepid 1985 movie, directed by Richard Attenborough. So I approached this latest reboot, by Leicester's Curve Theatre (at London's Sadler's Wells, then touring to Norwich, Canterbury, Birmingham, Cardiff, Edinburgh and High Wycombe), with considerable trepidation. My wife had seen the movie too and hated it. I had to twist her arm to get her to come along.

I'm glad to say our fears were utterly confounded. This exhilarating production sweeps you along with barely a chance to catch your breath. It's under two hours (with no interval) and it feels even shorter. Most musicals are at least half an hour too long. This one actually left me wanting more.

It combines upbeat dance numbers with heartfelt monologues that reveal what these auditionees are really thinking. Like most performers, behind the showbiz bravado they're terribly insecure. It's this contrast that sustains your interest. When they're dancing, they're full of confidence. When they're not, they're nervous wrecks. As the story unfolds, a crowd of anonymous also-rans becomes a group of living individuals, each with their own quirks and foibles. By the end, you're rooting for all of them, hoping they somehow all get hired.

GARY SMITH

A chorus of approval: Cassie (Carly Mercedes Dyer) and Zach (Adam Cooper)

All the performers in this chorus line (the winners and the losers) are superb. As singers and dancers, they're flawless – though that was something I'd expected. What really impressed me was the acting; how each auditionee creates a distinctive character, someone you really care about and believe in, rather than just another hoofer with a fantastic figure and a fake smile.

The only snag is the central relationship between Zach, the director of this show within a show, and his old flame, Cassie, a former Broadway star. Cassie has deserted Zach to try her luck in Hollywood, and has now returned to New York, having failed to make it in the movies. Older, wiser and almost forgotten, she's reduced to auditioning for the chorus line, competing against younger dancers on their way up, on her inexorable way back down.

This should be a plotline full of pathos, encapsulating the central message of the show. Here it feels tangential, rather than the emotional pivot of the story. Adam Cooper's Zach is a bit too nice, and Carly Mercedes Dyer's Cassie seems rather too robust and youthful. The fundamental fault isn't in the acting, but in the writing. Their relationship is underdeveloped. It's the only aspect of this musical that doesn't ring completely true.

Never mind. Even without a decent love story at its centre, this show still sails along. The backing band, led by Matthew Spalding, rise to the challenge of Hamlisch's haunting, seductive score, and choreographer, Ellen Kane, does a terrific job, moving dozens of dancers around the stage like an enormous shoal of fish. At the curtain call, the audience rose as one in a standing ovation (this cast didn't stick around to milk it).

My wife was whooping and cheering. I think she was glad she came along.

RADIO

VALERIE GROVE

The last time I took a month off from *The Oldie* was 30 years ago, when I was away in beautiful Boston writing a book.

Peter Black of the *Daily Mail* stood in: he wrote welcoming the new station Classic FM (apart from its 'idiotic' ads). He wondered how cricket could ever get on without the late Johnners, who'd ponder what cake there'd be for tea ('Oh good – tuck time') and had 'the most amiable face I ever saw, and the friendliest candid eyes that ever straddled a nose'.

This summer, my irrepressible old friend Hunter Davies stepped in. I'm glad he mentioned his exuberant intrusion into the *Today* programme – and quite rightly he complained about endless programmes about mental health on Radio 4. I agree. Amol Rajan announces 'a huge rise in people waiting to be diagnosed with adult ADHD'. Good grief!

This kind of news story often jostles in the bulletin with a modestly-told tale of true courage – eg that of Chris Perry, who died saving lives in the Ukraine. Or the cellist Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, an Auschwitz survivor aged 99. Or Christian Lamb, 104-year-old ex-Wren, admiral's daughter and D-day heroine, who received the Légion d'honneur from President Macron. Macron kissed her twice. 'I thought he was overdoing it,' Mrs Lamb told Paddy O'Connell.

Such are the cruel juxtapositions of current affairs.

Having lately wrestled with the NHS on my sister's behalf, I wondered: were our confrontations Orwellian or Kafkaesque? This question is more than adequately examined in Ian Hislop and Helen Lewis's comprehensive Radio 4 series.

Steve Rosenberg's description of living in Russia today was memorable. Orwellian or Kafkaesque? Orwell, Kafka and Lewis Carroll, he said. 'The absurdity, the weirdness, the parallel reality of life in Russia 2024 – everything feels upside down, back to front, inside out.'

This year (before Orlov's release, with Gershkovich), he'd watched human-rights campaigner Oleg Orlov being tried – and Orlov sat throughout his trial reading *The Trial*.

'We did approach the King for this cancer programme,' said Jon Holmes on his C-Word podcast. (And got back a message: not an agreement to appear, but 'We wish you well with this enterprise.') Men don't talk about cancer, apparently, but a bunch of performers – Stephen Fry among them – were all happy to tell their amusing tales, as survivors who caught their 'C' early. Testicular, prostate, bowel. Erections, balls and jacksies featured.

Eric Idle had pancreatic cancer – 'If it spreads, you're dead,' he breezed – five years ago. And he'd been writing *Death: The Musical* when he was diagnosed.

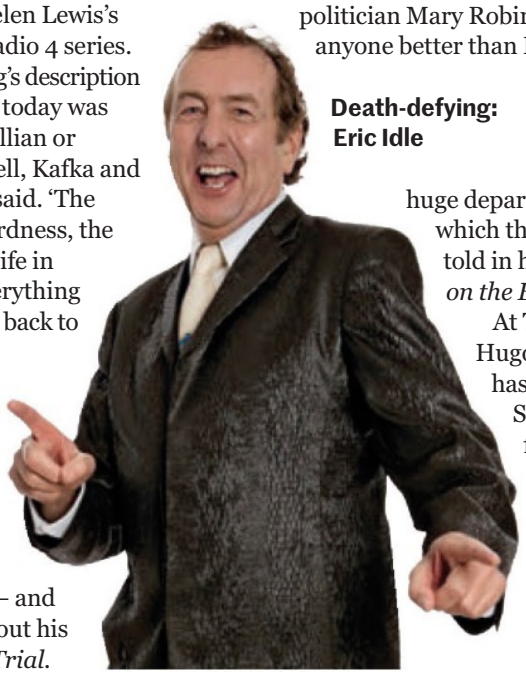
These were lucky men, invariably with access to 'the top man'. (Not so lucky was the deeply lamented Alexander Waugh, writer and *Oldie* contributor – who died of prostate cancer at 60. I shan't forget his winning greeting, on my first visit to Combe Florey when he was 19: '*Quelque chose à boire?*'

Thank you, *Oldie* diary, for lamenting the companionable Sean Rafferty's *In Tune* on Radio 3. *Vale* too to lovely Martha Kearney of *Today*.

Since most BBC news programmes, with expensive foreign reporting, are listened to by oldies, Libby Purves says – while the gullible young believe any old rumour from evil social media; hence the Southport riots etc – we must cherish the voices we trust most and like best.

Recent plaudits for: Michael Morpurgo's *Point of View* on the Olympics; Sarah Raven on *Desert Island Discs*; and *Natalie Haynes Stands Up for the Classics*.

I can't think of anyone better than James Naughtie (*Reflections*) to interview the totally honest and likeable politician Mary Robinson, at 80 – or anyone better than Rory Stewart to expose the ignorance of politicians appointed to run huge departments about which they know zilch, as told in his book *Politics on the Edge*.



Death-defying: Eric Idle

At Times Radio, Hugo Rifkind, who has presented on Saturday mornings for two years (a great antidote to *Saturday Live*), will now be on every day, replacing Matt Chorley. Hooray!

TELEVISION

FRANCES WILSON

Every time a major movie star washes up on a minor television series, I'm reminded of Norma Desmond being told by Joe Gillis that she used to be big: 'I am big. It's the pictures that got small.'

Sam Neill, aka Damien Thorn, the anti-Christ in *Omen III*, and Dr Alan Grant, the palaeontologist in the *Jurassic Park* and *Jurassic World* trilogies, is currently playing Senior Counsel Brett Colby in *The Twelve* (ITV). Pictures don't get much smaller than this, but Neill is still, at 76, looking pleased with himself, his black gown billowing behind him, his wing collar and bands as starched as the bed sheets in the Ritz.

An Australian adaptation of the Belgian series *De Twaalf*, *The Twelve* is a legal drama focusing on the lives of the jurors rather than the courtroom proceedings.

At least, that is its premise. In Season one, Brett Colby warned the accused that 'the jury is everything', but it was Colby who was everything. Hard as they tried to take centre stage, the jury remained minor characters in their own show.

Season two is set in the one-horse town of Tunkwell, Western Australia, where everybody knows your name. Two of the jurors are exes, another two were in the same class at school, and two more run rival real-estate agencies. The foreman, who has terminal prostate cancer and can't get the hang of his colostomy bag, is putting his house on the market, and both agents give him their business cards.

On trial are Sasha and Patrick, former lovers accused of murdering Sasha's mother, Bernice Price (Kris McQuade), whose body has been found dumped in the pump well of her vast farm.

'Who would do such a terrible thing?' asks a juror from out of town. More or less anyone, replies one of the local jurors: 'People will have been lining up to knock the old bitch off.' Bernice, it transpires, was a tight-fisted termagant who shot dead her neighbour's dog when it went after her chickens.

'If anyone killed my dog, I'd kill them,' says the juror whose ex is another juror. 'She would,' the ex agrees. 'She loved the dog more than she loved me.'

The dialogue, in which everyone says exactly what they think, is not subtle. One of the witnesses calls the victim the c-word, for which he has only the mildest telling off from the judge. But when Colby uses the phrase '*folie à deux*', the judge tells him in no uncertain terms to speak English. Ambulances and firemen are referred to as ambies and firos.

The jurors' home lives are revealed in a medley of sub-plots that mirror the events in the courtroom. Bernice, it transpires, tried to change her will on the day she was murdered, and the foreman with cancer threatens to cut his children out of his own will. Bernice was a tyrannical mother, and a girl on the jury has her own tyrannical mother. Bernice had a bullet through her window; an egg is thrown at the window of a juror.

Bernice was a vindictive neighbour; a juror loses her temper with the children next door. Will the jurors' private dramas affect their interpretations of the evidence?

What could, in the hands of a strong writer, be a rich human drama is instead hammy and superficial.

The jurors' own stories are an irritating interruption to the pleasure of watching Sam Neill win every round in court while conducting an affair with his co-counsel, Meredith Nelson More (Frances O'Connor).

When Meredith's husband flies in from Perth to announce he is leaving her and taking the kids, Colby looks on with devilish amusement. It is possible, if we look closely, to see his cloven hoof.

The Body Next Door (Sky), a three-part documentary set in the former Welsh mining town of Beddau, returns to the events of November 2015, when an unidentifiable corpse wrapped 41 times in groundsheets was discovered in the garden of a low-rise block of flats. Through reconstructions and interviews set against a soundtrack of foreboding music, we learn that Beddau is not the happy valley it imagined itself to be. As lies and secrets are revealed, the town's perception of itself begins to fall apart.

'How can this happen in a small community, where everybody knows everybody?' asks a neighbour. 'It was like a body just fallen out of the sky.'

Not even Sam Neill can add glamour to this particular tale.

MUSIC

RICHARD OSBORNE

VIVA VERDI!

Operatic life without Verdi is as frustrating a prospect as theatre life without Shakespeare. Yet these are not easy times for either.

In Verdi's case, the difficulty is finding singers capable of doing justice to the music – not least that of the Verdi baritone, a special creature who down the years has acquired rare-breed status.

Many of Verdi's great baritone roles are title roles, beginning with the eponymous 'King for a Day' in his cleverly crafted second opera, *Un giorno di regno*, and ending 43 years later with his only other comedy, *Falstaff*.

Not that all's entirely lost. In July, Garsington successfully revived *Un giorno di regno* with baritone Joshua Hopkins as the impostor king. After that, the Buxton Festival pitched in with a long-overdue revival of *Ernani*, Verdi's fifth opera, premièred in Venice in 1843.

As a late essay in the *opera buffa* tradition, the earlier opera can draw on singers skilled in Rossini and Donizetti. *Ernani* presents a stiffer challenge, not least because it's the first opera in which Verdi lines up his three great male vocal archetypes: the heroic tenor, the dramatic baritone and the Italian *basso profondo*, a character who strikes terror into all around him while harbouring anxieties of his own that appear to have no redress.

Verdi spotted all three in the scenario provided by a defining work of the new Romanticism – Victor Hugo's *Hernani,* first seen in Paris in 1830. It's a play that has at its heart the tragedies that occur when love clashes with Latin honour codes that are as brutal as they're bizarre.

Here, a woman is wooed by three alpha males: the Spanish king, Charles V, an elderly Spanish warlord Don Ruy Gómez de Silva, and the real love of her life, the outlaw Ernani, son of another grandee who's been murdered on the orders of the king.

Where Hugo's play sprawls, Verdi's opera goes for the jugular, each of its four acts shorter than its predecessor as tragedy looms. Dramatically, it's not a patch on the theatrical sophistication of Verdi's other Hugo-derived opera, *Rigoletto*. But to condemn *Ernani* for its story, as happened in Victorian times and still happens today, is to miss the point completely.

George Bernard Shaw was an early admirer, as he was of the similarly derided *Il trovatore*. Both operas, he breezily admitted, are 'absolutely void of intellectual interest'. What grips us are the music's 'tragic power, poignant melancholy, impetuous vigour and a sweet and intense pathos that never loses its dignity'.

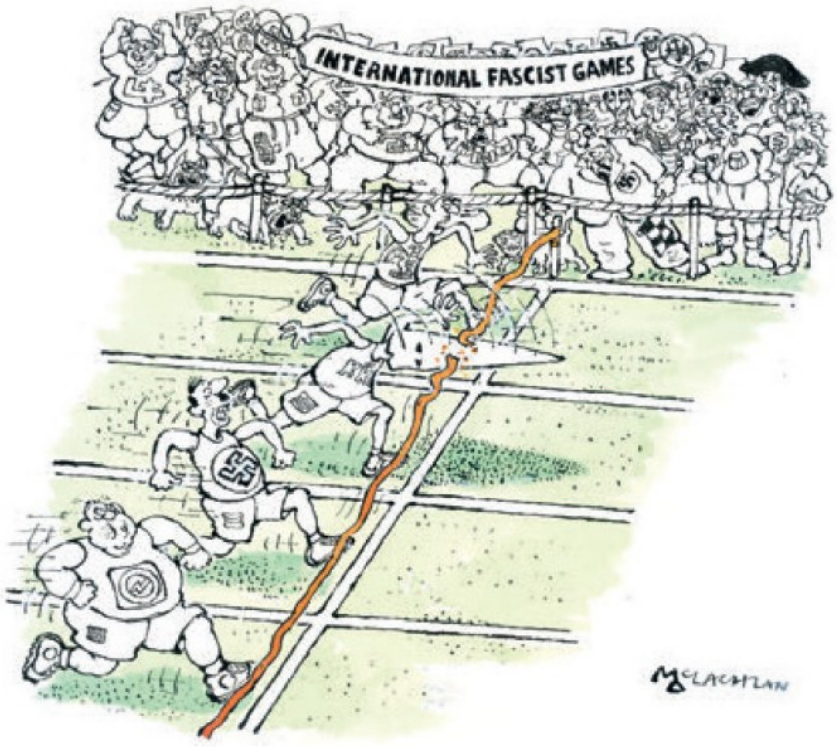
Shaw blamed the deriding of *Ernani* not on Verdi, but on Victorian theatre managers and the singers they engaged – 'that dynasty of execrable impostors in tights and tunics, interpolating their loathsome B-flats into the beautiful melodies they could not sing'.

Ernani hasn't been seen at Covent Garden since Victorian times; nor did an ill-directed and roughly-sung 1967 Sadler's Wells revival do much to silence the opera's detractors.

Hence the alacrity with which I jumped into my trusty Alfa Romeo and sped north to see this newest revival in Frank Matcham's lovely 900-seat Buxton Opera House – the house whose saving and restoration inspired the launch of the annual Buxton International Festival, which has thrived there since 1979.

The staging itself was nothing to

McLachlan



'There was some controversy as to who won the 100-metre final'

Ernani (Roman Arndt) and the Buxton Festival Chorus

write home about. Dowdily dressed (jeans and backpacks) and poorly thought through, it made little attempt to catch the hierarchical gloom of Habsburg Spain – until required to do so by the marvellous third act, where Charles V apostrophises the tomb of Charlemagne, as would-be assassins lurk in the cathedral undercroft.

Charles was sung by the French *baryton-noble* André Heyboer, an old-school survivor whose voice is still in passable shape. In even better shape was the 62-year-old bass Alastair Miles, a towering presence, whose portrayal of the elderly de Silva dominated the evening.

The Russian tenor Roman Arndt was a superb Ernani. Less impressive was the Elvira, Nadine Benjamin. She sang well but she's a restless actress, unable to cultivate that stillness of demeanour that's a prerequisite of great singing, not to mention the playing of an Aragonese aristocrat.

Artistic director Adrian Kelly spent the evening with his head in the score, quietly beating time. With strong principals, a superb chorus, the orchestra of Opera North squeezed into the small pit and adequate rehearsal time, perhaps that's all that was needed to effect the necessary conflagrations.

I remember Karajan saying that you can perform Verdi in a small house with an orchestra of 24 and just four first violins in a way that's impossible with Puccini, Wagner or Richard Strauss.

Yet another reason to raise a glass to the 'genius and gentleman' (W H Auden's phrase) who was Giuseppe Verdi.

GOLDEN OLDIES

MARK ELLEN

AGE SHALL NOT WEARY THEM

David Hepworth has a theory – and, having worked with him on magazines, TV and podcasts for over 40 years, I can assure you he's never wrong.

The rock career, he declares, is essentially a three-act play. Act One is the devil-may-care first flush of youth where you make your name, get screamed at and all your audience is under 30.

The second is the sagging middle section where the young think you're embarrassing and your fans are too busy with work and offspring to stay onboard.

But the third act, if you're lucky enough to reach it, is the jackpot. You're hailed as the noble figurehead of a golden age most of the media wished they'd lived through, everything you recorded is now on the net, and your fans are back and they've brought their children. Untold riches await.

Yet when Paul McCartney closed Live Aid in 1985 at the age of 43, people thought he was pensionable. What few of us imagined back then was that his career hadn't even heard the half-time whistle and that rock's former rebels would end up so warmly embraced by the establishment that they'd be furnished with knighthoods and Nobel Prizes and asked to play state funerals.

Or that pop music would be a furrow you could still convincingly plough in your 80s and beyond – in how many other jobs is that possible?

This suits everyone for, as the old saying goes, being a musician isn't a job, it's an incurable disease. In one magnificently detailed section of his new book *Hope I Get Old Before I Die*, Hepworth describes the Who's bassist John Entwistle rattling around in the baronial splendour of his absurdly baroque 55-room mansion, corridors stuffed with suits of armour, yearning for the addictive thrill of a roaring crowd and attendant bank-balance top-up, and you wonder what other life he'd be capable of living.

Like all David's captivating books about music, this reads like a series of rich, fast-paced and immensely funny short stories that back up the central argument, each chapter fizzing with original observations and fresh, anecdotal evidence about eternally fascinating acts such as the Beatles, the Beach Boys and Led Zeppelin.

You discover how the Stones revolutionised the live circuit, when the age of spectacle began and why a forgotten hippie got a million pounds from Madonna. You note how the movie *Almost Famous* turned '70s rock into period drama and trace Joni Mitchell's touching route to grandmotherhood.

And, as there are only two big moves a band can make (another good theory), breaking up and getting back together again, you learn the gripping extent of the fall-out between members of the Monkees, the Byrds, Creedence Clearwater and Pink Floyd.

But mostly it's about the impossibly good fortune of third-act stars to be still gainfully employed – indeed the appetite for archive box sets, merchandise and Abba-style digital re-enactment even suggests a lucrative afterlife.

'It's good to be here,' Keith Richards tells stadium crowds, with every reason. 'It's good to be *anywhere*!'

Evergreen: Robert Plant of Led Zeppelin, London, 1975

Hope I Get Old Before I Die: Why Rock Stars Never Retire by David Hepworth is out now

***Clockwise from left: Midas Transmuting All into ~~Gold~~ Paper*, James Gillray, 1797; *Comfort Blanket*, Grayson Perry, 2014; *Money Dress*, Susan Stockwell, 2010; *Bitchcoin* NFT, Sarah Meyohas, 2015-21; Gold Aureus of Nero (54-68 AD), Rome mint**

EXHIBITIONS

HUON MALLALIEU

MONEY TALKS:
ART, SOCIETY & POWER

Ashmolean Museum, Oxford,
to 5th January 2025

Only a couple of weeks ago, it seemed that cash would soon become extinct.

No new coins are to be minted this year. A while ago, cryptocurrencies were the future, but they became associated with scams and money-laundering.

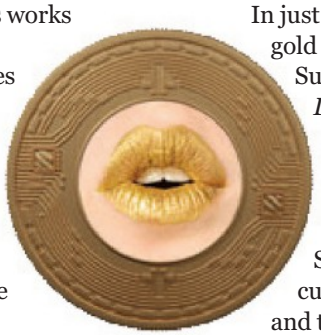
There was also NFT mania over non-fungible tokens, digital identifiers used to certify ownership and authenticity of art. NFTs have turned out to be a tulip mania for our time. I hope that the Ashmolean doesn't get caught out here. Following the British Museum and the Uffizi, it has commissioned an NFT to 'feature' in this show. It is, apparently, a 'single-edition generative AI'.

In 2011, there was a fascinating show at the Palazzo Strozzi in Florence which traced the spread of the florin from its first minting in 1237 to its status as the principal currency of international banking and trade.

The Ashmolean concentrates on how money's political and social influences affect its physical appearance. And it 'delves into the complex, tense and often humorous relationship between art, money and society' by considering coins and notes as works of art.

The possibilities for propaganda were recognised in antiquity. For millennia, leading sculptors, artists, printmakers and photographers have been employed to create the most effective messages.

In response, anti-establishment campaigners have repurposed official imagery, and protesters have stamped slogans on coins. And, in a splendidly capitalist manner, artists such as Warhol, Banksy and Boggs have used the imagery of money to make actual money for themselves.



In just 116 exhibits, from a gold aureus of Nero to Susan Stockwell's *Money Dress* (1910), via Rembrandt's etched *Goldweigher*, French West Africa, the later Habsburgs and the Sezession, the unissued currency of Edward VIII and the Guerrilla Girls, this stimulating show offers a wealth of art and information, conveyed with intelligence and humour.

Pursuits

GARDENING

DAVID WHEELER

IN A WELSH COUNTRY GARDEN

Gardeners of my vintage (the NHS was not yet invented and our present king was but a twinkle in his mother's eye) grew up without the plethora of today's department store-like garden centres.

We were nourished instead by numerous small-scale nurseries, many of them one-man or -woman bands, trading mainly in just a few favoured species.

Garden designers didn't come in the celebrity ranks that skip across the land today, and garden tools were – mostly – hand-powered.

Suburban front gardens blossomed with a handful of trusty stalwarts – berberis, forsythia, tea roses and, regrettably, blowsy pink mophead hydrangeas and gross dahlias and chrysanthemums destined for the village-fête show bench.

There was no *Plant Finder* to help us track down uncommon plants. Rarities were often acquired via swaps with fellow enthusiasts when they could be found. Or patiently grown from seed.

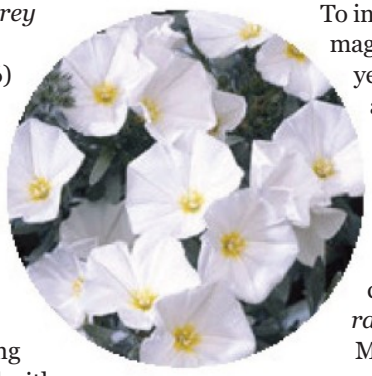
The National Gardens Scheme ('opening gardens of quality, character and interest to the public for charity') had been going for a couple of decades (since 1927). But, in a nation with a pitifully – or thankfully – carless population, most destinations were difficult or impossible to reach, or a schlep too far from home.

Bright and wonderful lights did, however, shine. Hidcote Manor in the Cotswolds, Sissinghurst Castle in Kent and Exbury in Hampshire – all, almost exclusively, fuelled by deep pockets.

And splendid gardens also flourished on a smaller, more domestic scale. One such was East Lambrook Manor, made popular by its châtelaine's string of highly readable books written in the 1950s.

Like the Silver Queen herself – Mrs Desmond Underwood (born Pamela Richenda Cubitt Montgomery-Cuninghame, author of *Grey and Silver Plants*, a collector's item from 1976) – East Lambrook's Margery Fish (1892-1969) knew how to put a small diversity of plants together for harmonious effect.

I first went to East Lambrook Manor in the early 1980s, house-hunting in an area richly endowed with a vernacular architecture built from England's best honey-coloured stone.



Non-strangling *Convolvulus cneorum*

Tucked away behind the house was Mrs F's silver garden, a modest-size patch brimming with aromatic plants, grown for a muted palette, that glowed on the wettest of Somerset days.

It was a seminal visit. Wherever I've lived since, I've attempted such a masterpiece of seeming simplicity.

Grey- and silver-leafed plants thrive on poor, well-drained soil. So, here in south-west Wales (probably no damper than Somerset, whose highest hills we can glimpse across the Bristol Channel from nearby elevated land), an appropriate site was essential.

My partner has successfully created one. By clearing a sunny bank of unbridled crocosmia and dreary dwarf conifers (the previous owners' pride and joy), he has refreshed tired soil and enclosed it with a dry-stone wall that lets the water through.

Shopping ensued. These few remodelled square yards quickly sparkled with ever-grey artemisias, lavender, *Santolina*, lamb's ears (*Stachys byzantina*), curry plants (*Helichrysum italicum*), some white dianthus (for perfume), *Senecio* (now (*Brachyglottis*, dammit) and, supremely, *Convolvulus cneorum*, fortuitously showing none of its bindweed relative's rampant, strangulating behaviour.

To intensify the moonlight magic of these hardy, year-round silvery, white- and pale yellow-flowered gems, we have scattered among them living sapphires – rosemary, blue geraniums, *Ajuga* and the mat-forming catmint *Nepeta racemosa* 'Walker's Low'.

Minimal maintenance is guaranteed. The plants' close-growing habits stifle weeds, and the clipping of such spreaders brings delight, releasing, as it does, pungent foliar fragrances.

And now that spring-flowering bulbs are available, we're poking yet more jewels into the silvery swathes: muscari, crocus, miniature yellow tulips…

By the way, Mrs F's *We Made a Garden* is still in print. Treat yourself.

David's Instagram account is @hortusjournal

KITCHEN GARDEN

SIMON COURTAULD

PADRÓN PEPPERS

I first came across Padrón peppers in a tapas bar in Santiago de Compostela, north-west Spain, not far from the town where they were first grown in Europe and which gives the peppers their name. I have been growing them in an unheated greenhouse for the past ten years, and their popularity is now such that they are available in some supermarkets.

We picked our first Padróns this year in the second week of July and enjoyed them in the traditional way,

fried in olive oil, with sea salt. They are classified as chilli peppers but are not especially hot until they mature and turn red later in the year. However, they are also known as the 'Russian roulette chilli', as you may hit on a fiery one when it's still green – though without quite the same lethal consequences.

A packet of French seeds advises pruning the stem of the plant once ten peppers have formed in order to produce larger specimens. I have no reason to do that, as we crop all we need and leave a few to grow larger and redder. If too hot to eat, they look well on the plant when brought indoors in October.

If you're sowing Padrón seeds in early spring, they will need a temperature of 18°-20° C. I tend to buy small plug plants from Simpson's near Warminster, Wiltshire. They stock about 70 varieties of chilli peppers, including Habanero Katie, said to be the hottest chilli grown in Britain.

Once the plants have been potted on, they should give little trouble. Grow bags are an option but, in my experience, eight-inch pots have been more successful. If an infestation of whitefly starts to appear on the leaves, put the plants outside for a couple of days so that the ladybirds can get to work on them.

If you have a surfeit of chilli peppers, you can hang them up to dry, or – as we do every autumn – add them to the juice of crab apples to make a jelly, delicious with roast guinea fowl or partridge.

COOKERY

ELISABETH LUARD

JAM TODAY

Calling all jam-makers, preservers and picklers – trainees and old-timers. It's that time of year. Apricots, peaches, damsons and plums are ripe and ready in orchards, hedgerows and gardens throughout the land.

Eliza Acton gets straight to the point with 'General Rules for Preserving' in *Modern Cookery for Private Families* (1845): 'Let everything be clean and dry. Keep the preserving pan away from the direct heat of a flame or the base will burn. After sugar is added, stir gently at first and more quickly towards the end. Clear scum as soon as it rises. To preserve fruit in syrup, cook first until soft enough to absorb the sugar. When preparing jam, boil the fruit till well-reduced before adding the sugar.'

Eliza Acton's very good damson jam

The fruit for this jam should be freshly gathered and quite ripe. Allow 6lb damsons to £3lb sugar. Split, stone, weigh, and boil it quickly for 40 minutes. Then stir in half its weight of good sugar, roughly powdered. When it is dissolved, give the preserve 15 minutes' additional boiling, keeping it stirred and thoroughly skimmed. Pot up and seal as usual.

Colonel Wyvern's apricot chutney

Wyvern's *Culinary Jottings for Madras* was a compendium of Anglo-Indian recipes, published in the 1880s by Colonel Arthur Kenney-Herbert. It was designed 'to prepare food fit for the Englishman in India', rather than introduce the exotic flavours of the East to the housewives of old Blighty. Enough to fill 5-6 jars.

1.5 kg apricots or peaches, stoned, diced
1 litre cider vinegar or brown malt vinegar
500g shallots or small onions, peeled and chopped finely
Walnut-sized nugget fresh ginger root, finely chopped
2 oranges, juice and finely scraped zest
500g light brown sugar
250g sultanas and/or raisins
2 tsps salt
1 tsp mustard seeds
1 tsp ground allspice

Split and stone the fruit and chop roughly. Bring the chopped onion to the boil in enough water to cover, and simmer for 5 minutes to soften, then drain (this to avoid the hard bits).

Put all the ingredients into a large preserving pan and bring gently to the boil, stirring throughout. Turn down the heat and leave to simmer, stirring regularly, for 1-1½ hours, until the mixture is thick and jammy. If the base catches and burns, tip everything into a clean pan without scraping the burnt bit and continue as before. Pot while still hot in warm, sterilised jars. Seal tightly and store in a cool, dark corner.

M F K Fisher's peach marmalade

'There is probably no better smell,' says the doyenne of America's food essayists,'than the forthright cloud that fills a room, a memory, as the bubbles in the jam pot rise darker from the bottom. Stir! Stir fast!' Makes 3-4 one-pound jars.

8 ripe, firm peaches (about 1kg)
500g granulated sugar
Juice of 2 lemons

Scald, skin, halve and de-stone the peaches. Crack 4 of the stones and cook them in a splash of water in a small pan until tender; then drain, skin and chop.

Put the peaches and kernels in a large saucepan and bring slowly to boiling point, mashing with a fork or potato-masher till they're soft and mushy. Stir in the sugar and lemon juice and bubble up for 10 minutes, stirring throughout so it doesn't stick and burn. Turn down the heat and cook gently for about another 5 minutes, till a drop on a cold saucer looks lightly set. Ladle into well-scalded jars, lid, seal and store in the fridge.

Ready immediately.

RESTAURANTS

JAMES PEMBROKE

GLASGOW BELONGS TO ME

In the internet Olympics, the gold medal for most popular search topic has for ever been won by pornography. Weather has always won bronze, while it is received wisdom that silver has long gone to ancestry research.

This may have been true 20 years ago but, now that we've all discovered our lineage lacks any spark, let alone grandeur, we have abandoned the hunt. And 'translate' has claimed silver.

My 28-year-old daughter, Honor, is one of the few people I know who can honestly claim to have absolutely no truck with class and its feeble echelons.

That is only because she has gone deeper. For her, it's all about pre-history. Just like a dinner-party astrologist, who announces that your dislike of milk in your coffee is down to your moon being in Capricorn, Honor is an obsessive inquisitor.

My Father's Day present was a DNA test to establish my genetic/tribal make-up. Given I am God's own Englishman, I told her she was wasting her money and my saliva because, after Noah's flood, we Pembrokes disembarked in Deptford, where we built ships for centuries.

Shattering news: 46 per cent of my bloodline is Scottish. 'Why pay £60 for such dreadful news?' I begged her. 'It was meant to be a present – not a curse.'

I'm the least Scottish person I know. But now it turns out I am more Scottish even than my sister-in-law Jocelyn, who, for all her 'yon bonny banks', was born in Sunderland. The infiltrator.

ELISABETH LUARD

So disturbed was I that I crossed the border to stay with Nick and Bella, somewhere near Glasgow. I am a learner Scot so I can't be sure where. They're so kind they took us into Glasgow to rub shoulders with my kin. And introduced me to the best fish restaurant north of Deptford: Crabshakk, in Argyll Street.

If there's one thing we Scots do well – other than chummy yet snide service to Sassenachs – it's seafood.

We exhausted the blackboard's list of Caledonia's scrummiest dishes: very real taramasalata; halibut-and-dill croquettes; a whole brown crab; cod-and-shellfish risotto; and – my last meal when I am hanged for my fervent Jacobitism – a whole mackerel with salsa verde.

I took the low road south to be reunited with what I believed to be the remainder of my ethnicity (southern England) – no more grey skies and hillsides covered in rocks and brown bracken. To celebrate my return, I drove Honor to Beaminster where we had a sunny dinner in the garden of the Ollerod. Such good food and good service. I had a salad of sheep's curd, raspberry-and-herb vinaigrette and watermelon, followed by lamb rump.

The joint was packed with happy locals, thrilled that they have two of the West Country's best restaurants in their small home town; the other is Brassica.

I tried to forgive Honor for ruining my summer by proposing a toast to the other 54 per cent of my ethnicity which is for ever England, but she choked as she produced a picture of the certificate. Had I not read to the bottom?

'Only 36 per cent of your ethnic origins are from England, Daddy – East Anglia.'

Shoot me now.

'The rest is Germany three per cent, Wales three per cent and Ireland 12 per cent – Munster, to be precise.'

Please tell me they just make it up.

DRINK

BILL KNOTT

CHIANTI CLASSICS

Len Evans, who was born in Wales, grew up in England and emigrated to Australia, was famous for many reasons.

He was Australia's first wine columnist. He turned his hand to winemaking, at Rothbury Estate and Petaluma. And his – shall we say? – 'broad' sense of humour would have made Sir Les Patterson blush. Most importantly, he was a great evangelist for Australian wine at a time – the 1960s and 1970s – when it was largely derided. Monty Python's 'Perth Pink' sparkling wine, 'a wine for laying down and avoiding', springs to mind.

He also claimed to have invented the Wine Options game. This involves a blind tasting in which participants are gradually whittled down as the host asks questions about the wine – which country, grape variety, vintage etc – until only the winner is left standing.

Some years ago, I stole his idea for a charity dinner. The staff of the restaurant had dutifully obscured the wine's labels with black sleeves, but they had failed to cover the bottles' necks. Perched proudly on each was a *gallo nero*, a black rooster, the unmistakable emblem of the Consorzio Vino Chianti Classico. Cue a mad scramble to find some masking tape.

The Consorzio is celebrating its centenary this year, although wines called Chianti date back to the late-14th century. And the original boundaries of Chianti Classico were established in a 1716 edict from Cosimo III de' Medici. So the Consorzio is a mere *bambino* by comparison.

Nonetheless, turning 100 is a great excuse for a party, so the Consorzio took over Theo Randall's splendid restaurant at the InterContinental on Park Lane for a night. They invited 34 winemakers (who between them pulled the corks from nearly 100 vintages). And, with the help of Mr Randall in the kitchen, they laid on a lavish spread after the tasting.

Two of the very best estates in the Chianti Classico region are Felsina and Fontodi. Their sublime wines are mainstays of the list at the River Café, of which Theo Randall is a distinguished alumnus. They were installed alphabetically at adjacent tables, their spittoons seemingly lightly used.

And for good reason. Felsina's Riserva Rancia 2019 (£46.61, xtrawine.com) is delicious: still tannic, but with a lovely, complex aroma of black cherries, tobacco and herbs. It might seem a lot to pay for a Chianti, especially one not designated as Gran Selezione, the top 'super-category', introduced ten years ago, but it has all the hallmarks of a great wine: complexity, length and the potential to age. Fontodi's spicy, plummy Chianti Classico 2021 (£29.40, vinvm.co.uk) is similarly first-rate. Should you be looking for a special bottle or two for the Christmas table, I highly recommend either, or both.

What was remarkable about the tasting as a whole was the variety of styles on offer within the appellation, facilitated by the Consorzio's championing of quality over tradition. This gives the talented winemakers of Chianti Classico a huge range of options, both in the vineyard and in the cellar.

Len Evans would have approved.

SPORT

JIM WHITE

BRITANNIA, RULE THE WAVES!

The old theory about racing yachts was that it would be a lot less damaging if the owners sat fully clothed in the shower tearing up £50 notes.

And nothing has ripped through the fortunes of ambitious rich men with quite the force 10 gale of the America's Cup. First raced in 1851, it has lured those with the deepest pockets in pursuit of a piece of sporting silverware nicknamed the Auld Mug.

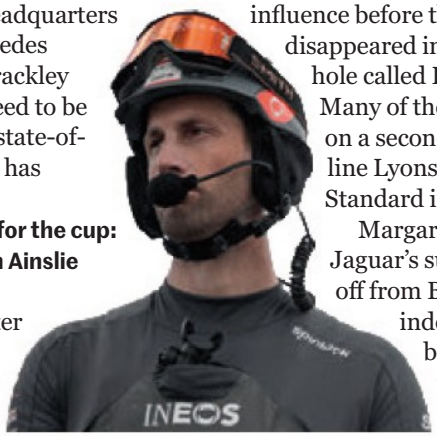
The latest Briton to chuck money at the idea of coming up with a boat capable of being the fastest in the world is Sir Jim Ratcliffe. As if part-owning Manchester United and backing a Tour de France team were not enough of an ego ride, Sir Jim, since he got involved in 2018, has handed over a significant chunk of his INEOS wealth to win the oldest extant competition in sporting history.

His aim, he has said, is to return the cup to its home country, the place that first came up with the idea. And it has been away for a while. Since the first competition was lost to an American boat, Britain has not been in possession of the trophy once across 36 contests.

Sir Jim has not swerved in his attempt to end 173 years of hurt. Not least, he has connected with Sir Ben Ainslie, the most decorated Olympic sailor of all time. Ainslie knows what he is doing in this competition. In 2013, with the American side 8-1 down in a race sequence that's won by the boat first to reach nine victories, he was recruited in the hope he might do the impossible.

And what a turnaround he pulled off. Team Oracle, backed by one of the richest men in the world, Larry Ellison, won 9-8. Tellingly, that was enough, even for a man with Ellison's depth of resources. He is no longer involved.

But Ainslie can win only in the fastest boat. That is where Sir Jim comes in, investing more than the national debt of a Balkan state. Sharing headquarters and expertise with Mercedes Formula One team in Brackley (you don't apparently need to be near the sea to design a state-of-the-art racing yacht), he has employed hundreds of people in the painstaking search for technical advantage. The staff roster includes roles such as performance data analyst and structural engineering lead, all under the auspices of the chief designer Martin Fisher, who's spent most of his career conceiving of ways to make racing cars go faster.



Up for the cup: Ben Ainslie

The result is the INEOS Britannia, an extraordinary piece of technology. In a format in which the holder is challenged by the winner of a series of races, Ainslie's boat will have to overcome half a dozen other contenders in the challenge series – taking place from 22nd August – before it can have a go at the New Zealand team (backed by Gulf wealth) in October.

If they manage it – and in the world of sport there can be no bigger if – Sir Jim says it will be the greatest achievement of his sporting life, even better than seeing his beloved Manchester United lifting the Champions League trophy.

But if they don't, the truth is he might look back with regret that he didn't just sit in the shower tearing up bank notes.

MOTORING

ALAN JUDD

THE JAG TRADE

Why buy a Jaguar?

It was easier to answer the question in the past. I've had five – three 1960s Mark 11s, a 1970s XJ6 and a 2003 XJ (X350). I bought them because they looked good, felt good to drive and were value for money. And you could always sell an old Jag.

Sir William Lyons founded the company as SS (Swallow Sidecar) Jaguar in 1922. It became plain Jaguar in 1945 – SS had by then acquired unfortunate associations.

Le Mans successes during the 1950s earned the company its sporting reputation. This was augmented by the big Mark 7-9 saloons, which offered Bentley levels of luxury and better performance at a fraction of the price. There followed the svelte and beautiful Mark 1 and Mark 2 compact saloons, beloved of police and bank robbers.

Then came the groundbreaking XJ6, the last Jaguar to bear Lyons's design influence before the company almost disappeared in the financial black hole called British Leyland. Many of these cars were built on a second-hand production line Lyons bought from Standard in the 1950s.

Margaret Thatcher ensured Jaguar's survival by hiving it off from BL. After years of independence, it was bought by Ford and then, improved and modernised, sold to Tata, who merged it with Land Rover to become today's JLR.

In May, the last XF, its successful mid-sized saloon, rolled off the line. Future Jaguars, say JLR, will be all-electric and moved upmarket, starting with a £100,000-plus four-door GT with a range of 430 miles.

'Pivotal to our Reimagine strategy is the formation of the House of Brands,' they announced, intended to 'build truly emotional engaging experiences for our clients…'

Oh dear. Does anyone take such guff seriously? People bought Jaguars not only for their looks, value and performance but because they were buying into an exciting heritage, buying a whiff of magic. Those Le Mans-winning C-Types and D-Types, with their gorgeous road-going XK siblings, followed by the revolutionary E-Type, meant buyers of later Jaguars felt a little bit special. The cars weren't always reliable but they always drove well and looked good, and that forgave them a lot.

Under Ford and now Tata, Jaguar have continued to produce good-looking, well-performing cars, more reliable than their predecessors. My nephew's 2010 XF is still going strong at 250,000 miles. But they still don't sell enough.

It's Land Rover sales that sustain JLR; Tata achieved that by moving LR upmarket, with no utilitarian equivalent of the old Defender. That's clearly what they're hoping to replicate by moving Jaguar into the six-figure stratosphere.

Can it work? Despite their being no less well designed and made, sales of current Jaguars don't compete well enough with other prestige brands.

Why then should buyers of the top ends of those brands, not to mention Bentley and Aston Martin, turn to Jaguar? Where's the whiff of magic?

Sadly, they could have had it. In Knightsbridge in 2010, I attended the unveiling of the futuristic C-X75 prototype, a curvaceous, 75th-anniversary 205mph hybrid beauty, designed by the legendary Ian Callum. Powered by an electric motor at each wheel and recharged by diesel turbines, it had a range of 560 miles and nugatory CO_2 emissions of 28g/km.

Beyond the plate-glass window, tourists snapped it, children posed against it, navvies stopped work to gaze at it and ladies paused on the way to Harvey Nichols. I thought I'd seen Jaguar's future. But they didn't make it.

If they had, it might have done for Jaguar what the E-Type did in the 1960s. And they wouldn't now have to chase elusive new buyers by waffling on about 'truly emotional engaging experiences'.

Matthew Webster: Digital Life

Computer protection racket

Twenty years ago, one of the most regular questions I had was how to protect our computers from attacks by viruses, worms, Trojans, malware and other dire threats.

In other words, which antivirus software should we buy?

It used to be a hot topic; none of us really understood what these menaces were, but we feared them and so regularly forked out for extra software to shield our equipment from them. Norton and McAfee were the two biggest suppliers. No doubt a few readers of *The Oldie* are still paying for their products, especially if their computer is a few years old.

A recent survey by security.org, a respectable organisation, discovered that although almost half of US citizens do not pay for antivirus software, usage increases with age. Twice as many people over 65 pay as those aged 45 or less.

Clearly, the notion of paying for antivirus software is dying out, and for once, the young people have got it right.

The software used to have a vital role. The likes of Microsoft and Apple had sufficiently brass necks to sell us computers that required us to provide our own security. Can you imagine a builder, however shady, selling you a house with no locks on it? It amounts to the same thing.

However, things have improved greatly. If you – like 75 per cent of the world – use Microsoft Windows, you should use the free Windows Defender product that comes with it. This is much better than it used to be. It's designed not to conflict with anything Windows does and will be updated regularly.

The same goes for Apple products. The built-in protection known as XProtect also shelters you from a constantly updated list of viruses.

Mind you, it's not easy to avoid paying. If you buy a new computer, as sure as eggs is eggs it'll come with a free trial of some antivirus programme. It's not there because the computer manufacturer thinks you need it. It's there because the software company has paid them to put it there. What's more, it'll nag you with alarming warnings until you uninstall it or buy it.

But don't just take my word for it. I checked with two real experts of my acquaintance. Both run complex IT-based companies with many computers. Neither of them pays for antivirus software. They use nothing more than the built-in programmes.

I use them, too, and have never had a problem with viruses or other unpleasantness.

However, none of this absolves us from behaving sensibly. Please don't download stuff of doubtful provenance. Your antivirus will probably spot it, but you can help it by not pushing your luck.

There is a price to be paid for peace of mind. Most antivirus programmes are about £35 pa, and maybe that's worth it to you. And the software you buy may offer other services that you find useful.

If it makes you feel more relaxed, continue paying for the devil you know.

But do have a think. You really don't need it.

Webwatch

For my latest tips and free newsletter, go to www.askwebster.co.uk

ncsc.gov.uk
The National Cyber Security Centre – sensible advice on computer security from this government office.

https://tinyurl.com/webster443
It is hot-air-balloon festival time – this video is from the Bristol Fiesta.

I will happily try to solve your basic computer and internet problems. Go to www.askwebster.co.uk or email me at webster@theoldie.co.uk

'Have you tried turning it off and not on again?'

Neil Collins: Money Matters

Don't trust all investment trusts

Investment shouldn't be exciting.

Unless you are in it as an intellectual contact sport, slow and dull is the way to accumulate a sound portfolio. Luckily, one class of share has already done it for you, in the shape of investment trusts.

These are 'closed-ended' portfolios of assets each chosen by a professional fund manager and put into a plc listed on the stock exchange. The balance of buyers and sellers determines the price.

Investment funds, by contrast, are 'open-ended', where the price is determined by the manager's dividing the number of issued units into the value of the portfolio. New units are issued to subscribers, or assets sold to meet demands of sellers.

Investment advisers prefer these because they get a commission. There is nothing in it for them if they recommend an investment trust. This fee effectively explains why the long-term return from investment trusts beats that from investment funds.

There are far too many investment trusts, but choosing a plain vanilla one just got easier. Witan is being taken over by Alliance Trust to create a £5-billion company. Witan's performance has been poor, while Alliance has recovered well from its own crisis nearly a decade ago, and its innovative structure of appointing different managers for slices of the portfolio has worked pretty well. (I should perhaps add that I am a shareholder.)

The investment-trust idea has been extended to all sorts of esoteric asset

classes, from obvious ones such as foreign markets to wind farms and renewables, financing for damages claims and, inevitably, property.

The investment-fund structure is quite unsuited to a property portfolio because of the illiquid nature of such investment. A run of redemptions by unit-holders will force either fire sales or suspension of redemptions. Avoid these funds, however attractive they may seem at the time.

A feature of investment trusts is an ability to borrow and gear up the returns. Fine in moderation, but the sorry fate of little Regional REIT, a property investment trust, shows how disastrously wrong it can be.

The company has been caught with property it cannot sell and a loan repayment it cannot make – so shareholders are being forced to rescue it. The share price has slumped from 120p to 13p in four years, as Covid destroyed the value of its office portfolio.

As the investment-trust advisers McHattie put it, 'Regional has been a stinker, and we think this share issue marks a last chance for the trust to redeem at least some of the lost value.'

Gamblers might like to place a small bet on the last chance. Investors would be better advised to go for Alliance Witan and sleep soundly at night.

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BIRD OF THE MONTH

Great Black-Backed Gull

BY JOHN McEWEN * ILLUSTRATED BY CARRY AKROYD

The great black-backed gull (*Larus marinus*) and the lesser black-backed gull might from their names seem difficult to distinguish.

This is complicated by the lesser being much commoner. Its 269,000 pairs outnumber the similarly sized herring gull's 176,000 pairs, to make it our most populous urban gull. Its black back can be only a shade darker than the herring's grey. Only in muddy-plumaged immaturity are the three species hard to distinguish. Especially the great black-backed, which does not reach full maturity until it is four.

Great black-backs can be urban scavengers, but they remain predominantly coastal and oceanic birds. As for the bird's identification, once seen, never questioned.

It is a mighty being, the largest of the world's 50 gull species: weight up to 5lb, length up to 2½ ft, wingspan up to 5½ ft. It is snow-white and jet-black, with a heavy bill enabling it to grab and swallow a live bird in one gulp.

At this time of year, young Manx shearwaters and puffins are still emerging at night from nest burrows to scramble for the safety of the sea. Darkness does not prevent their falling easy prey to the great black-backeds, which share their west-coast islands such as Skokholm and Skomer off Wales.

In the breeding season, this preference of the great black-backed for Irish coasts and the rockier and more islanded west coast of Britain is marked, with hardly a nest between Lothian and Kent, expansion being along the south coast.

They prefer islands, their size requiring platforms rather than cliff ledges for their nests. In summer, there are up to 19,000 pairs, a number doubled in winter by migrants to 80,000 ubiquitous individuals.

The great black-backed gull is paid handsome due in the world's most expensive book ($13.8m, Sotheby's, 2010), the four-volume *Birds of America* (1838) by John James Audubon (1785-1851).

Audubon painted each bird life-size from specimens (never stuffed) he had shot – as was the practice before film and binoculars – which he then arranged to lifelike effect. His 435 watercolours were reproduced on double-elephant folio size (100cm x 67cm) paper as hand-coloured aquatint engravings.

> Manx shearwaters are easy prey to the great black-backed gull

To emphasise the size of the great black-backed gull, he showed it as a wounded bird spreading its unbroken wing across two thirds of the page – a dramatic image, emboldened by his romantic temperament.

Fewer than 200 sets of the bound volumes were made, and many have subsequently been broken up, with plates sold individually for up to $350,000.

The great black-backed, for all its magnificence as an image, is the cheapest ($1,000 plus) because, alone of the plates, it shows a live bird bleeding.

Carry Akroyd is a landscape painter. Swoop Sing Perch Paddle *(Bloomsbury), the collection of her bird screenprints for this page, is out now*

In Granny's footsteps

Sixty years after Penelope Betjeman wrote a Spanish travel classic, her granddaughter *Imogen Lycett Green* retraced her ride

On the last day of a ride through the Sierra de Cazorla, we have ridden 17 miles.

Dusty and hot, we untack in a pine glade where we will feed, water and rope in our eight Andalusian horses for the night. Vultures circle high on the thermals. All is quiet.

Out of nowhere, a scream rings out. 'A scorpion has bitten my bottom!' shrieks Karen, wrenching her trousers to flick away the beast. It is in fact a giant striped centipede, but still.

At the same time, a grey mare, Bailarína, starts pawing the ground in the ominous way that signals colic. If she lies down, she will twist her gut and may die.

All hands on deck: Karen must get to hospital, and José, our Spanish guide, must get an injection from the vet to relax Bailarína's muscles.

A few weeks before this ride, my dog had a fatal injection, when she was 'euthanised' by my local vet. I know from the Greek that *eu* is good and *thanatos* death – but is there such a thing as a good death?

People said my mother, Candida Lycett Green – author of *The Oldie*'s Unwrecked England column – had a 'good' death.

Apart from the diagnosis of pancreatic cancer, she orchestrated the whole thing: the rural idyll of a funeral; the terrier in pup so that Dad – her husband of 51 years – would have something to do after she died; dearest friends coming one by one to say goodbye – even the hot priest with a leather jacket arriving on a motorbike to deliver the last rites (before *Fleabag*'s hot priest). Oh, how she would have loved *Fleabag*! But, dammit, she died too soon. I put my dog down and now I am weeping for my mother.

Penelope Betjeman, *centre*, with son, Paul, and daughter, Candida Betjeman (later Lycett Green), 1948

I'm so lucky I can hold her close by reaching for her memoirs: *Over the Hills and Far Away*, about a ride through Northumberland; and *The Dangerous Edge of Things*, about her childhood in Farnborough, with her parents, the poet John Betjeman and Penelope Betjeman (née Chetwode).

Penelope had a bossy tone and love of practical jokes, with her plain house full of leather harness and mothballs in her drawers, where she kept her jodhpurs, shirt and tie.

She taught my mother to ride and she taught me. It was with Penelope that I galloped through gateways in the governess cart, clipped a wheel and tipped out. With her I cantered as a small child ten miles to a hunt meet in driving rain, fell off, got back on, galloped all day over the Welsh Mountains and hacked home again in the dark. It is Penelope's

voice in my ear when I need it, saying, 'Get back on the horse.'

So when I was asked by a fast-talking Irishwoman, Karen Considine, if she could take me along the route Penelope rode for a month in 1961 for her book (now a travel classic), *Two Middle-Aged Ladies in Andalusia*, I said yes.

Karen, a Connemara farmer's daughter, read Penelope's book when she was 15. She worked as a polo groom all over the world, and in her fifties moved to Andalusia.

Twenty years on, she speaks fluent Spanish and lives in a tiny corner house in Gaucín. A few years ago, she wrote *La Ruta de Penelope*, published in English and Spanish, in which she tells the story of her own solo 31-day ride, mostly in the rain, retracing my grandmother's tour.

On that rain-soaked ride, Karen asked people in villages if they remembered 'the Englishwoman' of the 1960s. In Hinojares, on the slopes of the Sierra de Cazorla, north of Granada, she found José and Pili, the son and daughter of the muleteer in Penelope's book:

'Soon a mule dealer came in dressed in a grey cotton smock over corduroy trousers … one of the handsomest men I ever saw, such a gentle way of talking and such courtly manners…'

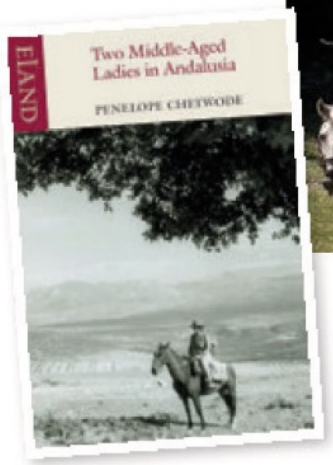
José and Pili between them run a hotel and mountain-riding business. Karen teams up with the family and Penelope's Ride – the five-day version – is born.

'Will you mind if a few Irish girls come along?' says Karen. Five roughly middle-aged gals tumble out of Granada bus station and envelop me in hugs and offers of beer. There is a chef, a festival creator, a businesswoman, an art teacher and a funeral director. I think we will be all right even if the rest of the world goes down.

José – handsome and courtly like his father, but shy – can't work out which of his Andalusian bays and greys each of us should ride, so we pick names out of a hat. Evening light slants over a beautiful bay, a doleful-looking mare and a grey Arab cross with a lugubrious head who looks like Don Quixote's Rocinante. I pick her, and make ready to fight windmills.

We're riding along mule tracks winding among holm oaks and hawthorn laden with dog roses, orange-flowering pomegranate trees and turfy stretches strewn with daisies.

You might think of Spain as scorched, but Jaén province is home to more springs and rivers than any other. In every village, there is a large trough. There is a *lavadero*, a communal washing room, in Belerda. And there are cool, green streams we swim in at lunchtime and the ice-blue reservoirs of the Francoist regime, during which the Fascist dictator flooded river valleys without informing the residents. They were robbed of their land – but their descendants are grateful now, for whole plains, hundreds of miles wide, are irrigated.



Imogen Lycett Green (*second right)* in Andalusia. *Below:* Granny's classic book

'Gallopy! Gallopy!' suggests José, who speaks no other English. We gallop along a white track between olive groves. We gallop along mule tracks, the sure-footed horses picking their way. We ride above precipices and climb mountain passes.

As we ride into Pozo Alcón, Karen points out a narrow street where Penelope lost a pair of pyjamas (they fell out of her saddle bag), only to have them returned to her at the next village. Locals watch us from front steps, clutching small children close. Look, *caballo*!

We ride through a poplar plantation to a river, where Pili and her husband, Pedro, have laid out *salmorejo* (a cold tomato soup with egg and bacon on top) and a pie with pimiento peppers. We plunge into the river and then rest under an enormous fig tree, which grows out of the waterfall. This must be the Garden of Eden.

Dubs, the art teacher, starts calling me Baby Penelope; then everyone does.

When Penelope rode alone on her mare, La Marquesa (the other middle-aged lady), she could knock on the door of a remote farm and find feed and a stable. In the *posadas* (inns), she would be the only woman traveller, surrounded at dinner by wiry travelling tradesmen who made a living selling *jamón* or coal.

Penelope found the constant attention on the road exhausting and developed an imperious way of passing other riders at top speed: 'I simply had to have the day to myself if I was to shine in the social life of the *posadas* at night.'

But those hilltop houses now lie in ruins and we don't meet a single other person on the mule trails in five days, bar two hikers and a surprised cyclist.

On Penelope's 1961 ride, Spain was experiencing the 'Spanish miracle' (*el milagro español*), a period of growth from 1959 to 1974, when Franco finally allowed external trade. But here, in the hills, they were living on subsistence farming.

People still lived in caves because they were hiding from persecution. Now people live in caves because they want an alternative lifestyle and can rent out their 'cave dwelling' on Airbnb.

Many of José's generation (including Pedro and Pili) went to Zurich in their twenties to earn money, returning with enough to build a house, with the bizarre result that everyone in the tiny village of Hinojares speaks German. But people have moved on from mule trading: Pili's son is a doctor, José's two daughters are training to be medics too.

It is four hours before José returns with the injection – four hours in which we six women take it in turns walking the mare with colic up and down, up and down. Karen got her two injections at hospital, and both she and the mare survive.

As do the rest of us. In *Over the Hills and Far Away*, my mother writes about old tracks and continuity, of how escaping onto a horse is not about running away but about coming home.

At our last meal, José cries for his father the muleteer and I give my well-worn jodhpur boots to José's horse-mad daughter to carry on the tradition of 'grandmother's footsteps'.

José was going to give up the horses in favour of mountain-bike tours, but now he promises he won't. He and Karen will lead another Penelope's Ride.

Two Middle-Aged Ladies in Andalusia *by Penelope Chetwode is published by Eland (£11.95)*

NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY

Tears in Provence

Catriona Olding looks after holiday homes while mourning her husband, Jeremy Clarke

La vie en rosé: **Catriona's Airbnb cave house**

'*La France est un paradis peuplé de gens qui se croient en enfer*,' said the writer Sylvain Tesson in 2017.

France is a paradise populated by people who think they're in Hell. It's a quote that a friend, André, admires so much he has it inscribed on the wall of the shed where he keeps his large and elaborate model of the Tour de France.

The Côte d'Azur of F Scott Fitzgerald, Katherine Mansfield and Cyril Connolly's *The Rock Pool* (1947) has become overpopulated, expensive, glitzy and, in parts, ugly – forcing many holidaymakers deeper inland to the Var. Peter Mayle's *A Year in Provence* (1989) drew Brits away from Tuscany towards the Luberon.

The result of this pincer movement is that the pretty village I've lived in for ten years has become increasingly popular.

But my tiny cave house is hardly a wealthy advertising executive's dream. There's no access, other than a narrow cliff path, few straight walls (it's mostly live rock) and no pool to lounge around, sipping rosé.

I paint, write, let out the little cave apartment next door in the summer and manage a few holiday rentals. Local people are amused by, and tolerant of, the eccentric Scotswoman who speaks terrible French and lives high above the village among the eagle owls.

We're in the middle of our short high season. The restaurants and bars are full, as is the swanky new Lou Calen hotel and restaurant complex. My eldest daughter and her husband ate at the Jardin Secret on Sunday and saw George Clooney and Amal dining in the next room. Tony Blair was spotted a couple of years ago, but we try not to let that put us off.

Last week, I saw an earnest and bespectacled Swiss family of four into an old stone cottage in the forest above a nearby village. The mother was wearing harem pants.

They hadn't been this far south before. 'Is the village safe at night? Is it OK to drive in the dark? Is it dangerous when it rains? Is there a problematic number of mosquitos?'

Later she sent me a text, saying she'd gone the full *Manon des Sources* and fallen in love with the place. I did the same thing 17 summers ago, wandering about the deserted hills, lighter of heart and spirit than I'd been since early childhood; high on the hot, sweet scent of wild figs, thyme, and rosemary.

But bashing France is fun sport for English journalists. I read febrile columns suggesting that all France is about to go up in flames. On the day of the Olympics opening, there were fires on the track of the high-speed TGV rail network – but there was nothing diabolical going on here.

We love our village and it's too hot to throw cobblestones or set fire to stuff. Local farmers protesting against EU agricultural policy have carefully turned the village name signs upside down.

My coming to France ten years ago with no French and very little money wasn't done on a whim. I supported myself: cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, picking up and dropping off kids, caring for – among others – a famous elderly frail author, and helping with holiday lettings.

I'd had a cleaner and gardeners at home before I left and it was difficult to adjust. Luckily, the bar was set pretty low.

The woman I replaced in the letting business, Tracy, left her role after being caught drunk and having sex with a chap from the village while waiting for renters to arrive. On the way out, she misjudged the driveway and reversed into the family's hired car.

In Truman Capote's story *A Day's Work* (1980), Capote follows his cleaner, the magnificent, dope-smoking Mary Sanchez, around to find out about her work and clients.

If you have a cleaner, you should read it. Your cleaner knows everything: your filthy bathroom habits, the minutiae of your relationship with your spouse, what you keep in your bedside cabinet and how drunk your teenage children were when you went on holiday and left her in charge. Pay your cleaner well.

Unlike Mary Sanchez, I'm a rubbish cleaner. The only cleaning I have to do these days is my own house, and the apartment I let on Airbnb, which is entirely cave. It's more Hobbit than batman – and guests love it. They tend to be charming, bookish and often gay.

Last year, when I was nursing my terminally ill husband – the peerless and beautiful *Spectator* Low Life columnist Jeremy Clarke – the apartment shower leaked. The lovely German guys who were renting bought sealant and fixed the problem.

My middle daughter was staying the following spring and helped me get the apartment ready for rentals. I was vacuuming under the bed and saw something unpleasant. 'What's that?' 'Oh,' she said, looking. 'It's OK, Mum. It's just an earplug.'

The best houses are easy to spot and get booked up quickly. Well-renovated houses of character with a pool, good beds and decent plumbing, within walking distance of the village, will always let well.

If you want to party, it's better to rent a place in the countryside. I felt sorry for guests I saw in last year – a mother with two grown-up daughters, one of whom was heavily pregnant. They were models of rectitude. The people next door made a racket late one night. My guests woke to find raw eggs had been thrown at the front door by an angry and mistaken neighbour.

Cotignac, Var. *Below*: Catriona and husband, Jeremy Clarke, in a local cave

Most of our renters know Provence and are happy to be here. Occasionally there are problems. One summer, it's pools going green. The next, it's plumbing. But sometimes it's the people who are at fault; badly behaved guests or difficult owners.

A few years ago, a Swedish woman was angry because she couldn't get Sky Sports in her expensive rental property – a tall truck had taken down the wire. She was drunk and insisted a colleague drive over at 11pm to fix the problem. On the last day of her holiday, she forced sanitary products down a lavatory, which resulted in the front garden's being flooded with excrement from the toilet and effluent from the septic tank.

In another property, six German cyclists, rather than taking their rubbish and recycling away, hid eight large black bags full of stinking ordure and bottles in the oleander bushes in the back garden.

If Jeremy was well enough, and I was elsewhere when they arrived, he'd meet my Airbnb people.

He once brought an American couple to the apartment – Cathy, a psychiatrist/neuroscientist, and her husband. The following morning, I went to the boulangerie and bought them croissants. We got chatting.

It was Jeremy's gentle, magnetic charm, humour and modesty, combined with the otherworldliness of the place, that sparked a friendship. They came back twice more and bought a second home on the other side of the village.

After Jeremy died in May 2023, I was a mess. The pain of losing him, the physical hardship of caring for him, and not eating or sleeping for two months had taken their toll. Cathy took me for walks in the hills above the village. Her wise words helped me through the dark and lonely winter months to follow. And one of the best things she did was to tell television-hating me to watch the TV series *Ted Lasso*.

Last July, another American friend, Puddles – 'the sad clown with the golden voice' – and his wife were on my terrace high above the village.

We'd just clinked glasses and said '*Santé*' when we heard prolonged and agonised screaming. We looked through binoculars but could see nothing. 'Please, God, it's not a child in a pool…'

We were relieved to watch an ambulance go past – but the screaming went on. I ran down. In flip-flops, it took three minutes.

When I arrived at the cheap apartment block, I was confronted with a woman sitting like *La Pietà*, screaming, blaming herself, with a dead German Shepherd dog on her lap. Her young son and teenage daughter were hysterical; husband and grandfather ashen and pacing.

They were a poor family; the children were sticky and smelt unwashed. I tried to comfort them. In the excitement of arriving, each thought the other had let the old dog out of the car.

When I told Cathy, she said, 'Oh my God. That's so sad and terrible – and your hippocampus has hardly healed yet.'

Catriona Olding wrote a tribute to her late husband, Jeremy Clarke, in the new book, Low Life: The Spectator Columns: 'The Final Years'

DUCHESSEART; HERVE LENAIN / ALAMY, PORTRAIT: LILY IDLE

Three is a magic number

The Triangular Lodge, Northamptonshire, celebrates its Catholic builder and the Holy Trinity

LUCINDA LAMBTON

Show me a finer and more beautiful building in the world – no exaggeration or fancy talk! – than the Triangular Lodge at Rushton in Northamptonshire.

It was exquisitely crafted between 1594 and 1596 at the behest of a devout Catholic convert, Thomas Tresham (father of one of the Gunpowder plotters), who created it as a testament to his faith.

This little building was erected at a time when to be a Catholic was punishable by imprisonment – even death. It was nevertheless coursed through with symbols of the Holy Trinity, including the all-important-in-this-case family emblem of the trefoil as in Tres-(h)am – 'I am three'.

The triangular form of the little building itself is decorated with an abundance of triangles as decorations. These, though, are not merely Catholic conceits; rather it is the glory of God that trumpets forth from the walls.

Most delightfully, this is in fact a warrener's lodge – the man who lived there looked after rabbits!

As a contemporary with the big house, nearby Rushton Hall (now a hotel and spa), the Triangular Lodge can be seen on the eminence of the connegerie – crammed full of coneys, as rabbits were called at the time.

This triangular warren was such a success that Tresham built another at Pipewell, a few miles away.

As well as satisfying the Treshams' stomachs, the creatures would provide a profitable business with their meat and fur. They also created an excellent way for making use of poor land.

There were many estates that enjoyed rabbit-farming on the grand scale. The excellent historian the late Mark Girouard gives other alarming examples in the English Heritage guidebook to the place: 'The great warren at Thetford in Norfolk once covered 3,000 acres and was eight miles long.'

Another at Methwold, also in Norfolk, was four miles long.

Sir Francis Bacon's warren in Gorhambury, near St Albans, took up 72 acres and yielded £60 a year.

Sir Thomas Tresham was in the business too, dispatching rabbits to London to be sold; the grey coneys for £3 per hundred, the black for £5 per hundred and the black and white, plumper, 'rich' rabbits for £10 per hundred.

This sharply three-sided little building, despite its myriad delicate complexities, is in fact built along the lines of a working warrener's lodge.

> More delightfully, the man who lived there looked after rabbits

It has a top floor from which the warrener could watch over his charges, as well as rooms below for the equipment needed to dispatch the rabbits and for hanging their skins. All the corpses would have been kept in a cool basement.

Tresham designed every aspect of it to revolve around the number three. The plan is an equilateral triangle, with each side being 33 feet 4 inches long (one third of 100 feet), tapering up to a height of 33 feet at the upper storey. There are two

storeys, plus a basement with three windows on each side. The three main rooms are hexagonal, each with a triangular corner chamber. Nine gables soar up to the sky, ablaze with stone flames, creatures and three-sided pinnacles topped with trefoils.

Each side of the building represents one member of the Holy Trinity, with unifying inscriptions carried around all three façades.

The 18 letters 'MENTES TUORUM VISITA ('Visit the minds of thy people') are incised above the first-floor windows.

And 'RESPICITE NON MIHI SOLI LABORAVI ('Look – I have not worked only for myself') (27 letters) is written above the sundials in the central gables.

The entablature, 33 feet long on each side, has three passages from the Bible. Each has 33 letters: 'APERIATUR TERRA ET GERMINET SALVATOREM ('Let the earth open and bring forth a saviour'); 'QUIS SEPARABIT NOS A CHARITATE CHRISTI' ('Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?'); 'CONSIDERAVI OPERA TUA DOMINE ET EXPAVI' ('I have considered thy works, Lord, and have been afraid').

Whereas the Holy Trinity was acceptable to the Protestants, the worship of the Virgin Mary was not. As for participation in the Catholic Mass, this could be punishable by death. These, then, were the two elements of Tresham's faith that were the most important to conceal. Mary was symbolised by a dove.

Dicing with danger were the nine stone angels, draining water from the roof, with lead spouts sticking out of their stomachs. With the letters and the triangles incised on their chests, they read 'SS SD DS' and 'QEE QEE QVE', the initials of *Sanctus sanctus sanctus Dominus Deus Sabaoth* ('Holy holy holy Lord God of Hosts') and *Qui erat et qui est et qui venturus est* ('Who was and who is and who is to come'). This is the opening of the hymn of praise as the congregation is bidden to join the choir of angels, during the most solemn part of the Catholic Mass, before the Host is transformed into the body of Christ.

The chimney, topped with trefoils of Tresham and the Trinity, soars defiantly into the sky, carved with emblems on each of its three sides. There is the sacred monogram with the cross and three nails.

The Lamb of God bears a cross that symbolises Christ. Enclosed in a pentagon, a tau cross rises out of a chalice to symbolise salvation.

Tresham family shields surround the windows, with a variation of trefoils on the top floor and crosses with trefoils at the end of each arm on the ground. Little trefoils with a triangular opening light the basement. The words 'TRES TESTIMONIUM DANT' are incised over the front door: 'There are three that bear witness' or 'Tresham bears witness'.

Inside, there are the most magical images of patterns of light as the sun pours through the fanciful windows on to the plain stone walls.

Sir Thomas Tresham was to spend nearly 12 years – plus a few extra months here and there – either in prison or in confinement or under surveillance, because of his religious beliefs.

The Triangular Lodge was his sermon in stone, and it speaks to us with brilliant eloquence after more than 400 years. It is an astonishingly beautiful building that is so sharply defined it quite slices into your senses.

The Triangular Lodge is an English Heritage building. You can see it from the train between Market Harborough and Kettering

The Triangular Lodge with three triangular gables on each side and, *below*, the door

The Triangular Lodge, Rushton, built in 1596 by Thomas Tresham. *Below*: the triangular hall for the rabbit-keeper

MILK WOOD; ENGLISH HERITAGE / GETTY; DAVE PORTER / ALAMY

How I forged the Iron Lady

Lindsay Duncan tells *Louise Flind* about working with Harold Pinter and Alan Rickman – and imitating Margaret Thatcher

Is there anything you can't leave home without?
At least one volume of poetry and, as I'm Scottish, sunblock and sunglasses in any season.

Is there something you really miss?
I enjoy investing in being somewhere else. I quite enjoy missing people as long as I know I'm going to see them, and family always pitch up at some point when I'm away.

Do you travel light?
No, no… I do go away a lot, and when I'm packing the house looks like the scene of a terrible robbery. I talk myself through 'What does 25 degrees feel like, and minus 3…?'

I really enjoy clothes, and I want the right thing for my mood. It's nonsense, because I can't possibly wear them all. And I look at my husband's case, which looks tidy and reassuring, and he's always got the right thing. I'm ridiculous, and I don't know what the answer is.

What are your earliest childhood holiday memories?
As a young teenager on our first holiday abroad in Bulgaria, I had completely red arms, and an incredibly attractive young waiter brought this dish of yoghurt. He said, 'Put this on your arms – and also it tastes delicious.' It was the first time I'd tasted yoghurt and it was so, so good.

Did you always want to be on the stage?
I was shy, like lots of actors. There was this idea I might be a doctor. That would have pleased my mother enormously – she was in the FANY [First Aid Nursing Yeomanry] during the war. When I was a teenager, thanks to the influence of a couple of friends from the boys' school, acting became a possibility,

Was your family theatrical?
My maternal grandfather was a master tailor in Edinburgh, and my paternal grandfather was in printing in Glasgow – a working-class family.

DAVE BENETT/GETTY

Where did you do weekly rep in the '70s and where did you stay?
Southwold in Suffolk. We rehearsed all day, performed at night, learnt our lines, went to the pub, walked on the beach. It was full-on, thrilling and kind of mad, and that's how you got an equity card. Then we transferred to the end of the pier in Cromer, which was completely bonkers.

In Southwold, we were billeted in a boys' prep school, and we were supposed to be girls in one dormitory and boys in another…

What was your first big break?
Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*. We went to the Public Theater in New York and then back to the Royal Court. And *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, which took us from Stratford, to London RSC, to the West End, to Broadway…

Who's been your favourite co-star?
Alan Rickman. With the success of *Les Liaison Dangereuses* and *Private Lives*, we literally spent years on stage together.

What was Alan Rickman like? And Harold Pinter?
They have a lot of similarities. They were both powerful people, and they demanded people around them to be as curious as they both were.

Because language for Harold was his life's work, his choice of words is an example to anyone who wants to write and the most marvellous exercise for people who want to act.

He was rigorous and so was Alan. He would always explore and always wanted to see what more there was to be discovered, and they were both loyal, and funny.

What is the most exotic place you've filmed in?
Cinecittà, the film studios in Rome.

And the least exotic?
Calgary in Canada; I was staying in an apartment which seemed to be a traffic island.

How did you imitate Margaret Thatcher in *Margaret* (2009)?
The writer and the director were determined that I shouldn't copy Thatcher's voice, because her voice was an invention. I spent ages working on her voice because I wanted to know what it felt like to be the person who had invented that voice, and I worked with a dialect coach.

Where did you go on your honeymoon?
My first honeymoon to a small island off Connemara; and the second time to Nevis.

Do you lie on a beach?
Funny – that's funny.

Do you stay in a hotel or apartment?
I love making a little pared-down version of home in an apartment, but I also love good hotels.

Are you brave with different food abroad?
I'm just obsessed by food. Probably the most adventurous thing I've eaten is veal intestines in Testaccio in Rome – delicious.

Do you have a go at the local language?
School French, and a bit of Italian, but I'm still dreaming about spending a few months with my husband in an Italian city, and I'll come back fat and fluent…

What are your top travelling tips?
Go with the right person.

Lindsay Duncan is in The Morning Show *(Apple TV) and* The Death of Bunny Monroe *(Sky)*

In the steps of John Osborne, a Shropshire lad

PATRICK BARKHAM

Beyond the hot spots and honeypots, gridlock and retail parks, England can still be eerily empty of people.

I took a walk in south Shropshire one sultry afternoon – two hours through forests and footpaths – and met no one. This was a woodland walk, and forest rides are usually bustling with enthusiastic bikers, hikers and dog-walkers, but here there was no trace of anyone – not even the drone of a distant tractor. During a mile along a twisting country lane with its mohican of grass, one venerable car chugged past, the back seats piled high with toilet rolls. Ours is a strange land.

I began my walk at the Hurst, John Osborne's former country pad, now a writing centre for the Arvon Foundation. It looks over the Clun Valley, a somnolent patchwork of small fields which on a humid summer's day resembled a painting, superficially unchanged in two centuries.

But the countryside is always changing, as I found, climbing a steep gully into the forest, where colossal, columnar trunks of coastal redwoods glowed vermilion in the afternoon sun. A small grove was planted here in the 1930s and the trees are already 130 feet tall. More redwoods now grow in Britain than in their native California. Another couple of decades and they will be our nation's tallest trees.

I took a forest track looping through Sowdley Wood, a large plantation on the Black Hill, one of several Black Hills that may have inspired Bruce Chatwin's novel.

Plantation woodlands are often regimented rows of tightly packed trees – gloomy monocultures where few native species thrive – but this was unusually interesting. The rides were broad and flowery; hogweed and foxgloves rampant after a summer of rain; meadow browns and ringlets bouncing beside bird's-foot trefoil and meadow pea.

The silence of high summer was striking; I could've been in spacious, slightly creepy Scandinavia. I only wished I could be stalked by a lynx. But at least there was the possibility of a pine marten; a number of these elusive predators were seen in these woodlands

GARY WING

in 2015, marking this mammal's return to England after extirpation.

The forest was planted in a series of compartments, and over the past century foresters have experimented with multifarious conifers: Lawson cypress looking like an out-grown suburban hedge, larch, western hemlock and some species I couldn't identify. Mostly there was Douglas fir; in some recently harvested compartments, young firs stretched up from a tangle of green, their tops all soft and droopy.

After a nice section of oak, and more firs, I reached the end of the wood and its broad forest ride. Suddenly, I was transported from Scandinavia back to Offa's ancient kingdom, and a narrow, rutted track. It resembled a dry river-bed – between an ancient hedgerow of twisted hawthorn, blackthorn and honeysuckle, on my left, and sheep pasture rolling away to my right. There was a spectacular view east and south taking in the Shropshire hills ... and weren't those blue hills in the far distance the Cotswolds?

I turned north onto a lane (with its single car) between more old hedgerows and eventually re-entered the wood.

Here it became an atmospheric place of spindly, twisted oaks: Clunton coppice. I was amazed to learn that these small trees were last cut back 85 years ago; our natives grow slowly compared with the New World pines.

The thought that all this forest was once magnificent oak coppice was sobering, but the walk's final stretch, traversing the plantation's lower edge, was enlivened by the possibility of a pine marten. I jumped at every scrabble, hoping for a marten but always seeing the fleeing wave of a grey squirrel tail. The foresters must be delighted that this pest of trees is now kept in check by the magnificent martens.

Park at What3Words forgives.potions.newsprint (free car park for Clunton Coppice). Take the footpath west along the northern edge of Sowdley Wood. At western end of woods, turn left on public footpath up hill, follow back through forest. Left onto the lane north back to the car park

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RANTS AND RAVES FROM THE INTREPID DUVET LADY

OF BRAIN BLEEDS AND BALACLAVAS

A while ago, in the early hours of the morning, I woke up in a gut-roiling panic. So this is what it is like to be succumbing to a massive stroke or a cerebral haemorrhage, I thought. My brain was boiling hot and I had an excruciating pain on the right side of my head.

My initial thoughts were: where is my phone, will I be able to dial 999 and would I be able to get downstairs and unlock the front door to admit emergency services?

By that stage, I was fully awake and my next thought was: why the hell am I wearing a cat helmet?

Sure enough, my cat had draped herself over my head; her head and front legs to the left and tail and hindlegs to the right. Further, to ensure she was well anchored and couldn't roll off, she had stuck a back foot into my right ear and embedded a couple of claws as deeply as she could. Hence the unbelievable pain.

It was all reminiscent of those vile fur coats so popular in the 1950s and 60s which were decorated with little shrivelled-up fox corpses acting as a collar and draped over the wearer's shoulders. As a kid, they revolted me.

Anyway, I so happened to mention this whole unpretty event to an acquaintance and was slightly put out when she didn't express the degree of surprise and amusement I was expecting.

Oh, she said, our cat regularly sleeps that way over my husband's head. I did a double take. And your husband tolerates it, I asked incredulously?

Oh she said again, he loves it. "You see Jessica, he is as bald as a hen's egg and his head is always cold. The cat is doing him a massive favour and it suits all of us. You see, if the cat wasn't literally around, my husband would go to bed wearing a balaclava as this is the only headwear that would stay put through the night." And, she summed up, "no matter how often he wore the balaclava, I never got used to it and waking up in the morning next to this vision, never failed to scare the jim-jams off me."

Jessica

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Genius crossword 443

EL SERENO

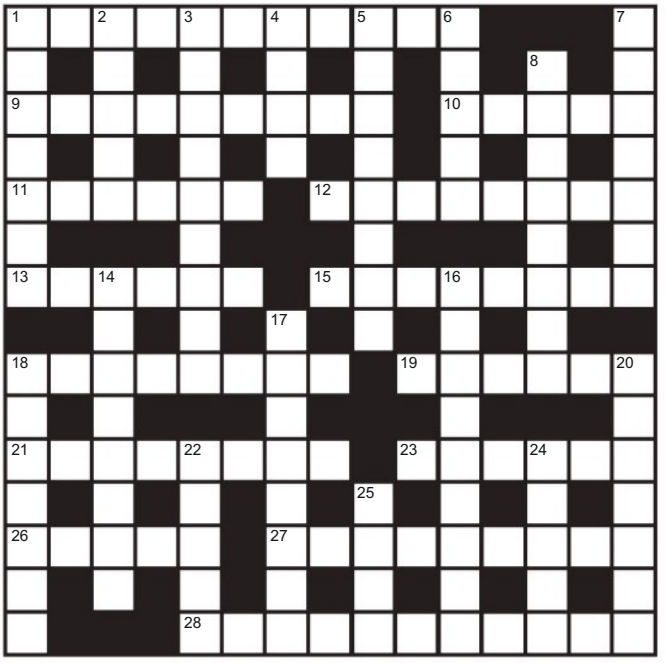
7 clues share an unstated definition

Across

1 Outline belief, hoarding silver (11)
9 Learn about retaining players (9)
10 Spirit drink according to rumour (5)
11 Creature that's timid, postmen oddly excepted (6)
12 Female, like Van Gogh with enormous courage (8)
13 Socially acceptable – in the beginning (6)
15 After drink, political wings will accept that is arrogant (8)
18 Trouble that comes at bathtime? (3,5)
19 Southern elite? That's a laugh (6)
21 French leader's sleep over with Trotsky (8)
23 Thwart Japan with a vote on veto (6)
26 Fights to hold onto western opinions (5)
27 Popular journal one Conservative finds lifeless (9)
28 What lobster has next – look and see differently (11)

Down

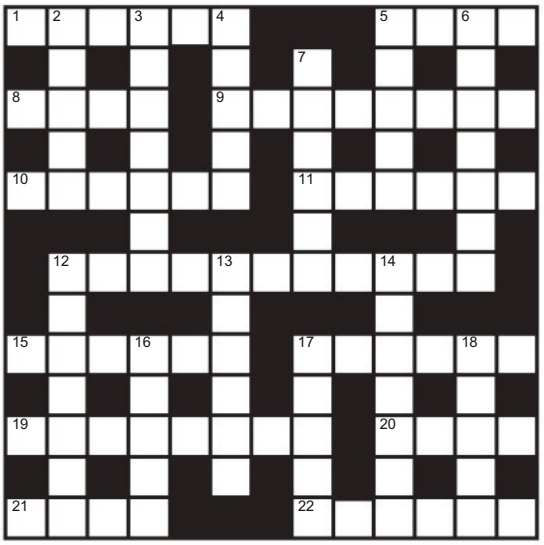
1 Monitors make a splash going north to cover freeze (7)
2 Bug PA losing head (5)
3 Italian traitor possibly arrested amidst cheers (9)
4 Go forth – not for this Germanic type (4)
5 ....and not potentially means Scandinavian (8)
6 Party in northern sector of Turkey (5)
7 Succeed like this, protected by doctor (7)
8 Avoid contact with this human dynamo (4,4)
14 Somehow end up keeping mine that's not been exploited (8)
16 Port offering a shift between sides (9)
17 Tribal chief's love child, say, turning up (8)
18 That morning-after feeling – not good! (7)
20 Kiss in cinema excited Zapata perhaps (7)
22 Some feel silly turning up fabric (5)
24 Jack's got a profit – and a girl (5)
25 Labour requiring leader to be replaced by Yankee (4)



How to enter Please scan or otherwise copy this page and email it to **comps@theoldie.co.uk**. **Deadline: 18th September 2024**. We do not sell or share your data with third parties.

First prize is *The Chambers Dictionary* and £25.
Two runners-up will receive £15.
NB: Hodder & Stoughton and Bookpoint Ltd will be sent the addresses of the winners because they process the prizes.

Moron crossword 443



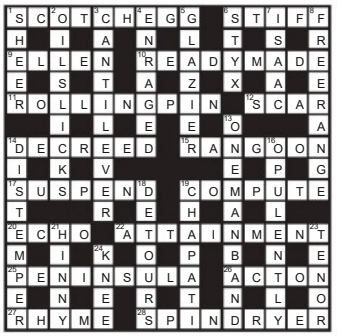
Across

1 Go back (to) (6)
5 Edges of dresses (4)
8 Spanish bubbly (4)
9 Giving way (8)
10 Conflict, bitter disagreement (6)
11 Posh musicals! (6)
12 Kindness, generosity (11)
15 Burns night dinner (6)
17 Kinsfolk (6)
19 Repartee, banter (8)
20 Swindle, fraud (4)
21 Remain (4)
22 Brief experiences; smacks (6)

Down

2 Precise (5)
3 Prevarication (7)
4 Rosemary and ____ (5)
5 Prevaricate, ___ one's bets (5)
6 Authority, instruction (7)
7 Backlash (6)
12 Very obvious and without shame (7)
13 Panoramas (6)
14 Retribution or just punishment (7)
16 Mucky (5)
17 Fast; ships (5)
18 Charter, rent (5)

Genius 441 solution



Winner: Eleanor Morrall, Bilston, West Midlands

Runners-up: Roger Brown, Shrewsbury, Shropshire; Deborah King, Wrexham, Denbighshire

Moron 441 answers: Across: 1 Cook, 4 Hook, 8 Loch (Cuckoo clock), 9 Pictorial, 11 Carbon, 13 Serials, 15 Pained, 16 Easels, 18 Needle, 20 Snicks, 22 Earnest, 23 Direct, 25 Test tubes, 26 Itch, 27 Myth, 28 Daft. **Down**: 2 Omit, 3 Kitten, 4 Horrid, 5 Oracle, 6 Double act, 7 Shin, 10 Lasagne, 12 Span, 13 Sidetrack, 14 Re-elect, 17 Sash, 19 Eatery, 20 Snatch, 21 Issued, 23 Drip, 24 Beef.

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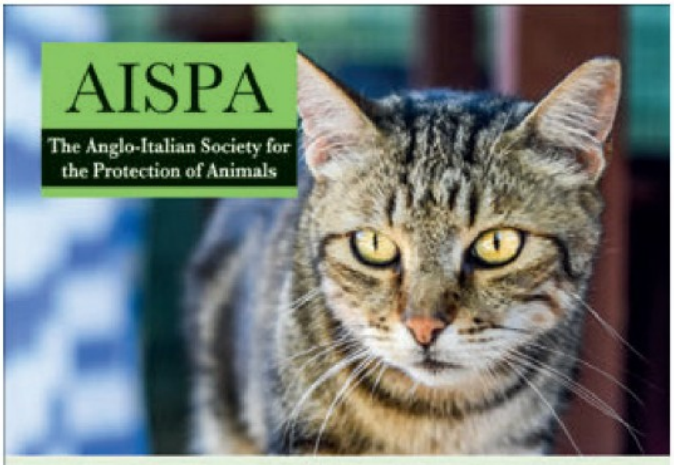

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'Eight ever, nine never' means that when you have an eight-card fit missing the queen, you should ever (ie always) finesse; when you have a nine-card missing queen-low-low-low, you should never finesse. It isn't a favourite, implying a certainty when none exists. In particular, the odds when you're missing four to the queen are extremely close. Inferences, even slender ones, from the bidding, lead and defence to date should swing you to finesse.

Take this month's deal from this year's Camrose Trophy for home nations, won comfortably by England. West led the ace of spades and a second spade to East's king. As declarer, you ruff East's knave of spades at trick three. Plan the play.

Dealer West East-West Vulnerable

North
♠ 10 5 3
♥ 10 9 5 2
♦ A 9 3
♣ K Q 5

West
♠ A 8 7 6 2
♥ 6
♦ Q 8
♣ A J 9 8 6

East
♠ K J 4
♥ Q 8 7
♦ 6 5 4
♣ 10 4 3 2

South
♠ Q 9
♥ A K J 4 3
♦ K J 10 7 2
♣ 7

The bidding

South	West	North	East
	1♠	Pass	2♠
3♥	3♠	4♥	end

The a priori odds in hearts favour the drop. But there's no rush. First, lead up your singleton club – perhaps you'll sneak it past West. No – West rises with the ace of clubs and exits with a club. You win in dummy and must now tackle hearts.

Here's the thing. West has bid on to three spades with very slender assets and ace-empty to five spades. Surely he has to have some shape – a singleton. This is likely to be in hearts, not diamonds. But you don't take a first-round finesse in hearts – West's singleton could be the queen. You cross to the ace. Nothing interesting has happened, so you must cross back to dummy in diamonds to finesse in hearts.

Now, you think about high-card points. Unless West has the queen of diamonds, he has at most nine points for all his bidding (assuming he has that singleton heart). You lead a diamond to the nine and run the ten of hearts. West duly discards and you can lead a third heart to the (queen and) king and cash out the diamonds. Game made – as it was for Mike Bell of London and Barnet Shenkin of Glasgow.
ANDREW ROBSON

Competition

TESSA CASTRO

IN COMPETITION No 309 you were invited to write a poem called *An Ill Wind*. I was surprised by the popularity of breaking wind among the entries. And I don't know whether the wind blew some competitors' verse into lines of unmanageable length. Even so, your entries produced a boisterous breath of air at the receiving end.

Bill Greenwell imagined the hardest-hearted appreciation of an ill wind, after a daughter blew herself up and her father saw the silver lining: 'Besides, thought Father, quite the chef,/ There's fewer mouths to feed,/ And I can now afford a Neff –/ A stroke of luck indeed!'

Commiserations to him and to Matt Brookwell, Jane Moth, Brian Howe, Ian Nicol, Imogen Thomas, Angela Ryder, Dorothy Pope, D A Prince, Erika Fairhead, Andrew Bamji, John Barrow and Sue Dickie, and congratulations to those printed below, each of whom wins £25, with the bonus prize of *The Chambers Dictionary* going to Howard Russell.

The rooks are back.
They have kicked out the crows
Who had kicked out the jackdaws
Who had kicked out the starlings
From high up in the sycamore
Where four nests have somehow survived the winter.
The rooks are back
Making fools of themselves among the birches
Performing hilarious, ungainly wrenchings
Of live twigs from unco-operative saplings
To replenish their nests.
The rooks are back
With their fractious, internecine racketings
Yet, silhouetted against the fading blue
Of this first, dusky evening of the pandemic,
I envy them the safety of their world.
Howard Russell

Wind-things have always been a source of joy.
The silver chiming bars a lover gave me.
The shells and bells and bits of slate I've hidden
To catch the passing zephyrs in the garden.
All these have pleased me, but today I lie,
After an intimate investigation,
Recently disconnected from a pump
That filled me as one would a Zeppelin
While intravenous juices let me fly
High over the assembled company.
Sooner or later, what goes up comes down
And here I am in what they call 'recovery'.
I am deflating slowly. Now and then
Accumulated breezes leave like Elvis
From the back door of the forsaken building
And the dull mutter rises to a roar.
Ann Drysdale

In the land where the breeze once danced with glee
The wind fell ill, no longer wild and free.
A playful whisper turned to mournful sighs
As it struggled to soar through the blue, blue sky.
The trees stood still no longer swaying
As the poorly wind lost its joyful playing.
Birds ceased to sing, the air grew cold,
The once vibrant wind now frail and old.
Clouds gathered heavy, burdened with sorrow
For the weakened wind with each passing morrow.
But hope remained, a glimmer in the sky
That the sickly wind would once again fly.
Through gentle nursing and tender grace
The wind found strength to find its place.
As it started to heal, the world would know
That even the wind can find a way to grow.
Peter Jarvis

Ill winds – the hurricane
That strips the island bare,
Leaving in flooded streets
No shelter anywhere.
Ill winds – tornado strikes
Bring towers to their knees,
Playing at hide and seek
With power lines and trees.

Ill winds – the bitter breath
Of anger, slander, hate;
The torrid wind of war
That makes Earth desolate.
But now and then a wind
With Holiness collides
And lifts the chariot
In which Elijah rides.
Gail White

COMPETITION No 311 The connections are manifold: order, motherhood, beds, a nonsense rhyme. So please write a poem called *Apple Pie*. 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 311', by Thursday 19th September.

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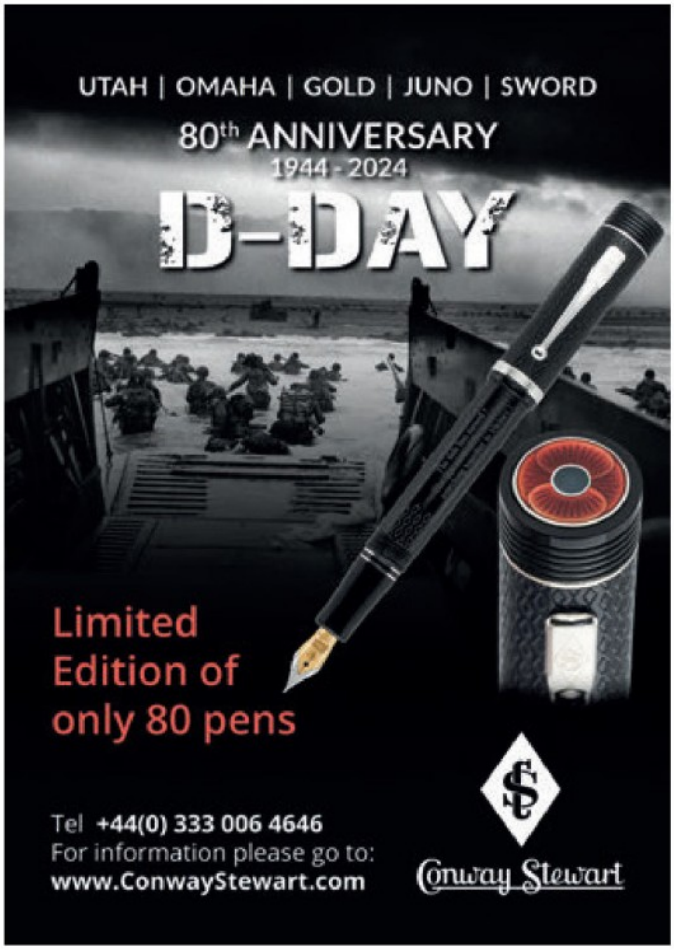

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Ask Virginia

VIRGINIA IRONSIDE

Sorry – the easiest word

Q I have fallen out with my daughter-in-law over a very trivial thing – I thought she owed me money when she didn't. Now she's pregnant and, following our argument, she says she doesn't want me to have anything to do with the baby. Both my son and I are very distressed but obviously he has to take her side. What can I do? I'm beside myself.
Name and address supplied

A Money, to some people, particularly if they've been hard up, means a lot more than it does to others who are better off. And your almost accusing your daughter-in-law of stealing money from you is a big, big thing. You cannot apologise enough.

Say you can't sleep for anguish over how stupid and horrible you've been. Send flowers. Say you can never forgive yourself. Lay it on with a trowel.

Remembers her feelings are deeply hurt – as mine would be – so it will take a lot to get back on friendly terms.

Sister acts up

Q When I was in hospital after a serious car accident, my sister (my only sibling) didn't visit me once. She rang once but was brusque and angry, implying it was all my fault. I'm so upset I can hardly face speaking to her. And yet I love her. What can I do?

A I have a friend who can't bear to come near a hospital and gets extremely upset and angry if I'm ill. It's almost a phobia.

As your younger sister, she may at some level see you as her parent, and it may upset her at a deep level to see you becoming weak and vulnerable. As long as she's sweet in other ways when you're well, that's all that matters.

Grandchild is a material girl

Q We are reasonably well-off though I'm not comfortable with excessive materialism. How do I tell my 15-year-old granddaughter she can't have everything she asks for? Although she sees me occasionally buying expensive clothes or cosmetics for myself, I still feel it's wrong to buy her the latest mobile or designer clothes. She really does have everything she needs.
How do I handle this?
Kate, Cheltenham

A The problem is that, in these days of TikTok etc, material things mean more to children than they used to. While we might have been happy with a hand-knitted jersey as a present, many of today's kids want the 'latest' in everything. If I were you, I'd give her experiences – a trip to the opera, say, or maybe a day in Paris for lunch. She can show off about these, and she'll also have an experience she'll never forget – and remember you for it. And, by the way, don't flaunt your make-up or expensive clothes.

When she comes round, be sure that you're wearing your old cardie full of holes.

Take it slow with new man

Q I'm a widow in my fifties and I've met a lovely man of 60. We see each other every other night and have a good sex life. The problem is that he's desperate to move in with me – and even get married. I feel unkind, refusing to commit, but I value my freedom.

Am I being silly saying no?
Name and address supplied

A Absolutely not. You are being completely reasonable. You might one day change your mind, but at the moment this is how you feel. Make it clear that the more he pesters you about this, the more resistant you'll become. Single men of 60 who don't have any glaring faults are like hen's teeth. If he wants to settle down, he'll find a compliant widow before he can say 'knife'. Just not you, now.

He won't buy me flowers

Q To follow up on your correspondence about men not buying flowers for women, I always longed for my husband to buy me flowers. And when asked why he didn't, he said that only men who had been unfaithful bought their wives flowers.
Kate H, Hove

A That obviously isn't true, but it does sum up how many men feel when they give flowers to a woman. They feel vulnerable and pitiful and rather apologetic. Real men, they feel, don't have anything to do with roses or daffodils, loved only by flower fairies, gay men, girls and ballet dancers.

Some men find it impossible even to say 'I love you' except in exceptional circumstances. This reluctance to show sweetness and vulnerability goes back to primitive feelings of insecurity, I fear.

You may never get your husband to change his mind – though I'm sure he'd be happy to buy you a chainsaw or some stout walking boots. Just a pity you can't put those in a vase, isn't it.

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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