PAM AYRES ON WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

I ♥ MY NEW TIGHTS BY MARY KILLEN

The Oldie

'The Oldie is an incredible magazine – perhaps the best magazine in the world' Graydon Carter

Spring 2023 | £4.95 £4.13 to subscribers | www.theoldie.co.uk | Issue 426

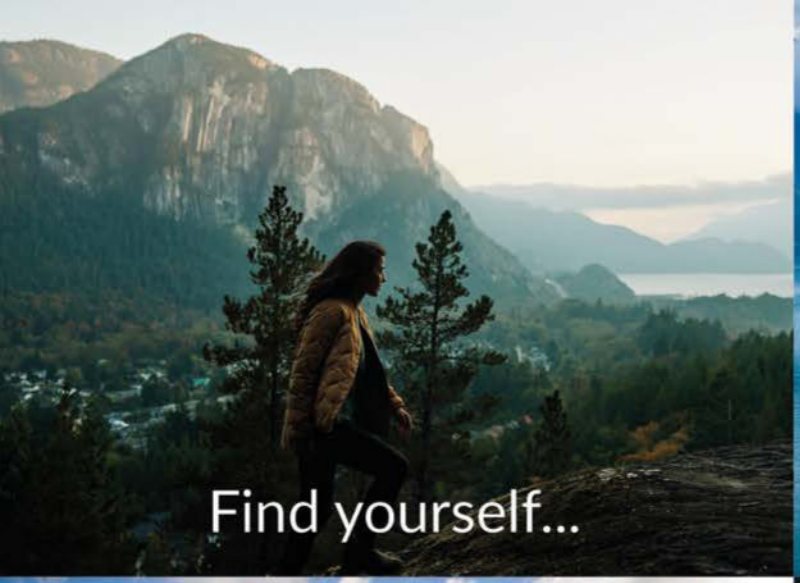
Hotels from Hell

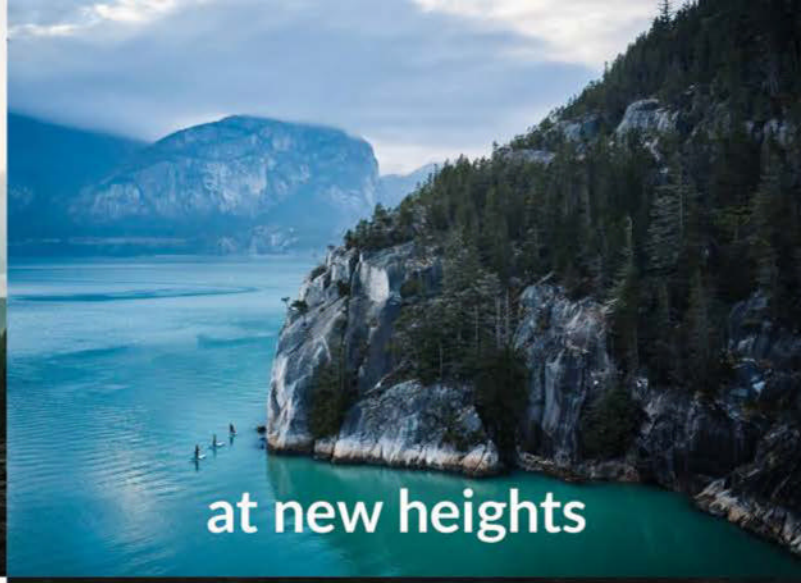
By Prue Leith

How I lost a fortune – Griff Rhys Jones on useless banks

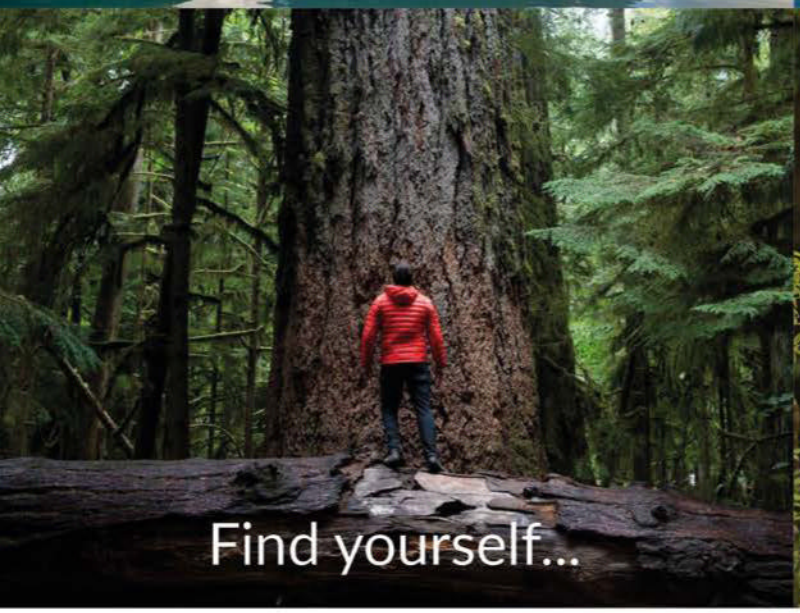
RIP Barry Humphries, Dame Edna and Sir Les Patterson

Who Dares Wins – Mike Sadler, 103, on his SAS service





BONVOYAGE
TAILOR-MADE TRAVEL ★ USA & CANADA



SUPER, NATURAL BRITISH COLUMBIA CANADA

Plan your bespoke holiday to British Columbia with one of our Canada experts today

Call us: **0800 980 7093**
Email us: **sales@bon-voyage.co.uk**
Website: **www.bvusa.co/BritishColumbia**

IATA ABTA V6171

Visit our website

The Oldie

Griff Rhys Jones's bank crash page 14

RIP Barry Humphries – and Edna page 24

Jasper Rees gets the horn page 34

Features

Regulars

Books

Arts

Pursuits

Travel

Reader offer

The Oldie

Moray House, 23/31
Great Titchfield Street,
London W1W 7PA
www.theoldie.co.uk

Subs queries? Email theoldie@subscription.co.uk or phone 01858 438791

ABC circulation figure
July-December 2021: 48,249

Editor Harry Mount
Sub-editor Penny Phillips
Art editor Jonathan Anstee
Supplements editor Jane Mays
Editorial assistant Amelia Milne
Publisher James Pembroke
Patron saints Jeremy Lewis, Barry Cryer
At large Richard Beatty
Our Old Master David Kowitz

***Oldie* subscriptions**
To order a print subscription, go to www.subscription.co.uk/oldie/offers, or email theoldie@subscription.co.uk, or call 01858 438791, or write to *The Oldie*, Tower House, Sovereign Park, Market Harborough LE16 9EF.
Print subscription rates for 12 issues: UK £49.50; Europe/Eire £58; USA/Canada £70; rest of world £69.
To buy a digital subscription for £29.99 or single issue for £2.99, go to the App Store on your tablet/mobile and search for 'The Oldie'.

Advertising
For display, contact :
Paul Pryde on 020 3859 7095
or Rafe Thornhill on 020 3859 7093
For classified: Jasper Gibbons 020 3859 7096

News-stand enquiries
mark.jones@newstrademarketing.co.uk

Front cover Steven May/Alamy

Whatever happens,
Wherever it happens,
Whenever it happens,
Help is at hand.

The Assure

Life-Saving Wristband

SOS Alert
A simple squeeze of the wristband calls for help.

Fall Alert
Monitors for severe falls.

I'm OK Checks
The simple way to confirm you're OK in the morning and before bed.

24/7

Uninterrupted, comprehensive protection in your home, garden and beyond.

4.8 322 reviews

★★★★★

acticheck.com
0345 25 75 080

acticheck

Tired of relying on medication for your aches and pains?

Our curcumin drink offers natural relief!

Kurk is specially formulated to target joint pain and improve mobility and comes in three delicious flavours.

A 12-week study of Kurk in 111 osteoarthritis patients demonstrated significant improvements in pain, function, and quality of life, while also reducing painkiller consumption and easing daily activities like stair climbing and walking.

A Special Offer
50% OFF
YOUR FIRST ORDER
USE CODE: TRUTH50

KURK

The Old Un's Notes

'I find it much easier to write as Les or Edna. If I'm writing as myself, I have to invent a character who is me,' Barry Humphries said once, discussing a piece in The Old Fella, *as Sir Les Patterson called* The Oldie.

How lucky The Oldie *was to get four comic genius columnists for the price of one: Edna, Les, Barry McKenzie and Barry himself.*

Barry worried his marvellous columns weren't good enough. After he recited Sir Les's heavenly Ode to the Queen *at The Oldie of the Year awards, he was convinced he was rusty: 'I haven't performed for a year [thanks to Covid].'*

He couldn't help but be funny. On the phone, he'd suddenly ask, 'Have you noticed all weathergirls have large breasts?'

On hearing from a colleague that I'm not married, he asked, 'Is he a vagina-decliner?'

Thanks to his perfect manners, he immediately asked my colleague not to pass on that question. She did – I've never laughed so much.

Barry was extremely kind. When he heard a friend was dying, he rang to say, 'I bring sad news: an old sweetheart of yours is mortally ill.'

He was so sharp. A reader once complained about Sir Les, thinking he was real.

'**Thought** *he's real?' Barry said, lightning-quick. 'Prick him, does he not bleed?'*

Sir Les does live on. Like Dame Edna, Barry McKenzie and Barry Humphries, he is among the immortals now.

Harry Mount, Editor

RIP Barry Humphries

Poets aren't always welcome in clubs.

The Academy Club in Soho still has a rule laid down by its late founder, Auberon Waugh, that poets can't be members – because they're allegedly bad company and never buy anyone a drink.

Things were different over a century ago in the Rhymers Club, which was exclusively *for* poets.

Members included W B Yeats, who dedicated his poem *The Grey Rock* to his fellow poets: 'Poets with whom I learned my trade, Companions of the Cheshire Cheese [the London pub where they met]'.

And now Maggs Bros, the antiquarian booksellers in London, has published a sales catalogue of works by the Rhymers. They include manuscripts by Ernest Dowson (1867-1900), whose famous lines include 'Days of wine and roses', 'Gone with the wind' and 'I have been faithful ... in my fashion'.

Yeats put a bit of a dampener on his fellow Rhymers by calling them 'the tragic generation' – but it's very much worth seeing their works at Maggs in Bedford Square, London, in May.

Has the Hooray Henry died? Has the last bread roll been hurled across the dinner table?

A new book, *England: The Last Hurrah*, by *Oldie* photographer Dafydd Jones, pictures the Wild Sloane in his last death throes.

Throughout the 1980s, Dafydd took irreverent and intimate portrait of birthday parties and charity balls, Eton picnics and private-school celebrations.

Dafydd says, 'I wondered if the party guests I photographed were just re-enacting a nostalgic fantasy, an imaginary version of England that already no longer existed.'

Among this month's contributors

Griff Rhys Jones (p14) starred in *Not the Nine O'Clock News* and *Alas Smith and Jones* with Mel Smith. His BBC series *A Pembrokeshire Farm* covered the renovation of his holiday home.

Prue Leith (p16) is a judge on *The Great British Bake Off*. Born in Cape Town, she founded Leith's restaurant and Leith's School of Food and Wine. Her *Oldie* column, Bliss on Toast, is now a book.

Hunter Davies (p33) has written over 100 books. His book *The Beatles* is their only authorised biography. He wrote *Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush* and *Wainwright: The Biography*.

Elisabeth Luard (p57 and p78) is *The Oldie*'s cookery correspondent. She is author of *European Peasant Cookery*, *Tapas*, *Family Life*, *My Life as a Wife* and *Squirrel Pie*.

NEIL SPENCE

NOT MANY DEAD

Important stories you may have missed

Loose sheep back in field
Evesham Journal

Sailing club aiming to re-launch lakeside café
Congleton Chronicle

Norman Centre's overgrown bush finally cut back
Norwich Evening News

£15 for published contributions

NEXT ISSUE
The June issue is on sale on 31st May 2023.

GET THE OLDIE APP
Go to App Store or Google Play Store. Search for Oldie Magazine and then pay for app.

OLDIE BOOKS
***The Very Best of The Oldie Cartoons*, *The Oldie Annual 2023* and other *Oldie* books are available at: www.theoldie.co.uk/readers-corner/shop Free p&p.**

OLDIE NEWSLETTER
Go to the *Oldie* website; put your email address in the red SIGN UP box.

HOLIDAY WITH THE OLDIE
Go to www.theoldie.co.uk/courses-tours

KATHRYN LAMB

Charge! Dafydd Jones's *England: The Last Hurrah*

The cover picture, *above*, was taken at Oxford's Dangerous Sports Club tea party at the Dutch Ambassador's house in Gloucestershire, in 1981.

Dafydd says, 'It was a couple of weeks after the wedding of Charles and Diana – so there was a mood of national celebration.'

An exhibition of the photographs is on until 31st May at the Centre for British Photography in London.

RIP Bertie Wooster.

✻ Twenty years ago, in July 2003, journalist York Membery was in charge of the publicity for the Rhodes Trust's centenary celebrations.

The trust, which funds the Rhodes Scholarships at Oxford, was set up after the death of the controversial mining magnate Cecil Rhodes.

The centenary celebrations culminated in a keynote event at London's Westminster Hall attended by Rhodes Scholar Bill Clinton, Nelson Mandela and Tony Blair. Can you imagine such an august line-up attending a similar commemorative event today, now that Rhodes is regarded as such a toxic historical figure?

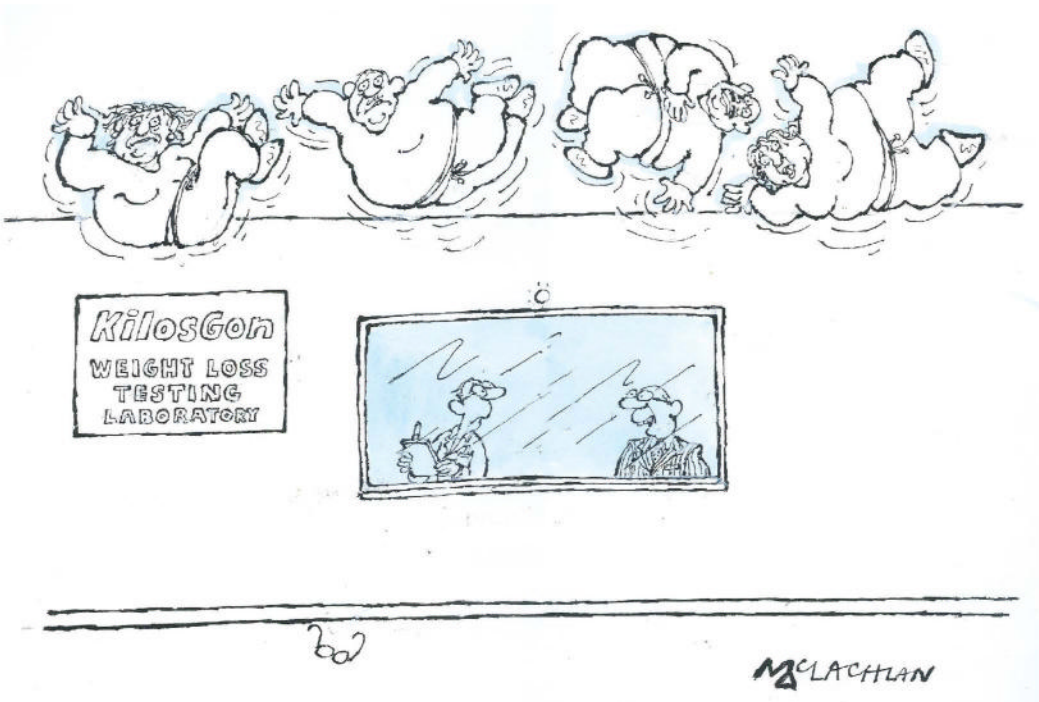
✻ Royal biographer Hugo Vickers, who writes on page 20 about his plan to become a recluse, has admitted to being victim of a right royal practical joke.

The Rev Richard Coles, writer and ex-vicar, recently declared, 'Deeply honoured to be appointed Custos Cochlearii for the Coronation, responsible for handling the spoon used for pouring the holy oil to anoint the Sovereign.

'It is kept in a little harness next to the breast to keep it at body temperature, mitigating any risk of thermal shock.'

Vickers, distinguished biographer of the Queen Mother, Queen Mary and the Duchess of Windsor,

Joker: Rev Richard Coles



'How are the trials going with our brand-new super weight-loss jab, Trelawney?'

'Your son has been faking measles again, Madame Seurat'

responded by saying, 'This is good Coronation news. Well deserved,' before remembering what the date was – 1st April. He cheerfully, admirably admitted, 'Just realised I fell into a trap. Egg all over my face. Just as well I didn't include this in lectures.'

What good eggs they both are!

The Old Un is too grumpy for most festivals – but not the Agenda Festival for over-65s at London's Hurlingham Club on 22nd May.

The day includes lectures on all sorts of oldie issues, from how to deal with technology to the best way to spend your money.

Many companies, some specialising in travel and finance, will have stalls there, too. *Oldie* columnists Gyles Brandreth, A N Wilson and Mary Kenny and editor Harry Mount will be giving talks.

For a 20-per-cent discount on the full price (£89 for one person and £150 for two), go to agenda-festival.co.uk and put in the discount code TheOldie20.

With businesses increasingly refusing payment in cash (so much for 'legal tender'!), MPs held a Westminster debate to speak up for those who prefer not to use bank cards for minor transactions.

The authorities prefer card-only payments because these make it easier to trace our movements and finances.

Not that they like to put it in quite such blunt terms. Treasury minister Andrew Griffith resorted instead to claiming that cash 'has a higher carbon footprint'.

Hang on! Isn't plastic bad for the environment?

No more can Lord's Cricket Ground, august home of Marylebone Cricket Club, be considered an oasis of gentlemanly behaviour.

MCC members have been informed of a new 'process for reporting inappropriate or antisocial behaviour'. An 'incident reporting hotline' has been established for text messaging or WhatsApp alerts, should any Lord's member say or do something untoward.

'Our security team will contact you,' says the MCC darkly.

Details are also apparently available on the Plan Your Day page on the Lord's website.

It all seems a long way from old notions of fish-paste sandwiches, a Thermos of tea and civil applause when the batsman (sorry, 'batter') scores a boundary.

The Royal Shakespeare Company's new production of *Julius Caesar* has not had the happiest reviews, but any failings cannot be attributed to lack of staff.

The show's programme lists more 'creatives' than it does cast members.

In addition to the director, there is a designer, two costume designers, a composer, a music director, a lighting chap, two fight directors, two associate music directors, two dramaturges, a casting director, an assistant director, an associate director and one person each for sound, movement, voice and text, and animation.

No wonder the RSC needs so many millions a year in public subsidy.

Happy 100th birthday, Thelwell!

The great Norman Thelwell (1923-2004) was the master cartoonist of horses and their tough little riders.

He would have turned 100 on 3rd May.

Pictured is *Up for the Cup,* about one of his favourite subjects, a Pony Club competition.

Singing the updated blues

Transform your conservatory in just one day

UK MADE

BUY NOW PAY LATER FINANCE AVAILABLE*

10 YEAR PANEL GUARANTEE

SAVE ££'S ENERGY EFFICIENT

£350 OFF
*QUOTE OLDIE0523

Is your conservatory TOO HOT in summer and TOO COLD in winter?

WARMER IN WINTER

"There is no doubt the conservatory is much warmer, and not darker either!"

David Birch, Chichester

TRANSFORMED CONSERVATORY

"We're so proud of our transformed conservatory that we have recommended Green Space to many of our friends and relatives."

Mr and Mrs Davies Somerset

COOLER IN SUMMER

"You could have fried an egg on the table in there in the summer, I now look upon the conservatory as a new room. It is quiet, restful and cosy."

Carol Doyle, Surrey

REDUCES ENERGY BILLS

"I've already turned the underfloor heating down. Lovely job guys, thank you!"

Anne Bird, Bristol

QUIETER IN BAD WEATHER

"For the first time we do not have to close the door to the conservatory when it rains to hear the TV."

Mr & Mrs Bailey-Webb, Warsash

"What a difference a day makes and yes, that's all it took to install."

Mr & Mrs Barber, Wells

Green Space UK
CONSERVATORY ROOFS

For a free no obligation quote call

0800 65 25 157

greenspaceconservatories.co.uk

10k+ HAPPY CLIENTS

GRAND DESIGNS LIVE ideal HOME SHOW

My Jamaican holiday with the Master

Fifty years after Noël Coward's death, I toasted him with Chris Blackwell, founder of Island Records and friend of Bob Marley

I am on the move. Well, I am 75 and time is running out.

My friend Leslie Bricusse, songwriter and showman, lived to 90 and was busy (and travelling the world) to the last. Leslie told me how he had had dinner with the great Hollywood director and screenwriter Billy Wilder, when Wilder was in his mid-nineties.

'How are you, Billy?' asked Bricusse.

'Good,' said Wilder. 'I'm working on a new project.'

'You know, Leslie,' he added, 'I really wasted my eighties.'

There is no time to lose, which is why I am hitting the road with a vengeance. I have just signed up to do a month on the Edinburgh Fringe, followed by a 40-date national tour. My wife thought of the title for the new show. It's called *Gyles Brandreth: Can't Stop Talking*.

Before I set off on my UK travels, I am rediscovering the rest of the world. Thanks to the pandemic, I did not fly anywhere for three years. Now I seem to be in a different country every week.

I am writing this from the Merrion Hotel in Dublin, where the hall porter introduced me to a consoling Irish saying: 'You're not as young as you used to be. But you're not as old as you're going to be.'

This week, Ireland. Last week, Jamaica.

I have been before, quite often, and always stay at the Jamaica Inn because it has the best beach (and friendliest staff) on the island and because I love its heritage. Winston Churchill and Marilyn Monroe stayed there – though not together, I don't think. Noël Coward was a Jamaica Inn regular – the piano he played is still in the bar.

Coward lived not far from the hotel in a house called Firefly, set high on a hill with the most fabulous view you can imagine. It's where he died and was buried, aged 73 in 1973. Fifty years to the day after his death, a small band of

Noël Coward's statue at Firefly, Jamaica

us Coward devotees stood at his graveside and remembered the Master.

One of our number was Chris Blackwell, founder of Island Records and friend of Bob Marley, often credited with introducing reggae music to the rest of the world. Chris's mother, Blanche Blackwell, gave Noël Coward the land on which he built Firefly.

Blanche was mistress and muse to Ian Fleming, who lived at Goldeneye nearby. She is reckoned by some to have been the inspiration for the character Pussy Galore in Fleming's Bond novel *Goldfinger*.

Blanche lived to 104, and Chris told me over lunch at Goldeneye, when I was singing the praises of the ice cream we were having for pudding, that his mother loved ice cream, too.

'In fact,' he said, 'in the summer of 2017, she told one of her staff that she really fancied an ice cream and he brought it to her. When he came back, he found she had finished it – and died.'

That's the way to go, isn't it?

And the week before our week in Jamaica, we had a week in Venice.

You won't believe this, but it's true. Venice is back to her best. The streets are full of water and the pavements are clean. The dog's mess has disappeared and, for what feels like the first time in half a century, St Mark's is not covered in scaffolding.

Of course, the main squares are still crammed with tourists but, within two minutes from anywhere (no exaggeration), you can slip down a side *calle* and find yourself alone in a deserted backwater.

I am with Fran Lebowitz on this: 'If you read a lot, nothing is as great as you've imagined. Venice is – Venice is better.'

I do read a lot. At the moment, by my bedside awaiting my attention are two books my wife has read and loved. One is the acclaimed new spy thriller by Harriet Crawley, *The Translator*. The other is the esteemed new biography of Noël Coward, *Masquerade* by Oliver Soden.

When will I get round to them? I don't know. I am only halfway through the three hefty volumes of Simon Heffer's unexpurgated edition of the diaries of 'Chips' Channon. I have reached the war years and I am gripped, both by Channon's account of life in London during the nation's darkest days and, possibly more so, by his personal candour.

Last night, I reached Saturday 2nd May 1942. Out for a pre-prandial walk in the countryside, Chips confessed he was 'assailed by strange and deep longings': 'I thought that I would have done anything, given anything, to be taken into the woods here, stripped and then whipped by a fat middle-aged woman! Why does one have such urges? Such strong, impossible desires. Do all men have them?'

Not so far, in my case at least, but who knows what the future holds? I am determined not to waste my eighties.

For tickets for Gyles's Edinburgh show in August: www.assemblyfestival.com

ANTHONY PIGEON / ALAMY

My banking crisis

New definition of Hell? Trying to talk to a real person at my local branch

MATTHEW NORMAN

Given how few experiences qualify as unique in this miserably repetitive world, one would be demented to imagine oneself to be the only victim of fatigue induced by a grand old name in high-street banking.

Indeed, one previous sufferer comes racing to mind. In his diaries, the late Kenneth Williams refers more than once to feeling tired having, the previous night, 'had the Barclays'.

Delicacy precludes a graphic translation. But for those unfamiliar with rhyming slang, it may melt the fog to mention that alternative phrases for the activity to which Williams obliquely referred include 'a Sherman' (tank), and 'a J Arthur' (Rank).

My exhaustion stems from a rather different kind of exposure to the Barclays.

Its genesis was my father's death some 20 months ago. An inactive company he left behind has an account with which I, now its sole director, must deal.

I have visited the Camden branch many times over many months, with the apparently modest ambition of showing my passport to someone and completing some formalities. Even by a financial dunce like me, this can be done in minutes.

At least it could in a parallel reality in which banks had the vaguest interest in providing an adequate service.

One of the infuriations here is that, at first glance, this large and well-appointed space seems so ideally suited to sating its customers' banking appetites. There are five or six tellers' booths, and a clutch of glass-fronted offices for appointments.

A second glance explodes that charming fantasy. At best, a lone teller is on duty, regardless of the length of the queue. After 2pm, when the staff must be too drained by the lunchtime sandwich to function, there are no tellers on duty at all.

And while there are often employees in those offices, it would be easier to break into the vault at Fort Knox, à la Auric Goldfinger, than to gain admittance.

A demoralised member of staff stands sentinel near the entrance, offering robotic apologies to the vexed, and guiding the bemused towards the machines that stand proxy for human interaction.

The infuriated and befuddled are always the venerable. You seldom see anyone under 45 in a bank. Among the blessings of youth is the lack of need ever to set foot in one of these hellholes. Their every banking requirement – including paying in cheques – can be done on an app.

It is of course the old-timers, who cannot cope with smartphone technology, who suffer. If the galloping number of branch closures leaves a sliver of doubt about banks' contempt for their maturer clients, the chronic understaffing in those that survive removes it.

Not that the tech is flawless. On this last visit, queuing for what might generously be termed 'assistance', I felt the pain of a middle-aged guy in front of me. He had downloaded the app, but it had not worked for days, paralysing his account, and no one was willing or able to fix it.

'The Lloyds across the road is way better than this,' I advised as he threw in the towel. 'Why don't you take your account there?' He nodded despondent agreement and departed.

Perhaps that recommendation failed to endear me to the woman who reluctantly beckoned me to the newly vacated chair. In her defence, she had a nasty cough, and possibly a low-grade fever. It may be that in better health she is a delight.

On this afternoon, her patience was strained. Informed that I had pitched up, yet again, to talk to someone about this account, she stated that this couldn't conceivably be done in person. I must ring the business department and do it on the phone.

When I did precisely that, I said, I was told to go to a branch with identification. So rather than get trapped in a Sisyphean loop of doom, ringing the business department one day and attending the branch the next until the release of death, was there a chance of seeing an adviser now?

There would be more chance, so the dismissive tone of her refusal implied, of Eric Pickles storming to a 12-length victory in next month's Derby on a dramatically arthritic woolly mammoth.

In that case, I ploughed on, can I fix an appointment to see someone within the next few days? Her dismay at that impertinence suggested Harry Secombe's beadle when Oliver asks for more gruel.

Recovering from the shock, she consulted her screen. The first available appointment, she said, was six weeks' hence.

After a reflex guffaw of incredulous mirth, I considered my options. The temptation to dip again into the oeuvre of Kenneth Williams with a semi-falsetto 'Ooh, stop messin' about' was fierce. But that seemed certain to fall under the all-embracing header of the inappropriate, potentially bringing security into play.

Instead, like my predecessor in the chair, I trudged dejectedly away, reflecting that my version of having the Barclays was not only immeasurably more prolonged than the Carry On stalwart's, but infinitely less satisfying as well.

WHAT MAKES OUR FOOTWEAR SO SPECIAL?

Wider, deeper & roomier than any footwear on the high street

Very adjustable - suitable for a range of swelling & foot problems

Diabetic-friendly styles available

VAT relief is available

RECOMMENDED BY UK HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS NATIONWIDE

AS ADVERTISED ON TV

UK NO QUIBBLE GUARANTEE FREE UK RETURNS

10% OFF YOUR NEXT ORDER*

QUOTE CODE **OLDIE0523**

*Excludes delivery charges and cannot be used in conjunction with any other offer. Offer available on in-stock items only. Strictly one use per customer. We reserve the right to withdraw this offer at any time. **Offer expires 03/06/23.**

VISIT **cosyfeet.com** OR CALL **0800 731 0148** FOR YOUR FREE CATALOGUE

"The through floor lift fits neatly into the house and was quickly and neatly installed. It has been reliable and has enabled us to live a 'normal' home life using the first and ground floors. A stairlift would not have done so."

Mrs Goddard via Trustpilot - January 2021

ADVERTISING FEATURE

AS ADVERTISED ON TV

Why have a stairlift when you could have a real lift?

A Stiltz Homelift is an ideal and affordable alternative to a stairlift. You can now safely travel between the floors in your home while keeping your stairs the way they have always been.

Neat, discreet, affordable and elegant

A Stiltz Homelift can be installed into almost any room in your home.

A Stiltz is uniquely compact with the smallest model taking up just over half a square metre. At the touch of a button a Stiltz Homelift turns your now home into your forever home.

Free, no obligation survey

A Stiltz Homelifts Consultant can visit your property to help you plan the best location for your homelift.

They can also answer any questions you might have, as can any of the friendly, UK-based phone team.

For a FREE brochure or no obligation survey give Stiltz Homelifts a call today!

The UK's No. 1 Homelift

- Rapid service
- Cost-effective
- Small footprint
- Freestanding design - no wall needed
- Wheelchair model available
- Manufactured, installed and fully guaranteed by Stiltz
- 3-floor travel available
- Finance options available*

*ask an adviser for details

Call FREE on 0808 304 4694 For a FREE brochure or no obligation survey call us or visit stiltz.co.uk

Stiltz Homelifts

OLDEN LIFE

WHAT WERE clothes props?

'A clothes prop?' The young sales assistant in the timber merchants looked baffled.

'Yes,' I said. 'A long piece of wood with a notch in it. Holds the washing line up.'

She still looked blank.

Once, every garden had a clothes prop and a washing line. Our line was slung between two apple trees over grass full of daisies. My mother-in-law's was between hooks in a tiny backyard. Both had clothes props – so that the line was low enough to peg the washing on but could be pushed high enough to clear the ground and catch the wind and sun.

It was – and is – the cheapest, easiest way of drying laundry. Going past back gardens in the 1950s and '60s you would see whole streets' worth of washing lines in nearly every garden, propped up to the sky like multicoloured bunting.

Even on dreary winter days, there's often enough dry daylight to get the worst of the wet out of clothes. Even if you end up bunging it in the tumble dryer (now) or on a clothes horse round the kitchen fire (then), it dries faster and smells sweeter.

Household catalogues have endless products offering cheaper ways to dry laundry. They all cost money. None is as cheap as a washing line. All you need is a bit of rope, two ends to tie it on to and a prop to keep everything out of the mud. Job done.

When it rained suddenly, it was a neighbourly thing to do to rescue a neighbour's washing if they were out. Now nearly everyone's out all day, there's no one around to take in the washing.

Some places are incredibly prissy about washing-lines. Upmarket estates – especially in the US – ban all outside drying of clothes, as if the sight of clean sheets were somehow ungodly. Yet posh American B&Bs advertise 'line-dried linen' as a luxury extra. Quite right, too. Getting into a freshly-made bed with sheets dried in the sunshine is a treat.

There are those other sorts of clothes lines that don't need props. But those whirligig things need a proper hole dug to hold them upright and still fall over, go rusty and have their lines go loose and collapse. You can get adjustable metal props too, but they also go rusty or snap.

At least when the old washing lines collapsed under the weight of clothes, we could re-use the bits as skipping ropes. Clothes props doubled as high-jump poles or lances for jousting. It didn't always end well. My last clothes prop lasted 30 years and ended its days as kindling. Definitely a life well lived.

Anyway, eventually an old man wandered along to the counter at the timber yard. 'Clothes prop? No problem,' he said. 'It's a long time since I've been asked for one of those.' He found a likely piece of timber, cut a notch in the end and charged me just £2 for it. If this prop lasts as long as the other one did, it will be the bargain of the century.

Sharon Griffiths

MODERN LIFE

WHAT IS premiumisation?

Premiumisation is when a company persuades customers to spend more on a 'premium' or 'luxury' or 'boutique' version of an everyday product.

It's a horrible word – premiumisation – and as such it's extremely popular in the English-abominating corporate world. 'That's a great product, Henry. Can we premiumise it?'

Gin is a good example of a product that has been 'premiumised'. Not so long ago, no one looked down on you for spending £12 on a bottle of Beefeater. Now, it has to be artisan gin, small-batch gin or craft gin in an unnecessarily heavy bottle. How do you know it's better? It costs £32.

Lux: Fever-Tree

The soft-drinks brand Fever-Tree has enacted a parallel premiumisation of tonic water, creating an inflationary pincer movement that explains why the G&T you ordered at the interval the other day cost £10.50. Premiumisation is nothing new. Car manufacturers have always sought to sell affordable cars and luxury cars; airlines divide us into First Class, Business Class and Bugger Off That Way Class. Supermarkets have been offering Finest and Taste the Difference ranges alongside Economy and Saver ranges since the late 1990s. This is called 'segmentation'. It helps them make money from rich, poor and squeezed middle alike.

But it's at that upper end where the action is right now. 'Premiumisation creates opportunities for revenue growth, grows margin expansion and, most importantly, it delights our end users,' said one CEO on a recent investors' call, as reported by the *New York Times*.

You'll never guess the company. It was WD-40, about the most workaday product you can imagine. And remember what Andy Warhol wrote about Coca-Cola in 1975? 'A Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking.'

Well, Coca-Cola now offers a 'signature mixers' range at twice the price of a bum-on-the-corner Coke. 'Ylang-ylang and ambrette seed are balanced with warm brown spices, balsam and amber…' runs the marketing copy.

Hang on. How come these companies are chasing the luxury market? Well, inequality. If a small proportion of people have an ever-larger proportion of wealth, it makes sense to chase their abundant pounds rather than the straitened pounds of the poor. Premiumisation is also attractive when inflation is so high. No one loves spending £3.50 on a yoghurt that cost £2.25 last year. Call it a luxury yoghurt and it softens the blow.

All of this has led to fears that companies will soon stop bothering with their less affluent customers. 'Is the entire economy gentrifying?' wondered the *New York Times* recently. But maybe it already has. Things once widely seen as ordinary are now widely seen as luxuries. A two-bed flat in Zone 3. Healthy food. GP appointments. Uninterrupted thought. It's a premiumised world – we're just living in it.

Richard Godwin

Through your keyhole

Who lived in your house before – and when was it built? House detective *Angela Lownie* reveals all

In recent years, interest in house history has grown tremendously, boosted by books and TV programmes such as *The Secret History of Our Streets* and *A House Through Time*.

Even the smallest house has been bought, sold, leased and subject to rates and taxes, and its occupants have left any number of records. If we dig deep into the archives, uncovering the history of our homes, and breathing life into the forgotten inhabitants, a fascinating story will unfold.

But where do you start?

If your house is listed, you can read its listing on the Historic England website. It's also worth checking whether your home is covered in Nikolaus Pevsner's architectural guides to the counties. Architecture books are invaluable for background knowledge and to deduce a building's date. The best all-encompassing website for British architecture is that of the Royal Institute of British Architects.

For more specific information, title registers and plans can be obtained from the Land Registry. Title deeds give details of owners, sales, mortgages and boundaries that can go back hundreds of years. If you don't have them, they might be with your solicitor, lender or landlord if you are a tenant. Many deeds are in archives.

Thanks to the ever-expanding resources on the internet, much of the hard graft for would-be sleuths can be removed by the click of a mouse.

The Victoria County History and *Survey of London* can be accessed online, as can the extensive collection of Ordnance Survey and other maps held by the National Library of Scotland.

Maps can pinpoint when your house was built and show changes of street or house name or number. The Layers of London site uses maps and other content to blend history, geography and digital technology – allowing you to see your street superimposed on any number of historic maps or look at Second World War bomb damage or Goad Fire Insurance plans.

Local council planning applications can also be accessed online, often providing scans of documentation dating back to the 1940s.

Genealogy sites such as Ancestry, Findmypast and the Genealogist are constantly being added to. The census lets you see who was living in your home at ten-year intervals from 1841 to 1921, with names, genders, ages and occupations – even including infirmities such as being deaf or 'feeble-minded'.

Don't believe everything you read in the census, which could have been incorrectly transcribed or the wrong information might have been given by the householder.

Actresses might disguise their true age and brothel-keepers invariably described the residents as dressmakers or milliners. A man might be living with his mistress who described herself as his wife, or put himself as single when his 'wife' and children were tucked away in Chelsea.

Wills are often a rich source of information. A bonus might be an inventory, which helps to create a vivid picture of the house at the time – the furniture, pictures, kitchen utensils and the different grades of bed.

The 1910 Lloyd George Domesday Survey recorded every building in the country, with information relative to the value of the property, including the owner, occupier, description and extent.

While online, check out Discovery at the National Archives, which describes records held by them and more than 2,500 archives across the country. A visit to your local archives might yield estate and manorial records, rate books, drainage records, directories, electoral registers, plans, maps, photographs, Civil Defence records, title deeds and newspaper cuttings.

Rate books are invaluable for properties built before the census was taken, often pinpointing a build date as well as owners and residents. Unusual changes in the rateable value of the house may indicate if it has been rebuilt or enlarged.

Who'd live in a house like this?

Victorian drainage records might sound dull but could include the original layout of a basement – usually much changed since – showing where the butler kept the silver or where the boots were cleaned.

In the archives, there is nothing to beat the feeling you might be the first person in years to untie a bundle of filthy deeds, or notice a doodle in the rate book done by a bored collector.

Biographies are another good source. Again online, the British Newspaper Archive and the Times Archive fill in much detail and provide the most colourful stories.

A resident of a house I researched in Westminster lost four of his five sons in the Napoleonic Wars. Another in Kensington was a survivor of the *Titanic*. On that fateful night in 1912, her daughter took charge of the tiller in one of the lifeboats, steering it through the sea, strewn with icebergs and debris, and did a good deal of the rowing.

Sherlock Holmes observed that small details are often a clue to something larger. The history of our houses sheds light on worldwide events and creates links to a broad, fascinating story of the past.

Angela Lownie runs London House Histories, a research service for London properties.
londonhousehistories.co.uk

Griff Rhys Jones thought his savings were as safe as houses – until his bank crashed

Your money's gone

Run on the bank at Bedford Falls: James Stewart in *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946)

We don't talk about money, do we?

You shouldn't fret about that nest egg, after all. You just hand it over to those qualified, expert fund people and forget about it, don't you?

Yup. And when Credit Suisse or Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) in California collapses in a heap, it is totally 'foreigners buggering up', isn't it? Somewhere in that bit of the newspaper you use to light the fire.

Last time this happened, though, (mug-punter that I was) I found out that, entirely unbeknownst to me, a substantial chunk of my own personal, cash nest-egg had been passed on to a bank to 'look after', on deposit for a few days, by a hedge-fund institution I was trying to get out of.

At the time, I was up a mountain and unable to reach a computer to get into my personal bank account.

The bank was called Lehman Brothers. The following day, it crashed.

'Don't worry, Griff,' they told me smoothly. 'It's secure debt. You'll get it back by the end of the week.'

Ha ha.

It took ten years. I went on a long voyage. But I did learn some unforgettable facts about banking.

Such as: that banks are totally entitled to go off gambling with any money they have – even money on a 'secure' or entirely interest-free deposit.

And if they are as greedy as Lehman's, Credit Suisse or SVB (they never learn), they might also bet everything on just one horse, too.

The SVB CEO took home ten million dollars last year. This bonus was paid because he had placed all of the three billion dollars in his care on one horse called 'long-term bonds'. It was 'high-risk'.

At this failed cowboy outfit, only one independent director had any serious banking experience, and he didn't sit on the 'risk committee'. One who did was known for his 'deep experience in the premium wine industry'. He knew as much about banking as I did.

Face it, squire, your 'money' – your deposit; your dosh – is booked as a 'liability' on the balance sheet. It can be declared as a 'loss'.

Did you think they kept it in a box or something?

Back in the early eighties, Mel Smith and I did a sketch in *Alas Smith and Jones*, where a bank told a customer they had lost 'his box'. The audience howled with laughter.

In 2008, I was told that even though there was still plenty of cash swilling about in some sort of box somewhere in Lehman's, Barclays, 'when they bought the brokerage arm, took that, too'.

‘Eh? They bought the money?’

‘Yes, of course. They had to pay the bonuses to the Lehman’s team.’

‘The bunch of piss-poor card sharps who destroyed the bank?’

Yup. Barclays finally decided that might look a bit ‘off’. So they trousered the wad instead.

Despite the best efforts of the creditors, the German government decided that, in spite of the masses of geld lying in the German branch of Euro Lehman’s, the bank accounts of German citizens were not to be distributed to other distressed members of the EU – like me. We left that level playing field a little later, of course.

Then the High Court in Britain also blocked any ‘early’ payment to those dimwits with deposited money.

They decided it all needed a bit more thinking about by senior financiers, accountants and expensive lawyers. Unsurprisingly, they did find enough cash to pay themselves.

Those get-rich-quick investor folk who were owed bonuses, or were gambling on the markets – those ‘unsecured’ creditors – were allowed equal claims on any money that might eventually be found behind a radiator. It would be unfair on them if normal ‘customers’ were given back their cash first.

As the bankruptcy proceedings ground on (‘The longest in history’, we were told, breathlessly) I was informed that any repayment from winding up the broken bank, which was taking years, would be dramatically lengthened. That was because the Lehman’s US receivers were now suing the Lehman’s UK receivers. Just for the sake of it, really – with more money for the lawyers.

As my contact explained, a lot of money had sort of ‘evaporated’. This was because the laws about borrowing money on shares and debt were different in America.

Lehman’s, being ingenious, worked out that by shipping tens of millions of shares over to Britain, they could borrow up to ten times the value over here (thanks to British law) and then ship everything back across the Atlantic and gear it up again (thanks to American law).

Then they could skip off to play on the roulette wheel with the heap of froth they had created, now masquerading as billions of dollars. Only a banker can do that.

But – and there is a big ‘but’ here – did you know that bankruptcy debt repayment was set in the eighties,

Lehman Brothers collapses, 2008

during higher inflationary times? It has to be repaid at eight per cent, compound interest. A nice whack. The longer it took, the more the value of the debt increased.

Astoundingly, this led to a speculative hedge-fund market in Lehman’s debt – not dissimilar to the sub-prime mortgage market responsible for the crash in the first place.

More rapacious wide boys started playing chicken again. Who would be the last to jump out of the way before this racket exploded?

Letters arrived, offering to buy my debt. I thought they were from nutters, but I couldn’t help noticing the price was going up.

So I offered to sell – but these things are never simple. I discovered that my money (huge to me) was considered too pitifully tiny to be worth trading. But, eventually, some genius thought of bundling all the weeny debts into one big ‘tranche’ or ‘package’ … er … just like those sub-prime mortgage things.

The delay meant I was now poised to get 100 per cent of my debt back.

‘Hold on, hold on!’ my accountant said. ‘What sort of sober-sided financier are you?’

Where was my urge to recklessly gamble? Just because it was my own pension? If I held out, I might get more.

I ignored him. We progressed. But he phoned again. ‘I have discovered that in order to do this sale, Griff, you have to move it into another account.’

‘Eh?’

‘You have to make your safe “secured debt” into an “unsecured debt”.’

‘No. That was the dangerous debt. Why do they want that?’

‘They reckon that’s going to get repaid first.’

I was worried. What might happen if I left this debt sitting in something as dangerous as an account overnight?

I organised a special meeting, in a locked room. I signed one transfer document and then the other straight away, right there, with no more than three seconds between them. I stood back. It was done. I got the full amount back.

Much later, the ‘unsecured debt’ was eventually settled at 41 per cent of its true value. And the secured debt? They paid it all – after 14 years – handing over £115 billion.

I also understand they were successfully forced to use what little remained in the coffers to pay that crazy interest.

But I didn’t look. I don’t want to know. I don’t care.

I used to think this bank stuff had nothing to do with me. A collapsing bank was a 19th-century phenomenon. My main reference point was *It’s a Wonderful Life*, with James Stewart scrabbling about for loose change to buy off his depositors.

But the whole system is now wobbling again. Credit Suisse have just done a Lehman’s. The Swiss government has stepped in.

Some people are annoyed. The shareholders (or ‘owners’) of the bank have all been recompensed by the Swiss government. This has dismayed the bond-holders.

Over here, Lord Turner of Ecchinswell, former Chairman of the Financial Services Authority, has called this priority ‘an odd thing’.

We also see pictures of the staff of this broken institution carrying their boxes of spider plants into the street. And we are invited to sympathise with the poor loves. More victims.

But I can’t help noticing that not one correspondent, not a single financial paper, no business-pages editorial nor any sombre-faced politician seems to have worried about the actual, ordinary customers of this so-called bank.

They’re not players, you see.

Urged by every partisan adviser to ‘stay calm’, you might like to know that, currently, there isn’t a single British bank in the latest list of the top-50 safest banks in the world.

Still, you can live a long and happy old age on that £85,000 you are guaranteed from the wreckage of your high-street casino, I am sure.

On tour, *Prue Leith* stayed in 30 hotels – and was driven mad by lights, duvets, tiny fridges and the loo paper

My Hotel Hell

NEIL SPENCE / PHOTOMONTAGE JONATHAN ANSTEE

I'm getting seriously grumpy in my old age, especially about hotels.

I've recently been on the road with my one-woman tour and have slept in 30-odd inns round the UK.

Mostly, the experience has been miles better than it would have been 20 years ago. But the little problems – that could so easily be put right but aren't – bug me. Do you think hotel owners or managers ever sleep a night in their own establishments? Surely, if they did, most of my niggles would get cured next day.

Let's start with the obvious: those little bottles of shampoo, conditioner, bath gel and body lotion. If you aren't wearing your specs (and who wears them in the shower?), you can't read the tiny, pale grey print on the labels. Many is the time I've slapped conditioner all over my face.

How about reading in bed? I'm glad to say those little, flexible lights you can direct to your page are now more common. And the great big bedside lamps that occupy three-quarters of the space on the bedside table are becoming extinct. Designers love a statement lamp.

But why not put it on the wall, leaving room for your book, cuppa, water glass, specs, phone and iPad on the table?

How do you turn lights off? Most hotels require you to get out of bed and tour the room, switching off the standard lamps individually and the master switch by the door. Why not have master switches controlling all the lights on both sides of the bed? If there is a master switch, it is always on the right – when you are in bed. When I'm alone in a hotel, I must sleep on that side, which I resent.

And how many hotels have a mini night light to guide you to the bathroom in the dark? One bought from Amazon for a few pounds and plugged into a socket would do the trick.

Don't designers realise that soft, atmospheric lighting might be great for romance – but that when you're packing, hunting for your phone or threading a

needle, you need bright overhead light. Bring back the central ceiling light.

Next: modern housekeepers need a lesson in bed-making. They tuck about two feet of the duvet into the bottom of the bed. You have to pull it all out to yank the bedclothes round your shoulders.

And if, like me, you don't like great, heavy duvets and ask for blankets, the housekeeping staff are utterly confused. If they have any blankets at all, they are single throws, or just those useless little runners to decorate the foot of the bed. Getting an extra sheet to go under the blanket is another battle. I end up pulling the cover off the duvet and using that.

Hotels now mostly have great beds: big (usually two 3ft ones zipped together) and firm. No complaints there. But what's with the multiple cushions that serve no purpose other than to look good? We had six on the bed in one hotel. I stick them in a corner on the floor.

And what about the multiple, overstuffed pillows? Yes, you need one for sitting up in bed, but the other two should be a thinner one for people who don't want to be smothered, and a baby pillow for fusspots like me, who want to tuck it under the neck.

We take two of these (and a decent-size blanket) everywhere – which means an extra suitcase.

Therein lies my next complaint. Many hotel bedrooms don't have those handy folding stands for your suitcase. They should provide two. They fold to nothing in the wardrobe. Since I commandeer the single folding stand, my husband has to open his suitcase on the floor. Neither of us finds fishing for stuff at floor level easy.

Air-conditioning means hermetically sealed windows; my husband complains of undefinable stale smells. I like it when the temperature control on the wall is easy to master. Some of them are incomprehensible.

Most hotels no longer have those huge telephones with two dozen buttons for different departments that I could never work. Now you just dial 0 for everything – and it doesn't always get an answer.

Room service is vital in hotels where the restaurant closes at ten, especially for people like us getting in late after the theatre. Often the bar is still open for a nightcap, but it generally takes some persuading to get the staff to bring us 'room service' in the bar.

Why? If they are up for taking it to the room on the sixth floor, why not serve it to us in the bar, right next to the kitchen?

British hotels are pretty good at breakfast, but the quality does vary. It cannot cost much more to get good yoghurt, proper scrambled egg (not powdered), a decent selection of fruit in the compôte, warm croissants and better quality granola.

Mind you, in America you're unlikely to get breakfast at all. New Yorkers eat breakfast out, in cafés and diners, where the lox and bagels, eggs Benedict and avo on toast are terrific. Most of the hotels we stayed at on a recent tour had nothing but a shop in the foyer, selling pre-packaged handheld snacks.

I hate those smart hotel fridges stuffed full of drinks for sale. If you lift one of them out because you want to put something of your own in, it automatically charges the cost to your room. We often bring half a pint of fresh milk with us to avoid those horrible 'dairy stix' or mini jiggers of UHT milk. Ditto decaf tea. Why are fresh milk and decaf tea bags too much to expect when you get decaf coffee and herbal tea?

How come some hotels, rarely but brilliantly, let you on to their Wi-Fi free as soon as you log on, with no passwords, forms to fill in, obligation to accept their 'offers and communications' or join their club? Why can't they all?

And could hotel managers stop wasting paper, time and expense, with a standard welcome letter in an envelope telling us how absolutely delighted they are to welcome us, blah blah blah. I'm sorry to be ungracious, but no one is fooled this is a heartfelt missive intended especially for them.

Isn't it good to say goodbye to all that cool, grey and white décor, and those acres of silver-grey and 50 shades of brown and black? My husband fantasised about loading a van with bright red cushions and touring the country enlivening lounges and foyers – like Constable giving life to a landscape painting with a red jacket on a peasant.

But, on this tour, we found several hotels with colourful, delightful décor. The best group was Malmaison, with generally interesting paintings and art.

The best owner-run hotel was Salthouse Harbour Hotel in Ipswich. It's full of colour, wonderful fabrics and unusual collections (coffee jugs, blowfish, sculpture). It feels like a personal collection, not an interior designer's confection.

Finally, do housekeepers really have to fold the end of the loo paper into a point, stick it down with a company sticker and primp the top two tissues in the box into a flower shape? Is tissue origami taught at hotel school?

Don't mention the décor: the staff of *Fawlty Towers*

Do housekeepers really have to fold the end of the loo paper into a point?

Prue Leith is a judge on The Great British Bake Off

Who Dares Wins

Mike Sadler, 103, the oldest survivor of the early SAS, fought his way through Italy, France and the unforgiving deserts of North Africa

I was born in London in 1920, while my family was passing through the city.

Two weeks later, with me a babe in arms, we moved to Gloucestershire, where life was hard – but we didn't see it that way.

Today, of course, everyone's lives are so different, but one thing remains similar. People have always had dreams of one kind or another; from a very young age, mine was to have an interesting life and see the world. I was looking for adventure.

When I was 15, I cycled around Germany with a friend, staying in youth hostels. We visited little cafés; in one, the waitresses discovered we were English and they thought it was a great joke to stand around saying '*Heil Hitler*' to us, laughing. They paid no mind to our startled faces.

There were clear signs of what was going on: our youth hostels had 'Jews not welcome here' signs. And out in the countryside we saw young people working on the land, marching together with their spades over their shoulders in a militaristic way.

We were struck by the level of organisation. People seemed to know what they were doing and where they were going. It was a stark contrast with Britain at that time.

None of us knew what the forthcoming war would bring. But long before that, in 1937, when I was just 17, I boarded a ship and set out for Rhodesia, where I worked on a farm. I joined the Rhodesian artillery when the war began and became an anti-tank gunner in the Western Desert.

On leave in Cairo, I met some members of the Long Range Desert Group, who asked me if I would be willing to join them. That was how I learned the magic art of navigation and began working with the SAS.

The SAS was born in the hot and unforgiving deserts of North Africa. On the basis of a simple yet revolutionary idea that small groups of highly trained and determined men operating deep behind enemy lines could wreak untold damage on the enemy, the SAS were to prove themselves time and again one of the most potent pound-for-pound forces throughout the rest of the war.

Very Special Air Service: Mike Sadler (*left*) today and (*right*) 80 years ago, when he was an SAS officer

Nowadays the SAS has a fearsome reputation, but I don't remember ever wanting to kill anybody. However, I found a life in the SAS that suited me. I got a bit of an education – albeit an unorthodox one. I enjoyed the organisation's unusual kind of discipline. And I became friendly with all sorts of people from all manner of backgrounds.

In fact, in central Libya we captured a few Italian prisoners who were agreeable chaps. They became, in a way, friends – so that when a German aircraft came over, they hurried to help us get out mountings for our guns.

When we got back to Cairo, we took them for a drink in one of the bars before handing them over. It was quite difficult to see these Italians as being on the other side, but they knew very well that we would have shot them had they tried to escape.

Of course, the technical context then was quite different. We had no support from satellites or other wonders of communication that people take for granted today. We were wholly dependent on one another and on our mental and physical resources and aptitudes.

Looking back, I suppose the war in the desert was quite different from the war in Italy and France. Once we were in France, we were fully aware of the Nazi evil and the Gestapo-style grip on German behaviour. Hitler had issued his instructions that people like us were to be shot.

Our attitudes changed. And I ended up investigating the murders of friends in France. This wasn't a good time as far as I was concerned.

Much has been written about the early formative years of the SAS – and I still remember them clearly – but now, for the first time, an illustrated history provides a compelling photographic record of that period.

Drawing on previously unpublished material from the SAS regimental archives, these pictures of the SAS fighting across North Africa, up into Italy and through Western Europe tell their own captivating story.

I can no longer see but I know these pictures would bring back memories of hardship, danger, sacrifice and loss, as well as great friendships and much laughter.

I hope they serve as an interesting and illuminating reminder of a small group of young men who, by daring to win all, played their small part in defeating the tyranny of Nazi Germany.

Who dares wins.

This piece is from the foreword of Joshua Levine's SAS: The Illustrated History of the SAS *(William Collins, £25), published on 11th May*

LIMITED TIME OFFER

100% COTTON

PLEATED CHINOS

only **£50** buy 2 for £90 **SAVE £10**

PETER CHRISTIAN
Gentlemen's Outfitters

A traditional pleated front ensures a generous cut and all day comfort. Our classic 100% cotton chinos are cut with single pleats plus they boast our discreet expanding comfort waistband. Finished to the highest standards; elegant with a jacket and shirt, or casual with your favourite sweater. Essential trousers, all year round.

- 100% cotton
- French bearer fly front
- 2 buttoned hip and 2 deep side pockets
- Hidden, expanding comfort waistband gives 2" flexibility
- No Quibble Money Back Guarantee**

Waist: 32 34 36 38 40 42 44 46 48 50 52"
Leg: 27 29 31 33"
Colours: Navy, Sand, NEW Blue, Sage, Tan, Stone, Green

FREE DELIVERY*
SAVE £5
+Free Returns**
use code
24H18

"Quality range of Chinos with excellent sizing and colour options...My new go-to menswear site." Ray

★★★★★ Trustpilot
RATED **EXCELLENT**

Order Pleated Chinos (MT06)
Use code **24H18** for **FREE P&P**

peterchristian.co.uk

01273 493 393 Mon-Fri 8am-Midnight Sat-Sun 8am-8pm

Order by post – Cheques payable to Peter Christian. Quote **24H18** and send to: Freepost PETER CHRISTIAN

Go Online or Call for a Free Catalogue

*Free UK delivery (normally £5). Offer ends midnight 03/07/23. £50 Minimum spend applies. **Free returns within the UK only and subject to items being in perfect condition, in their original packaging and returned within 30 days.
A Division of Hills of Bramley Ltd. Co Reg No 04767802

SCAN ME

After the Coronation, royal expert *Hugo Vickers* will become a recluse and say a fond farewell to parties, London – and sex

I want to be alone

The time has come for me to disappear.

I knew that when the Queen died, the game was over for me.

As a small boy (back in 1959), I attached myself to her coat-tails by a long, invisible, metaphorical thread and flew happily behind her for decades.

Occasionally I flew alongside her, and those moments were special. Her death on 8th September was like the sounding of the Last Post.

Until this May, the Coronation needed to be explained – an arrogant statement, but few had studied the ritual and few remembered the last great service in 1953. I had written a book about it, and that kept me busy with talks in Britain, New York, Washington and California, and as part of the ITN team on the day.

After that – nothing. *Niente altro*. Time for renunciation, the most rewarding time of all.

I was one of the lucky few who relished lockdown. The government asked me to stay out of the way and I was happy to do so. Everything was cancelled. If I happened to watch a film in the afternoon, I was serving my country, helping the nation. It held the same joy as being pronounced 'off games' at school.

Meanwhile I never worked so hard in my life. No time was wasted in tedious London traffic jams or squashed into crowded tubes. I hardly used my car. Provisions were delivered to the door and left outside – as if I were a leper. I gave lectures in Toronto, New York, San Francisco and Palm Beach, without straying from my desk.

I am lucky to have been taught how to be a recluse by two particularly extreme ones – Gladys Deacon, Duchess of Marlborough (1881-1977), and Stephen Tennant (1906-87).

Stephen was the brightest of the Bright Young Things of the 1920s. By the time I met him, he had gone to seed. He once said to me, 'My doctor tells me I am too fat, but I like myself and the more there is of me the better.'

The fact that I knew them both indicates that they did receive visitors occasionally, though they preferred to be alone.

Gladys Deacon quoted Thoreau: 'I never found the companion that was as companionable as solitude.' 'Goodbye to all that' was her motto. After the horrors of Blenheim, she settled in the 'derelict hamlet' of Chacombe. She put chicken wire round her property, bought geese which attacked everybody, put blackout curtains over her windows and had them drenched in oil once a year.

Villagers recall her walking at night, her torch flickering on the ceilings of their bedrooms as she passed by. She took in food in a basket lowered from an upper window. When her Polish servant came, she lowered the door key in the same way and he let himself in.

Here we have a good formula. When visitors come, they must ring my doorbell for about 30 minutes. I will then lower the basket. And I can see myself walking alone on Salisbury Plain in my long, black cloak, with a lantern flickering in the darkness of the night.

Stephen Tennant took to his bed, supposedly dying of a consumptive illness in the late 1920s. He was still there in the 1980s. He drew the curtains against the world, and received visitors only on his terms and at whim.

No more parties for Hugo the Grinch

Juliette Huxley once wrote to him, 'Oh, Stephen, do you live in such an ivory tower that the clock only chimes when you bid it to?' A blissful negation of time. He spent his hours reading and writing; his brain remained sound.

What will I miss? Nothing. Many things I have done and I don't need to do them again. I am thought to be social, but that is because people see me only when I am out and about. Every time I get an invitation, with few exceptions, my first thought is how to escape.

In 2016, I was 'obliged' to go to the

PICTORIAL PRESS / CHRONICAL / ALAMY

Reclusive pin-ups: the Duchess of Marlborough and Stephen Tennant

Caribbean, to promote Commonwealth Walkways. There were only two things in London that I was sorry to miss in seven weeks away – a book launch, of Josephine Loewenstein's *Wind in My Hair*, and a play, *The Red Barn*, with Elizabeth Debicki, whose performance I had so enjoyed in *The Night Manager*.

I worked out that if I go to a party, someone might ask, 'Hugo, what are you doing? How are you?' and I would reply.

But if I am not there, someone else can answer for me. 'Have you seen Hugo? What is he doing?' I don't need to be there. I can be at home reading a book.

While I'm reading, if a character goes down the Grand Canal in Venice or walks on the Great Wall of China, I have done that. I can picture it. I don't need to do it again.

Sex? One schoolfriend of mine has dedicated his life to having as much sex as possible. He has a short memory – so he has to keep doing it. Interestingly, the only girls he remembers are the ones he didn't get. So his head contains images of sensible girls who eluded his grasp (literally his grasp) while those who succumbed have faded away (just as well, sometimes).

I have a long memory.

I am not quite ready to go the whole hog and put up the blackout curtains. I like sunlight, but that may change. The genuine recluse will eliminate day and night altogether, sleep when tired, and wake when ready.

Yet what about the proposed lecture tour of Long Island? Well, I can go and still pretend to be a recluse at home.

An Australian friend tells me I can get a machine that not only switches lights on and off but possibly burns the toast to give the impression that I am at home.

Meanwhile, I can be in a favourite retreat elsewhere in the world – the Pensione Bencistà in Fiesole, or the treehouse in the rainforest on Dominica.

Perhaps I'd better think it out again. I won't be *quite* a complete stay-at-home recluse.

Hugo Vickers has written biographies of the Queen Mother, Queen Mary and the Duchess of Windsor

Reliable Outdoor Rollator

A rollator is a mobility aid that greatly enhances your autonomy. The Trionic Veloped rollator gives support and relief during any outdoor adventure.

If you find yourself experiencing balance issues, consider investing in an efficient walking aid to help with unsteadiness.

Trionic's terrain-taking model, the Veloped, can overtake curbs, rocks, roots and other obstacles without losing ground contact. The sturdy design and air-filled tyres minimise vibrations and offer a smoother ride on gravel, grass, cobblestone and forest tracks. Treat yourself or a loved one to one of the most reliable walking aids on the market!

Award-Winning Grips.
Ergonomic and comfortable grips

Slide the Seat Forward.
Walk closer with a better body posture

5 Trionic Veloped models.
Different colours and accessories

Trionic Climbing Wheel.
Conquer all obstacles

Foldable Frame.
Easy storage & transport.

14" Big Wheels.
Manage obstacles and rough ground

Call us now on 0330 818 1586 or visit trionic.uk/oldie to read more and order your free catalogue.

TRIONIC

0330 818 1586 · www.trionic.uk/oldie

I love taking down particulars

For decades, *Nicholas Lezard* has been using police notebooks. They're ideal for coppers – and writers

This being a magazine that has – how best to put this? – a foot in the past, there is sometimes the feeling that things are not as good in some respects as they used to be.

However, there are some things that not only *are* what they used to be but are still, amazingly, around, for the simple reason that they are unimprovable.

So I give you, ladies and gentleman, the Ryman's Police Style Notebook.

I was first put on to these by the writer Will Self. At the time – this was quite early in his career – he was often finding himself in situations where (again – how best to put this?) the police might be expected to take a keen interest.

So I wondered if the fact that he carried a police notebook with him at all times was done in the spirit of talismanic optimism; that if he had one of the accoutrements of the forces of law and order about him, it would somehow protect against the unwelcome attention of those very forces. But no: it was a simple matter of practicality.

It is a modest 3in x 5in (the dimensions are given, on the back, in imperial measurements, and if that's not enough to get you dashing out to your nearest Ryman, I don't know what is), and contains 96 bound, lined pages.

This means that, depending on the size of your handwriting and the degree of contraction (sz yr hndwrting/deg of contrctn), you can plausibly get up to 20,000 words of your brilliant thoughts down on paper, to be deciphered later at your leisure. Or not – I'll get on to that.

It is encased between stiff boards, and comes with a cloth elastic band that holds it all compactly together and stops the pages from getting dog-eared. It is hinged at the top, and to flip it open is to transport yourself, and anyone watching, back to the days of *Dixon of Dock Green*, of let's-be-having-you, nah-then-nah-then-what's-all-this-then and I'm-going-to-have-to-take-down-your-particulars.

In my youth, I was the *Independent*'s unofficial chronicler of the alternative scene. Whenever I was interviewing a group of eco-warriors or ravers, it would amuse me to watch their eyebrows shoot up as I produced the notebook and started scribbling. These people, though almost invariably committed, charming and intelligent, were necessarily operating at or just within the margins of the law. In their experience, the sight of such a notebook spelt trouble.

Back to the days of *Dixon of Dock Green*

I wonder if the same reaction would surface now. I suspect there is an atavistic memory of the PNB (as it is often referred to), but I don't mix in those circles any more, alas. I wonder if even the police use them any more. Modern PNBs apparently have untearable, waterproof paper, but that's not always a good thing, if it's the same kind of material used to make nasty modern currency notes these days.

You may wonder what the utility is for people who are not writers. Writers do not burst with ideas: they have to search for them, or lie in wait for them – and if they are not set down, they vanish into thin air. Carrying one of these notebooks around is a great help. But non-writers also need to record thoughts, shopping lists, reminders or the email address of the gorgeous person sitting next to you at lunch. Jot the date above your entry and, hey presto, it's now a diary.

I should, by the way, make it clear that only the Ryman PNB will do. Amazon sells a version with a quiver, or sheath, for a little pencil, and this is cute, but the pages are perfect bound – that is, very imperfectly bound, with glue, not thread. The pages will, within days, start fluttering out of it like autumn leaves, and that won't do at all.

Also, pencil is a non-ideal writing implement, as its marks will fade as the pages rub together. No, you will need (this is my choice, after years of experience) the black Pilot V5 Hi-Tecpoint, pricier than Biro, but oh, so smooth and reliable.

It is a pleasure to marry old and modern(ish) technology like this. Don't use a Moleskine notebook: they are for the pretentious, and cost a fortune.

The only problem is this: like many writers, I find the flow of inspiration becomes swifter towards the end of the evening, sometime after the first three-quarters of the bottle. Never, or hardly ever, have I had an inebriated idea that on inspection the next morning has turned out to be junk.

I have, though, found some to be illegible. A shrewd reader would be able to tell almost exactly the hour I had written some wonderful *aperçu* down, depending on how much the handwriting resembled that of a pissed spider that had just crawled out of an inkwell.

I am learning how to write slowly, and with discipline, after about 9.30pm. Meanwhile: happy jotting.

GETTY / CSA-PRINTSTOCK

The Oldie mourns four great columnists: Barry Humphries (1934-2023), Dame Edna Everage, Sir Les Patterson and Barry McKenzie

Four of a kind

Ode to the Queen

By Sir Les Patterson – recited at the Oldie of the Year 2021

I was in a sauna suckin' on a coldie
When I got this email from my mates at The Oldie*:*
'We're having a big lunch at the Savoy –
There'll be Royalty present.' I said, 'Oh boy!'
It was then that I read the bit under my thumb:
It said, 'No offence, Les, but please don't come.'
So now I'm cancelled as if I didn't count,
Thanks to that bald bastard, Harry Mount –
He probably thought I wouldn't be missed,
Or make a pass at Camilla or turn up pissed.
It's true when I make a speech, there's seldom much doubt
That when I reach my climax, something slips out.

But when something slips out, the ladies protest:
They yell, 'Good on you, Les – now show us the rest.'
They're shit-scared that the ladies might go into shock,
But I know a few here who've been round the block.
Now I've cleaned up my act – I'm squeaky clean, I'm woke And I'd never offend with an off-colour joke.
I never use the 'f' word in the presence of minors
And I stick up for lezzos and vagina-decliners,
And there is nothing more beautiful, I have to say,
Than a wholesome, sexual relationship between a happily married politician and his PA.
So, my dear little Duchess, I'm sorry to trouble you –
But please give Les's love to the PoW.

NEIL SPENCE/ NICK GARLAND

By Royal Appointment: Barry recites Sir Les's *Ode to the Queen*, 2021

The Wit of Barry Humphries

On his mother

'You see, Barry – not everybody likes you.'

My mother offered this kindly reminder one morning at breakfast 69 years ago.

'We don't know where Barry came from' was another of her frequently uttered observations. All eyes were then turned to me, the eldest son, whose very provenance was somehow open to speculation.

I was slowly learning how exceptionally gifted children can suffer at the hands of alien, but well-intentioned, parents.

On Britain

'We're going overseas,' announced Ada Scott, my mother's friend. 'After that, we might pop over to some of the clean countries.'

By 'overseas', Ada meant what we all meant: England. My grandparents called it 'going home' and, in the Melbourne of that epoch, it was an inevitable destination, to which we swam like spawning salmon.

The 'clean countries' were nowhere near the Mediterranean, of course, and were probably places like Denmark, Holland and Switzerland.

We were totally deprived of the thing that England had in such abundance and which Hitler threatened: quaintness.

The only thatched cottage we could cherish was our magnificent Staffordshire thatched-cottage teapot, and matching cup and saucer, which, after becoming slightly chipped, ended up in the gardener's shed.

On the Old Metropolitan Music Hall

You could sit up there in the gods and you were in a picture by Sickert. You could smoke, of course, and sip a pint of old and mild, and lean over the brass rail – and there, way down there on the stage, was Hetty King in her mariner's suit, smoking her pipe and singing *All the Nice Girls Love a Sailor*.

On Peter Cook, with whom he worked at the Establishment Club and at *Private Eye*

Even those who knew Peter well would agree that he was profoundly unknowable.

He always wore the impenetrable armour of jocosity; everything was a joke, uttered in a funny voice, so you never really got near him. His posture was undulant, his smile beguiling.

Cook was not an actor. He was a university wag giving an impression of a comedian – only doing it better. There was something almost paralysed about his performance that was funny in itself.

He had two comic voices: a lugubrious Cockney and an implausible posh, based on the posh and mock Cockney of old radio comedians which, in turn, derived directly from the music-hall tradition.

Dud and Pete, and their later incarnation, the coprolingual Derek and Clive, were the last great music-hall act. And the best.

On giving up drink
Embarrassment – creeping, cringing, crippling, crushing and inevitable – is one of the worst side effects of chronic alcoholism.

It is almost as bad as cirrhosis, heart disease, fatal reflux, divorce, suicide and death; and inexcusably putting your hand on the wrong knee.

'You were in good form last night!' says your friend with a rather hard look. Or 'How are YOU feeling this morning?'

But you don't remember last night. You were there, palpably, but you weren't there. You were functioning in a blackout. And what was this in your pocket? A book of matches. The Blue Lamp Club! Where's that? And where was the car you must have driven?

It was like that time last week when you woke up in a strange bedroom with a shawl over the lamp and the odour of patchouli, and two little kids burst into the room and addressed the lump in the bed beside you and said, 'Mummy! Who's the funny man?'

You were the funny man, and you had to be funny again tonight! And twice on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

On illness
The scrotum is very forgiving.

Barry McKenzie's Australian Glossary

dip the wick, to To feature or exercise the ferret

Foster's A modest Melbourne brewery catapulted to fame by Barry McKenzie's tireless and inexplicably unremunerated promotion

grope, going the An Australian caress

kookaburra's khyber, as dry as a A condition of the throat prior to the ingurgitation of ice-cold lager

neck oil Whisky

potato-peeler Sheila

rubbidy Pub

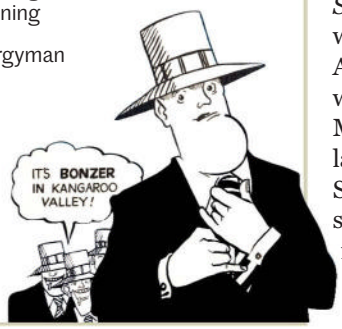
rudie A solecism

sheets, to christen the An undesirable, involuntary ending to a convivial Australian evening

sky pilot Clergyman

strides Daks

Technicolor yawn Liquid laugh



These comforting words were recently uttered by a distinguished surgeon before he deracinated a nasty excrescence in a dark part of my anatomy.

On death
A journalist on a popular newspaper told me that *on that very day* he had been engaged in writing my obituary!

With fatuous self-satisfaction, I record my reply. 'I hope there isn't a deadline,' said I, quick as a flash.

Do you, my dear perusers, think that the national broadcaster has already compiled a programme to be transmitted on that melancholy day in the distant future when the gladdie falls from my lifeless grasp?

Will there be a eulogy from Jeanette Winterson, a kaddish from Lady Gaga, and a heartfelt expression of regret from Lord (Boris) Johnson for not having given me the knighthood?

The Wisdom of Dame Edna Everage

Before you ask, I still look gorgeous, and my gynaecologist, Rick Stein – yes, the same, Possums! – looked up the other day and told me I was at the height of my powers!

He is a famous chef as well – so he's always washing his hands, bless him. When I told him that I had an opening for a gynaecologist, he jumped at it.

I'm now looking back on my wonderful achievements over the years and starting work on my trilogy.

It's only one book but my literary agent, Jonathan Lloyd, tells me people love trilogies, and who am I to argue?

You will read about my lunch at the *Spectator* (a periodical of the period) with the American statesman Spiro Agnew. My stint in the Falklands War, when I fearlessly sent my bridesmaid Madge Allsop over the top to look for landmines. My virtual adultery with Salvador Dali. My long years of self-sacrifice during my husband Norm's illness, and how I established my worldwide charity, Friends of the Prostate.

On these pages, you will meet my mother, before I had her caringly relocated in a facility for the bewildered, and read about the legendary night we burnt my mother's things.

Madge has applied, unsuccessfully, for the job of Santa Claus at Selfridges. She has certainly got the facial hair, but her *Ho-ho-ho*s were unconvincing.

Madge, bless her heart, has no wrinkles but she certainly has corrugations. Her face looks like she sleeps face down on a chenille bedspread.

The Diplomacy of Sir Les Patterson

Bugger me, this lovely little lass claimed she'd never seen fly buttons before!

She probably thought I was a dinosaur – so I reckoned she wouldn't be surprised when she came face to face with my pterodactyl! Are you with me?

Fly buttons are history now, and I reckon her boyfriend probably had a strip of Velcro on his generation gap.

I'm not home much, but when I sneak into the bedroom late and give my wife Gwen a peck on the top of the head and she turns over in her sleep, I can always hear the empty voddie miniatures clinking under the duvet.

Yes, perusers, my wife, God bless her, is a BIG SIPPER, to be honest. Some nights she is as full as a Pommy Complaints Box and yet she says she could have had a career in TV commercials if she hadn't been knocked up by me.

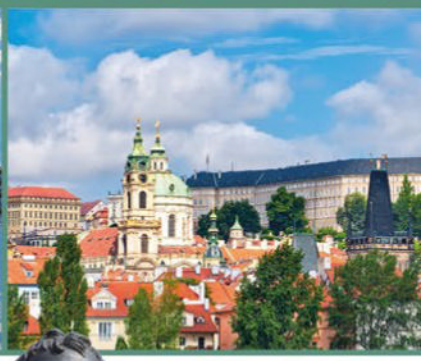
I look for beauty everywhere, and here's a passing reflection from your mate Les.

Don't forget there is nothing more beautiful in the world than a meaningful and caring relationship between a happily married Australian diplomat and one of his nubile research assistants.

The lord be good to you all,
Les

NOBLE CALEDONIA





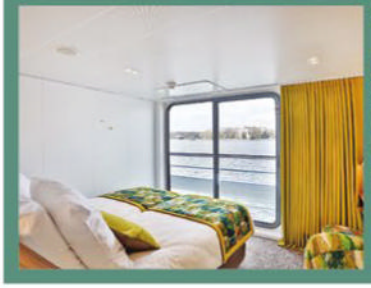
FROM BERLIN TO PRAGUE

An eight night river cruise along the Elbe aboard the MS Elbe Princesse II
20th to 28th April, 6th to 14th May & 15th to 23rd October 2024

Join us as we discover the natural beauty of former East Germany's dramatic landscape whilst we cruise along the Elbe River from historic Berlin to beautiful Prague. For those contemplating a tour of Middle Europe, the usual option is a land based coach tour offering overnight stops and long road journeys. This attractive eight night itinerary offers an ideal alternative of relatively short journeys by road, whilst the major part of the journey is undertaken aboard our delightful vessel the MS Elbe Princesse II which we have chartered for our sailings from our longstanding associates, Croisi Europe. Accommodating a maximum of just 74 passengers and with a shallow draught, the vessel is ideally suited for our river cruise.

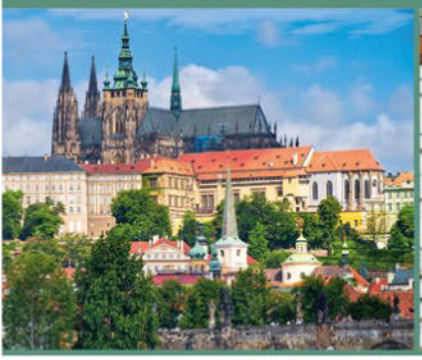
Our journey will take us from the vibrant city of Berlin to historic Magdeburg, Luther's hometown of Wittenberg, the famous porcelain town of Meissen, culturally rich Dresden and through the lovely Elbe Sandstone Mountains, where the river has cut a deep valley through sandstone rocks, ending in the graceful Czech capital of Prague. This is the perfect trip for those who enjoy seeing something different every day. Our floating hotel, the MS Elbe Princesse II transports you in considerable comfort between the two great cities of Berlin and Prague. The slow speed of the vessel allows you to absorb the changing landscape of town and country and observe everyday life along the river.

ELBE PRINCESSE II is a modern vessel designed to navigate the challenging conditions of the Elbe River and we have exclusively chartered her for these sailings. The vessel accommodates a maximum of 74 passengers, providing a warm and intimate atmosphere on board. With plenty of light and a large Sun Deck, there is ample opportunity to watch the world gently pass by as you relax on board your comfortable floating hotel. All cabins are located above water level affording outside views and those on the Upper Deck feature a French balcony. Spread over three decks, the onboard facilities include a delightful restaurant which accommodates all guests in one sitting and the lounge which is a pleasant space for relaxation and the large panoramic windows create a bright and airy ambience.




ABTA V3514

For full details on this holiday call us today on **020 7752 0000** for your copy of our brochure.



THE ITINERARY IN BRIEF

Day 1 London to Berlin, Germany. Fly by scheduled flight and on arrival transfer to the MS Elbe Princesse II. Meet your fellow guests and crew this evening at the welcome cocktail and enjoy dinner on board.

Day 2 Potsdam. This morning we will visit the Versailles of Prussia known for its palaces and parks. Here amongst the splendour of Frederick the Great's creation we will see the park of the Palace of Sanssouci and the Tea House. Enjoy the afternoon sailing.

Day 3 Magdeburg. Our morning guided tour will include the historically significant cathedral and the Monastery of Our Lady, the town hall, Guericke Fountain, Old Market Square and of course, the Green Citadel. Return to the vessel for lunch and continue our sailing.

Day 4 Wittenberg. Wittenberg was the home of Martin Luther and the centre of the Protestant Reformation. It was here at the Schlosskirche in 1517 that Luther nailed his 95 Theses in opposition to the Roman Catholic Church. On our half day excursion we will take a walk through the old town. Return to the ship for lunch and a leisurely afternoon sailing to Meissen.

Day 5 Meissen. Today's tour will focus on the beautiful city of Meissen with its enchanting Renaissance houses. During our guided tour we will visit the Meissen factory museum where fine porcelain has been produced since the early 1700s and see first-hand how this trademarked porcelain is created by hand. Sail this afternoon to Dresden where we arrive in the late afternoon and moor overnight.

Day 6 Dresden. We will have the full day to explore this wonderful city known as 'Florence of the Elbe'. Our guided morning tour will include the historic centre, the Frauenkirche and the Baroque Church of our Lady, which still shows signs of the Allied bombing during World War II. After lunch on board there will be the opportunity to explore this striking city independently.

Day 7 Saxon Switzerland. Arrive early this morning into Bad Schandau, our base to visit the famous rock tower known as the Bastei, which was formed by water a million years ago and from where we can enjoy stunning views of the Elbe. We continue on to Castle Konigstein, an impressive fortress overlooking the Elbe where Napoleon's forces were billeted during his German campaign. Return to the vessel and spend the afternoon cruising.

Day 8 Prague, Czech Republic. We continue cruising this morning to Litomerice from where we drive to Prague and visit, the Czech Republic's capital in all its elegance. Our guided walking tour of this UNESCO World Heritage City will include the Charles Bridge, Old Town Square and the castle. After lunch in a local restaurant enjoy some free time to explore at your own pace before returning to the ship in Melnik.

Day 9 Prague to London. Disembark after breakfast in Melnik and transfer to Prague airport for our return scheduled flight to London.

PRE-CRUISE BERLIN EXTENSION

If you would like to spend some time in Berlin we are offering an optional two night extension, based at a centrally located, four-star hotel, which includes a city tour of Berlin. Full details can be viewed online.

PRICES & INCLUSIONS

Prices per person based on double occupancy start from **£3295** for a Main Deck Twin cabin.

WHAT'S INCLUDED:

Economy class scheduled air travel • Eight nights accommodation aboard the MS Elbe Princesse II on an all-inclusive, full board basis (excluding premium brand alcohol) • Shore excursions • Noble Caledonia onboard team including Guest Speaker • Gratuities • Transfers • Port taxes • Airport taxes.

NB. Travel insurance is not included in the price. Ports subject to change and water levels and weather conditions may affect the itinerary. Our current booking conditions apply to all reservations.

SAMSUNG Galaxy Tab A8

easology

The all-new Samsung Galaxy Tab A8 easology is specially designed for ease-of-use, yet it is also packed with the very latest technology....

Introducing

The Tablet That Makes Tech Easy!

★★★★★
"It lets me do everything I want without hassle or difficulty"
Sandra, 72 N.York

- **Hi spec tablet designed for ease-of-use.**
- **Download your favourite apps.**
- **Great tech from a trusted brand.**
- **Easy searching, easy reading, easy navigation.**

Technology is central to our lives, yet are you sometimes left wondering why it cannot be easier? That's where the Samsung Galaxy Tab A8 easology comes in. Discover a great tablet with all the features you need, yet with everything a little easier!

Why Should Easy Mean Less?
Find clearer layouts, easy internet browsing, larger text, big icons and much more. This groundbreaking tablet represents the latest technology, made easy!

Stylish, Sleek And Powerful
The stylish, sleek Samsung Galaxy Tab A8 easology is perfect for searching the internet, video calling, watching videos, using social media and much more. Whatever you like to do, it's easy on the large 10.5", full high definition screen. This superfast tablet is WIFI enabled, has Dolby speakers, comes with a large storage capacity and a long-lasting battery.

Easology Is So Easy-To-Use
A hi-spec tablet designed for ease-of-use, without any compromise in technology. This Samsung easology tablet does everything a normal tablet does... just easier. Perfect for anyone who wants the best technology from a trusted household brand.

EASY SEARCHING
Internet browser with buttons to magnify.

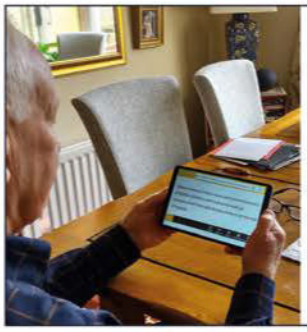
EASY LAYOUTS
Enjoy intuitive screen layouts.

EASY READING
Easier reading with large text.

DOWNLOAD APPS
Download your favourite apps.

EASY FEATURES
A magnifier for reading instructions.

EASY NAVIGATION
Clear actions and buttons.



The Samsung Galaxy Tab A8 easology delivers market-leading performance with all the latest features, in an easy-to-use tablet. **It is exclusively available from the easology store for £229.99 (and comes with a free stylish case).**

SPECIFICATIONS

- Easy-to-use interface
- Big 10.5" HD screen
- 32GB storage
- All-day battery
- Front and rear cameras
- Add storage with a microSD card

The easology Home Screen Explained

The Home Screen is split into 4 main sections:

TOP RIGHT: Four quick contacts you can assign to friends and family, or anyone you might need to contact easily.

TOP LEFT: Features the time, date and weather for your area.

MIDDLE: A list of your favourite apps. Download apps from the Google Play Store and add them to your home screen.

BOTTOM: A row of apps you are likely to use the most, including a handy magnifier, camera, settings, and internet.

HOME BUTTON: A single tap on this rounded square will return you to the familiarity of the Home Screen at any time.

Watch online at www.easology.net/a8

What easology users are saying:

★★★★★

"I am very happy with my new Samsung easology tablet. Just what I was looking for. It has a good battery, decent storage and is nice and easy to use. I am very happy with the purchase and can 100% recommend."
Jenny, 71, Cardiff

"I have been online for 20 years and wanted a new tablet with the latest technology. My Samsung easology has a great screen, great sound and is fast. It's also really easy-to-use. Being online has never been so enjoyable!"
Gerry, 76, Cleveland

ORDER BY PHONE (Local Rate)
0118 418 1217
Mon-Fri. 08:30 - 20:00
Sat. 9:00 - 14:00

ORDER BY WEB
www.easology.net

Free Delivery | 2-Yr Warranty | Secure Payment

Fleet Street is full of robots

Artificial intelligence is more original than most columnists

A N WILSON

The robots are coming!

German photographer Boris Eldagsen won the Sony World Photography Award, and then handed back his prize. He admitted that the stunning photograph, of two women, one hunched behind the other's shoulder, was made by AI (Artificial Intelligence).

The mood of the moment is to fear AI. But if intelligence, artificial or otherwise, produces beautiful art, wise government, and efficient machines, then why not?

An article in the *Times* by William Hague aimed to make us scream with horror. AI is advancing at such a speed a nuclear war might break out, not on the say-so of some crazy Ayatollah or trigger-happy Putin, but because of a computer or a robot making the decision for us.

Hague's rather sad solution to this nightmare was – you guessed it – for *politicians* to 'prepare for the next stage'. We could, he insists – we being the UK – 'be a world leader in supercomputing'.

If you had to pit Sir Keir Starmer and Rishi Sunak against a clever computer intent on nuclear wipeout, you would not be wise to bank on the humans (I use the word advisedly) coming out victorious.

One actually wonders whether Whitehall would be so very different if the Civil Service, Cabinet Ministers and HM Opposition were replaced by robots.

And what would happen if AI replaced the columnists and programme-presenters in providing us with a comment on the news?

Would we truly notice the difference if all the work of all the hacks and hackettes of TV, radio and print journalism were done by the chatbot ChatGPT?

Nearly all journalism is created, if not by actual robots, then by people who are so incapable of original thought or expression that they might as well be scripted by ChatGPT.

Universities now regularly run students' essays through the computer to make sure they have not all been lifted direct from ChatGPT.

But the students themselves fear, reasonably, they will falsely be accused of downloading their essays via ChatGPT when all they have done is to be born with totally unoriginal minds.

When David English – the legendary Editor of the *Daily Mail* – died last year, he was hailed as 'the journalists' journalist', the great man of Fleet Street, etc etc.

The late Peregrine Worsthorne, former Editor of the *Sunday Telegraph*, was alone in pointing out that English had in fact been the opposite of this. He was the enemy of original thought. He forced everyone who wrote for the *Mail* to write in a '*Daily Mail* style', and if they did not conform, he would get his henchmen to rewrite. There was never a moment of surprise in reading any of the columns or news items in English's *Daily Mail*.

Likewise, from the other side of the spectrum, it is very unusual to read a columnist in the *Guardian* whose views cannot be predicted in depressingly exact detail. You know what they are going to think about Brexit, the war in Ukraine, the row about transgender self-identification – before you have read a single word of their pieces.

The career of Hadley Freeman demonstrates what happens if you step out of line at the *Guardian*. After 22 years of being easily the best columnist on the paper, she stepped out of line. Her bravely expressed views on the Gender Recognition Act were disapproved of.

She has spoken of an 'atmosphere of real fear' in the paper, generated by the trans lobby. She is now writing excellent columns for the *Sunday Times*.

> Those who dare to question the status quo are very rare beings

Craig Brown – like Hadley, one of the rare writers of true originality who regularly appear in the papers – created two journalists, Bel Littlejohn, who actually had a real column in the *Guardian*, and Wallace Arnold, a pipe-smoking, name-dropping Conservative who seemed a bit like a dozen or more of our then drinking companions.

It was actually several years before I realised that Bel Littlejohn was an invention. If she had not, sadly, died, she would no doubt be at the forefront of sniffing out transphobia in the likes of J K Rowling or Hadley Freeman.

But Freeman is a bright light in a naughty world. Most *Telegraph* writers write like the *Telegraph*. Most Radio 4 editors and presenters have an unmistakably Radio 4 timbre to their world view. They might as well be – in some ways, are – robots.

An exception was manifested in a truly intelligent discussion about AI on the *Today* programme in April between Professors Bhaskar Vira and Rose Luckin. They were discussing the effect of AI in the educational world, and the wider implications of their conclusions are relevant to us in Hacksville.

AI, they pointed out, is a brilliant way of channelling and accumulating *information*. But, as for *knowledge*, 'Knowledge about ourselves is what differentiates us from our AI peers,' said Prof Vira.

Robots and computers can accumulate information but they can't process it. That's what can be done by human scientists, human historians and – when they can be found – the original journalists.

But those who dare to question the status quo or to refuse to parrot the 'editorial line' are very rare beings.

RIP practical jokes

The 20th century was rich with hilarious pranksters, from Orson Welles to Henry Root. Why are there no jokers today? By *Piers Pottinger*

***Panorama*'s spaghetti-tree harvest, 1957**

'Who put salt in the sugar bowl?

'Who put fireworks in the coal?'

These were the opening lines of Terry Scott's naughty-schoolboy song, *My Brother*, back in 1962.

The song was indicative of an era when pranks and practical jokes were more or less expected from youngsters.

At Rishi Sunak's school, Winchester College, many years ago, a group of boys learnt that a teacher was standing as a Labour councillor at the local elections. The teacher was the proud owner of a bright red Mini Cooper.

On the eve of the election, a group of boys managed to paint the car a resplendent Conservative blue. It was a prank that is still recounted today. I doubt that anything so daring happened by the time Rishi arrived at the school some years later.

After school, many pranksters continued their activities at university. In the seventies, a group of Oxford undergrads set up a bogus awards dinner, inviting all the most pompous and self-important lecturers to the Randolph Hotel. There they were served a deliberately repugnant dinner with oxidised wine and not an award in sight. Quite an effort – not to mention the sizeable bill incurred.

I am sure readers of *The Oldie* will recall many amusing antics from their younger days. *The Oldie*'s Barry Humphries was a master prankster in his youth.

While flying, he would decant a tin of Heinz Russian Salad into the sickness bag. Halfway through the flight, he'd pretend to vomit loudly into the bag – before proceeding to eat the contents, to the horror of his fellow passengers.

I fondly recall the glorious George Melly appearing at Ronnie Scott's, where he inserted in the jazz classic *Dr Jazz* the couplet 'Who put the Benzedrine in Mrs Melly's Ovaltine?'. George sang it with a knowing wink.

A good practical joke shouldn't harm its victims. It should prick the balloon of pomposity or highlight an absurd rule or practice. Sadly these days there seem to be few jokes, as wokery takes over the focus of university life.

The HMS *Dreadnought* hoax of 1910 was engineered by Horace de Vere Cole, king of practical jokers. He and a group of friends from the Bloomsbury set, including Virginia Woolf, dressed up as Abyssinian royals. They demanded (successfully) that the Foreign Office give them a tour of the Royal Navy's warship HMS *Dreadnought*. Given that they were all in blackface, today they would probably have been arrested.

Cole was an eccentric Irish prankster par excellence, who once posed as the uncle of the Sultan of Zanzibar to make a ceremonial visit to Trinity College, Cambridge, when he was an undergraduate there.

On another occasion he bought tickets for a pretentious play in the West End and gave them to eight bald men, on whose heads he had written a single letter which spelt the word BOLLOCKS. Seated together in the stalls they could be seen by everyone above them.

Practical jokes have been celebrated in literature. Remember Bertie Wooster knocking off a policeman's helmet for a bet and as a result coming before the magistrate?

Henry Root, aka William Donaldson, wrote a series of preposterous letters to well-known individuals in 1980, published as *The Henry Root Letters*. His letter to the Queen said, 'You're always opening things: hospitals, schools, theatres, factories, flyovers, playgrounds etc.

'Why don't you close a few things? I have in mind such blemishes on the face of our society as the National Liberal Club, BBC2, Soho's 'foreign' cinemas and so-called massage parlours.'

On TV, *Candid Camera* (1948-2014) was famous for stunts such as 'driving' a car with no engine into a garage, baffling the mechanic it was shown to when it wouldn't start.

Next came Jeremy Beadle on *Beadle's About* (1986-96). His elaborate stunts could be amusing but rapidly became tiresome, with a focus on getting people to lose their tempers by severe provocation.

These days, *Just for Laughs* from Canada offers occasional jollity, and *Impractical Jokers* relies on a very juvenile sense of humour of the kind portrayed in the film *Animal House*.

April Fool's Day still provides a platform for serious news organisations to play a joke on their viewers or readers. Richard Dimbleby led the way on *Panorama* in 1957 with the legendary film on the annual spaghetti-tree harvest.

In the US, Orson Welles's 1938 radio broadcast of *War of the Worlds* had thousands fleeing their homes as they mistook a newscast for a real bulletin. But that was not the intention of the broadcast. Welles had no idea the fake bulletin in the play would cause such mayhem.

Sadly, the internet now means most hoaxes are actually fraudulent. There is nothing funny about them. People also take offence so easily – often resorting to legal action – that would-be practical jokers are much more wary about embarking on a jolly jape.

Isn't it time for a spectacular stunt to remind us all that the Great British sense of humour is still as alive and inventive as ever?

Let's hope there is a modern Horace de Vere Cole out there somewhere, poised to brighten up our lives. We could all benefit from a little more laughter.

Piers Pottinger is a public-affairs consultant and funster

Eximius
REFINED LIVE-IN SUPPORT

Inspected and rated Outstanding ☆ Care Quality Commission

sia Business Member

BABICM

SOLLA Society of Later Life Advisers AFFILIATE

Homecare Association

Looking for an OUTSTANDING alternative to a Care Home?

Live-in care offers a safe and cost-effective alternative to a care home, nursing home and hourly care.

With support from an Eximius companion, individuals or couples can remain safely in their own home, surrounded by family, friends and their own comforts and memories.

Bespoke live-in care for all your personal, medical and domestic needs

Our companions are highly trained in all areas of live-in care, including:

- Dementia
- Stroke
- Parkinson's Disease
- Multiple Sclerosis
- Spinal Injury
- Brain Injury
- Recovery and Respite Care
- Care for Couples

Eximius companions will support you with your day-to-day needs such as:

- Medication
- Personal Care
- Shopping and Cooking
- Cleaning and Laundry
- Social Outings and Appointments
- Companionship

LIVE LIFE TO THE FULL
Call us today for a chat and a free no obligation assessment

Call: 01494 424222 / 0203 794 9933

Email: info@eximiussupport.uk ■ www.eximiussupport.uk

Aspects of bohemian love

Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical is based on a book by Bunny Garnett, Bloomsbury Group writer – and *Liz Hodgkinson*'s childhood neighbour

The Andrew Lloyd Webber musical *Aspects of Love* returns to the West End for a 12-week run in May, starring Michael Ball.

But who was the extraordinary man who wrote the romantic novel of tangled love affairs on which the musical is based? This was David Garnett, always known as Bunny. Born in March 1892 and the only child of publisher's reader Edward Garnett and Constance (née Black), who translated many Russian novels into English, Bunny led a highly tangled love life of his own.

An integral member of the Bloomsbury Group, he had many affairs with both men and women, before and during his two marriages. He first married illustrator Rachel Marshall, with whom he had two sons, and then Angelica Bell, 26 years his junior, with whom he had four daughters.

And that is where I come in, as I knew both Bunny and Angelica. Their four girls, Amaryllis, Henrietta, Nerissa and Fanny, were at Huntingdon Grammar School with me and I became friendly with them all, as they were very close in age to one another. I often used to visit their home, Hilton Hall, near St Ives. It seemed magical, with Picassos and Matisses on the walls, plus paintings by Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, Angelica's parents.

There were books on the shelves by the girls' great-aunt, Virginia Woolf, with covers designed by her sister Vanessa.

Hilton Hall was crammed full of art and literature. I longed to come from such an illustrious family, live in such a house and have so many famous, talented people in my ancestry. Alas, I came from a working-class background, which numbered only farm-labourers and kitchen maids as far back as you went.

Even so, Angelica and Bunny welcomed me into their home. Bunny took a particular shine to me as he thought I was clever and talented. He was also grateful for my friendship with his daughters, who to the other pupils seemed like exotic aliens. I also have the unique distinction of having taught Bunny, aged 70, to rock and roll, at one of their parties.

Henrietta and Amaryllis Grant, by Vanessa Bell, 1953

Their lives seemed glamorous and idyllic, the highest of high bohemia. The girls would often spend holidays with their maternal grandparents in their Sussex farmhouse, Charleston, where they would pose to be painted.

In later life, Henrietta wrote about the agony of staying still while Vanessa stabbed at the canvas, but those paintings are now worth an absolute fortune.

It was not long, though, before cracks started to appear. During the girls' childhood, both Bunny and Angelica were often away, leaving the children to fend for themselves. Angelica finally left Bunny in the early 1960s to lead her own life, and Hilton Hall fell into neglect.

Amaryllis trained as an actress, but never managed to succeed in this tough profession. Desperately adrift as an adult, she drowned herself, aged 29, in a horrible echo of her great-aunt Virginia's similar suicide.

Henrietta was sexy and beautiful, far more outgoing than her older sister and married at 17, already pregnant. Her husband, Burgo Partridge, was the son of diarist Frances Partridge, sister of Bunny's first wife. Thus, the marriage was not exactly incestuous, but pretty close.

Three weeks after their daughter Sophie was born, Burgo died of a heart attack, leaving Henrietta a mother and widow while still a teenager. The twins, Nerissa and Fanny, went to art school. But none of the girls ever had a job or earned a living.

In his late seventies, Bunny was having to do lecture tours of America to earn enough cash to keep them all. Angelica said in a 2001 interview that she was also always giving them money.

One might have expected these golden girls to have gone on to glittering careers, especially with all their influential connections, but it never happened. Perhaps the weight of their relatives' achievements was just too great, or maybe severe dysfunction in the household inhibited them.

Angelica's 1984 book, *Deceived with Kindness*, disclosed that she was not told of her true parentage until she was 18. Up till then, she believed her mother's husband, Clive Bell, was her father, not the gay Duncan Grant. Nor did she learn until much later that the bisexual Bunny had been one of her father's lovers.

She wrote that she felt bludgeoned into an unsuitable and deeply unhappy marriage by Bunny's sheer force of will and did not have the strength to resist.

Then, *Bloomsbury's Outsider*, Sarah Knights's 2015 biography of Bunny, revealed more about his riotous love life and inability to be financially solvent, even though he was a successful writer. Henrietta said, 'We were very poor.'

Bunny died in 1981, aged 88, leaving less than £11,000. But there was a wonderful bonanza for his three surviving daughters as they each received a share of royalties from *Aspects of Love* and were set up for life.

All but Fanny have now died. I still feel honoured to have been granted an intimate glimpse into their rarefied but ultimately sad lives.

Aspects of Love *is at the Lyric Theatre, 12th May to 11th November*

RIP Old King Coal

On 1st May, coal deliveries were banned. *Hunter Davies* mourns the coalmen who used to pour coal straight into his Carlisle kitchen

I am looking down out into my north London street at the moment. It's a quiet street, mid-afternooon, and it is chocka with vans.

What are they all doing? Delivering groceries, that's what.

There is a Waitrose van – we have quite a few toffs in our street – plus a Co-op, a Morrisons and a Tesco van, waiting to find space to park.

That one is for me. Bringing 24 bottles of New Zealand Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc. How could I resist, when there is 25 per cent off for every six bottles? Rapture.

The scene takes me back 80 years to my Carlisle childhood, during and after the war. No cars in the street then – no one had a car. The only car you ever saw was the doctor's. Yes, they used to do house calls. Can you believe it?

But what we had in our streets were countless horses and carts, delivering stuff – potatoes, turnips, fish, tea, ice cream. Plus rag-and-bone men, knife-sharpeners, onion men.

The ones I dreaded were the coalmen. They were mainly little, weedy fellows but could carry enormous bags of coal on their puny backs.

They would come round the side of our house and my mother would let them in – straight into the kitchen, where she was making our tea. Tatties and mince, usually – yum yum.

She would open the coal-cellar door and they would trudge in and out of the kitchen, emptying all their sacks of coal.

Why did I hate them coming? The coal dust was everywhere – all over the table and chairs, the kitchen stove and the mince. Worst of all, down my throat. No wonder I had the most awful asthma all through my boyhood.

I still can't believe that Carlisle Corporation, when they were building our council estate, put the coal cellar inside, in the kitchen. How unhealthy and awkward was that? Posh houses had a manhole outside, on the pavement.

Anyway, since 1st May, it won't happen again. There will be no more door-to-door coal deliveries. Banned. Could be a hanging offence.

Coalmen, St Leonards-on-Sea, 1958

You are unlikely to have seen any coalmen for decades, but apparently they still exist in some parts of the country. Up north, I should think. Past Watford.

It is all to do with Clean Air Acts and its being illegal now to burn coal and other nasty stuff in your grates. Quite right, too.

When I came to London in the fifties, the smog was appalling. Thick, yellow, horrible stuff. When it descended, I couldn't see my front door. Thank goodness smog has totally gone.

And so have all the horses and carts – and most of the door-to-door delivery men we used to have.

But we still have some. I get my milk delivered. It comes very late at night – a lovely surprise for my breakfast muesli.

I'm the only person in our street – perhaps in London; on the planet – who gets their milk delivered. I live alone and don't have a car.

I also get a newspaper delivered, through my little letterbox. And do I moan and groan if it isn't there when I come downstairs?

You can't get the staff, you know. When I was a lad, there were waiting lists to be paper boys or paper girls. Now the young won't get out of bed.

In my teens, I had two jobs, delivering papers and groceries. I had one of those heavy bikes with a big basket. When full, they were hellish to manoeuvre and could easily topple over.

Thank God for sliced bread. I honestly do remember when sliced bread arrived in Carlisle in 1950. The novelty wasn't just that it was sliced but that it was wrapped in greaseproof paper. When your basket toppled, and the food fell out into the mud, you could just wipe the sliced bread and carry on.

It seemed mad and so uneconomical to deliver tea. There was a dinky van, which went round delivering Ringtons Tea. I know, because I once got a holiday job as the Ringtons van boy. Being a paper boy was hellish, having to get up so early, lugging that huge bag. Sitting in the tea van with the driver was cushty.

I got it through connections. You couldn't have got such a job without contacts. The driver was also my violin teacher, Alf Adamson.

A council-house kid with an invalid father, and yet I had violin lessons? It was because Alf took pity on me.

In 1950, aged 14, I came fourth in the Carlisle and District Music Festival for under-15 violinists. My name was in the *Cumberland News* – boaster. There were only four entries, but don't let on.

You never see vans delivering tea these days – or coal. But posh groceries in posh vans? Goodness! Dear God, it is now an industry.

Hurrah, my wine is here. Cheers!

Hunter Davies is author of The Beatles: The Authorised Biography

How I got the horn

After his marriage fell apart, *Jasper Rees* found solace in the French horn he'd last played at school

For the past 20 years, I've been living with the consequences of a midlife crisis.

It began, as these things often do, with the end of a marriage and the imminence of a round-numbered birthday.

Men usually confront such landmarks through the medium of wheels: soft-tops, Harleys, super-light road bikes with which they attempt to race back towards an unreachable youth. I opted for a less-travelled, more treacherous road: clambering into the attic, I retrieved an old French horn that I had cast off more than 20 years earlier.

I wrote an article for the *Telegraph* about the exhilaration of resuming it, and got a surprising response from many who, it emerged, yearned to do something similar. Curious to explore these feelings, I set off on an adventure.

The ensuing book began at the annual festival of the British Horn Society, held that year in Southampton, where I joined a huge ensemble blasting an eight-part version of the *Hallelujah Chorus*.

It ended a year later at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, where I went on stage alone. I was on between the president of the International Horn Society and the horns of the London Philharmonic Orchestra.

Before an audience intimidatingly rammed with seasoned pros and top amateurs who knew what an absurd daredevil stunt this was, I had a crack at Mozart's third concerto for horn, K447. It was the same piece I'd once flunked so catastrophically at school that I gave up the instrument for good.

Titling the book *I Found My Horn*, borrowed from Flanders and Swann's *Ill Wind*, I used my year of living dangerously as a springboard to relate the history of the world from Moses to McCartney with regard to mankind's original signalling instrument.

When an abridged version was read on *Book of the Week*, an actor-writer got in touch. 'That's my story, too,' Jonathan Guy Lewis told me. He'd suffered the same trauma with the same concerto with the vital difference that, mid-performance, he had contrived to faint.

That went straight into the play we co-wrote, which opened at the Aldeburgh Fringe Festival a few months later. Jonathan played all the characters with protean dexterity, and we included bits of horn from all the greats: Wagner, Bruckner, Mahler, Haydn, Schubert, Beethoven, Rossini, Sibelius, not forgetting John Williams, plus an excerpt of that *Hallelujah Chorus*. It was directed by Harry Burton, whose father, Sir Humphrey, classical-music impresario, came to the first performance.

Having no history with the instrument, Harry was the one to intuit that, although its co-star and love object is a French horn, this was a universal redemption story going way deeper than K447.

'I've done nothing to make myself memorable,' I wrote in the book. Most of us know what it means to regret the life unlived; hopes unfulfilled.

We did the play all over the shop, popping up in posh regional theatres and small houses in the West End.

'A shot of pure joy,' said the *Telegraph*. 'Funny, serious, moving,' said the *Sunday Times*.

Jonathan would go on to rework the play as a corporate entertainment. Performing it to startled young execs, he encouraged them to apply its lessons to the workplace. Does the hero admit defeat and retreat or, channelling the wise counsel of elders, plough on towards a showdown with awaiting demons? This was not an outcome I predicted when I went into the attic all those years ago.

Not being *The Mousetrap*, eventually we stopped. Then, this year, a pub theatre in south London had a slot going free. So we got the play out of the attic, and discovered that its themes now resonate more than ever – audiences connect with it even more.

It helps that Jonathan, still brilliant at acting, is far closer to 60 than 40 and the years' heavy freight sits more poignantly on his shoulders. Also, the play has been revived into a theatrical culture in the throes of an uncertain evolution. It's now quite rare, seemingly, for audiences to enjoy a guilt-free entertainment that doesn't lecture or harangue.

Finally, there's the thrilling jeopardy of live theatre: having acted his socks off for 80 minutes, Jonathan then has to stand and deliver K447. No one knows how it will go – actor included.

It occurs to me, 20 years on from when I found my horn, that I have measured out my life with 16 feet of coiled brass tubing. The instrument Jonathan performs on is the one my father bought for me from Boosey & Hawkes in 1977. The make is Josef Lídl of Brno, from a country that no longer exists.

Over the course of the play's existence, my Czechoslovakian horn has become a talking character – an id-like conscience and prompter that calls insistently from the past. You couldn't do that with a trumpet or a flute.

The horn is, incomparably, the horn whose magical glamour is revealed when Jasper, in the dark of his attic, first opens the case and a golden glow bathes his face.

Why not come and see for yourself?

Jasper Rees's I Found My Horn *is at Riverside Studios (30th May to 11th June)*

THE CORONATION COLLECTION

IN CELEBRATION OF OUR NEW MONARCH,

HIS MAJESTY KING CHARLES III

A STRICTLY LIMITED-EDITION COLLECTION, EXCLUSIVE TO ROSLAND

To celebrate the coronation of His Majesty King Charles III, Rosland is proud to present this exclusive collection of commemorative coins.

Crafted in fine gold and pure silver, with the highest attention to detail, this stunning collection is sure to be treasured by royal enthusiasts and avid collectors alike.

Each coin features a newly commissioned portrait of the King on the obverse and the Imperial State Crown on the reverse, both of which have been designed by esteemed artist and former Royal Mint coin designer, Jody Clark, with final approval given by the royal household.

Start your collection today and experience the glory and splendour of this truly great moment in our nation's history.

2G, 4G & 8G SOVEREIGN SET
Limited to only 999

1OZ GOLD PROOF
Limited to only 200

2OZ GOLD PROOF
Limited to only 50

5OZ GOLD PROOF
Limited to only 23

5OZ SILVER COIN
Limited to only 500

1 KILO SILVER COIN
Limited to only 50

Call 0800-902-0000
Text 'GOLD' to 62277

ROSLAND GOLD.CO.UK

KING CHARLES III • CORONATION • 6TH MAY 2023

BUY TODAY AND RECEIVE YOUR **FREE** COPY OF THE ROSLAND BOOK OF GOLD

Roll up! Roll up! Miracle tights are here

Hallelujah – there are no gussets, seams or sagging

Tights were slow in coming to Northern Ireland – so I started teenage life in stockings with suspenders.

Suspender belts – worn around the waist or hips with hook-and-eye fastening – were uncomfortable because they dug into even slim bodies, causing pain and bulging.

The four or six elastic suspenders which dangled from the belt gave minor injuries to the wearer. You stretched them down to attach them to the stocking tops and they were invariably too short – so they snapped back at you.

The plastic discs that fed into the metal grasps were always breaking off their tethers, and many girls, like me, would have to substitute a 5p piece. You have heard of the VPL or visible panty line – in suspender-belt days, there were VSPs – visible suspender protrusions.

Meanwhile, in the days before tights reined everything in, hefty-thighed women suffered from chafing at the bare tops of their legs. When suspender belts were invented in the 1920s, they were considered a lingerie engineering breakthrough. They were preferable to the circulation-suppressing tight-fitting girdles and garters that preceded them, onto which stockings were attached in a way that inhibited free movement.

When tights came in in the sixties, most females never looked back. They were an idea whose time had come – the miniskirt could never have existed without them.

It took time for the engineering of tights to be perfected. The first ones aimed to be flesh-coloured but failed – they had an orange tint. For many years, you got only one wear out of tights as they laddered all too easily.

You could mend them only by threading a blonde hair through a fine needle and darning them – and even then the mending was far from invisible. To stop the ladder in its tracks, women would apply nail varnish to both ends.

A farewell to qualms – no need for stockings now

Now, after many decades of harder-wearing, thick black tights, unpleasantly textured so as to resemble leggings, fishnet and patterned tights have come to the fore for bohemians. The ladylike wear skin-effect tights which replicate the bare leg.

Tights no longer ladder as you are putting them on, but good ones are now very pricey. You can get a pair for £5 but they will bobble, and tiny specks of white elastic will start showing through after a few cycles in the machine. A pair from Falke costs £35, will not bobble and will last indefinitely.

Wolford and Falke were the go-to brands for fashion stylists for many years, but the cognoscenti now favour the Heist brand. The problem, even with expensive tights in XXL, was that even thin women found they didn't stay up – instead, they rolled themselves down like strips of wallpaper. As a result, some young women continue to wear maternity tights even after giving birth.

Now Heist has created a game-changing engineering solution – with no gusset, seam or sagging. They are the most comfortable tights available, made from supersoft yarn and with an adaptive waistband.

There is no digging in or rolling down, ever. You can choose from styles in classic black and nude in various denier counts.

You have an extremely pleasurable wearing experience with no threat of having to do any undignified wrenching.

Calzino, Wolford, Falke and Heist all produce attractive tights. But why not go to Shepherd's Bush Market – that mysterious shopping hub – where fishnet and patterned ten-denier tights can be bought for £2.50?

Millennials have an emotional attachment to tights for another reason – their mothers used to swing them in their tights when they were dressing them as babies and toddlers. Lovely for women to associate tights with comfort, but sad for oldie men who associate suspenders and stockings with eroticism.

Men no longer bother with long johns on the shooting field. They wear their wives' tights. 'They keep you warm and keep everything in,' says one sportsman.

And it doesn't matter if they are laddered, if worn under trousers. In Ireland, laddered tights are used in the garden to tie bushes back – it is a less self-conscious country.

I post papers to my accountant in an inside-out plastic bag with the name and address written with felt-tip pen and the whole bundle tied up with an old pair of tights.

'We received your Irish parcel this morning,' my accountant told me the other day.

Forgotten Box set

Muriel Box, the first woman to win a screenplay Oscar, was once neglected. Now she's back in the limelight. By *Valerie Grove*

It's high time there was a box set of Muriel Box films.

In 1945, Box (1905-91) was the first woman to win an Oscar for best original screenplay, for *The Seventh Veil*.

She wrote 22 films and directed a dozen of them in the 1950s, when she was the one of the only female directors. Sometimes she got a double credit – Muriel and Sydney Box – until her husband ran off with a leggy blonde. People would assume a film was by Sydney (1907-83), a producer and screenwriter, even when the work was mostly hers.

I met Muriel in 1974, when she'd written a vivid memoir called *Odd Woman Out*. Her films reflect her personality: intelligent and original.

With her amused face and smiley eyes, she seemed not too bothered that few remembered her films (the last was *Rattle of a Simple Man*, 1964). She was happily re-married to the Lord Gardiner, the Lord High Chancellor under Harold Wilson from 1964 to 1970. As Gerald Gardiner QC, he had defended Penguin Books in the 1960 *Lady Chatterley* trial.

As Lady Gardiner, Muriel was no longer just a name in the fleeting screen credits on movies shown on TV (as they rarely were then). Her Oscar became a toy for her grandchildren, she cared so little.

To avoid confusion: Betty Box was her husband's sister, producer of the *Doctor* films; she married the producer of the *Carry On* films, Peter Rogers. But Muriel (née Baker) got into films before the Boxes. At 15, she met a man on a train who turned out to be Joe Grossman, studio manager at Elstree. 'Come and work in films,' he said.

Since she loved cinema, she leapt at the idea. By 1925, she was working with film-maker Michael Powell. When she met Sydney in 1932, he was a showbiz reporter; she was editing scripts. After they married, they ran Gainsborough Studios on the banks of Regent's Canal.

Muriel and I revisited her childhood home in Surbiton. She'd been a restless,

Action! Muriel Box wrote 22 films

ambitious teenager, 'slowly stifled in a suburban brick-box from which there seemed small chance of escape'. Her parents had bought 354 Ewell Road (now three flats) in 1906.

The bickerings over money between her mother (schoolmistress, suffragist) and her railway-clerk father, developed into savage rows and even blows. Muriel's early view of marriage informed her films. 'I was a feminist from the word go,' she said.

Childhood was punctuated by drama. At six, she was deflowered by a playmate. She had a tonsillectomy at home, her tonsils fed to the cat. She witnessed her older brother upturn a pan on the stove, covering himself in boiling oil. He survived to become a crack-shot soldier. A next-door neighbour was lost on the *Titanic*.

The Kingston Kinema, with its cliffhanging serials, slapstick comedies and flickering newsreels, became Muriel's refuge. She left home with a cinematic flourish, leaving a note on the dining-room table: 'Gone to the devil.'

Her films – *The Passionate Stranger* (1956) and *The Truth About Women* (1957), both newly remastered by Canal+ – feature backdrops of immaculate, wisteria-clad houses in the sunlit Home Counties. Filmed with exuberance and mischief, every scene sparkles with luminous colour.

The scripts are ironical and satirical. The women (Ann Todd, Diane Cilento, Mai Zetterling), with their tiny waists, are chic and feminine but indomitable. The men (Michael Denison, Wilfrid Hyde-White, James Mason) are suavely supercilious, debonair but often idiotic.

In *The Passionate Stranger*, Margaret Leighton tells her husband, 'I'm supposed to be rather a good pianist, you know.' 'You're supposed to be my wife,' snaps back Ralph Richardson.

Laurence Harvey is perfect in *The Truth About Women*, but he was the most difficult actor Muriel ever worked with. 'I don't know whether his stardom had gone to his head,' she said, 'or whether he was just like that.'

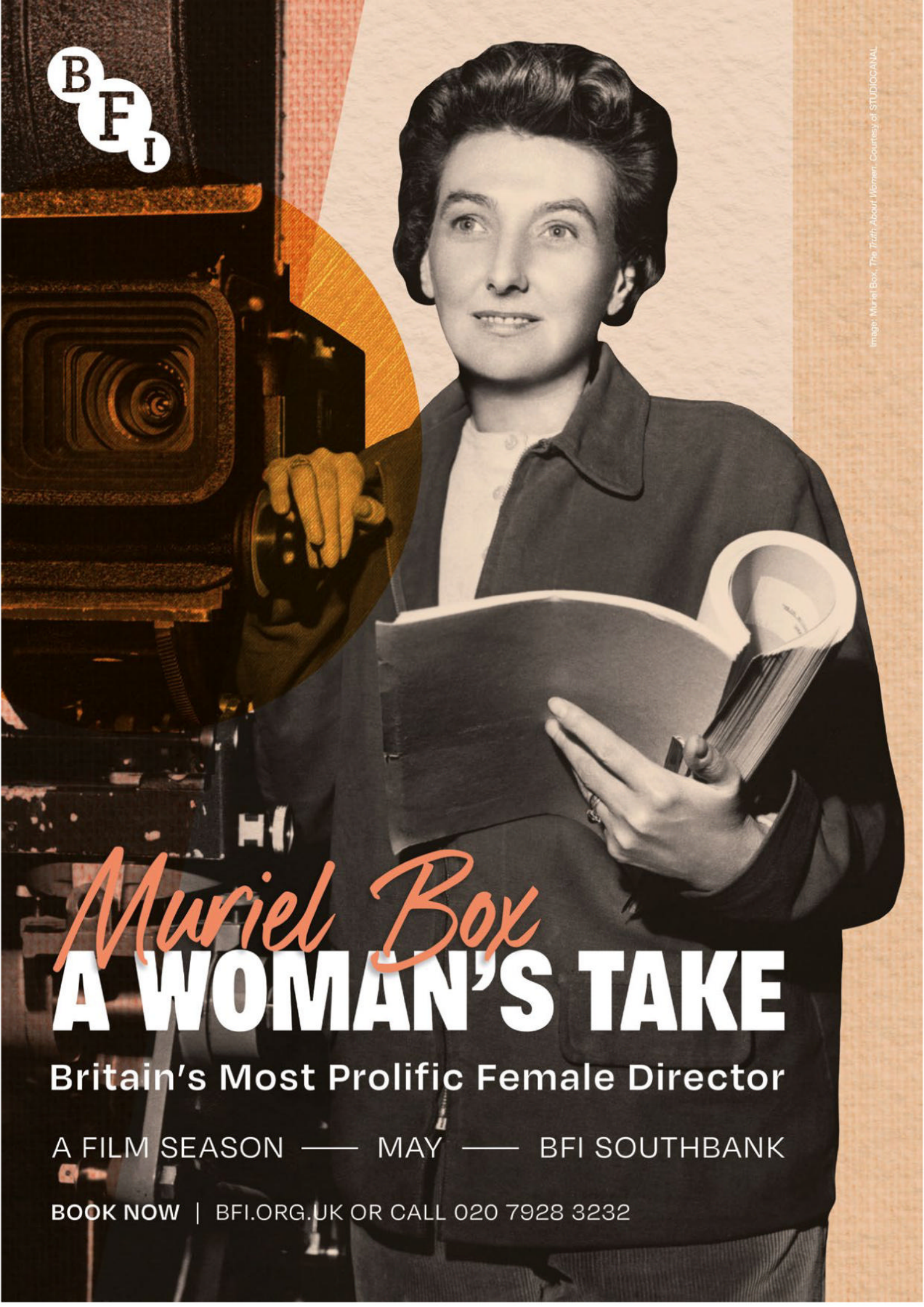
Until her mid-40s, despite her film experience, Muriel was not allowed to direct – even a film she'd scripted called *Road Safety for Children*, for the Ministry of Information. Not until 1952 did she direct her first feature, *The Happy Family*, about a working-class family fighting to save their house from demolition.

When she wrote and directed *Street Corner* (1953) about policewomen, a retort to *The Blue Lamp* (with a mainly female crew), the great critic Dilys Powell sang its praises. Male critics made nudge-nudge remarks such as 'It would be a pleasure to be arrested by any of them (*hurr hurr*)'.

Box died in 1991, but at last there's a Muriel Box season at the British Film Institute, thanks to the efforts of the film-maker Carol Morley and BFI curator Jo Botting.

Lovers of old movies can enjoy 14 scripted and directed by her, including *The Passionate Stranger*, *The Truth About Women* and *Simon and Laura* (1955) – in which a TV company makes a series 'mirroring the life of a normal married couple'. The marriage of the chosen couple, Peter Finch and Kay Kendall, proves quite hellish. What a prescient foretaste of reality TV from this forgotten titan of 20th-century film.

The Muriel Box season is at the BFI Southbank from 1st to 31st May


BFI
Muriel Box
A WOMAN'S TAKE
Britain's Most Prolific Female Director
A FILM SEASON — MAY — BFI SOUTHBANK
BOOK NOW | BFI.ORG.UK OR CALL 020 7928 3232
Image: Muriel Box, The Truth About Women. Courtesy of STUDIOCANAL

Danger! Railway cuttings

Sixty years ago, Dr Beeching wrote the report that closed Adlestrop Station

DAVID HORSPOOL

He remembered Adlestrop. And Ainsdale, Airmyn, Aldeburgh, Aldermaston and Aldridge.

And so on, through more than 2,000 'passenger stations and halts to be closed', before the final tolling of the bell at Yeovil Town, Yetminster and Yorton.

In Scotland, the shadow of his gaze fell from Abbeyhill to Yoker Ferry; in Wales, from Aberaman to Ynyslas.

He was Dr Richard Beeching (1913-85), and the lists of the condemned formed the doleful appendix to the report that bears his name, printed 60 years ago in 1963. In fact, it only bears his name in popular recollection. *The Reshaping of British Railways*, to give it its proper title, was published under the authorship of the British Railways Board, and Beeching's name doesn't appear on it anywhere.

Beeching's intervention – what quickly became known as 'Beeching's Axe' – is, in retrospect, a fascinating example of the never-ending tussle in Britain between modernity and tradition, technology and humanity, the view from the centre and the view from the provinces. Depending on which end of the seesaw you were on, everything looked very different.

And some things that looked self-evident six decades ago can seem far more doubtful now.

Beeching was an early example of the perennial trust British politicians have placed in the go-getting businessman.

No matter that his professional expertise stemmed from his work for ICI, the chemical giant. Beeching was certainly an impressive man, with a PhD in physics, a distinguished record as an armaments engineer during the war, and a leading role in developing one of the wonders of postwar textiles, Terylene.

BUT it is unclear how any of this stellar CV qualified him to preside over the biggest shake-up of transport in Britain since the railways had first been laid.

As the Report made clear, something did need to be done for the railways.

In the two years before its publication, the network had lost more than £150 million. This was a shock to a system that had managed to pay its own way up to the 1950s. So the first nostrum, which has taken a long time to die, was that somehow the railways should be made self-sufficient, rather than being funded as a public service.

Oh, Dr Beeching!

The second was that roads, and what the report called 'the growth of family motoring', could replace the need in the long term for adequate coverage of the country by rail.

And yet, in the same year as Beeching's famous report threatened to emasculate one form of transport, another, mostly forgotten report, the Buchanan Report (*Traffic in Towns*) painted a gloomy, almost dystopian vision of the menace of the car.

A film made to introduce this report began with silent shots of traffic-choked streets, pedestrians squeezed off pavements and graphic close-ups of the results of motor accidents. The journalist James Cameron greeted the viewer with the pronouncement 'everybody knows we're being invaded, devoured and practically immobilised by our own machinery'.

Unfortunately, the solutions proposed by Colin Buchanan, professor of transport at Imperial College London, were even more dystopian. In London, they encouraged the development of the infamous Ringways plan. This would have turned the capital into a series of concentric motorways, culminating in a 'Motorway Box' as the central circuit, carving its way through Kensington, Chelsea, Blackheath, Hackney and Camden.

In the end, though town bypasses were built and London did receive a few miles of the proposed 478 originally planned for, it was Beeching's plan, rather than Buchanan's, that came closer to being realised.

Though it was difficult to argue that some of the least used parts of the network really could, or should be saved (and stations and lines had always opened and closed from the beginning of the railways), the sense that some places were forgotten, once their rail connection was removed, was hard to disprove.

Local objections finally did for the Motorway Box, ten years after the two reports were published. But local resistance concentrated in London is rather more effective than individual campaigns to save a small branch line or station. Only a small proportion of stations were spared Beeching's axe. The bus replacement services, three words every traveller dreads, were never an adequate, or often an actual, alternative.

Sixty years on, we are still having some of the same conversations: about keeping smaller communities connected, the cost of transport, who should pay for it all, and the view from Whitehall and Westminster compared to the visions of academic experts or successful business brains.

Another great railway plan, HS2, stutters on, costing billions and seemingly satisfying nobody. But it's sustained by its own momentum, like an engineering Magnus Magnusson - it's started so it had better finish.

Astonishingly, given all the ambition of that grand project, the prospects of electrification for those large parts of the network still not hooked up seem as distant as ever. Beeching mentioned electrification once, in an aside that seemed to assume it would take place in due course. But, like all our visions of how to keep Britain moving, it never quite happened.

Travel Insurance with No Age Limits!

Peace of mind for your next holiday

- Experts in Cover for Medical Conditions
- 24 Hour Medical Emergency Support
- Cover for Cruise Holidays
- Cover for Covid-19

SPECIAL OFFER FOR THE OLDIE READERS
10%* OFF
BASE PREMIUM
Quote code od10

Call us FREE for an instant quote - It's easy!

0808 196 2115

Our friendly team are waiting to help you

goodtogoinsurance.com

Excellent ★★★★★ Trustpilot

Insurance Choice Awards

Goodtogoinsurance.com is a trading name of Ancile Insurance Group Limited. Authorised & Regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority - No. 471641.
*Discount applies to base premium only and not to any medical screening premiums or optional extras. Discount valid until 31 December 2023.

ITS NEVER BEEN EASIER TO GET CONNECTED

The Oldie has teamed up with mobile manufacturer emporia and network provider IQ Mobile to bring you an amazing offer on easy to use phones which will get you better connected with family and friends.

Buy either of these phones and receive a great **FREE** gift as well as your first month's connection **FREE**.

If you already have a mobile you can transfer your existing number to your new emporia and you can cancel your contract at any time if you wish.

emporia

emporiaSMART.5

Combining performance and ease of use, this amazing smartphone has a 5.5" screen with large easy-to-see icons, and a triple lens 13mp camera system for great photos.

The unique smartcover protects your phone and also means you can make or answer a call without even opening it.

£249 + £10 per month for unlimited calls and texts and 3gb of data.

SAVE £30 on SRP

First month connection FREE, plus FREE protective screen.

emporiaJOY

A classic big button clamshell phone with a large keypad, large screen and an outside display to see who is calling.

£90 + £7 per month for unlimited calls and texts.

SAVE £42 on SRP

First month connection FREE, plus FREE protective carry pouch.

Contact IQ Mobile to buy your emporia device & claim your free connection and exclusive savings. Visit www.helloiq.co.uk/theoldie or call 01225 588101

IQ mobile

Town Mouse

Start spreading the news: New York is scary

TOM HODGKINSON

The city has got a hideous new logo – and is full of desperate, crazy souls

ALEXI ROSENFELD / GETTY

'Look out for the rats,' said my friends and relatives, when I told them I was going to New York for a week.

According to the *Atlantic* magazine, there are more than two million of my most-feared enemy living in the Big Apple. And they're really mean.

'They've got scars, they're missing eyes, they're missing part of their tails,' said rat expert Dr Jason Munshi-South. 'Their life is fairly brutal. They'll gnaw through walls. They'll gnaw through wires. They'll destroy cars.'

In the end, it wasn't the rats that bothered me. It was the poverty and sheer madness of the inhabitants of this harshest of cities.

I braved going underground several times for trips on the subway. What you see down there is pretty chilling. Every carriage contains a sleeping man, often stinking of urine. I suppose it's warm and dry and the plastic seats do not have armrests between them, meaning that the lost and broken souls of the city can stretch out for a few hours.

You also see desperate people trying to eke out a living in the underground walkways between stations. At Atlantic Avenue, I saw a legless man begging from his wheelchair and a couple selling mango slices from a cardboard box. The streets are filled with mumbling bums pushing supermarket trolleys, often with loud music blaring – and look out for the kamikaze delivery boys on electric bikes.

All day long, you encounter people who look as if they have just taken some very strong and stimulating drug.

I read that fentanyl and crack are the highs of choice. One day at 11am at Winthrop Street Station on the subway, a young man opposite leaned over (having heard my English accent) and engaged me in a conversation about Manchester United. From time to time, he removed his mask to reveal a frantically gurning mouth. He was perfectly friendly but worryingly wired.

On another occasion, I was walking back to my hotel along Union Street, one of the main arteries of Brooklyn. It was around 4pm. I'd just seen a man asleep on a bench, and a line of around 100 people queueing up outside a community centre for free food, so I was already feeling a little sad and edgy.

Then I saw three twentysomething men walking towards me. They were shouting and banging the hoardings outside a building site. One of them ran up to me, fixed me with a piercing look and shouted, 'You a public defender? Public defender? Legal-aid society?'

I have no idea what he was on about but stepped aside and hurried on my way, thinking of how much I was looking forward to getting back to the relatively unscary streets of old London Town. Yes, I know we have our homeless and our crazies too, but they charm you and sell you the *Big Issue*. It's a different level.

I met up with old friends who had moved to New York 20 years ago. They say they now want to come back to Blighty. 'I've never been scared on the subway before,' said one. 'Now I am.' They have been spat out and brutalised by the city that killed John Lennon.

And what is Mayor Eric Adams doing about this? During my stay, he seemed more concerned with promoting New York's hideous new logo. We all know and love the great 'I heart NY' design, yes?

Well, on 20th March, the city presented a replacement for it.

They've changed the 'I' to 'We', added a 'C' and redrawn the heart as the kind of childish animation you might see in the metaverse. 'I wonder how much money they spent on this absurd rebranding,' said Mr Coyote, my New York friend, who writes for the *New Yorker*.

And indeed the *New Yorker* itself reported that New Yorkers hate the new logo. 'Not since the Dodgers left Brooklyn has any intended innovation met so much appalled resistance as the proposed new logo for post-pandemic New York,' reported Adam Gopnik. 'It has reeled in hate mail of a kind that not even Donald Trump would seem to deserve from Stormy Daniels.'

A wag on Twitter suggested that a more accurate slogan would be 'We Smell NYC' or 'We Survive NYC'.

Survival: three years ago a friend of mine who worked on Wall Street said his life was all about survival. This year, he fell down dead of a heart attack.

And such inequality. A new book by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Matthew Desmond is starkly titled *Poverty, by America*. The poor, he says, feed the rich. They pay rent to landlords because they can't get mortgages. They pay the bulk of overdraft fees charged by US banks; the figure in 2019 was $11.7bn. So wealthy people – landlords, lobbyists and middle-class homeowners – do very well from this mess.

At the end of each day, I felt as if I wanted to reach for the crack and fentanyl, just to obliterate the anxiety and the inescapable feeling I was very slowly turning into a rat.

I've got greenhouse envy

GILES WOOD

My wife has claimed I am 'addicted' to gardening. So why have I failed to buy a greenhouse all these years?

It was inexplicable to Mary that someone who spends most waking hours in the garden should have a King Canute-like resistance to the most obviously helpful garden 'tool' of all. So I looked for the source of my prejudice.

Isn't there something deeply unsexy about a greenhouse? Not that I am trying to be sexy. But don't they signal decrepitude, along with taking out your teeth and putting them in a beaker of Steradent?

When you think of men of action – Ernest Hemingway, Herbert von Karajan or the sort of men who run with the bulls of Pamplona – you cannot see them pottering over a bench in the greenhouse, painstakingly removing beetroot seedlings from modules of peat-free compost and replanting them in small pots.

'That can't be the reason,' said Mary.

I thought harder. Now that we live in a blame culture, it is customary to find someone else to blame for our personal defects. It suddenly came to me: it isn't a phobia of greenhouses but a phobia of flowerpots and potting. I can trace this antipathy back to my favourite childhood TV programme – *Watch with Mother*.

The Flower Pot Men was about Bill and Ben, two little string puppets made out of flowerpots, who lived at the bottom of an English garden.

'Who do they remind you of?' I could imagine Mary asking.

The plot changed very little with each episode. Typically, while the 'man who worked in the garden' was away having his dinner, Bill and Ben would emerge from their pots.

After a minor adventure, a slight mishap would occur, for which someone would have to take the blame.

'Which of these two Flower Pot Men? Was it Bill or was it Ben?' the narrator would trill in a quavering soprano.

The culprit would quickly confess, before the gardener's footsteps would be heard coming back up the garden path. In my own head, those would be Mary's footsteps.

The Flower Pot Men would then vanish back into their pots. It was their jerky movements that fascinated and repelled me at the same time.

And, as if these movements were not enough to trigger an unconscious bias against potting sheds and greenhouses, the Flower Pot Men spoke in a highly inflected version of the English language called Oddle Poddle. The fear of turning into a flowerpot man in my old age is all too real.

We now live in a secular period of great uncertainty and we require trusted role models to help us make momentous decisions. So I turned to Bob Flowerdew to see what he says about greenhouses in his *Organic Bible*:

'Greenhouses come in all sizes and to suit most pockets but can take up a lot of time and money if you start to fill them with tender plants in pots. The wooden greenhouse is slightly easier on the eye than metal-framed ones.'

My first heretical act was to get a metal-framed greenhouse, namely an all-British Rhino in Tuscan olive with integral shelves and staging, rainwater-harvesting gutters and automatic windows.

I also bought finials – which do not come as standard, but which elevate the greenhouse from an allotment asset to the first stage of gentrification.

But I am worth it. Why should the plants alone have optimum conditions?

Moreover, the cost of fresh vegetables mean this greenhouse will pay for itself within a decade. The promise of being able to gorge on greenhouse tomatoes and cucumbers should release me from the torment, to paraphrase William Cobbett, of obtaining daily supplies for the table.

After Easter, I found that when I returned from staying with grander friends with glasshouses, my greenhouse looked cute but small. I had made the mistake of opting for the six-foot-by-eight entry-level version. Looking again at the Rhino website, I realised I might have fallen into a Heffalump trap. But I am not alone.

I read, 'Keen gardeners, new to greenhouses, often choose 6' x 8', as this is the 'standard' size, only to find that they quickly run out…'

I didn't have to read any more. I already knew I should have bought the eight-foot-by-ten greenhouse. It takes up only an additional two foot in each direction and gives more room for plants to breathe.

It would even have given space for Mary to join me inside the 'hurricane-proof' edifice for a cuppa, while episodes of climate chaos and unseasonal hailstones raged outside. I could have bought this for just ten per cent more.

The advice of Bob Flowerdew was ringing in my ears: 'Get the biggest greenhouse you can afford.'

SAS Est.1991

specialauctionservices.com

Vintage Film Posters & Memorabilia
Tuesday 23 May

A fine single-owner collection of vintage film posters and memorabilia, recently rediscovered after more than thirty years in storage

Special Auction Services, Nexus Park,
Plenty Close, Newbury RG14 5RL
music@specialauctionservices.com

Things ain't what they used to be

Where are the stuffy reactionaries who used to defend the good old days? asks *Mary Kenny*

Janan Ganesh, a writer on the *Financial Times*, has claimed there is a shortage of reactionary voices in Britain today.

Mr Ganesh could nominate only one true reactionary in British public life: the commentator Peter Hitchens.

TOBY MORISON

There just aren't enough people who would, like Evelyn Waugh, say that Conservatives are hardly worthy of the name, since they 'hadn't turned back the clock one minute', despite holding power for years.

Actually, many of us probably do nurse some secret reactionary views. But it's a tendency that dare not speak its name, for fear of our being accused of 'hate speech'.

The French have a phrase describing the reactionary reflex: '*c'était mieux avant*'. It was better before. Even when it wasn't always better before, the '*c'était mieux avant*' reaction pops into oldie heads. Popular music? Wasn't it better with Frank Sinatra, and Simon and Garfunkel, when you could hear the lyrics?

Theatre: don't you just long for a nice, conventional production of *The Cherry Orchard*, where actors and actresses strive to look and behave like land-owning Russians in the early 1900s, speaking in well-projected RADA voices?

Television drama: must Dickens be reinterpreted with extra storylines about drugs and sexual fetishes? And do we have to have the f word every ten seconds?

Sport: must lectures about race or the wickedness of the British Empire be dragged constantly into the field? Are our consciences to be assailed by climate-change concerns when we're having a harmless flutter on a horse?

Private life: whatever happened to conversations that were once held in privacy? Must we be regaled with detailed public discourse about heavy periods during the menopause, let alone Prince Harry's frostbitten penis?

Religion: why can't the clergy focus on providing beautiful ceremonies and spiritual uplift, instead of fretting about political issues? And why muck around with old prayers? The latest wheeze is to rephrase the 'Hail Mary', re-casting the Blessed Virgin as 'God-bearer', rather than 'Mother of God'. *Madre de Dios!* Hasn't the Ave Maria served us well enough since the 12th century?

My mother-in-law, although not by inclination a reactionary, used to sigh, 'Why can't they leave well enough alone?' Quite so!

Of course, rationally, we know that times change, society alters, technology develops and every new generation has to overthrow old ways. How often did we rail against the 'stuffy Victorians' who seemed to draw up the rules when we were young?

Yet the reactionary impulse deserves its place at the table, too. Its inclusion fulfils one of the most progressive of modern dictums: 'diversity'.

Brexit has certainly created more obstacles in moving people and things between the UK and the EU. I had cause to mention, earlier this year, the difficulties involved in transporting the contents of a flat from Ireland to England, under new Brexit regulations.

The bureaucratic procedure would, as an aunt of mine used to expostulate, 'vex a saint'. Three times, the paperwork was returned as insufficiently detailed for the Customs authorities. On the third attempt, it was deemed unacceptable to declare that packed boxes had 'no commercial value'. (These contained old clothes, some kitchen cutlery, diaries and letters.) I was then advised to put 'one euro' against the value, and this fiction was passed.

The EU/Irish customs charged me €250 (nearly £220) to allow me to transport my commercially worthless personal clutter from Dublin to Deal. One might imagine customs charges applied to trade, rather than valueless, personal stuff – not so.

The problems encountered are partly about revenue – they like to charge. And they're partly about the joy bureaucrats take in exercising their power, focusing on trivialities and keeping you waiting – like coach parties lined up at Dover for days on end.

Next time I'm planning to move stuff, I'll be tempted to consult the Dublin criminal classes for assistance. They seem to move around consignments of cocaine, heroin and firearms quite often without let or hindrance.

Italy has always been known for its bureaucracy, and that's still the practice. Friends who are in the process of selling a property near Rome are met with complex and bewildering legal procedures, written in arcane language.

The excuse given for long delays in sorting out paperwork is a charming shrug with the well-worn phrase '*Siamo in Italia*' – 'We are in Italy,' delivered with a sense of fatalistic acceptance.

Yet there's an advantage in orotund paperwork: the less clarity, the more room for ambiguity, and creative interpretation. This can work to the benefit of those most adept at effecting legally-based transactions.

Paradoxically, something in me is pleased when old traditions of canny verbal dexterity endure, in a world now supposedly run by robots and artificial intelligence. Perhaps that's a reactionary reflex, too.

In search of my lost love, Ramona

Thirty years on, my pin-up still drinks cherry whisky with a shot of Tizer. But everything else about her has changed – for the worse

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...

STEVE WAY

Sobriety is a gift you never knew you needed.

Twelve years ago, in order to elevate my mood and get a giddy, sustained high, I had to leave work at lunch on Friday and pub-'n'-club it till dawn.

Now, to feel a similar sense of instant, ongoing euphoria, I simply have to leave the company of my parents.

We'd had an angry exchange about an accidental situation – admittedly of my making – where half the rooms in the house are British Summer Time, half are Greenwich Mean Time and the microwave is somehow Eastern Mountain Time.

It ended with Mother yelling tartly, as she prompted me out of the back door, 'We might not know if the clocks are forwards or backwards, but I'm damned sure I know which son is backward.'

I found myself unexpectedly walking the afternoon streets of my old seaside town. Feeling faintly nostalgic and at a very loose end, I walked past one of the pubs I used to spend periods between jobs in. For the first time in a long time, I decided to swing open its literal saloon doors.

Given that it was the afternoon, it was quite quiet. A couple of groups of retired men were seated at two tables. I could hear louder voices in the beer garden/smoking area. Three younger men in sportswear on taller stools chatted to the professionally uninterested barmaid. Every time one of them cracked a joke, he would find himself so funny he would kick his stool backwards and stand up for a few seconds to control his own laughter.

Away from the hyenas, I asked the barmaid if Cheryl still worked there – but the name meant nothing to her. I explained I'd been a regular in here in 2007-ish. She seemed unimpressed. She just said she'd put my no-alcohol lager in a normal glass, as she didn't want 'the lads latching on to the fact you're a soft-drinker'.

The toilets were above the bar, up a staircase I used to call Everest because, even pre-beer and pre-hip replacements, it was always a challenge.

Mid-wee, I heard someone else thundering up the stairs. To my horror, in a tiny toilet, I was suddenly joined by one of the hyenas.

As I washed my hands, the hyena said, 'You see that door knob, my friend? That's got more germs on it than anything you've just washed off your hands.'

In this topsy-turvy tipsy-in-the-afternoon world, disease control was clearly for dandies.

I popped my head into the beer garden on the way back to the bar. It contained two women vaping something sour-strawberry-shoelace-ish, while falling out over whether barnacles are edible.

As I left them, one of them yelled after me, 'Oi, Little Legs! Come over here and give me a hug.'

Terrified that I was about to be shanked, I squinted. My face softened as I realised this was lovely-if-loose-living Ramona. I'd met her years ago in the intense world of nineties competitive karaoke.

I allowed myself to be embraced/enveloped by her chunky-knit cardigan. Looking down at my five feet, she smiled broadly. I was dazzled by the gaps in her teeth. North-east Lincolnshire is about to erect road signs, saying, 'You are now entering a dental desert.'

I was going to offer to buy her a drink when she said, 'Buy us a drink, Jemmy Little Legs.'

We both laughed.

I ordered her a cherry whisky with a shot of Tizer.

'You remembered! He's got a good memory – he's like a little professor, aren't you?'

Despite coming from different worlds, we were soon gabbling away about our shared past and my quarter-final-winning rendition of *Never Ever* by All Saints. 'I had tears in my eyes when you sang that,' she cooed, 'pissing myself laughing.'

Soon it was five o'clock. BST or GMT, I no longer like to be out after *Pointless*.

'We should do this again,' she said, as I stood to leave.

'What?' I perked up. 'Like a date?'

'No, not like a date. Like I'm sat here every day, ain't I?'

'Oh, yes, I'll call in,' I promised, a little dejected.

En route home, I rallied, remembering how much Mother disliked Ramona.

I could hear Mother, one day in the future, despairing, 'How did we raise him and he ended up with a lady like Ramona?'

And I would reply, 'Well, this is what happens in homes where the parents love accurate clock times more than they love their children.'

Tired of feeling tired?

Combat fatigue with this game-changing supplement.

Magnesium is an essential mineral for all aspects of health, from muscles to bones, heart health, mood and even just getting a good night's sleep – and it's vital for fighting tiredness and fatigue.

We need magnesium to make adenosine triphosphate (ATP), a molecule that gives our cells the energy they need to function and drives our metabolism. Without enough ATP, you'll feel less energetic.

Amazingly, more than half of us aren't getting our daily recommended magnesium intake from our diets, according to the UK National Diet & Nutrition Survey.

'I do feel it has given me more energy.'

'I get leg cramps at night as well as interrupted sleep and I was reading what I could take to help me.' Explains 69 year-old, retired citizens advice advisor, Jane Shaw, who lives in Kent.

'I read about Magnesium+ Advanced and my neurologist also suggested taking a magnesium supplement so I thought I'd give it a try.

'Magnesium+ Advanced really helped me with my leg cramps, I've been taking it now for around three months.

'I recently went for a long country walk with a friend, three hours each way. There's no way I would have been able to do that before. Though I still do get tired, I do feel it has given me more energy.'

Many magnesium supplements use magnesium oxide formulations simply because they contain a high amount of magnesium.

'However, there's a drawback – the magnesium is not easily released into the body,' explains Dr Miriam Ferrer PhD, Head of Product Development at FutureYou Cambridge, the creators of the supplement. 'Taking more magnesium oxide to try and make up for the problem can lead to an upset stomach and other unpleasant gastrointestinal side effects.'

Magnesium+ Advanced mimics the way magnesium is stored in plants. This formulation contains magnesium with natural glycine amino acids in a soluble organic complex called 'magnesium bisglycinate buffered'.

Studies have shown that it is more than four times easier for our bodies to absorb than standard magnesium oxide.

'It's much more bioavailable because it can be absorbed in the gut via a channel that's exclusive to amino acids,' explains Dr Ferrer. 'This 'VIP entry' means that it can enter the body more quickly and easily. It also makes it very gentle on the stomach.'

HOW TO CLAIM

YOUR FREE TRIAL PACK

To claim your free 28 day Magnesium+ Advanced subscription trial pack worth £14, visit

FutureYouOffers.co.uk

or freephone

0800 808 5740

quoting code

MAF660

Your first box is free (just pay £2 postage) and you will be enrolled into a flexible subscription costing £14 every 28 days, which you can cancel at any time, without obligation.

Developed in Cambridge

Science you can trust

Letterbox Friendly

100% satisfaction, guaranteed

Award-winning Customer Care

Trustpilot EXCELLENT Over 7,500 reviews

FutureYou CAMBRIDGE

***Magnesium contributes to: a reduction of tiredness and fatigue, a normal energy-yielding metabolism, normal functioning of the nervous system, normal muscle function and normal psychological function.** Introductory offer valid for new UK customers only. Offer expires 31st July 2023. See FutureYouHealth.com/MAF660 for full terms and conditions.

Safer bathing from the mobility experts

NOW WITH A **15 YEAR WARRANTY***

Slip-resistant surfaces

Integrated riser grab bar

Stylish folding seat

"My husband and I would like to thank you for the superb makeover. We are delighted with your service"
Mr & Mrs R Pleasants

At Premier Care, our extensive range of stylish **easy-access showers** and **walk-in baths** have been designed to give people with increasing mobility issues the confidence to bathe safely and securely in style and comfort.

Our all-inclusive service means we take care of everything, from design through to expert installation by one of our skilled teams. We even clean up after ourselves. All you need do is enjoy your new bathroom.

- A complete service that will transform your bathroom and your life.
- Peace of mind - helping tens of thousands of people for over 30 years.

Premier Care in Bathing - the UK's No.1 for stylish wet rooms, easy access showers and walk-in baths.

For your **FREE** brochure call us today:

0800 988 4232

Ref PCD461

* Call 0800 988 4232 for more details

BRITISH INSTITUTE OF KBB INSTALLATION PARTNER

COVID-19 AWARE
HAND SANITISER
SOCIAL DISTANCING
PPE

Premier Care™ in Bathing

www.premiercareinbathing.co.uk

Sophia Waugh: School Days

Watch out! There's an Ofsted inspector about

After an Ofsted inspection has deemed a school 'good' or 'outstanding', the school can expect a four-year pause before the next visit.

We were last visited in 2017 – so have been living on borrowed time. Every now and again, we would hear that Ofsted inspectors were, shark-like, circling the area, but each time they flicked their tails and cruised off after other prey.

Then, one day, the Head's assistant put her head round my classroom door and announced an emergency assembly. 'Is it The Call?' I asked. She nodded.

And so it began. The children were given the pep talk (in other words, please stay in lessons and don't start to fight). The staff was told not to worry (in other words, worry). The site staff rushed around making everything beautiful.

And then we were told the subjects on which Ofsted wanted to focus or, in their terminology, carry out a 'deep dive'. Maths, science, geography – and English, my subject.

Even remembering that news makes me feel a lurch of nausea. You feel as though you carry the reputation of the school on your shoulders. We all spent hours tweaking every lesson plan down to the millisecond.

Teachers in the unaffected departments brought us biscuits and wished us luck, but were unable to hide the relief in their eyes.

I was teaching a lesson on *Henry V* and God when I saw our head of department and the inspector stroll across the courtyard in my direction.

I realised I had pitched my lesson far too high for this group. They are compliant, which is something, and I was definitely modelling the school's motto of 'High Standards and High Expectations'. Whether I would be able to show proof of high engagement was another matter.

I heard the door from the courtyard into the English corridor bang shut. I paused in my explanation of *Non Nobis* and *Te Deum* (honestly, what had I been thinking?). I counted steps in my head, waiting for the door to my classroom to open.

And it did not. The inspector chose to turn left rather than right; I was saved.

The most peculiar thing is that when the day comes to a close and you have not been visited, rather than feeling relieved you are almost angry. Ofsted has hung over you for months; for 24 hours, the pitch of expectation is so high that you're dizzy. And then – nothing.

Our own inspection (which ended well) took place against a backdrop of public rage against Ofsted after the suicide of Ruth Perry, 53, a Reading head, after a bad Ofsted rating. At the same time, a local education trust announced it would no longer refer to Ofsted in any of its information or literature.

It is beginning to look as though Ofsted in its present form has had its day. But even if that is so, there will be some other way of judging us and we will still want to prove ourselves.

I cannot resist quoting from *Decline and Fall*, by my grandfather, Evelyn Waugh: ' "We class schools, you see, into four grades: Leading School, First-rate School, Good School, and School. Frankly," said Mr Levy, "School is pretty bad." '

Thank God I do not teach at a School.

Quite Interesting Things about ... words

● The most frequently used noun in English is 'time'.
● The Amondawa people of the Amazon have no word for 'time'.
● Danish has no word for 'please'.
● Sanskrit has no word for 'emotion'.
● Winston Churchill was the first to use 'sniper' in print. The word came from India and meant someone who shot snipe – small, fast birds with an erratic flight path.
● The word 'strike', as in refusal to work, dates from 1768, when angry sailors in Sunderland disabled ships by 'striking' their sails.
● *Onnagata* is Japanese for an actor who specialises in female roles.
● An abbey-lubber is a lazy monk.
● Sussex dialect has more than 30 words for mud.
● Borborygmi is the technical word for stomach rumbles.
● The first written record of the word 'pizza' dates from 997AD.
● Hemipygic means 'having only one buttock': literally 'half-arsed'.
● Deipnophobia is the fear of dinner-party conversations.
● A muntin is the thin strip of wood or metal that divides the glass in a window.
● Charette is an intense flurry of activity to finish something by a deadline.
● Nikhedonia is the pleasurable anticipation of success before any actual work has been done.
● Aprosexia is the inability to concentrate on anything.
● A wonty-tump is Herefordshire dialect for a molehill.
● A babalevante is someone who makes feeble jokes.
● *Zischeln* is a useful German verb meaning 'to whisper angrily'.
● Forflitten means 'overwhelmed by unreasonable and out-of-proportion scolding'.
● Autotelic means 'worth doing for its own sake' (like this column).

JOHN LLOYD

Churchill on fire

222 QI Answers to Your Quite Ingenious Questions *is out now*

For more on QI, visit qi.com and, on Twitter, @qikipedia

God

SISTER TERESA

My great escape – to a London art show

I deliberately chose to live as an enclosed Carmelite nun, with all that this entails of strict enclosure.

I was at least partially aware of the sacrifices that might be involved. I knew that what I needed in my life was totality of commitment.

But, even after 40 years, there remain occasions when I am tempted to jump over the wall. If I am missing from the monastery in May, I shall be found at Emma Tennant's exhibition in London.

I shall be sent a catalogue, which will give me hours of delight, as well as inspiration for quiet prayer. Alas, the catalogue cannot do full justice to the scale of the plants, flowers and leaves – nor to the extraordinary translucency of the watercolours. There is an expression of light, the light in the world and of the world, very specifically expressed via the marvel that is photosynthesis.

It would be wonderful to stand in the middle of the show and look around, seeing them together and at once.

Some artists have the ability to make one look at the familiar with their own inspired vision: Cézanne does it for the landscapes of Provence, and Hockney for swimming pools. Emma Tennant illustrates plants with total emphasis on their delicacy, which we might, left to ourselves, overlook.

She catches perfectly the awe-inspiring fragility of an ordinary primrose. This can and should lead us to think about our own fragility – something that, in old age, becomes a leading preoccupation.

Emma's rhododendron

Throughout scripture, we are reminded of our mortality via the short-lived existence of plants; there are numerous references to this in the Old Testament. Rather more surprisingly, St Peter, not on the whole a poetic character, quotes Isaiah when he writes in his first letter, 'For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof fadeth away.'

A primrose is so easily crushed – and so are we. The pictures of the horrible earthquake in Turkey prove this. What we need at such times is hope: hope that all things will be made new.

This exhibition gives us hope. Next to the lovely pink and white flowers of *Rhododendron maddenii* (pictured), we have its seeds. These seeds are not much to look at: little, brown, woody things, with a hair-thin question mark coming up through the middle – a metaphor for our own lives, perhaps.

But it is these seeds that will provide the miracle of death-conquering new growth.

Plants for Connoisseurs, *Emma Tennant's show, is at 14 Park Place, St James's, London, 17th to 19th May*

Memorial Service

Ronald Blythe, CBE FRSL (1922-2023)

Ronnie Blythe, author of *Akenfield*, Britain's greatest writer about the countryside and an *Oldie* contributor, was also a lay canon at St Edmundsbury Cathedral, Bury St Edmunds. His memorial service was held there.

Novelist Julia Blackburn, a friend of Blythe's, remembered how she was always startled by the way his face changed. 'One minute, I saw a fragile man growing older year by year and in the next, I saw a boy, filled with the laughter and energy of youth.'

Blackburn told how Ronnie was the eldest of six siblings, all of them sleeping together in one room. 'His father, a farm labourer, used to fetch a bundle of straw on cold nights and scatter it over his children to keep them warm like piglets in a barn.'

The poet John Clare was Blythe's literary hero. David Holt read Clare's *The Nightingale's Nest*. The hymns were *My song is love unknown; Jesu, the very thought of thee* and *Hills of the North, rejoice*.

The King's representative in Suffolk, Lady Clare, the Countess of Euston, read Blythe's article, *My Little Owls*: 'Certain happiness. Pear blossom. 6am tea. Matins for a dozen in the chancel. Making my sweet-pea wigwam. Seeing strangers pass. Watching the manes of the horses being caught in the wind. Reading Psalm 96. Loving my little cat. Not going to the party. Sploshing up the farm track. Listening to George Herbert on the radio. Seeing the boundary ditch full of water. A whisky at bedtime... Catching sight of my little owls in the blackthorn, where they have always been.'

The Rt Rev Michael Seeley, Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich, recalled Thomas Hardy's *Afterwards*, the poem in which he imagines people after his death remembering someone as 'a man who used to notice these things'. The bishop said, 'All over Suffolk, there will be those who hear a bird sing, watch a shrub blossoming, see the skies shifting or distant columns of rain drifting cross the horizon, and will say, "Ronnie was a man who used to notice such things."'

JAMES HUGHES-ONSLOW

Highs and lows of exercise regimes

Am I right to be obsessed with walking thousands of steps every day?

DR THEODORE DALRYMPLE

Once upon a time, epidemiology had some kind of connection with epidemics, that is to say with outbreaks of infectious diseases.

Then it discovered that smoking was the cause of lung cancer, and it hasn't looked back since. Now it searches for statistical associations between factor X and disease Y: and, of course, it finds them. That is because, if you study enough factors, you are bound to find associations.

The danger of this kind of research is that, if taken too seriously, it turns the whole of life into a medical procedure: what you eat, what you do, and so forth.

Recently, for example, I have taken to counting the number of steps I take when I go to post a letter or to the butcher to buy some health-destroying meat.

I constantly calculate the percentage of the steps I have taken that are necessary (according to research) to reduce my chances of dying in the next few years by 50 per cent. A trip to the post office is about one-fourteenth of the necessary daily total, but of course I can hardly justify going to the post office 14 times a day.

Research on the number of steps people take per day has become fashionable. In one famous paper, 2,110 middle-aged people were divided into those who took fewer than 7,000 steps per day, those who took between 7,000 and 9,999 steps per day, and those who took more than 10,000. They were followed up for about ten years, and the death rates in all groups were compared – that is to say, deaths from all causes.

Those who took fewer than 7,000 steps a day had the highest death rate by a considerable margin. By the end of the follow-up period, one in 14 of them had died, by comparison with one in 54 of those who took between 7,000 and 9,999 steps, and one in 33.3 of those who took more than 10,000 steps.

As the result of publicity given to this kind of research, the number of people who now count their steps using an electronic device to do so has increased greatly of late. For them, walking (as they earnestly or anxiously look at the device on their wrists) has become a bit like cleaning their teeth; only it is their various, potentially death-dealing viscera that they are giving a clean.

Research of the kind that I have quoted is inevitably somewhat flawed, however. The problem is that those who take fewer steps tend to be less healthy in the first place, with a higher initial risk of death. They tend to be fatter, for example, and the fat are generally less keen on walking than the slender. Are people fat because they don't walk, or do they not walk because they are fat?

At any rate, it is difficult to compare groups of people who differ only by the distance they walk each day.

The raw data I have quoted have therefore to be adjusted for confounding factors such as body-mass index. But the more such statistical adjustments that have to be made, the less certain the result – every adjustment carries within it the possibility of error.

Certainly, one has the impression that researchers into the number of steps that people take want walking to be health-giving: no publicity has been given to the fact that walking more than 10,000 steps seems to be harmful by comparison with walking fewer than 10,000 but more than 7,000.

Curiously, also, the research has caused me, though I am sceptical of its value, to count my steps, at least intermittently. There is a limit, therefore, even to my own rationality.

I suppose that if Charlotte Brontë were writing today, she would begin *Jane Eyre*: 'There was no possibility of walking 7,000 steps that day…'

'I know, Mum. But I think I can change him'

READERS' LETTERS

The Oldie, 23–31 Great Titchfield Street, London, W1W 7PA *letters@theoldie.co.uk*
To sign up for our e-newsletter, go to www.theoldie.co.uk

Hunter captures Coward

SIR: I enjoyed Peter Mullen's piece on Noël Coward (April issue) – but am awfully upset to be dismissed as the anonymous 'reporter' who apologised for asking him so many questions about himself. And he replied, 'Not at all – I'm fascinated by the subject…'

I was the Chief Feature Writer of the *Sunday Times* at the time, don't you know, and still have the visiting card.

I had gone to Switzerland in 1969 to interview Coward for his 70th birthday. The only interview he gave. I later reproduced it in full in a book of interviews called *Hunting People*, published by Mainstream in 1994. Hurry, hurry, it must be in a charity shop near you.

In it he reveals his latest amusement – putting on a surgical gown and being allowed to go into a hospital operating theatre to watch. He had observed a hysterectomy, childbirth and death: 'The ovarian cyst I saw removed was from an actress I knew. I had tea with her later at five o'clock.'

I was sure it was an insight into his true character, but not sure exactly what…
Hunter Davies, Ryde, Isle of Wight

Elvis, king of the mountains

SIR: The remains of a parish church and a monastery dedicated to St Elvis (Richard Willson's letter, May issue) stand near the Preseli Mountains in Pembrokeshire. How appropriate that the King of Rock 'n' Roll should have his name associated with a Saint **Elvis** venerated in the vicinity of the mountains of **Preseli**!
Roger Davies, Witney, Oxfordshire

Lambton to the slaughter

SIR: Why do you lionise Lord Lambton in 'A very British scandal' (May issue)? He was evidently an over-privileged, faithless cad, serving his constituents no better than a number of contemporary Conservative MPs whose scandalous behaviour has exercised our patience recently.

Christopher Sandford cries 'shame' that no one has made 'a really good film' about him.

I speak for legion women who are bored by being expected to be entertained by the antics of such unprincipled men.
Jackie Lloyd, Lyme Regis, Dorset

Philosophy of tomatoes

SIR: Henry Price, whom A N Wilson (Books, April issue) associates with a tomato, gave one of the only two courses of lectures that I attended from start to finish during Greats. Audible, articulate and clear, he gave us a splendid synopsis of the purpose and meaning of philosophy.

As he finished his summary (June 1958), a bold young undergraduette rose to her feet and thanked the professor in a short, warm and well-expressed speech for an excellent year of lectures, finishing by correctly claiming that she spoke for all of us.

The poor old chap blushed, stammered and tottered away, giving the impression that no one had ever said anything like that to him before.
Andrew Gordon Clark, Catcott, Somerset

Bible trigger warning

SIR: I was interested to learn from May's Modern Life that Instagram has an absolute ban on female nipples, because the same is true of Facebook Marketplace. On this platform, I once tried to sell (for charity) a 12-LP set of Laurence Olivier reading excerpts from the Old Testament.


Genesis censored

One of the photos I used in the ad was from the LP sleeve of Genesis (*pictured*), which featured an early painting of Adam and Eve. Facebook software automatically blocked it; this was confirmed when I appealed – after a real person had allegedly checked it out.

I thought about instigating headlines such as 'Facebook Bans Bible!' but concluded that life was too short to fight battles that one cannot win.
Terry Hyde, Yelverton, Devon

Bibbing with Larkin

SIR: In the May issue, Christopher Coleridge asks whether the word *bibbing* is still in use to describe touring English country churches. It should still be familiar to readers of Philip Larkin who, musing about a time 'When churches fall

completely out of use', wonders if 'the very last' person to visit the place will be 'some ruin-bibber, randy for antique'.
Linda Armitage, Cheltenham, Gloucestershire

Imbibing with Coleridge

SIR: Christopher Coleridge (May issue) cannot find the word *bibbing* in a Google search but remembers it from his youth meaning touring country churches. It seems that the word is more likely derived from *imbibing*; might I suggest that his definition provided his elders and betters with a more acceptable answer to what he was doing on a sunny afternoon away from his studies?

Another word that seems to have disappeared is *tonking* or to *tonk*. This was commonly used in my school days in the 1950s meaning to hit a ball (usually a cricket ball) very hard and very far. It is a lovely onomatopoeic word, but it does not appear in the *OED*.
Peter Bowen-Simpkins, Petersfield, Hampshire

Grumpiness cure? Merlot

SIR: I read Julian Neil's article (May issue) on creeping grumpiness with a mixture of pleasure and despair. I noted with grim satisfaction that I was agreeing with every single one of his complaints about the England of today.

Subsequently, my wife read the article and said that she thought I had written it under a nom de plume – until she got to the final sentence. Mr Neil assuages his irritations with a gin and tonic; my panacea is a glass of Merlot.
Jim Lynch, Towcester, Northamptonshire

Jeremy Thorpe's Gents

SIR: Your correspondent Lawrence Cummings (Letters, May issue) wonders whether Jeremy Thorpe, when asking him the way to the lavatories at the Oxford Union in 1971, was asking a question or issuing an invitation.

Some light may perhaps be thrown on this by the fact that Jeremy Thorpe was, 20 years earlier in 1951, elected President of the Oxford Union (on his second attempt).

It seems unlikely that, in four years at Oxford assiduously hacking his way to the Presidency, he did not discover the whereabouts of the gents'.
Yours etc,
Julian Lloyd, Boughton, Chester

*'Guess what. The Loch Ness Monster **was** real'*

Favourite thongs

SIR: Mary Killen's assertion (May issue) that 'They [thongs] acted as "wicks" transmitting undesirable products from back bottom to front' might equally apply to the cotton gusset of conventional knickers or panty liners etc.

Any absorbent item that bridges the female perineum could be regarded as a hazard in the same way as a thong.

As for the charge that the thong is 'the least-comfortable piece of clothing invented', I have worn one on a party night out, cross-dressed as a rock chick, and found no discomfort at all.
Yours in discreet modesty,
Ms Angela Trimble, Portsmouth, Hampshire

My short story

SIR: While not being quite as diminutive as Jem Clarke ('A short guide to tall stories', May issue), I am still shorter than most other men, measuring just five feet six inches, and very occasionally come in for some good-hearted flak in my local.

However, a remark once made by a fellow toper had a certain edge to it. So I told him that where I come from, stature starts from the neck up. Guffaws all round, collapse of stout party and subject changed.

This put-down originally came from David Lloyd George (also five feet six), and I am sure that it would have pleased him to know that it had been appropriately aired again by a fellow shortie like me. Or Jem Clarke, of course.
Jack Critchlow, Torquay, Devon

Return to Oz

SIR: I fear the Old Un is too young!

In his tribute to John Mortimer (May issue), he describes *Oz* as an 'obscure satirical magazine'. It was hardly obscure: its peak circulation was 80,000, and it appeared monthly from 1967 to 1973. It contained little satire – though it had the wit to lampoon a facet of what it was promoting: the hippie lifestyle.

More importantly, it was part of the 1960s counterculture which played a part in transforming the world – by advocating political and social change and an end to the Vietnam War. It was one of an array of underground magazines that emerged at that time, including: *IT* (*International Times*) in the UK; the *East Village Other* and the *Berkeley Barb* in the US; and *Actuel* in France.

Wizardry of *Oz* magazine

Between them, they promoted feminism, fun and the avant-garde, while attacking racism and male chauvinism.

Oz championed the New Journalism created by Tom Wolfe; and its designer, the artist Martin Sharp, took magazine design to astonishing new heights and pushed printing technology to new limits.

Is the Old Un too young to remember these delights – or was he too stoned to notice?
Yours faithfully,
David Reynolds, London SW15
(Trainee sub-editor Oz*, 1967-69)*

Hattie Jacques's bad gravy

SIR: I'm in full agreement with Sharon Griffiths over the state of the nation's gravy (Rant, May issue). I think no one put it better than Tony Hancock in the 1958 episode *Sunday Afternoon at Home* when he told Hattie Jacques, 'I thought my mother was a bad cook, but at least her gravy used to move about.'
Yours,
Tony Peters, East Grinstead, West Sussex

The tarts' vote

SIR: AN Wilson (Oldie Man of Letters, May issue) recounts the phrase 'power without responsibility – the prerogative of the harlot through the ages' being used by Stanley Baldwin, having been given it by Rudyard Kipling.

When he used the phrase on a platform during hustings, Harold Macmillan whispered to the man beside him, 'Now he's lost us the tarts' vote.'
Yours,
Dr Rob Caird, Greywell, Hampshire

I Once Met

Jimmy Savile

'How are you getting home?' asked Jimmy Savile.

It was 1965. I was a 17-year-old reporter on the *Manchester Comet* weekly newspaper. I had just interviewed him at the Top Ten Club in the New Elizabethan Ballroom, Belle Vue, east of the city centre.

I said I would phone my parents. He asked where we lived. He said it was only a few miles from his place and that he would drive me home.

And he did – in his bubble car. At the time, he also owned a Bentley and an E-type Jag, but no one in their right mind would have driven either of them anywhere near Belle Vue. At the time, of course, too, no one knew what went on in Jimmy Savile's mind.

As we drew near to the road which would have taken us in a straight line to my parents' home in Prestwich, he turned left and said he was just popping home to get something.

I wasn't worried, hard though it is for people to understand that now. In those days, there was nothing for girls of my upbringing to worry about.

Drugs were on the periphery; we could go anywhere without fear. If you met someone in a club and they had a car, why wouldn't you allow them to drive you home? That all changed the following year when the Moors Murders

In plain sight: paedophile Jimmy Savile

trial hit the headlines and fear came to town.

We arrived in Great Clowes Street, Salford. Savile lifted the lid-like door of the bubble car and invited me in 'for a minute'. I followed him into a room with red walls and a black ceiling. I was suddenly aware of him looking at me. He was shuffling papers on a side table.

As I met his eyes, he said, 'You'll be OK with me, kid. I don't go for well-brought-up Jewish young ladies like you.' I didn't think anything of this at the time. I was dressed in my interview suit rather than clubbing clothes and he knew that Prestwich was a Jewish area. He took me home, I thanked him for the interview and the lift, he let me out of the car and that was that.

I didn't think about any of this again until I heard a radio interview, after his death, with his great-niece who had been one of his sex victims.

When asked why she didn't tell anyone about her ordeal, she said he'd told her that no one would believe her. It all came flooding back to me, 46 years later. That's when I realised the meaning of what Savile had said to me.

Jimmy Savile had been a professional wrestler. In this capacity, he'd been contacted by a Jewish men's aid committee for a local charity.

They had bought land and in the mid-1960s were raising money to build a settlement for physically and mentally disabled children. Savile participated in several sportsmen's evenings which were big money-spinners at the time.

He became very popular in the community and would have learned something he may not have known until then: that Jewish parents always believe their children – in public, at least.

Judie Krebs

MEMORY LANE

I asked Alistair Cooke for his job

Thirty-five years ago, I was in New York, reporting for BBC radio from their US studios high up in the Rockefeller Centre.

Suddenly, one Wednesday evening, I sprang to my feet as a very familiar face passed by my door. It was Alistair Cooke (1908-2004).

He was coming in, as he had done for years, to record his weekly *Letter from America*, which would then be broadcast by the BBC to millions all over the world. For Americans, he explained the English. His was the voice of Britain. He was the main reason for my becoming a journalist. As a small boy, I had been glued to the wireless, later to be called the radio, to be mesmerised by his soft, sure, seductive voice. He was the man who understood everything, or so it seemed to me.

Everyone else in the New York studios expected him. He arrived on time. He recorded on time, for 15-minutes, with alternative endings: depending on who in the world it was aimed at and what time they'd be listening, he'd say, 'Good morning' or 'Good evening'. The engineer would splice the phrases on to the end of the recording.

Not the retiring type: Cooke

And then he finished by leaving on time. The office stood up, as if watching a monarch, offering the utmost respect. From everyone but me, that is. I barred his passage as he went for the lift. I said he was to blame for my being there, but my aim, of course, was to get his job. Could he give me some advice?

He kindly explained he planned never to retire. So, there were just two possibilities. The first was to push him off a bridge. The second was to return to London and launch a series of talks from there, but called, of course, a *Letter from London*. Which is exactly what I did.

By Kevin d'Arcy, London E3, who receives £50

Readers are invited to send in their own 400-word submissions about the past

JOSEPH TURNER
YORKSHIRE

Linen Shirts

~~£89~~ Now **£49**
Or buy **2** for **£42** each

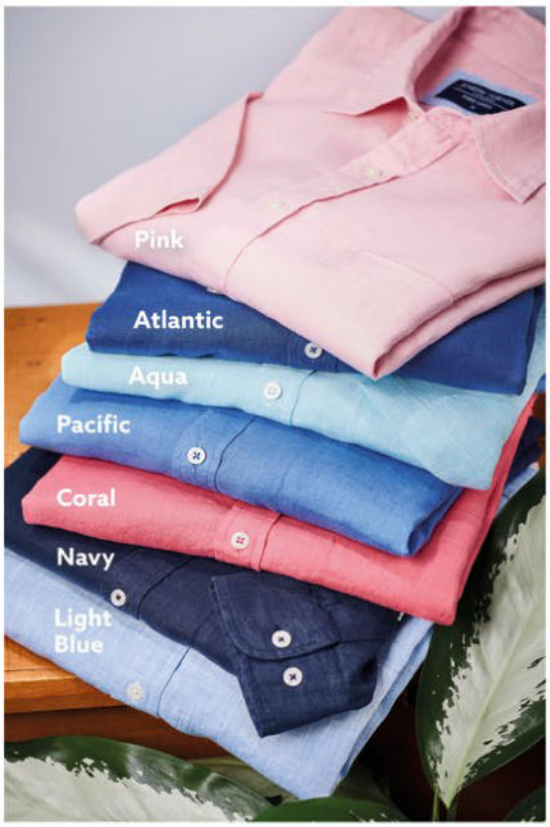
Free UK Delivery & Returns

Use Code **MAOLD27**

Choice of long or short sleeves

- 100% pure linen
- Breast pocket as standard
- Long sleeve shirts have adjustable button cuffs
- Soft casual collar
- Machine washable at 30°C

To fit chest sizes (inches):
S 36-38 **M** 39-41 **L** 42-44
XL 45-48 **XXL** 49-52

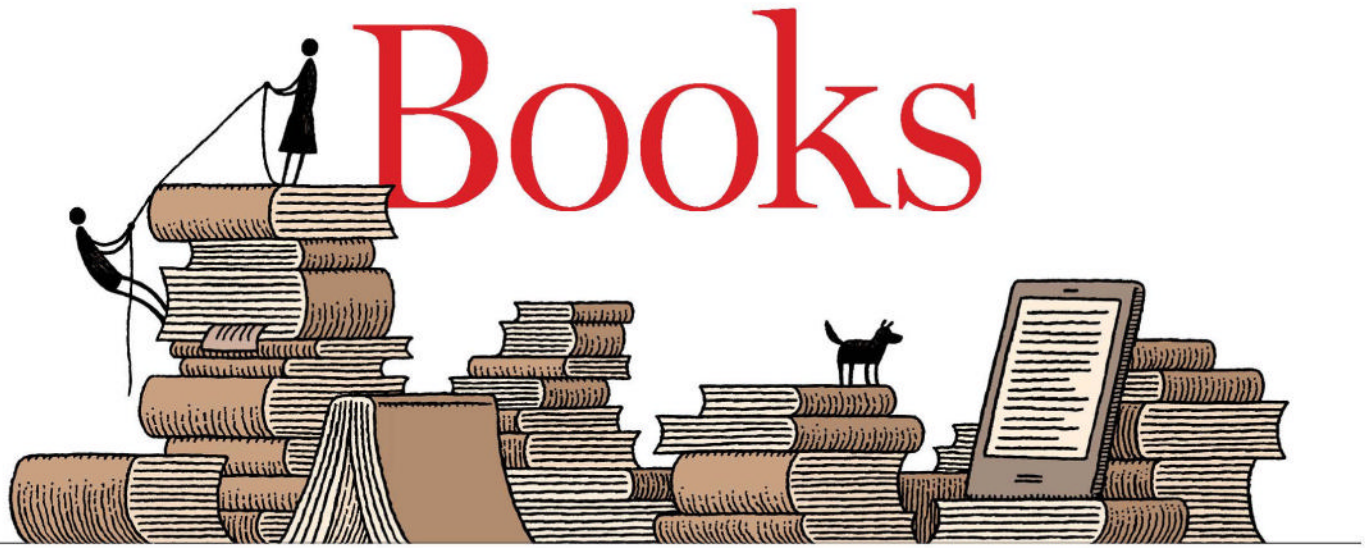


ORDER NOW

Go to **www.josephturner.co.uk/linenshirts** and use code **MAOLD27** at the checkout
or call **01845 575 100** and quote **MAOLD27**

Call centre open Monday to Friday 9am - 6pm and Saturday 10am - 3pm. Closed Sundays and Bank Holidays.
Despatched within 2 working days of receiving your order, subject to stock. Offer ends 14/06/23.

Books



Lamb with extra sauce

MARK BOSTRIDGE

Lady Caroline Lamb: A Free Spirit

By Antonia Fraser

Weidenfeld & Nicolson £25

Two things spring to my mind whenever the subject of Lady Caroline Lamb (1785-1828) crops up.

One is her enchanting portrait by Thomas Phillips from 1814, which adorns the cover of Antonia Fraser's new book. In it, Caroline is dressed in the livery of a boy page, her favoured disguise, used to gain a glimpse of the masculine freedoms denied to her as a society woman of the early-19th century.

The other is the film *Lady Caroline Lamb* (1972), scripted and directed by Robert Bolt. Bolt's wife, Sarah Miles, splendidly camps it up in the title role, but the film's best line is delivered by a stately Margaret Leighton as Caroline's 'mother-in-law from hell', Lady Melbourne. Informed that Caroline has died of a broken heart, Leighton exclaims, 'My God, wouldn't she!' with all the force her Old Vic training can muster.

'My God, wouldn't she!' pretty well sums up the scandalised response to her outrageous behaviour that surrounded Caroline in her lifetime and which has helped form her reputation in the two centuries since her death.

She has been largely defined by her brief but notorious – and adulterous, as she was married to the politician William Lamb – affair with Lord Byron. Intoxicated by the sight of Byron's 'Greek lips' and 'natural curls', and by his status as a superstar following the publication of *Childe Harold*, Lady Caroline soon fell victim to an excess of Byromania.

For Caroline, her love for Byron was the 'supreme love' she'd been searching for. Byron described Caro's heart as like a little volcano pouring lava through his veins. But when he announced that he loved another, the effect on her was severe and lasting. It was Caro who allegedly declared of Byron that he was 'mad, bad and dangerous to know'.

Mad, bad and dangerous to know: Caroline Lamb sees Byron's cortège, 1824

It's all too easy to reduce Caroline's subsequent life to a sequence of melodramatic episodes in keeping with the essential staginess of this very public affair. There was what Byron called 'Ye Dagger Scene', in which Caroline attempted suicide by stabbing herself in the jugular at a London summer party. Then there was Caroline's substitution of the figure of Guy Fawkes at a local bonfire night with an effigy of Byron.

Most terribly, there was the tragic scene (*pictured*) after Byron's death in 1824 – which would be unbelievable in fiction – when Caroline chanced upon Byron's cortège as it passed the Melbourne seat, Brocket Hall in Hertfordshire.

Byron's body, including – I've failed to resist mentioning this – his abnormally-sized sexual organ, was on its way to be interred at the church of Hucknall Torkard, near Nottingham.

GARY WING

Antonia Fraser's major achievement is to invest Caroline Lamb's life with a long-overdue sense of proportion. Caroline was undoubtedly wild. She was deemed 'ungovernable' as a young girl, when she was prescribed laudanum contained in lavender drops to subdue her attention-seeking behaviour.

But she was also 'an intelligent, original, questioning woman', a free spirit who risked bringing the aristocracy into disrepute and therefore had to be punished. The source of the more spurious stories about her, it's clear, emanated from her husband's family, ever eager to force William Lamb to agree to a legal separation from his tempestuous wife, something in which they eventually succeeded.

Fraser writes with charm, empathy and the kind of readability that makes the findings of modern scholarship easier to swallow. And there can be no doubt that her understanding of Caroline owes something to a kind of wisdom derived from her own experience.

Long ago, Fraser sat in the Strangers' Gallery at Westminster as the young wife of an MP, the late Sir Hugh Fraser.

There's a marvellous scene of Caroline, as one of 'the Sex' banned from the Commons, dressing as a boy and peering through a lantern to observe William Lamb giving his first speech. Fraser too has faced the glare of publicity intruding into her relationship with a famous writer, Harold Pinter (though with an infinitely happier outcome). She knows Chatsworth, home to Caroline's Devonshire cousins, where the Phillips portrait still hangs, having worked in the archive there for her bestselling biography of Mary, Queen of Scots.

Significantly, Fraser allows proper emphasis to Caroline's life post-Byron. She continued to be obsessed by him, while trying to rebuild her life as a writer and surrounding herself with a new circle of literary friends.

Glenarvon, the first of Caroline's three novels, may be the ultimate *roman-à-clef*, portraying Byron as a satanic villain, but it should be seen less as an act of revenge, more as testament to her own suffering.

In her prologue, Antonia Fraser states that *Lady Caroline Lamb* is the culmination of a long and fulfilling career of studying history. If that turns out to be so, this engaging biography will represent a wonderful swansong.

Mark Bostridge is author of Florence Nightingale: The Woman and Her Legend

Truly scrumptious

ELISABETH LUARD

The Flavour Thesaurus: More Flavours

By Niki Segnit

Bloomsbury £20

There are cookery writers, recipe-writers and culinary historians. And then there's Niki Segnit. She's the real thing – a genuine, gold-plated *sui generis* (she's earned herself the Latin).

Her first *Flavour Thesaurus* – the new one, *More Flavours*, is plant-led – has already been translated into heaven knows how many languages. Considering our island nation's lingering reputation for terrible cooking, that's quite a compliment.

The idea behind both books is simple, the execution anything but. The cover promises 'pairings, recipes and ideas for cooks'. That doesn't do justice to the breadth of knowledge acquired through book learning, allied to a deep interest in the science behind what happens in the mouth, that goes into each of the miniature ingredient portraits, few longer than 100 words.

There's the occasional mention of meat and fish as an add-on, but cheese, eggs, honey and yoghurt are allowed centre stage. Segnit avoids flat-out vegan on the grounds that 'the (considerable) technicalities of substitution … were detracting from my primary subject, flavour'.

Quite so, considering the oddity of much that's labelled 'vegan': tofu sausages don't seem to make much sense to me. What makes perfect sense is a plant-based what-goes-with-what that frees us omnivores to shift to a (mostly) vegetarian diet because it all tastes so good – or would, if you cooked your way through all 800 entries.

It's not so much a recipe book as an ideas machine. The chapter headings, 19 in all, are joyfully subjective. If it works, why not? Groupings such as Nutty Milky, Animalic, Caramel Roasted and Cruciferous reflect the author's revolutionary mindset.

*'Why should it say "*Chairman and CEO"*?'*

Each group, the author explains in the introduction (essential to an understanding of what she's up to in the text), belongs to a flavour family.

Each, 'in turn, is linked to the one adjacent to it. Together, they add up to a 360-degree spectrum, represented as a flavour wheel.'

By way of explanation, a listing under the chapter title Sweet Woody, links pine nuts, pecan and maple syrup, because of the shared chemistry.

This sets the scene for the coming together of Pecan & Apple (ampersands indicate basic combinations), as found in Huguenot torte. That triggers a riff on apple-pecan-raisin fruitcake consumed as a hangover cure on an island in the Venetian lagoon, following the purchase of a pair of shoes in blue Chinese silk.

This in turn leads to an informal drinking party involving vodka infused with skunk (a powerful strain of *Cannabis sativa* particularly suited to those who grow their own).

The essence and genius of the woman lie in the stories and digressions; the sourdough starter that leavens the loaf. Cumin & Lentils are really a no-no because they taste how vegetarianism used to – brown and lumpy, much like 'Trillian's efforts to cheer up Marvin the Paranoid Android' (in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*).

The author's wise conclusion is that Runner Beans & Turmeric, the diagnostic ingredients of green-bean chutney, work together because, in spite of their wide-apart lands of origin, they taste of an English summer: 'wet grass, warm soil and the bitter, engine-oil exhalations of a hot garden shed'.

There are culinary gems aplenty. Together, Potato & Buckwheat ('morning on the allotment') make the filling for Yavorivsky Pie. This is a stupendous Ukrainian version of India's stuffed parathas, served, as is usual in the lands of the Slavs, with soured cream.

Potato & Chickpea live together in *panelle e cazzilli*, a Sicilian street snack. The first consists of deep-fried cubes of chickpea batter. The second (trigger warning) comprises unusually skinny potato croquettes, known to Sicilians as 'small penises' – watch where you look when ordering.

Revelations abound. What's news to me is that Brown Sauce – HP and Daddies' Sauce – is sweetened with dates.

This leads Segnit into some serious recipe-testing. To prepare your own, blend pitted dates with ripe tomatoes and season with allspice, tamarind paste, maple syrup and sherry vinegar.

Hooked? Me too. Take it slowly. Find a quiet corner (you may have to laugh aloud), open the book at random, pick an entry and roll it around your taste buds. Feel free to agree or disagree. I'm not convinced by Garlic & Quince, but Segnit makes me think I might be wrong.

Which is just as it should be. This book will change the way you and I think about what and how we cook. And not because of the step-by-steps or gorgeous pics (there aren't any), but because it treats us like grown-ups.

Elisabeth Luard is The Oldie*'s cookery correspondent*

Brighton Hell

BRUCE ANDERSON

Killing Thatcher: The IRA, the Manhunt and the Long War on the Crown

By Rory Carroll

Mudlark £25

Counter-factual history can be immensely stimulating.

What might have happened, what almost happened – the questions are endless and the answers can never be conclusive.

Around the end of the First World War, Winston Churchill took an interest in flying aeroplanes. He was eventually dissuaded, but only after some near disasters. But suppose he had persisted in his new hobby and this had ended in a fatal crash?

There would have been no Churchill to lead us in the Second World War – a different outcome, but hardly a more favourable one.

Around the same time as Churchill renounced aeronautics, Michael Collins was assassinated. If he had lived, he would have dominated the infant Irish Free state, almost certainly for the better. Instead, Eamonn de Valera led Ireland backwards and it became a theocratic slum.

But there was a recent, even more dramatic 'what if': an event that nearly occurred, would have had profound consequences for modern Britain and is the subject of this book.

In October 1984, after careful planning, the IRA tried to murder Margaret Thatcher by bombing the Grand Hotel during the Tory Party Conference at Brighton.

This book's title is *Killing Thatcher*, which some readers will find tasteless. But there is nothing tasteful about terror and homicide. Although Mrs Thatcher escaped, five people died and some victims spent agonies trapped in the rubble. The title is legitimate. That is what was planned and what nearly occurred.

Rory Carroll has produced a fascinating and complex narrative, weaving together events, personalities and the historical background. The result is a gripping tale. Though the reader knows what is going to happen, the book is as pacy as a good thriller. It is also unclear where Mr Carroll himself stands. Instead of rushing into moral judgements, he lets us view events from the participants' own eyes.

Tout comprendre may not not exactly be *tout pardonner*, but we come to understand the political culture that produced the IRA, enabled it to recruit bombers and gunmen – and incited some of its supporters to try to kill Margaret Thatcher.

There is also a sympathetic portrayal of the policemen who became involved. From the beginning, they were under immense pressure to catch the criminals. Their bosses, and the politicians, wanted results fast. This involved sifting through rubble and rubbish, searching for any relevant photographs and racking all the police brains with sources for clues. It is an account of forensic prowess of a very high order, which ended with success.

Mrs Thatcher was lucky. A few more feet away in a different room – her career as a warrior queen and political demiurge would have been at an end. So what would have happened to the Thatcherite agenda? Who would have taken over the baton?

Much would have depended on Norman Tebbit's fate. With serious injuries and a crippled wife, it would have been almost impossible for him to become Prime Minister. But if the Tebbits had been as unscathed as the Thatchers, Norman would have been the obvious choice. There would have been a mood of anger and outrage.

The then Mr Tebbit would have been the ideal man to respond to that.

There would have been consequences. In retrospect, it is surprising that the Brighton bomb had so little effect on Anglo-Irish diplomacy. The negotiations that led to the Anglo-Irish Agreement were not disrupted. That would not have happened had Norman Tebbit occupied No 10.

If Mr Tebbit had been unavailable, the late Nigel Lawson might have been an outside candidate, but the obvious successor would have been either Michael Heseltine or Geoffrey Howe, both of them Euro-fanatics.

At that stage, many Tories were unaware of the potential splits that would come to ravage their Party. Either Heseltine or Howe would have picked up the fallen banner, but not the one of Mrs Thatcher's choice. It would have been Ted Heath's legacy on Europe.

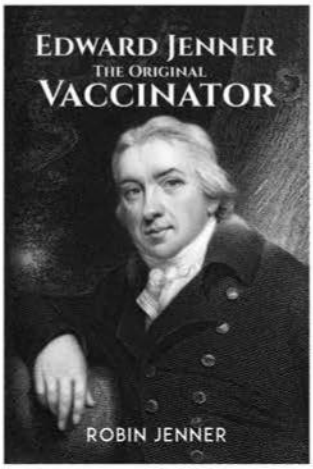
As it was, Mrs Thatcher had six more transformative years. But republican terrorists got her in the end.

In the late summer of 1990, Ian Gow fell victim to a terrorist bomber. If he had still been alive, Margaret Thatcher's campaign for the Tory leadership would have been much better run. She would have gained the four votes she needed to see off Michael Heseltine.

What if, indeed. This is a book that should give pleasure to anyone who enjoys a good read about British politics.

Bruce Anderson is drink correspondent for the Spectator

Edward Jenner
The Original Vaccinator



'This book tells the story of **Edward Jenner**, the 18th century country doctor who devoted his life to find the cure for the dreadful disease of smallpox, the disease that killed millions of people from all over the world over many centuries. The book tells the story of how Jenner persisted in his research despite opposition from many people, including many of his friends in the medical world. Jenner would not be put off however and on 17th May, 1796, he carried out the first ever vaccination on a young boy, James Phipps, and Jenner was delighted that it was a success. That small but incredibly important operation led the World Health Organisation to say in 1980 that the disease was conquered.

The book also tells of Jenner's other interests that are little known. During his long career he worked on other things such as the nesting habits of the cuckoo, the annual hibernation of animals during winter, and his work on angina, to name but a few.

Jenner died on 26th January, 1823 making this year, 2023, the two hundredth anniversary of the great man's passing. It would be a fitting tribute to this great man to see if there was a resurgence in his reputation and a celebration of his achievements.'

Available from all good booksellers inc. Waterstones & Amazon

'If I had to do it all again, I would never have written that unauthorised biography of the King'

Nightmare-sur-mer

JASPER REES

The Seaside: England's Love Affair

By Madeline Bunting

Granta Books £20

The seaside, as Brits popularly conceive it, promises fun and sun, bucket and spade, fish and chips.

It originated as an English idea, the beach as a place of R and R: to go to the edge of the land for a briny renewal in our island fortress's baptismal moat, as it doesn't quite say on the posters. What it does say is 'Skegness is so bracing!'

Other countries caught on, though as recently as the 1980s Blackpool still had more hotel accommodation than the whole of Portugal. But what begins must end, and what goes up must come down, and that is the story of Madeleine Bunting's tour of England's biggest resorts.

As a title, *The Seaside* feels like a typo. The story of national decline, as seen and symbolised in our blighted margins, is really about seacide: death by water.

Bunting begins circumnavigating in Scarborough, haunt of her childhood hols, where the cliffs are crumbling into the sea and levels of indebtedness are among the highest in England. As she heads south to Lincolnshire, the walled coastline is threatened by rising sea levels. By the time she gets to Clacton, she finds some of the worst educational attainment in the country, while areas of Margate are in the top half a per cent of the Index of Multiple Deprivation.

There's such a thing as East Kentitis, which describes a sense of hopelessness and pessimism. Similar stats afflict Hastings.

'I had expected something more from Bognor,' she sighs. Voted joint-worst seaside resort in 2019, modern Bognor has been truly buggered.

On the bell tolls. Education gaps, affordability ratios and overcrowding in multiple-occupancy housing are all researched and reported.

Brighton has the highest percentage of 15-year-olds who smoke. Torbay has the highest proportion of young people with special needs, and also tops the suicide rate. Minehead has England's oldest population, and West Somerset the lowest social mobility. Blackpool has the highest rate of hospital admissions for alcohol-related harm and drug use. These are the facts and figures of what one director of public health labels 'shit-life syndrome'.

So, not a travel book then. Or if it is, it's a miserable one. Here and there, Bunting takes a cold dip in the sea to remind herself that, at least nominally, these places are or were for getting away from it all.

Her travels do involve a merciful proportion of so-called 'coastal gaiety'. From the prelapsarian yesteryear, she cites the seaside trips of many a thrilled novelist and goggle-eyed painter.

It seems amazing that Mrs Simpson sat out the abdication crisis in Felixstowe. Or that Coco Chanel once went to Morecambe, which, only a few decades on, the Mancunian stand-up Colin Crompton dubbed 'a cemetery with lights', where 'they don't bury their dead; they stand them up in bus shelters'.

The rot set in when the package-holiday industry lured everyone abroad, vaporising seasonal income. Successive governments began turning a blind eye to a motorway pile-up of social problems.

The sea doesn't help. 'An uncomfortable neighbour', it relentlessly duffs a place up and, because the piers and hotels were built for a bigger market, they are far too expensive to restore.

Fear of immigration lurks. One regrexiteer in Torquay moans that he can no longer recruit housekeepers to work in his hotel, even at £13 an hour.

Bunting deliberately misses out all the rich happy places: the former fishing villages of Northumberland, Norfolk, Suffolk, Dorset and Cornwall – where she hears of a three-bedroom cottage in Rock sold for £3.2 million.

She does drop in on Padstow, but quietly loathes its commodification. 'Poor old Padstow,' she says, whose town council is the richest in the country, mainly thanks to parking fees. Rick Stein has made the place 'famous for being famous'.

Fame is a buzz word in her no-nonsense prose. Also categorised as famous are St Augustine, Dover's white cliffs and *Dover Beach*, *Fawlty Towers*, John of Gaunt's 'sceptred isle' speech, Blackpool's Illuminations, the Romans (for landing at Ramsgate), Mass Observation and the medieval tradition of pilgrimage.

There is also much talk of the liminal. 'The sense of liminality was visceral,' Bunting says of her teens in Brighton.

Interviewed experts – including one known as 'the Professor of Crap Seaside Towns' – are generously block-quoted by Bunting at some length. But solutions seem to be over the horizon, if not the rainbow.

As a methodical piece of reportage, *The Seaside* is, like Skegness, bracing.

The best its unflinching author can hope for is that it will quickly date. If it does, it will be probably because things can only get worse.

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

Homing instinct

DAVID WHEELER

George: A Magpie Memoir

By Frieda Hughes

Profile Books £16.99

Frieda Hughes has sent me skipping down memory lane.

In the early 1950s, when he was ten or eleven, my older brother 'adopted' an abandoned day-old magpie, and I well remember the domestic mess and bedlam it generated as it grew up.

It was called Lucky (we didn't know its sex) and to get it out of our lives – to give it its freedom – after several months it was driven to woods 20 miles away and released.

Hughes, daughter of the late Ted Hughes and the late Sylvia Plath, adopted her magpie chick in early May 2007. Her book chronicles the time they spent together. Yearning for plants, pets and a home of her own (as well as 'health, happiness and wealth'), she found a house in mid-Wales.

George's appearance meant she could make a garden – 'an expression of my desperate longing to put down roots' – and bestow great love on a helpless creature. It all coincided with a decaying marriage to her Australian husband, an unsuccessful painter referred to only as 'the Ex' – the book's second string.

George fortuitously landed (perching came later) on fertile ground.

Put your trust in Stannah

- ✓ Large range for all types of stairs
- ✓ No quibble 14 day money back guarantee
- ✓ 2 year warranty and 2 free services on all new products
- ✓ 30+ fabric choices, the widest in the industry
- ✓ British family-run company with 150+ years expertise

Call today
0800 414 8727
stannah.com

Stannah
Keep on being you

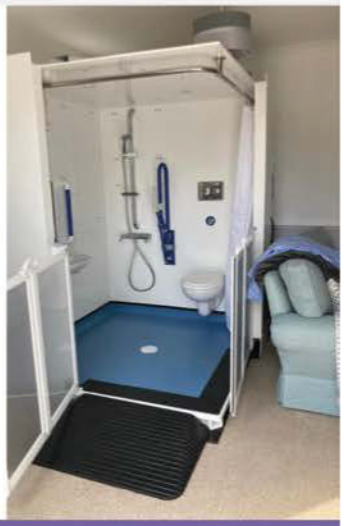
WashPod

JUST HALF A DAY TO KEEP YOU HAPPY AT HOME

Avoid expensive care homes and enjoy a one-stop-shop

The Internal Compact WashPod is a modular accessible wetroom that can be installed in the corner of a room in just half a day without the disruption of major plumbing — Whether you're renting or buying our WashPod, we will manage it all for you.

CLAIM YOUR
DISCOUNT
ON THIS MODEL, WHILE STOCKS LAST, BY QUOTING
"THE OLDIE"



Visit www.dignityaccess.co.uk
Email lg@dignityaccess.co.uk
Call 01342 410242 / 07708 173397

"We are not here to sell you Moth Shield, we are here to remove your moth problem"

MOTH SHIELD

MOTH PROBLEMS?

Not with Moth Shield!

Non-powered vaporiser for on-going 24/7 protection against moth.

The most effective **ODOURLESS** treatment against moth attack with maximum effectiveness from large storage areas to the narrowest corner of your home.

Moth Shield now has an exceptional track record in **guaranteeing the removal, destruction and prevention of moths in your home within 24 hours.**

If you're not sure how best to deal with your moth problem, you are welcome to call us on (020) 8959 5877 for more specific advice (other options are available).

Unique 4 for 2 SPECIAL OLDIE OFFER

4 non-powered 100ml vaporisers (normally £29.16 each) for £58.32 saving £58.32

Minimum of 10 weeks moth protection each time your vaporiser is refilled. Each new vaporiser is supplied with 100 ml of our Moth Shield liquor to start you off, 500 ml refills available thereafter at £62 for 2 (including delivery)

T: 020 8959 5877
E: robertbehar@mothshield.com
W: www.beharprofex.com/moth-removal

Hughes's life hitherto had been largely unsettled, owing to her father's peripatetic lifestyle – 'I never had my few clothes all in one place, or my books' – leaving her and her brother 'like two trailing limbs' as the family moved from one house to another.

George is based on diary entries she made when the 'small, feathered scrap caught my eye' while she was working in the garden. Its beak was full of fly eggs, its body bleeding in several places.

As she is an artist (Hughes contributes a handful of delightful character sketches to the book), there were small watercolour paintbrushes to hand to enable an essential clean-up.

The garden provided the many worms the growing chick demanded. But its diet soon extended to the meat and treats fed to Hughes's three dogs. These animals had become George's 'friends', whose bowls of food, as he became more adventurous, provided him with a handy larder from which to steal tasty titbits.

After George fledged and took to the wing, within a month, he would help himself from Frieda and the Ex's lunch and supper plates.

In command of flight and increasingly independent, George 'was quickly becoming a sort of magpie version of a belligerent teenager with attitude', causing her to wonder if she'd wake up one morning to discover an avian hoodie.

George's upbringing runs alongside the frantic creation of the garden Hughes always desired. With little help, she herself managed the landscaping, eventually handling '125 tons of stone and having mixed 65 tons of concrete' for walls and paving, all the while fighting against ME, diagnosed long before, and chronic back pain, following a terrifying car crash in Australia.

There were days when fatigue and back pain meant she had to roll out of bed in the morning 'on all fours', struggling to stand up, dress and strap herself into a brace.

Hughes could still paint and, indeed, write poetry (like her parents), but her health suffered too from the threat of losing her one paid job, compiling a weekly poetry page for the *Times*. The page was eventually reduced by half before finally being scrapped altogether – a severe blow to the household's sole breadwinner.

As summer progressed, George took to whole days out, at first for short periods, returning frequently through an open window. But his excursions began to last longer (overnight sometimes).

Complaints started to come in from neighbours troubled by his thieving and unwanted attentions – not least his trick of landing painfully on someone's bare head. And George had it in big time for Mary, Hughes's cleaner.

Unless George organised his own freedom, something would have to be done to restrict his roamings. Work began on an aviary, measuring some 21 by 28 feet. Hughes 'would plant a forest of bushes and little trees … I wanted to create an oasis for him'.

Thursday 20th September: 'The [aviary's] post-holders arrived today and would be closely followed by the posts and the mesh. George's days of freedom were numbered.'

Or were they? By the end of the month, George had stayed away for a week. Thereafter… Readers must discover for themselves why, eventually, the aviary was not needed.

Should Frieda Hughes have then stopped typing? I can't help feeling that her book's *final* 40 or so pages would be better placed as the *first* 40 or so pages of a sequel – a book I'd relish.

David Wheeler is The Oldie*'s gardening correspondent*

'Which tax bracket are you interested in avoiding?'

Falklands conflict

EWEN SOUTHBY-TAILYOUR

Too Thin for a Shroud

By Crispin Black

Gibson Square £20

On 8th June 1982, during the Falklands conflict, the Royal Fleet Auxiliary *Sir Galahad* was bombed in Port Pleasant by Argentine aircraft with the loss of 48 personnel, including 32 men from the Welsh Guards.

Crispin Black was on board; only now has he felt the need to put his 'side' of the story.

I have never met Crispin Black but I know and admire a number of Welsh Guards officers and warrant officers who, along with most of their comrades, take a more balanced view than his.

They have expressed their misgivings with this book, especially as the author, who has publicly declared his 'hatred of the Royal Navy in general and the Royal Marines in particular', is hardly the right man to seek the unbiased truth.

Too Thin for a Shroud is the bitter result.

Mr Black covers the tragedy in detail before concluding it was everyone's fault but the Welsh Guards'. Studying what he erroneously claims are newly released papers in the National Archives (I have had a copy of the Board of Inquiry report into the loss of *Sir Galahad* since 1998), the author misinterprets and manipulates well-established facts, getting some significantly wrong.

He then makes the equally remarkable assumption that 'none of the stories over the past 40 years [is] true'.

To reinforce his arguments, he targets all branches of the naval service to the point that it is amazing that the largest amphibious operation conducted by any nation since 1945 was such a resounding success.

The heart of the matter has always been twofold. Why were the Welsh Guards on board *Sir Galahad* and why were they still on board when the bombs struck?

First, the landing craft that were due to transport the men to Bluff Cove from HMS *Fearless* had, unbeknownst to anyone else, been redeployed by a 5 Brigade unit. Hence, only half were landed at their destination, while the remaining half returned to San Carlos to reload into *Sir Galahad*.

Secondly, had the men disembarked at Bluff Cove, as ordered, the regiment and 5 Brigade would not now be having their shortcomings aired in public.

TIME IS RUNNING OUT

The climate crisis means Azumah is struggling to grow enough food for his family. But there is hope.

GREAT GREEN GOAL

THE GREAT GREEN WALL

An epic African-led initiative to grow a wide belt of trees, restore land and provide nutritious food for the millions of people like Azumah living in its path.

PLAY YOUR PART

Donate to Tree Aid's Great Green Goal appeal today and help transform land, communities and lives across Africa's drylands.

TREE AID

SCAN HERE: **OR VISIT: TREEAID.ORG/AZUMAH**

Registered with FUNDRAISING REGULATOR

Tree Aid, Brunswick Court, Brunswick Square, Bristol, BS2 8PE. Registered Charity No. 1135156. Company Registration No. 03779545.

It is a disgrace that none of the surviving officers from the naval service was interviewed for this book. Clearly the numerous, unchallenged accounts were not going to help Black's agenda.

Throughout his arguments, Black has never understood that *Sir Galahad* could not reach the Guards' ultimate destination. The final miles from the Fitzroy anchorage to Bluff Cove always had to be conducted in smaller, shallow-draught craft, in the dark. Yet the author ignores this fundamental point.

In a series of statements about the two company commanders, Black claims that not only was Admiral Fieldhouse a liar but General Moore was deemed by the author (a second lieutenant in 1982) to have been unsuited to command the land forces.

In truth, Moore was the perfect choice precisely because he was a Royal Marine and thus experienced in amphibious warfare with its complicated command structures, coupled with the complexities of an open sea flank. Moore also understood how the Royal Marines and the Royal Navy work together.

Black is an officer with no understanding of amphibious warfare – which the campaign conducted throughout, with the naval service supplying continuous logistic support, transport and firepower, from both the sea and the air.

In spite of Black's protests, the Board of Inquiry, on which he relies heavily, established the circumstances surrounding the loss of *Sir Galahad* and was required to do no more. So why did the army not conduct its own investigation?

I suggest that this is because much of 5 Brigade's failings need to be shielded from public scrutiny for as long as possible. Publication of the chaos and confusion caused by the precipitate and reckless move forward by this army brigade (central to the whole saga) would be most damaging.

As a postscript to his troubling account, Black states, 'Five senior Royal Marines and Royal Navy officers sought to prevent publication.'

He knew at the time that our sole aim was to avoid the reopening of 40-year-old wounds and the inevitable flood of criticisms of his battalion. He also knew that we were supported by his commanding officer and a Field Marshal!

What a pity we all failed.

Ewen Southby-Tailyour was amphibious adviser to the command during the Falklands War in 1982

Phoney Blair

A N WILSON

Orwell: The New Life

By D J Taylor

Constable £30

Why – how – does Orwell matter? It is because of *Animal Farm*.

Like so many decent people, Orwell espoused the aspirations of the Left during the dark years of the European dictatorships. Being honest as well as decent, he saw how inexorably the idealistic dreams of the William Morris socialist era developed into the Gulag.

And he told the story with immense sympathy, pathos and humour, making it into an allegory so clearly written and so limpidly wise that any reader could understand it.

Disillusion was the dominant emotion of his life. First, disillusion with his own class and background. P G Wodehouse, meeting Orwell towards the end of the war, marked him down as 'one of those warped birds who have never recovered from an unhappy childhood and a miserable school life'.

There's a lot of truth here. Eric Blair, the son of colonial types, sent to Eton, was an archetypical product of his class and his times.

But he chose not to be Eric Blair, but to be George Orwell. His various journalistic sorties into socially different worlds resulted in two brilliant books – *Down and Out in Paris and London* and *The Road to Wigan Pier*.

But the shabby clothes and roll-up cigarettes could not conceal his true origins. This gangling class warrior specified in his will that he should have a funeral according to the rites of *The Book of Common Prayer*, and he put his adopted son, Richard, down for Westminster.

Orwell's observant friend Malcom Muggeridge wrote that whatever steps he took by way of camouflage, the betrayal of his origins was a giveaway to those origins.

There was an essentially bicameral personality to a man who fought for the Republic in Spain and wrote some of his best stuff for the ultra-left paper the *Tribune*, yet was described by a percipient friend as 'Bohemian Tory'. This friend was Sir Richard Rees, editor of *Adelphi* magazine, for which Orwell wrote some of his best early reviews.

You get almost no sense of Rees, Muggeridge or any of Orwell's friends from this biography. Their names are trotted out, often in lists of Grub Street habitués. But we are not told what they looked like or sounded like.

Orwell was in many respects a cold fish. Lettice Cooper (aunt-in-law to Jilly) is quoted as saying, 'Although humane, George was completely selfish.'

Where she said it, who knows, since Taylor does not have reference notes.

Nor does he know how to construct a narrative. Eileen, Orwell's first wife, collapses in Selfridges, worn out by carrying their young child, Richard. We are rather abruptly told she had been suffering from vaginal bleeding, and then, on the next page, she dies under the surgeon's knife, while having her uterus removed.

Surely a moment to reflect on how Orwell received this news? (He was in Paris at the time.) Give us a page on the nature of their not always happy marriage?

But no. Instead, there is an excursus on the general subject of Orwell's dislike of homosexuals, followed by ten pages of generalisations, entitled 'Orwell and His World'.

Orwell was a writer who above all valued simplicity of style and conciseness of expression. Taylor's book isn't badly written. It is simply not 'written' at all.

Orwell's view of the Suffolk town of Southwold, 'as expressed in the portrait of Knype Hill in *A Clergyman's Daughter*, is highly unflattering'. Can a view be unflattering? Why not simply say, 'Orwell hated Southwold'?

'The Blitz was in full swing.' Eh?

'Orwell's relationship with Eileen is nearly always filed under the heading of whirlwind romance.' The mixed metaphors and sloppy phrases get in the way of the story, right up to the point where we find Orwell, suffering from tuberculosis and worn out by his job at the BBC, 'chained to his desk for five-and-a-half days a week and … up to his neck in administrative minutiae'. Sounds uncomfortable.

The most disappointing thing about this biography, however, is its utter failure to set *Animal Farm* in its historical context.

The most devastating analysis of totalitarianism ever written is swallowed in an avalanche of Taylor's pettifogging chitchat about 'literary London'.

There is no attempt to explain the appalling world situation in which *Animal Farm* was born. The long-forgotten hacks who first read the book in London are lovingly named in chapter after chapter, but the terrible world the masterpiece describes – the Gulag, the millions dead – might, for this Grub Street drudge of an author, never have been.

A N Wilson is author of Confessions: A Life of Failed Promises

Acorn Stairlifts

Regain the freedom of your home

"I no longer dread having to climb the stairs."

Mr. Rowe, Nottingham

Our customers love us!

Trustpilot

Keeping you safe in the home you love

NEXT DAY INSTALL

It is more important than ever for people to remain mobile and independent in their own homes, and we are here to help.

- NEXT DAY installation available
- Stay in the home you love
- For straight and curved stairs
- FREE Survey and quote
- 365-day local service
- New or reconditioned

CALL ACORN NOW ON FREEPHONE

0800 326 5145

FOR YOUR FREE BROCHURE & QUOTATION

Please help us to continue serving the theatrical profession by making a donation or leaving a gift to the Actors' Benevolent Fund in your will.

In 1882, the great actor manager Sir Henry Irving founded the **Actors' Benevolent Fund** with a promise to help actors and actresses experiencing hardship due to accident, illness or old age.

Sir Henry's legacy lives on today, and the Fund remains committed to his promise by offering confidential advice and support to those most in need. This vital work is made possible through the kindness of our supporters.

For further information, including details of inheritance tax relief, please call us or visit our website.

020 7836 6378

actorsbenevolentfund.co.uk

Registered charity number 206524

"READING IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN ANY OTHER THING."

Jacob*

coram | better chances for children since 1739

Approximately 1 in 4 children leave primary school unable to read at the expected level.[1]

When children have fallen behind in reading by the age of 11, the impact can last for the rest of their lives.

Their wellbeing, confidence and self-esteem are impacted, educational opportunities are severely diminished and job prospects negatively affected.

For almost 300 years, Coram has been creating better chances for children. Founded in 1739, we are the first and longest continuing children's charity.

We have evolved from the eighteenth century Foundling Hospital, to a dynamic group of specialist charities, **supporting over 100,000 children, young people and families every year**.

Coram's specialist reading support charity, Coram Beanstalk works tirelessly with teachers, parents and carers to stop our children falling behind. Our volunteers provide one-to-one reading support in weekly 30-minute sessions with the children most in need.

Taking time to listen and get to know each child to help them engage with education, build self-confidence and find joy in reading.

Over the last 50 years, Coram Beanstalk has been providing children with the opportunities they need to thrive, supporting over 250,000 children to build their reading ability and confidence.

The cost of living crisis is having a devastating impact on children's learning. It has been reported that one in five parents and carers are spending less on books and one in six parents say their children are struggling more in school than a year ago.[2]

Last year, the generosity of people like you helped us to provide children in need with specialised support. You can help children who have fallen behind get back on track to a bright future.

Visit **coram.org.uk** to find out more.

1. Now the whole school is reading: supporting struggling readers in secondary school. Ofsted Report.
2. Parents and carers spending less on books as cost-of-living crisis impacts families across Britain. National Literacy Trust. 27/02/2023

*Images, names and some of the details of the children mentioned have been changed to protect their identities. Funds will be used where the need is greatest. Coram Campus, 41 Brunswick Square, London WC1N 1AZ Phone: 020 7520 0330 fundraising@coram.org.uk www.coram.org.uk The Thomas Coram Foundation for Children (registered charity no. 312101) was established by Royal Charter in 1739.

Registered with FUNDRAISING REGULATOR

Commonplace Corner

A kiss is love. A broken cup is jealousy. A grin is happiness.
Virginia Woolf on the shortcomings of cinema, 1926

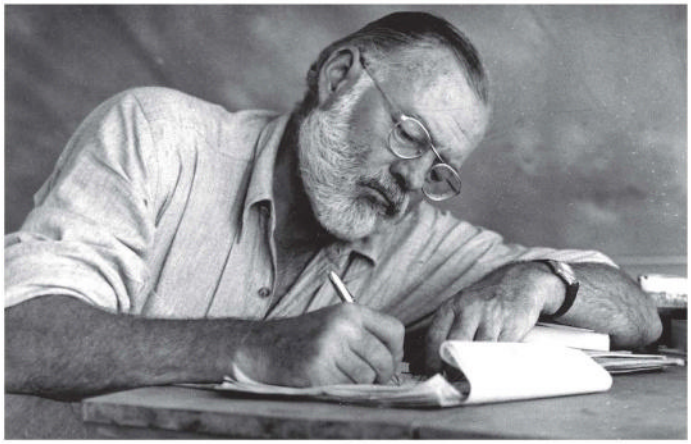
With most musicians, you feel that they are human beings who happen to play music. With her, you had the feeling that here was a musician who happened to be a human being.
Daniel Barenboim on his late wife, Jacqueline du Pré

Everything is first seen by artists, and only afterwards are the rest of us able to notice it.
Artist Patrick Heron (1920-99)

I wouldn't mind seeing China if I could come back the same day... A novelist needs new scenes, new people, new themes. The Graham Greenes, the Somerset Maughams ... travelling is necessary for them. I don't think it is for poets. The poet is really engaged in recreating the familiar; he's not committed to introducing the unfamiliar.
Philip Larkin, interviewed in the Observer *by Miriam Gross*

No one who has read Jean Rhys's first four novels can suppose that she was good at life; but no one who ever met her could know how very bad at it she was.
Diana Athill, Stet

Maxims take only a minute to read but can provide matter upon which thought can ruminate for hours.
Aldous Huxley



Out of Africa: Ernest Hemingway, Kenya, 1953

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want him for long.
Ernest Hemingway

To be a socialist is a small price to pay for a good conscience.
Philosopher Stuart Hampshire (1914-2004)

There will be few who, when they are in want of matter for conversation, do not reveal the more secret affairs of their friends.
Friedrich Nietzsche

Everyone's dying for me (a) to go right-wing; (b) to go soft; and (c) to write non-fiction. The novel is much more of an adventure, and an expression of freedom. You're not free when you're writing about Stalin. Whereas that's the frightening thing about a novel: how do you control the quicksand reality floating out at you? There are no budget restrictions on what you can do.
Martin Amis

It's not that you've got the qualifications for this or any other work. You haven't got the disqualifications, though, and that's much rarer.
Prospective employer to Jim Dixon in Kingsley Amis's Lucky Jim

There is no doubt that a person's charms are less frequently a cause of love than a remark such as 'No. This evening, I shan't be free.'
Marcel Proust

Dandies make the best soldiers.
The Duke of Wellington

TOM PLANT

Driving

Driving is no fun these days.

Cars used to represent freedom and enterprise, but now misery seems to be the motorist's constant companion.

I used to have a car but got rid of it a decade ago. I have only good memories of bombing around town in the nineties and noughties. But a recent family illness necessitated a near-daily commute to south London in my mother's old banger, and it was a rude awakening. I was stunned by the crap driving all around me.

Hatchbacks dawdlied along at 22mph in (increasingly rare) 30mph zones. Unable to resist after the third or fourth time it happened, I flashed one bloke (it's always a bloke) who promptly stopped dead, kettling me in, three inches behind him.

The 'post-lockdown' malaise and increase in antisocial behaviour don't help. Factor in the prevalence of mobile phones and those ridiculous new laptop-sized satnavs and it's not surprising most modern drivers are half-asleep.

Then there are the endless mini jams populated by ugly, faceless marques that look more like security vehicles than like motor cars. And the distractions; most London roads now have more street furniture than Portobello Market. City administrators of all stripes appear to hate cars but can't seem to come up with decent alternatives.

And don't get me started on motorway driving: a succession of idiots clogging up the middle lane, lost in reveries, while lane one is empty and lane three crawls along with irate, impotent motorists.

The guilt doesn't help. Was my journey really 'necessary'? Well, yes, if I wanted to care for my mother before she pops her clogs. And it can only get even worse for drivers, with Low Traffic Neighbourhoods on the increase and the arrival of the dreaded '15-Minute Cities', where no one's allowed to drive anywhere.
MATTHEW PHILLIPS

SMALL DELIGHTS

Telephoning for a doctor's appointment and being told you're next in the queue.
ALAN RICHARDS, LLANFAIRFECHAN, CONWY

Email life's small delights to editorial@theoldie.co.uk

Book of Uncommon Prayer

Rev Michael Coren loves the old prayer book – and so do his young parishioners

I recently led a morning Eucharistic service in Burlington, Ontario, using the *Book of Common Prayer* (*BCP*).

At the end of it, a student from the local university approached me and said, 'Hey, Rev, cool language. Never heard that before in church. I may even come again.' I was about to explain the origins of the text and its evolution when, entirely wisely, the young man stuck his earbuds in, turned on his music and waved goodbye.

'I'll be back,' he shouted as he left. I doubt he was listening to William Byrd or Thomas Tallis, but he has indeed been back.

It often happens. Contrary to what we've been told for decades about new generations wanting the contemporary and the modern, my experience – as a father and as a priest – is that kids are too savvy and cynical for that.

They can distinguish between language directly influenced by Shakespeare and language directly influenced by a committee based on diversity, sensitivity and inclusion.

It's the same in the Roman Catholic Church – arguably even more so. The Latin Mass, or even the Mass in the vernacular in an older form, is popular not only among older people longing for the past, but among younger people longing for the permanent.

I admire Pope Francis, but his attacks on – even persecution of – the Latin Mass are unwise, downright cruel and extraordinarily counterproductive. The Vatican has just imposed new restrictions on the Traditional Latin Mass.

There's tangible growth in Latin Mass parishes, often among young people. They react to beauty and to the profound. It's true that some of them are vehemently conservative, but by no means all.

I'm a liberal Anglo-Catholic, supportive of equal marriage, women's ordination and fairly radical politics, but that's because of, and not in spite of, my attitude to worship.

Our usual services, often known as 'Alternative', are fine, and the various churches in the Anglican communion have done a surprisingly good job in elegant translation.

But that's not always the case. There are churches where the liturgy is partly written by groups of eager parishioners, and it's almost always the same enthusiasts.

Cranmer (1489-1556)

They mean well, but the results sometimes resemble rejected scripts from *Star Trek* episodes rather than timeless worship of the divine. Lots of references to wonder, awesome and mystery.

But the *BCP* is different. Oh, how wonderfully different it is: 'Land of the living', 'A tower of strength', 'At death's door', 'Peace in our time', 'At their wits' end', 'Babes and sucklings', 'Softer than butter', 'From ashes to ashes, dust to dust', 'To have and to hold', 'In sickness and in health', 'Till death us do part'…

The book we use now dates from 1662, but that's a little misleading. Its origins are earlier, and there have been edits since. The first prayer book was published in 1549, shortly after Henry VIII's death.

It is wrongly assumed that he founded the Church of England, but in many ways, he held it back. His break was purely with Rome, and that attitude wasn't uncommon among otherwise traditional Catholics in 16th-century Europe.

When he was succeeded by his genuinely Protestant son Edward VI, authentic reforms could take place. The original *BCP* was the first prayer book to contain all the weekday and Sunday services in English, and it was controversial and divisive.

Another, more Protestant version was published in 1552. When Edward VI died the following year and his Catholic half-sister Mary came to the throne, it was the temporary end of the book and permanent end of the man most responsible for it. In 1556, Thomas Cranmer, by then 66 and unwell, was imprisoned, humiliated, and then burnt to death.

He had been an important player in Henry VIII's divorce from Mary's mother, Catherine of Aragon – so this was personal. He was also the mind, soul and skill behind much of the *BCP*. His literary style was indicative of what would form the genius of Elizabeth and Jacobean prose, drama, and poetry.

Elizabeth I reintroduced the book in 1559, including some edits to satisfy the conservatives. The Anglican church may seem relatively Catholic today, but Cranmer was an authentic Protestant, heavily influenced by the Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli.

When the Parliamentarians won the Civil War, they abolished the *BCP*. We sometimes forget how persecuted the Church of England was under the Puritans. So, when Charles II was restored to the throne, the book returned, and its 1662 version is largely what we have today – in 50 countries and 150 languages. It's arguably more responsible than Shakespeare or the King James Bible of 1611 in spreading and shaping the English language.

Last month, I was at the bedside of a woman in her final moments. She asked me to read from the *BCP*: 'Hear what comfortable words our Saviour Christ saith unto all that truly turn to him.'

'Oh, the comfy words,' she said. 'I so love the comfy words.' And she died.

The comfort of Christ, the comfort of great liturgy, and the comfort of comfy words.

Rev Michael Coren is a priest in the Anglican Church of Canada

PICTORIAL PRESS / ALAMY

Arts

FILM

HARRY MOUNT

LOVING HIGHSMITH (12A)

How can you ever make a compelling documentary about a writer, even one as brilliant as Patricia Highsmith?

Writers are famous for, um, writing – which doesn't make for gripping viewing, as the footage of Highsmith typing demonstrates.

Still, you can get close to filming a writer's thoughts if, like Highsmith, they keep diaries and do enough interviews.

And so this turns out to be a good documentary about a writer, splicing Highsmith's thoughts from her diaries with interviews, passages from her novels and clips from films of her books. Her dark, strongly plotted books were so well suited to filming that it's a pleasure to watch the clips from *The Talented Mr Ripley* and *Strangers on a Train*.

It helps, too, that this film is largely about her female lovers, several of whom are alive, or were until recently – so they can give first-person accounts.

Highsmith (1921-95) had male lovers, too, but so long ago that they're all dead. And she didn't care much for sex with men. As she said in her chilling, original way, 'Kissing men is like falling into a bucket of oysters... Sexual intercourse is like steel wool in the face.'

The most perceptive lover is Marijane Meaker, an American writer. Highsmith, she says, 'didn't assume she was entitled to anything', despite being very famous once *Strangers on a Train* was released in 1951, when she was only 30.

In the interviews, Highsmith comes across as understated, modest and with little ego. Unlike most writers, she hated interviews: she said they made her 'feel like a patient with some kind of disease. The doctor takes off all your clothes.'

Meaker says Highsmith was 'easy to love' and better looking than you'd expect. We're used to seeing her in later life, when age and drink gave her a haggard, hangdog look. The young Highsmith is a pretty, gamine mole; and, like the old Highsmith, elegantly dressed.

Some critics have attacked this documentary for avoiding Highsmith's horrific views on Jews, Arabs and Blacks, scattered through her later diaries.

They are mentioned briefly in the film and I think it's fair that they aren't the focus. This movie is about her lovers, life and books. You could easily do another one on her horrible side. And, anyway, horrible people can be gifted, too, in the way nice people often aren't.

The documentary explains her self-confessed taste for 'creepy' stories, thanks to a dreadful upbringing. Her mother said she took turpentine to abort her. She then divorced her father, Jay Plangman, nine days before her birth, before marrying Stanley Highsmith.

Aged six, Patricia moved to New York with her mother, who Meaker says was a 'bitch'. Patricia Highsmith tried in vain to win her mother's affections. Late in life, relations got so bad that she hired a lawyer to break legal ties with her mother, leading to her disinheritance.

CORBIS

The Talented Miss Highsmith, 1970

This wreck of a childhood explains the strong seam of melancholy running through her interviews.

It also explains her endless wandering: to France, Britain and her last home, Switzerland, often in pursuit of a doomed love affair. After the collapse of an intense relationship with a married woman in England, she resolved to live alone for ever.

A French lover, Monique Buffet, says there was something very touching about Highsmith. And there is an aching loneliness, combined with a gentle voice and nervousness, that make you warm to her – as well as the wonderful books.

The novels came from an exceptional imagination. Highsmith dreamt up wicked Tom Ripley from a single sighting of a lone, deranged figure on the beach at Positano. After that, 'The sentences go down on the paper like nails.'

Carol (1952), the lesbian novel she published under a pseudonym to hide her sexuality from her mother, came from another single sighting of a woman in a New York shop where Highsmith was working. She immediately wrote the plot in her notebook: 'Oh God, how this story emerges from my own bones. It flowed from my pen as if from nowhere.'

Highsmith is the best critic of her own books. They aren't about murders, really, but address 'The absence or presence of guilt ... the overwhelming desire to confess or put your foot in a trap.'

This is a film for Highsmith fans, who will appreciate her brutal views of her character: 'My life is a chronicle of unbelievable mistakes – things I should have done and vice versa'; 'Resentment was my second emotion, one I knew well before I knew its name.'

Highsmith was so clever that even just hearing her words repeated makes this documentary more intelligent than most other films.

THEATRE

WILLIAM COOK

HAMNET

Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, until 17th June

Apart from a few facts and figures, we know relatively little about William Shakespeare.

This is a headache for historians, but a godsend for creative writers, who can indulge their wildest fantasies. Maggie O'Farrell and Lolita Chakrabarti are the latest in a long line of scribes who've turned to fiction to pad out a biography of the Bard.

In 2020, O'Farrell wrote a powerful novel called *Hamnet*, named after Shakespeare's only son, who died when he was 11. Her book was an acclaimed bestseller, and now Chakrabarti has turned it into an intriguing, thought-provoking play.

Most writers tend to focus on Shakespeare's theatrical life in London. In contrast, O'Farrell chose to write about the family he left behind in Stratford-upon-Avon: his wife, Anne Hathaway, and their three children, Susanna, Judith and Hamnet.

This makes for a less spectacular story, but one that's ultimately far more interesting. Rather than a rumbustious backstage romp, O'Farrell wrote an intense domestic drama, and Chakrabarti has adapted it, pretty faithfully, for the Royal Shakespeare Company.

Seeing it performed in Stratford, where it's set, adds a potent authenticity to this new play.

Actually, that authenticity is almost entirely illusory. As O'Farrell says, her novel is merely 'idle speculation', based on the most meagre information. The tale she builds upon this flimsy platform is remarkably persuasive, but it's important to remember that almost all of it is pure supposition.

We know Shakespeare's father, John, was a respectable glover who fell on hard times, cut a few corners and fell out of favour. O'Farrell makes him an angry, violent drunk (a suitably malevolent portrayal by Peter Wight) but, for all we know, he might just as well have been an amiable teetotaller.

Likewise, we know Hamnet died when he was 11, but we have no idea what he died of. O'Farrell imagines him dying of the Black Death, but he might have perished in any number of other ways.

The fiction at the heart of this play is the relationship between William and his wife Anne – or Agnes, as her father called her (and as O'Farrell calls her too). When

GARY SMITH

Sea of troubles: Shakespeare (Tom Varey) and his wife, Anne (Madeleine Mantock)

William and Agnes married, William was only 18, still a minor in those days, while Agnes was 26, and already pregnant. This has led lots of (mainly male) writers to assume that Shakespeare was a guileless ingénu, lured into a stifling, loveless marriage by a wily older woman.

O'Farrell takes a different view. Her novel – like Chakrabarti's play – is told from Agnes's perspective, and that's what makes it so original. She's a woman of intelligence and integrity – constrained by her lack of education and opportunity, but otherwise her husband's equal.

William, on the other hand, is passionate and flighty. Like a lot of creative folk, he's terribly self-absorbed. Before he becomes a playwright, he's listless and frustrated. After he becomes a playwright, his focus is elsewhere. His love for Agnes is sincere, but it's strained by his prolonged absences, and ultimately shattered by their son's untimely death.

Agnes never recovers from Hamnet's death – William eventually gets over it. Agnes remains stuck in Stratford – William returns to London. Agnes retreats into mourning – William's career takes off. In fact, we have no idea whether Agnes and William got along really well or really badly. But for a novelist, the absence of hard evidence is an asset, not a handicap. With nothing to tie it down, O'Farrell's imagination runs free.

The climax of the drama comes when Agnes travels to London to see her husband's latest play, *Hamlet* (the names Hamnet and Hamlet were interchangeable in Shakespeare's day, like Jack and John today). At first, she's aghast that he's purloined her private grief for public entertainment. But then Shakespeare works his magic, and Hamnet, recast as Hamlet, takes on a new life of his own.

Chakrabarti's script, like O'Farrell's novel, engages the emotions and the intellect. Like all good dramas, it keeps you thinking long after the curtain comes down. Madeleine Mantock breaks your heart as Agnes, Tom Varey is an endearing, infuriating William, and the supporting cast is full of fine performances.

If you can't get to Stratford, you can catch it at the Garrick Theatre in London from September. Go see.

RADIO

VALERIE GROVE

This AI thing. Artificial intelligence. Scary!

Already China has an AI news presenter, dead-eyed. Radio 4 gave us *A Documentary: By ChatGPT*, proving that an AI artist – named Aida after Ada Lovelace, Byron's mathematician daughter – could talk the talk (in a squeaky voice) and paint the portrait. David Aaronovitch's *The Briefing Room* warned us just how terrified we should be. Online, you'd be told David is 'from Golders Green'. Not so. Who trusts online information? What's genuine; what's fake?

No doubt there will soon be Audia, a chirpy AI radio reviewer. But will she know the catchphrases from *ITMA*? Or recall who sang *My Old Man's a Dustman* to the tune of *Je Ne Regrette Rien*, on *Clue*? Possibly, via Google.

But will she get the jokes? I don't have Alexa, but I am told she goes into a sulk if asked something she can't do. These AI babes lack hinterland.

I suspect most fellow oldies like hinterland. Authoritative information, delivered in non-grating voices. No 'wow's or 'incredibly's or 'so I'm like's. Melvyn Bragg's *In Our Time* – with, for example, Hermione Lee on Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* – is sober and ego-free. Compare it with Greg Jenner's *You're Dead to Me*, where young comedians learn about the life of, for instance, Mary Wollstonecraft, interjecting 'Omigod!' and 'Aw! Her baby died!' – to appeal to the young, I suppose.

Even tolerant James Marriott, aged 30, writes in the *Times*, 'We are living through a dismal era of pointless celebrity podcasts… What is the point of this smug wittering? Not everybody should have a podcast.' Marriott lately discovered 'the stupidest podcast ever' by Jameela Jamil, about online dating. All Jameela's guests were long coupled – so they were hardly illuminating. 'How about a podcast about life in the Gobi Desert,' wrote Marriott, 'presented by penguins? I mean honestly.'

The Rev Richard Coles was showered with fond farewells from *Saturday Live*. He now hosts a salmagundi podcast, *The Rabbit Hole Detectives*, about 'stuff'. It features Charles Spencer, the earl, and Cat Jarman, Viking archaeologist – all 'unashamedly posh' (not quite: the earl has a slightly camp delivery, and Cat upward-inflects: 'He had like arthritis? And they kind of gave him like acupuncture?'). They all bring along random factoids about anything: 'fertiliser to baptismal fonts', umbrellas and Evelyn Waugh, cabbages and kings. Quite Interesting, John Lloyd would say. Quite likeable, too.

In *Movers and Shakers*, the admirably upbeat pod for people with Parkinson's disease (PD), a gang including Mark Mardell and Rory Cellan-Jones meet in the Ladbroke Arms in west London to chat breezily about their affliction. One is a judge, who recalls a fellow judge whose golf swing remained a winner in spite of his PD.

Paxo is the resident gloomster who, unleashed from BBC constraints, can retort, 'Most judges know f*** all,' but still remains the voice we wish would carry on doing *University Challenge*. Recently they recalled the day they got their diagnoses. It seems most neurologists deliver the verdict with an offhand 'Yup, it's Parkinson's. Bad luck!'

What, I wonder, will King Charles make of a new political pod produced by Reduced Listening, with Nish Kumar and Coco Khan, amusingly called *Pod Save the UK*? It is launched on Coronation day.

Or does he linger in Wirelessland – relying on voices like Jeremy Bowen's, reporting, as I write, from Jerusalem with clarity and compassion — and on *Archive on 4*, where Michael Symmons Roberts took a nostalgia trek through 100 years of radio drama. He concluded with Richard Burton's peerless voice in *Under Milk Wood*, written in 1953, launching the Elizabethan age.

TELEVISION

FRANCES WILSON

Rupert Murdoch apparently missed all four seasons of *Succession* (HBO), which reveals a marked absence of paternal pride.

Not only was the best television drama in living memory based on his very own family feuds but it has been revealed that one, or maybe all, of his children – Elizabeth, James and Lachlan – fed plot lines to the show runners.

Which of the many golden moments might the Murdoch children have provided? The one where Tom (Matthew Macfadyen) offers to do jail time to curry favour with his father-in-law, Logan Roy (Brian Cox)? The one where Logan blackmails his son, Kendall (Jeremy Strong), who has accidentally killed a man? Or the one where Roman (Kieran Culkin) sends his father a dick pic meant for Gerri (J Smith Cameron)?

According to *Vanity Fair*, Lachlan Murdoch told his dad that it was James who had been the snitch. In terms of the Murdoch succession battles, Lachlan is currently in and James is out. 'Rupert pitted his kids against each other their entire lives,' a family friend is quoted as saying. 'It's sad.'

But no sooner had Jerry Hall, Murdoch's fourth wife, received her husband's surprise email informing her that 'I've had to call an end to our marriage' than she was warned by a lawyer not to contact *Succession* with any ideas of her own.

What makes this news all the more entertaining is that it is precisely the sort of chicanery Shiv, Kendall and Roman Roy, as well as Marcia, Logan's discarded third wife (Hiam Abbass), would get up to.

This last season of *Succession* was aired at the same time as 92-year-old Rupert Murdoch ended his two-week long engagement to former dental assistant, street preacher and QAnon fan Ann Lesley Smith.

Sadly, it's too late for Smith to sell any storylines to *Succession*'s scriptwriters, but sources say she was offering to inspect Murdoch's teeth while he was still with Jerry Hall. Jerry celebrated Lent by tying dental floss around the neck of an effigy of Murdoch, which she then roasted on the grill.

In order not to give anything away to those who have not caught up with *Succession*'s finale, I will focus my admiration for the series on season four, episode three. That's when Connor, the eldest and least-loved son (Alan Ruck), gets married to Willa (Justine Lupe), whom he formally paid to be his girlfriend, on a yacht cruising down the Hudson River. No sooner have the engines started revving than Kendall gets a call from Tom, who is on Logan's private jet, to say the old man is 'very, very sick'.

Logan, having had a heart attack in the bathroom, is probably already dead but Kendall, Shiv and Roman each say their goodbyes by telephone to the monster who raised them, warped them and pitched them against one another.

In the next 30 minutes, we get all five stages of mourning: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.

'No, I can't have that,' says Shiv, in denial at hearing that her father has died.

Meanwhile, Kerry, Logan's nylon-haired assistant-cum-mistress, looks, as Tom puts it, as if she's just 'caught a foul ball at Yankee Stadium'.

Family affair: Kendall (Jeremy Strong), Marcia (Hiam Abbass) and Logan Roy (Brian Cox)

Ed McLachlan

'Here he is, guys – our latest superhero. You'll either love him or hate him'

'I can't forgive you,' Roman tells Logan in a healthy expression of anger. Next comes the bargaining: 'Don't go, Daddy,' says Shiv, playing on the fact that she was once his little princess. Tom, meanwhile, having lost his 'protector', sinks into a momentary depression which paves the way for acceptance.

'There he is,' says Roman. 'That is Dad.' He is pointing to the line graph on his phone that shows how the company's stock has plummeted in the last ten minutes.

'We'll get a funeral off the rack', says Kendall. 'We can do Reagan's with tweaks.'

Meanwhile, Connor and Willa marry in a room full of empty chairs. Would that my mourning for the loss of *Succession* were as streamlined as this.

MUSIC

RICHARD OSBORNE

MUSIC FIT FOR A KING

With a coronation on, I found myself taking down from the shelves Paul McCreesh's fascinating two-disc anthology *An English Coronation: 1902-1953*.

Cast in the form of the ceremony itself, it marries the coronation liturgy with some of the best music from the 20th century's four coronations.

It's all very splendid. Music by Tallis, Gibbon and Byrd sits happily alongside bespoke coronation pieces by Purcell and Handel – *Zadok the Priest* sung at every coronation since 1727 – Elgar, Vaughan Williams and Walton.

Walton wrote two popular coronation marches, and in 1953 he was also asked to set the *Te Deum*. 'Having a spot of bother with "the Virgin's womb",' he wrote to a friend, 'the kind of trouble I always get into – don't tell the Archbishop!'

In fact, it's one of the best bits.

What's so impressive about this ancient ceremony, the head of the Royal Academy of Music, Jonathan Freeman-Attwood, suggested in a review of the McCreesh, 'is the way extremes of unalloyed opulence sit so movingly alongside intimate supplication, notably in the lonely solemnity of a monarch facing God'.

One thinks of Elgar's two contrasted contributions to the 1911 service, his magnificent *Coronation March* – dark-hued, angry even, transcending ceremony – and one of his tenderest pieces, the Communion anthem, *O hearken thou*.

Or the unalloyed splendour of Vaughan Williams's arrangement of *The Old Hundredth* – complete with fanfares 'for all available trumpets' – set beside the sublimities of the two movements from his Mass in G minor that were adapted for the 1953 coronation.

By 1953, London was widely regarded as the musical capital of the world, owing in no small part to the prodigious amount of cultural capital that had fetched up in these islands during the Hitler years. But capital needs wise investors, which is where our orchestras, opera houses, teaching academies, music publishers, arts administrators, recording industry and, most influential of all perhaps, the BBC, have served us so well.

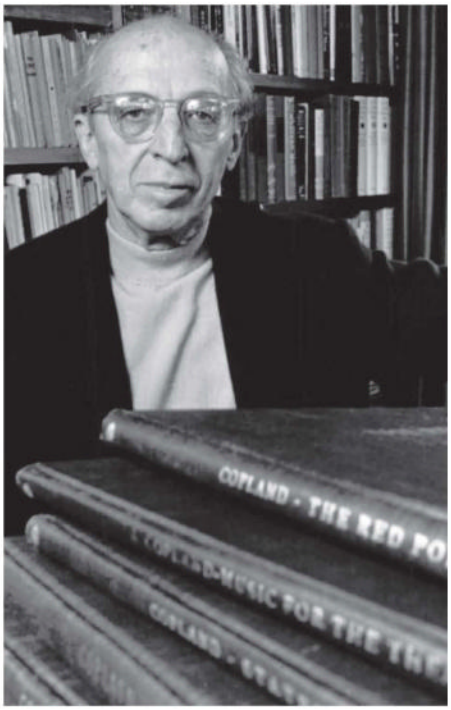
Things change during a 70-year reign. In recent times, Conservative governments have kept the BBC on iron rations, while it, like many similar cultural institutions, has been infected with the canker of modern management.

I was fascinated during the recent shenanigans over the future of the BBC Singers by the way the BBC's salaried staff cudgelled management.

It began with a cleverly produced piece on Radio 4's Sunday-morning *Broadcasting House* – the introductory music a recording by the BBC Singers of *Psalm 39*, beginning at the verse 'Lord, let me know my end'– and culminating in a magisterial appearance on the *Today* programme by Sir John Eliot Gardiner.

Sir John is not a man to mince words. 'Balderdash!' was one response to a quote from management. 'They don't give a flying fig' was another.

He'd been introduced as someone who could tell us about the music for the forthcoming coronation: a skilful subterfuge – the information was



Fanfare for the Common Man: Copland

embargoed at the time – by *Today* producers who were clearly in no hurry to receive their P45s.

'The dream of every musician who loves his art is to involve gifted listeners everywhere as an active force in the musical community,' said composer Aaron Copland in the first of his 1952 Harvard Lectures.

Sadly, it's a truth that's been largely ignored by our music educators since the 1960s, when the arrival of a tsunami of pop and rock coincided with a root-and-branch reorganisation of the English state-education system. Youngsters gifted enough actually to play an instrument weren't deprived of classical music, but future generations of Copland's potentially gifted listeners were.

I treasure an article Damian Thompson wrote in the *Daily Telegraph* shortly after the 2011 launch of Michael Gove's National Plan for Music Education; a plan that promised every schoolchild access to a musical instrument for at least a term.

'A good idea,' Thompson concluded. 'But before children start playing classical music, they really ought to try listening to some.'

And there was more. Mention classical music at a dinner party peopled with the literati and glitterati of our modern media elites, reported Thompson, and they'll 'start gasping like guppy fishes'. They still do.

Sadly, ignorance leads to fear, and fear begets hostility. An old schoolfriend writes of a recent concert in Huddersfield Town Hall that was picketed by yobs from what purports to be a local place of learning. All classical music is 'racist', read one placard. (The evening's soloist was Isata Kanneh-Mason.) Classical concert-goers are 'white supremacist', read another.

The feral youth of Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* are frightening enough, but at least their leader was happy to bang on about the 'glorious Ninth' of 'Lovely Ludwig Van'.

GOLDEN OLDIES

RACHEL JOHNSON

THE DAY THE MUSIC DIES

Confession. Since I subscribed to Spotify, I have 'curated' a playlist of Liked Songs and when I'm in the car, I just shuffle the tracks and by and large, I'm happy, hearing the same ones over and over.

Simon and Garfunkel. Talking Heads. Bob Dylan. The Beatles. Elton John. As *MMMBop* by Hanson or the Sugar Hill Gang's *Rapper's Delight*, say, comes on I think, THAT would be on my *Desert Island Discs*! Just tremendous. What a choon. Isn't life grand?

My husband, meanwhile, complains, 'Every single track a cliché. You are just SO middle of the road.'

Which brings us to prog rock and Peter Gabriel, who is back with a foot-tapping new single *The Court (Dark-Side Mix)*. It has backing vocals from his daughter, and is the second to be taken from his upcoming album *i/o*. He has a world tour this year, with UK dates in June.

Confession. One, I know Gabriel a bit, and have played tennis with him. Two, I don't have a single one of his compositions on my faves list (totalling 300 tracks) and this is, I think, a shocking and disloyal omission.

Gabriel, who founded the WOMAD festival, was of course once in Genesis. He's a producer, activist, musician and campaigner and has won many, many awards for all he has done – and does. I can't rehearse all his achievements here.

What I want to talk about is his seer-like vision because, unlike most people in the rock-and-roll hall of fame, Peter Gabriel seems to see round corners, like Cassandra.

And what he says is this. He thinks the game could be up. And for why? AI, you fools.

'This is something that's going to have way more impact than the Industrial Revolution and the nuclear bomb. So if we don't start anticipating what it might do, it's going to be too late, because it's very fast,' he says.

Too right. Spotify knows what I like because of my Liked Songs. When I commanded Alexa to play Peter Gabriel, she (what are Alexa's pronouns? Help!) gave me *Solsbury Hill*. Second, *Sledgehammer*. *In Your Eyes*. That collab with Kate Bush, *Don't Give Up*.

All completely predictable. So predictable that maybe ChatGPT could write his next hit – not that this prospect disturbs our maestro much, as he contemplates a world tour and new album.

'We might as well just grab the algorithms and dance with them,' says Gabriel, 'rather than fight them. Unfortunately, I don't think my job or anyone's job is safe from AI.'

So there you are. Music will see the Peter Gabriels of this world out, but not necessarily their grandchildren or children.

Whoever said 'Rock and roll will never die' may have been wrong, it turns out.

Sorry, fans.

Angel Gabriel: Peter at WOMAD, 1992

EXHIBITIONS

HUON MALLALIEU

LUXURY AND POWER: PERSIA TO GREECE

British Museum, 4th May to 13th August

Food historian Tasha Marks has cooked up a recipe to publicise this show. Her gilded walnut baklava was inspired by an account of the sweetmeats for one of Alexander the Great's feasts.

When the courtiers wanted to eat it, 'they took off the gold and threw that away in order that their friends might be spectators of their sumptuousness, and their servants might become masters of the gold'.

At its greatest extent under Darius the Great, the Achaemenid Persian Empire (550-330 BC) covered an even greater area than that conquered by Alexander, spreading from his native Macedon in the west far into India and central Asia.

The style and the styles of Persia already affected Greece and south-east Europe before his time. But one of the contentions of this suitably sumptuous show is that Achaemenid feasting and luxury were powerful political and diplomatic weapons readily adopted by Alexander. That led to an increase in Persian influence on Greek culture after the Empire's fall, much as the Greeks later influenced their Roman conquerors.

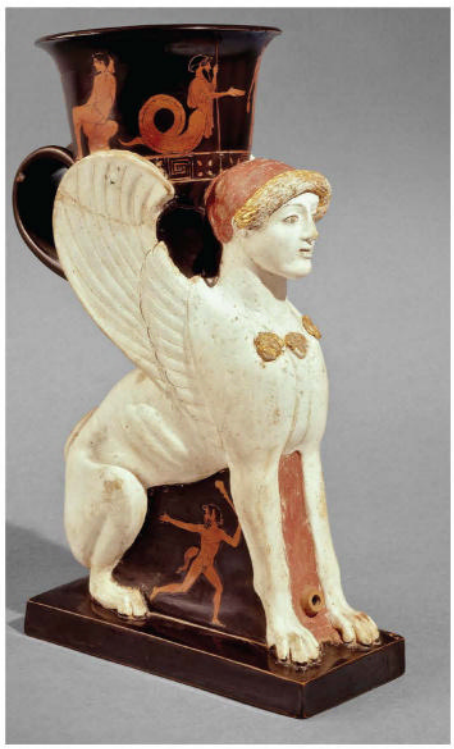
The British Museum is rich in artefacts resulting from this cultural mélange. And it has obtained many outstanding loans of gold, silver and glass objects, which make this a superb show – most notably the Panagyurishte treasure.

These nine items – a *phiale* (libation bowl), an amphora, three oinochoe and four rhytons (animal-head drinking vessels) – are all in 24-carat gold. They were discovered in 1949 by three Bulgarian brothers working near a railway station.

Three replica sets were made for Bulgarian museums while these, the originals, travel to major exhibitions abroad. Their last visit to Britain was in 1976. Dating from the end of the 4th century BC, they are believed to be ceremonial items used by the kings of Thrace.

A Persian silver-gilt gryphon-shaped rhyton of the sort that inspired the Thracian craftsmen comes from the BM. So does an Athenian pottery example, shaped as a lion's head. These demonstrate the diffusion of Persian culture, as does a wonderful, gold oak-branch wreath, decorated with a bee and two cicadas. It was found in Turkey.

How such things would have impressed Alexander in Persepolis – similar items have been found in the tombs of his Macedonian successors.



Clockwise from above: **Hellenistic plate, 2nd-3rd century BC; sphinx rhyton, 450-470 BC; Turkish rhyton, 5th century BC; Panagyurishte-treasure ram head, 4th century BC; Puglia jug, 380-400 BC**

SLOANE STREET AUCTIONS

No Seller's Fees

Taking consignments now
We have an old fashioned ethos providing a friendly, honest, and competitive service.

Free valuations

Please call us on 0207 259 0304 for any further information or advice.

Auguste Rodin (1840-1917),
Iris, Study with Head Iris/Étude avec Tête
Est. £50,000-80,000
Sold. £115,000

A very large rug
Est. £20,000-30,000
Sold. £23,400 (inc commision)

Francis Holman (1729-1790),
Est. £8,000-£12,000
Sold. £17,000

A pair of 16th Century portraits
Est. £30,000-£50,000
Sold. £58,000

Felix Ziem (1821-1911)
A View of Constantinople
Est. £20,000-30,000
Sold. £24,480.00 (inc commision)

SLOANE STREET AUCTION GALLERIES LTD.
69 LOWER SLOANE STREET, LONDON, SW1W 8DA
INFO@SLOANESTREETAUCTIONS.COM - +44 (0)2072590304 - WWW.SLOANESTREETAUCTIONS.COM

H. CROWTHER LTD
LEAD GARDEN ORNAMENTS










Phone : 020 8994 2326 E-mail : info@hcrowther.co.uk The Studio, 1 British Grove, Chiswick, London, W4 2NL
www.hcrowther.co.uk www.leadrestoration.co.uk

Pursuits

GARDENING

DAVID WHEELER

TRAVELLERS' TALES

For garden-minded people in an urban or suburban neighbourhood, Ben Dark's *The Grove* will ring bells.

Subtitled *A Nature Odyssey in 19½ Front Gardens*, it tells the often surprising stories that cling to a score of everyday plants – magnolias, buddleias, camellias, privet, tulips, hollyhocks, wisteria. These trees, shrubs, climbers, perennials and bulbs are known even to the least horticulturally-minded bod.

The Grove refers to Grove Park in the London Borough of Lewisham, ten minutes' walk from Dark's house, as familiar to him as the creases in the palms of his hands.

As a gardening teenager, recently transplanted to a city on the south coast from a rural Cotswolds village, I, like Dark, took an interest in the plants all around me. I was soon hooked on fuchsias (named in honour of German physician Leonhart Fuchs, 1501-66).

They are a gaudy genus I duck today, (except for the delightfully slimline, bicoloured, though dubiously hardy *F hatschbachii)*. Still, learning some basic expertise from them, I honed propagation skills that I continue to practise on a variety of other plants.

Herr Fuchs is not alone in having plants named after him. Many more plants commemorate a disparate bunch of botanists, explorers and men of the cloth.

Take magnolias. Dark says their flowers emit 'a metabolic warning … an amplification of the tree's scent, a sweet, lemony tang, dominated by linalool, the terpene alcohol found in tangerine peel and lavender flowers'. They are named after French botanist Pierre Magnol (1638-1715). Buddleia, according to Dark, is 'such a railway plant that it shocks when

Leonhart Fuchs: father of the fuchsia

met in an herbaceous border'. It honours English cleric Adam Buddle (1662-1715).

And camellias, to the Victorians, 'came to symbolise either perfected beauty, admiration or longing, depending on which author was pulling it all out of thin air that day'. They venerate Czech Jesuit missionary Georg Joseph Kamel (1661-1706). My, they got around in those days.

Their popularity might render them insignificant to some horticultural sophisticats. But Dark's chosen genera nevertheless include species and cultivars worthy of high praise and, in some cases, prestigious botanical importance.

Take our traditional hedging plant privet. Explore its kith and kin and you'll discover semi-evergreen *L quihoui*, the so-called wax-leaf privet. It's native to China and Korea, sporting large panicles of fragrant white flowers in late summer.

No less a figure than the late Graham Stuart Thomas, National Trust gardening supremo for 20 years, once told me of its garden value, to be cherished above its cohorts. He grew it in his suburban garden near Woking, among a plethora of his adored roses.

Asking himself which garden on the Grove is his favourite, Dark replies that 'none is a clear front runner'. Instead, he ponders what he'd do if he ever had a Grove Park garden of his own.

Spoiler alert: 'This imaginary space,' he concludes, is the '½' garden of the book's subtitle, 'one that is almost real because it goes everywhere with me'.

And don't we all carry such an imaginary place in our heads? I certainly do.

Dark's book amused and educated me during recent bouts of insomnia. I found snippets of information that now elevate my occasional street wanderings to something approaching a botanical exploration.

At less than a tenner for the paperback edition, that's truly affordable schooling.

David's Instagram account is @hortusjournal

KITCHEN GARDEN

SIMON COURTAULD

HYSSOP

Years ago, I had a few plants of hyssop. When I moved house, I left the hyssop behind. I don't remember using it to flavour food or to edge a border, but I have recently learned there are several good reasons for growing this herb again.

Perhaps the best reason is that hyssop apparently repels cabbage white butterflies. According to the gardening writer and seed-supplier Sarah Raven, three plants, in the ground or in pots, around a 5ft x 15ft bed of brassicas, should keep the little horrors away during summer.

Hyssop can be grown from seed sown outside now, or from cuttings taken in summer. While white- or pink-flowering hyssop can be found, most varieties will produce blue flowers, not unlike those of bugle or sage. The plants should grow up to two feet, they will self-seed and, as

hardy perennials, will spread their roots like mint, to which hyssop is related.

Carefully controlled and pruned, hyssop will make a colourful, low hedge, preferably in full sun and a soil which is not too acid.

The flowers have a pleasant scent which is attractive to bees.

There are several references to hyssop in the Bible. On the cross, Jesus was given a vinegar-soaked sponge on a stalk of hyssop and, in the Old Testament hyssop was used in purification rites.

'Purge me with hyssop,' David asks God in the Book of Psalms, so that he may be cleansed in body and soul.

The herb has a long history of medicinal use; an infusion of its leaves has been thought to have healing properties. More easily recognised, however, are hyssop's culinary properties.

The chopped, young leaves of hyssop, a slightly bitter-tasting herb, go well with rich meat such as venison and feathered game; also with fatty fish.

Some sausages may benefit from flavouring with chopped hyssop, and the flowers are decorative in a salad.

The Carthusian monks may have adapted their recipe for Chartreuse liqueur since the 18th century. Among the many plant ingredients, I hope that hyssop is still included.

COOKERY

ELISABETH LUARD

SPRING PICNIC

A motor excursion, says Lady (Agnes) Jekyll – 1920s *Times* cook, sister-in-law of the more famous Gertrude – deserves a home-made picnic.

Then, as now, the nation's purses being sorely tried, motorists were discouraged from taking luncheon in hostelries. The provincial innkeepers of 'this dear, dear realm of England' had failed to emulate their foreign competitors in the provision of desirable food at reasonable cost.

Her ladyship adds that travellers by rail were reverting to the old-fashioned habit of taking their journey food with them. Some were driven by motives of economy, others to avoid hostile microbes in a crowded restaurant car.

If the journey is prolonged, says Agnes, the prudent traveller packs a fitted luncheon basket with all the necessary equipment – china, silver, glass, linen – and adequate provision of food and drink.

What follows can be considered adequate provision for a spring picnic on the move in the 1920s.

Home-made foie gras

'An acceptable counterfeit for the rich man's foie gras ... to which the addition of small pieces of truffle greatly improve the flavour.' The English truffle, *Tuber aestivum*, is in season right now in woodlands throughout the land, but a drop of truffle oil (unavailable in the 1920s) will do just fine. Enough for 5-6 as a sandwich filling.

500g chicken livers
125g fat bacon
50g butter
Sprig of thyme
Bay leaf
1 tbsp brandy or sherry
1 tbsp double cream
Salt and pepper
Truffle oil – optional

Pick over the chicken livers, removing any white stringy bits, and chop into small pieces. Dice the bacon. Melt the butter in a frying pan and fry the bacon slowly till it changes colour, then add the chicken livers, thyme and bay.

Add the brandy or sherry and fry together gently for about 10 minutes. Remove the herbs and either pound in a mortar or transfer to a liquidiser and process until smooth.

Mix in the cream and a drop of truffle oil (if using), season with salt and pepper, and press into a pot, finishing with a layer of clarified butter if the foie gras is not to be used immediately for picnic sandwiches. Store in the fridge for no more than two or three days.

Almond-and-chocolate cake

A luxurious cake such as this, admits her ladyship, might call for a reproach from the thrifty. Gorgeous with strawberries and a scoop of vanilla ice cream. Serves 6-8.

225g best vanilla (white) chocolate
1 tbsp orange juice or water
150g caster sugar
150g butter
100g ground almonds
5 eggs, separated
Butter and flour for greasing and dusting

ELISABETH LUARD

Preheat the oven to 180°C/350°F/Gas 4.

Melt the chocolate with the juice, butter and sugar in a bowl set over a pan of simmering water. Remove from the heat; allow to cool a little.

Meanwhile, whisk the egg whites till they hold soft peaks. Beat the egg yolks into the still-runny chocolate. Mix in the ground almonds.

Then fold in the whisked whites – only a little at first so that the mixture lightens enough to accept the rest.

Butter and line an 18cm-square cake tin (easier to portion out than if you bake it in a round tin). Spread in the mixture. Bake for 40 to 50 minutes, till well risen and firm to the finger.

Leave to cool in the tin and cut it into squares before you transfer it to a rack. If it cracks on top (very likely), that's part of the charm.

RESTAURANTS

JAMES PEMBROKE

CHEAP DATES

'"Sexist"? What's wrong with being sexy?' asked Nigel Tufnel, lead guitarist of Spinal Tap, whose amplifier went to 11 because 'it's one louder'.

This is my preface to an (arguably) sexist generalisation about my acquaintances among the fair sex when it comes to paying the bill in restaurants.

I know plenty of generous women. Maybe not enough to form a football team but, definitely, sufficient to make a up a four in mixed-doubles tennis.

But, since my first date at the age of 15, when I took Ailsa Berrie for dinner at the Old Granary in Wareham, I have been led to believe that the bill is Man's Work.

Many women cling to the antediluvian notion that lunch for two costs £40. There is a clear exception: Jan Moir, former restaurant critic of the *Daily Telegraph*, who brilliantly exposed the ludicrous prices (and dishes) of restaurants in the previous (May) issue of *The Oldie*.

Some women have feigned fainting and have had to be revived with smelling salts while we men do the heavy lifting with the bill. Others run to the loo while we fork out £200, only to return with mild gratitude as if they've been bought an ice cream.

I did some publishing work for a friend recently and said, 'Don't worry –

just buy me dinner.' When the bill came (for a bargain £90), I edged it towards her and she screeched, 'I didn't think you actually meant it!' It's the company I keep.

Here is a resumé of Italian restaurants in the West End, where you might get close to £40 for two. If you have one course. No coffee. And bring a hip flask.

First up, sunny Cin Cin in Foley Street, with tables outside: £18 for two courses of well-prepared dishes and a glass of Pecorino for £6.50.

Next, Vasiniko in Covent Garden. My (clearly gender-fluid) cousin Olivia treated me last month. The name sounds Russian – in fact, *vasiniko* is Neapolitan for basil. The pizzas and pasta are worthy of its origins. For £7, you can have a glass of rosé, which my very sexist friend Adam calls 'girl petrol'. Like you, I despise him.

Also in Covent Garden (and St James's and Bermondsey) is Café Murano, the cheap daughter of Angela Hartnett's mother ship, the mortgage-requiring Murano. Here, among the buzz of a pre-opera crowd, you can have a starter portion of *gnocchi cacio e pepe* for £13.

Then there are two noisy, cocktail-peddling places for grandchildren: very cool Ave Mario, again in Covent Garden, where linguine al pesto goes for £12; and the Italian Greyhound in Seymour Street, where I took my son, a waiter at the plutocrats' paradise, River Café. He recommends a spicy 'Nduja pizza (£15) and porcini and provolone arancini (£8).

Finally a surprise. Cross the river, as you would in Rome, and head for Taverna Trastevere, in Battersea. This is my Find of the Month. I took a local on her birthday to this proper trattoria Romana, owned by Pizzicheria Grappelli, the Roman butcher/delicatessen in nearby Northcote Road.

I was apprehensive to go where no taxi ever strays, but every dish smacked of the Eternal City: *tonnarelli cacio e pepe* (£12) and gricia (£16) and maialino (£18), not a stone's throw from the fleshpots of Chelsea.

And the cost of that first date with Ailsa, in 1982? £18 for two.

DRINK

BILL KNOTT

SOUTHERN COMFORTS

Every year, in the second weekend in May, 120,000 mint juleps are served at the Kentucky Derby at Churchill Downs, Louisville. Unlucky punters have a lot of sorrows to drown but that's still a phenomenal number of cocktails.

It is a fine drink. Shake 75ml of bourbon with 2 tsp of sugar syrup, a dash of Angostura and a handful of mint leaves. Then strain over crushed ice into a cold highball glass – or, more authentically, a silver julep cup – stir it a bit with a long-handled bar spoon, top it up with more ice, stir again and serve.

Or get someone else to do it for you. At Block, a steakhouse and bar in St Anne's Court, Soho, drinks maestro Tony Vega has compiled an astonishing list of more than 350 American whiskeys. With copious tasting notes and historical details, it runs to 24 pages.

The Block bartenders will happily turn any of them into a julep, although some – Vega poured me a spicy, butterscotch-edged glass of Yellowstone from the Limestone Branch distillery – are too good to mix with anything but a splash of water.

For cocktails, I like Buffalo Trace (widely available for about £25). It has just the right balance of assertive, spicy rye and sweet Kentucky and Indiana corn. It makes terrific Old-Fashioneds and Manhattans, as well as juleps, and it can also co-star in a modern classic, the Paper Plane, invented by bartender Sam Ross in 2008 and one of Vega's favourites.

Shake 25ml each of bourbon, the delightfully herby Amaro Nonino Quintessentia (thewhiskyexchange.com, £29.95), Aperol and freshly squeezed lemon juice over ice. Then strain into cold coupes or martini glasses. Ross originally garnished his creation with a tiny paper plane, but you might find a twist of lemon zest easier on the fingers.

Vega also suggests a boulevardier. It's really just a negroni with the gin swapped for bourbon: two shots whiskey to one shot each of Campari and sweet vermouth, served over ice in an old-fashioned glass and garnished with a strip of orange zest. And, simplest of all, a bourbon highball: one part bourbon to two parts soda (or ginger ale, if you prefer), poured over ice into a highball glass and garnished with a slice of lemon.

Back in Louisville, the fortnight-long Kentucky Derby Festival includes another less celebrated race.

The Derby is known as the Run for the Roses, after the garland of 554 red roses that is draped over the winner. The Run for the Rosé, by contrast, is an obstacle race in which the city's waiters compete while holding aloft a tray of glasses.

The glasses are filled with White Zinfandel (the Zinfandel Blush of abominable memory), presumably because nobody minds too much if it's spilt.

SPORT

JIM WHITE

MAN U VS MAN CITY

Twenty-five years ago, the scriptwriter Colin Shindler wrote a memoir called *Manchester United Ruined My Life*.

It charted how, as a lifelong supporter of the then perpetually stuttering Manchester City, he felt he was wilting under the shadow cast by the neighbours' apparent relentless dominance.

Fourteen years later, after his own favourites had been financially turbocharged by Abu Dhabi's oil, he wrote *Manchester City Ruined My Life*. Football, he believed, was something that could be enjoyed only in perspective: the ups worked only because of the downs.

Constant success – especially that financed by a theocratic autocracy that chucks gay people off roofs – was a brew he found nauseating. And, for him, things appear only to have got worse. Because, in 2023, here he is hosting a podcast called *Football Ruined My Life*. According to Shindler, the game, clearly, has a lot to answer for.

'I love football – that's the point,' he tells me. 'It's the modern game that makes me feel bereaved. In my life, I've always been in the vanguard, espousing the modern way. But when it comes to football, I find myself in my seventies, thinking, "Yeah, actually, it really was better in the old days."'

Whatever his sense of betrayal, the podcast is a hugely entertaining listen. Together with his fellow septuagenarians – the football writer Paddy Barclay and Gary Lineker's agent, Jon Holmes – he chats away with passion, knowledge and spirit about the old days.

'The idea came to me when I heard Paddy on Radio 5 talking about Harry Kane,' he explains. 'Nothing personal – I'm sure Harry Kane is a fine fellow. But I thought to myself: I'd much rather listen to Paddy talking about Denis Law, about how Denis used to hang in the air like a helicopter. So I approached him and he said he'd love nothing better.'

Every month, it is a bit like earwigging on the three of them down the pub as they put the footballing world to rights. And their interchange is a constant joy.

There is one slight drawback to the pod's central premise: it is surely inarguable that football is better now than it ever was. The players are quicker, smarter and better prepared. Decent pitches encourage skill. Stadiums are welcoming rather than death traps. And there is always a match to watch live on the telly.

'I'm not proud of myself – I find modern football difficult to watch,' Shindler insists. 'The cheating, the exhibitionism, the fact the managers on the touchline have become part of the theatre. I deplore so many modern manners; diving I find reprehensible. I liked old pitches that used to cut up in October, brown for most of the year. It was like football we played.'

Even the club-owners, he reckons, were more agreeable back then. This is odd, given that when we were both young in Manchester, his City was owned by Peter Swales, an unscrupulous TV-rental salesman with a dodgy comb-over. Meanwhile, my United was in the hands of Louis Edwards, who had made his fortune selling past-its-sell-by-date meat for school dinners. Not exactly titans of decency, either of them.

'No, but the point was Mrs Swales went to have her hair done in the same parlour as the wives of season-ticket-holders, who could bend her ear about how rubbish City were on Saturday,' he says. 'Now no one gets close to the owners. They have no connection with the culture of their clubs. I think City is about Manchester; they think of it as a global phenomenon. The fact is the football that happens now has been elevated to a level I just can't relate to. I'm sure I'm not alone in that.'

He is right. And the thousands of listeners across ten countries who have downloaded his delightful podcast clearly agree.

MOTORING

ALAN JUDD

NEW, IMPROVED ARTHUR DALEY

You may have seen advertisements for motorway.co.uk. I hadn't, but my nephew reported an easy sale of his VW Passat. So I gave them a try.

It's an online network of dealers – no private buyers. Dealers pay to be on it, you advertise your car, they bid against one another and you get the highest offer.

No selling fee – and you don't have to accept if the offer's below the reserve price you agree with Motorway.

The buyer then contacts you and picks up the car from your home, usually within days. After an inspection to confirm that it's no worse than you described, and possibly a test drive, you are paid on the spot. No tyre-kickers, no callers who don't turn up and no haggling, unless the buyer finds some undeclared fault or blemish. The buyer of my nephew's car found an overlooked dent and they agreed a £100 reduction.

We were selling our 2018 VW Polo, bought 18 months earlier with 11,000 miles on the clock. It now has 26,000, with two door dings, a scratch on the off-side front wing and a scuff on the near-side sill. It was also due an MOT and service.

Getting it on to the website was straightforward. They don't ask for a description – no 'drives like a dream', 'first to see will buy' or 'genuine reason for sale' nonsense – but they do send you a list of detailed factual questions.

They also require photos of all the documents and service history and of the car itself from specified angles, interior and exterior. You have to describe and photograph any blemishes. You give them your bank details and the car goes live – in my case at 8am on the Monday, with the promise of a result by 3pm.

And so it proved. The buyer from a West Country dealer network arranged to pick up the car in ten days, apologising for the delay.

Secondhand cars, as anyone who even glances at the market knows, have undergone an unprecedented increase in value, largely as a result of the shortage of microchips for new cars. Business is therefore brisk, and he wasn't sure whether he would come himself or send a transport company.

In the event, he came, I met him at the station, he walked once around the car, pronounced it fine and rang his accountant to authorise payment. By the time he dropped me at home, the money was in our account.

We could of course have got a couple of thousand more if we'd sold privately. But it's often not easy to find a buyer willing to pay five figures for a car unprotected by consumer legislation (as with any private sale), no warranty and no comeback. We would also have had to pay to MOT and service it.

Although it was trade price, it was a competitive one – we'd previously been offered £1,600 less as a forecourt trade-in. That would have meant buying another car when our aim was to reduce the size of the home fleet.

I've sold many cars since being let out on to the road – almost 80 and nearly always, with a few memorable and fortuitous exceptions, at a loss.

Sometimes a catastrophic loss – a complete write-off, such as the MG Magnette that collapsed through the garage hoist while being MOTd. This time, trade price was close enough to the retail price we'd paid 18 months before to feel that, given the miles we'd done, the Polo had paid for itself.

The lesson is: if you have a modern small car you're thinking of selling, sell now while the market is hungry.

Matthew Webster: Digital Life

A digital LP? Music to my ears

I am a happy user of Spotify, the biggest online music-streaming service, but I am beginning to wonder if it's worth the money.

Music enthusiasts of my vintage have seen a steady progression from one medium to another. I can just recall 78rpm Bakelite records, and I've bought vinyl, tapes, cassettes, minidiscs and CDs. I still have most of them.

Now we have the streamers. They hold gigantic online libraries of music, and we pay a subscription for the right to listen to it; performers are paid a tiny fee when we do.

But why would I need to listen online when I already have records and CDs?

It's for the convenience. I can easily listen to almost anything I want wherever I have an internet connection. And the quality is fine, once my phone or laptop is connected to a modest portable loudspeaker system. A good one costs less than £100.

Of course, there are drawbacks. First, it's not free, or at least the free version of Spotify is barely worth using; it comes loaded with very irritating audio advertisements and other restrictions.

Their cheapest ad-free option costs £120 a year; this is not peanuts and you could buy many CDs for that sort of money.

Then there is the question of ownership. Buy a CD and it's yours for ever. Stop paying Spotify and you'll lose access to the music.

What's more, the music comes and goes. No musician is obliged to load their music onto Spotify – or, once they have, to keep it there. Neil Young, one of the angriest exponents of grey-haired rock music, removed his stuff over a COVID-related tiff.

I also understand that it's common for a performer to remove something from Spotify if they find that it is selling well elsewhere (perhaps it has been featured in an advert), thus preventing less-well-paid online listening. You can't really blame them.

I have two more serious worries for the future. First, the subscription price might rise beyond my means.

The second relates to the business model. To attract customers, they need to offer the largest-possible collection of music, and so Spotify doesn't charge performers to upload their work. That's fine. According to one survey, there are something like 158 million tracks sitting on Spotify and its rivals.

However, in 2022, apparently 67 million of these were listened to fewer than ten times and 38 million were not listened to at all. So about two-thirds of all the uploaded music was sitting idle and unloved on computers somewhere. This matters, because computer storage space costs money.

Surely it can be only a matter of time before either the listeners are charged more, or the services impose fees on the un-listened-to musicians, or both. When this happens, there will be a big weed-out. Many performers will withdraw their less popular work, and the listeners' choice – especially of more obscure recordings – will be much reduced.

So I am laying in some defences. I have finally admitted to myself that the vinyl LPs I have been cherishing since school days will have to go. I am selling what I can on eBay and using the money to buy CD versions of the albums I'll miss. I then copy them onto my computer ('ripping' is the jargon).

It's also possible to copy a vinyl LP onto your computer, although it's not for the faint-hearted.

Once this is all done, I'll have the music I want securely in two places, one physical and one virtual. And it will all be mine for ever, whatever happens to Spotify – or to me.

I'll be back in control.

Webwatch

For my latest tips and free newsletter, go to www.askwebster.co.uk

Discogs
discogs.com
Online database and marketplace of music for enthusiasts and collectors; allmusic.com is similar.

BBC Genome
https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk
BBC's Programme Index contains listings from 1923 to 2009, including 263,339 playable programmes.

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

Margaret Dibben: Money Matters

How to claim your lost billions

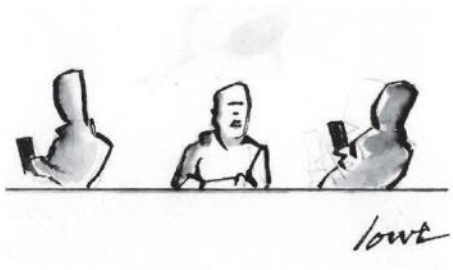
A letter from Virgin Money arrived at Jane's home, addressed to Wendy, the late wife of her partner, Andrew. The bank wanted to see her ID to update her account details. Wendy had died 20 years before, 400 miles away, aged 55.

Andrew now has dementia and the letter left him distressed, thinking his wife was still alive and he needed to find her. He hadn't known about the savings account when Wendy died. So, he had asked Virgin Money to close the account.

Jane has power of attorney for Andrew and, fearing fraud, contacted the bank. This was 18 months ago.

She had no response and phoned again two months later. The bank apologised and lodged a complaint from her but, despite the promises, again nothing happened. Neither did she receive a response to two letters she wrote to the chief executive.

Last year, Jane had cancer treatment. So she was unable to keep chasing



'Do you remember when the chattering classes actually talked to each other?'

Virgin Money and eventually she contacted *The Oldie* for help.

Virgin Money had been out of contact with Wendy for more than 20 years. I wanted to know why it had taken so long to track her down and why the bank believed she lived at Jane's address, but it has not answered my questions.

Soon after I first asked, it did finally write to Jane, apologised again, closed the account, which contained just £10, and sent the balance to Andrew's bank.

Virgin Money hasn't offered compensation for repeatedly ignoring Jane's complaint, even though she appears to have made more effort to contact the bank than it made to find Wendy. My guess is that they might have had joint accounts and it eventually tracked her through Andrew's entry on the electoral roll.

Money in bank accounts can sit untouched for decades for various reasons – people simply forget, don't tell the bank they have moved house, or children never know that accounts have been opened for them.

Billions of pounds sit in forgotten accounts which, after a time, banks can classify as dormant. Broadly, with current accounts, this could be after 12 months of inactivity, with savings accounts dormant after three to five years, depending on the individual bank's criterion.

In 2011, the Dormant Assets Scheme was launched. It allows banks and building societies to transfer money that has languished in frozen accounts for 15 years to be passed on to good causes.

Joining the scheme is voluntary.

Before handing over any deposits, banks must by law make an effort to reunite the customers with their money, though they are not told exactly how much effort to exert.

If the original owner eventually turns up, they will still get back the money due to them all along – some £110 million has been returned this way.

Since it was launched, the scheme has accepted around £1.5 billion from dormant accounts and transferred £892 million to social and environmental initiatives. Earlier this year, it released £76 million to help people struggling with the cost of living.

The scheme will soon expand to include additional types of accounts: first with money held in forgotten insurance and pension policies; and later in shares and investments, which could raise an extra £738 million for charity.

'Their kids will be begging for it'

BIRD OF THE MONTH

The Osprey

BY JOHN McEWEN * ILLUSTRATED BY CARRY AKROYD

All places yield to him ere he sits down;
... I think he'll be to Rome
As is the osprey to the fish, who takes it
By sovereignty of nature.
William Shakespeare, Coriolanus, Act 4, Scene 7

CARRY AKROYD

The osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) is avian royalty. Few sights are more magnificent than this fish-eating eagle crashing into water from 150ft. The monarchy brings millions of tourists to Britain. And birdwatchers have travelled in millions to the British osprey HQ, Loch Garten in Scotland's Cairngorms National Park.

Restoration of the dynasty, once banished by egg-collecting and taxidermy, began at Loch Garten in 1955, which witnessed the first nesting in Britain since 1916.

The osprey, one of six land birds with a global range, has a European summer population, which migrates from West Africa. Initial Loch Garten hatchings were thwarted by egg thieves.

The pioneer conservationist George Waterston (1911-80), director of RSPB Scotland, outlawed the thieves by replacing secrecy with publicity. In 1959, Operation Osprey founded the Loch Garten Visitor Centre. By its 60th anniversary in 2019, it had received 2.75m visitors.

Loch Garten juveniles bred at other sites, encouraged by chick relocation and nest provision. Ospreys will inhabit artificial nests, as demonstrated in the USA, where these are successfully built, even in public places. British expansion has been led by conservationist Roy Dennis who, inspired by Waterston, founded the Roy Dennis Foundation.

Today, Britain has 250 breeding osprey pairs, mostly in Scotland but also in Wales and England – since 2022, as far south as Poole harbour.

Ospreys, even juveniles, migrate singly. Dennis challenged Sacha Dench, the UN Ambassador for Migratory Species, to do for ospreys what she had famously done for Bewick's swans – accompany them on migration by paramotor.

In 2021, on a trans-UK project, she survived a fatal airborne collision that killed her cameraman, Dan Burton. Severely injured, but spurred by Burton's death, she led her 2022 Flight of the Ospreys expedition in a convoy of trucks from Scotland to Africa.

The expedition kept tabs on three satellite-tagged Scottish juveniles (Glen, Kirk and Tweed) and 4K, born at Rutland Water in 2013. Of the juveniles, Kirk drowned, Tweed was killed by a goshawk in Portugal and Glen, having hitched two rides on ships, survived.

An average one in three migrating ospreys dies. Ospreys use energy-saving thermals to soar and drift along. Sea creates no thermals. The 8¾-mile Strait of Gibraltar presents an ultimate challenge. Other enemies are predation, hunting, poisoning, property development, pesticides, power lines, wind turbines and, notably in 2022, drought.

4K survived and was renamed Dobire after the Guinean fishing village near where the team sighted him at journey's end. Having left on 9th September, he had covered 3,280 miles in 26 days.

The 2022 *Flight of the Ospreys*, broadcast on Radio 4, has led to a forthcoming documentary film. The Roy Dennis Foundation website includes how to build your own osprey nest.

In April's Bird of the Month, David Long was misnamed. My apologies, JM

On the Road to Morocco – with Mum

A specially designed Marrakesh villa is ideal for *William Cook*'s mother after a broken hip and long Covid

I'm standing in a crowded souk in the bustling centre of Marrakesh, watching my 81-year-old mother haggling over a pretty Moroccan plate. It's hard to hear above the frantic hubbub, but I can tell she's doing a lousy job.

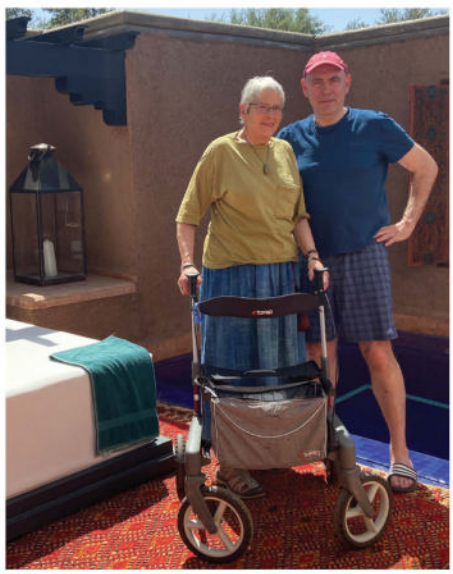
The trick is to get the seller to name a price, offer a third as much and settle for just under half, but my mother is far too polite to haggle. She ends up paying almost the asking price. The vendor can't believe his luck.

Never mind. It's only a few quid. What's far more important is that my mum is having a great time. It's her first foreign trip since she broke her hip (followed by long Covid), and for a while we feared she might never go abroad again.

Yet here we are on the road once more, our first time together overseas since she took me on a day trip to Boulogne 50 years ago. Her stamina is finite, and she needs her rollator to get around, but otherwise she's doing fine.

But Morocco? Are we both mad? I must admit it wasn't my first choice. I'd been several times before and always found it fascinating. But it's an unpredictable, hectic place. Hardly the ideal destination for oldies with mobility issues, you might think.

Left: **Villa Azeer, designed for guests with impaired mobility**



Below left: **Celia James and William Cook, her son**

Well, think again. I've never had a more relaxing week away, and my mother felt just the same. Granted, we were staying in a luxury villa that's way beyond my normal budget – but, as a jobbing travel writer, I've stayed in more expensive places, and none of them has been quite as nice as this.

I'm quite partial to a bit of pampering, while my mother's tastes are far more spartan. The last holiday we took together (and which I wrote about for *The Oldie*) was a youth-hostelling trip to glamorous Berwick-upon-Tweed. She would have been quite happy to settle for something similar this time round – but then I got a call from Brian Callaghan.

In Gibraltar, with his wife, Shirley, Brian ran the Caleta Hotel, famous for its

WILLIAM COOK

A bazaar trip: Jemaa el-Fnaa, Marrakesh

chess tournaments. In Marrakesh, they've built Ezzahra, a secluded complex of three plush villas in Palmeraie, a quiet, verdant hideaway a short drive from the city centre.

The Caleta closed last year, but Ezzahra is still going strong, and now Brian and Shirley have built a new villa here, called Azeer, specifically designed for guests with impaired mobility. Would my mum and I, Brian asked me, like a test drive?

Ezzahra doesn't provide specialist care. The staff are incredibly helpful, but they're regular hoteliers, not trained clinicians. If you need someone with nursing skills to help you, you'll have to bring them along. Yet if you're reasonably hale and hearty, but have some trouble getting about (like my mum), Azeer is an ideal base.

The first thing that strikes you about Azeer is how different it looks from the other villas. Ezzahra (the main villa, with seven double bedrooms) is fairly grand, and so are the two smaller villas, Azzaytouna and Alkhozama (three and two doubles, respectively). Azeer is more traditional – mud-brick walls flecked with straw.

The interior is surprisingly spacious – full of locally sourced fittings: Bejmat tiles; Tadelakt plasterwork; woodwork adorned with ornate Berber motifs. Conceived by Philip Hooper, of Colefax & Fowler, it's supremely comfy and very restful on the eye.

The villa is step-free and wheelchair-friendly. If you're a bit wobbly on your feet, you'll find it easy to navigate.

There's a portable electric pool lift and an electric wheelchair. There are electric doors and sit-down showers with non-slip tiles, easy-grip taps and handles. There are support bars in the plunge pool. An electric, hand-held gizmo allows you to raise and lower the bed.

All these accessories are remarkably unobtrusive. Until you need to make use of them, you hardly know they're there. There are no trip hazards and no need to worry. The main thing it gave my mother was peace of mind.

The villa sleeps up to four people: two in the large, airy master bedroom, plus one or two more in a snug and cosy double. An ideal group would be an elderly couple in the main bedroom, plus a carer or a younger couple in the smaller room. Both bedrooms are en suite.

So what's the bottom line? £1,500 a night – pretty steep by any yardstick, but there's quite a lot thrown in: breakfast, lunch and dinner, plus spa treatments (my mother adored her massage, and her hammam), airport transfers and a bespoke guided tour of Marrakesh.

Ezzahra has had a lot of press, but *The Oldie* is the first to review the new villa. Other writers rave about the luxurious setting, but the thing that makes Ezzahra so special is the personal service: a team of 20 at your beck and call, and they really know how to look after you.

I arrived with a touch of bronchitis – a doctor came and sorted me out straight away.

You need to book Azeer alongside another villa – so it'll work only if you're in a bigger group. Could I afford to come here regularly? If only. But for a big birthday or a landmark anniversary, I can't think of anywhere better.

Brian and Shirley's daughter, Tamara, runs regular Pilates residences. There's a painting course in September, led by artist Colin Watson (the six-night all-inclusive stay, with activities and one-to-one art tuition, costs £2,700 per person).

My mum said it was the holiday of a lifetime. She enjoyed her trip into Marrakesh, but she was happiest pottering around the lush gardens and chatting with the friendly staff. She lives alone, very simply, and she always puts other people first. If anyone deserves a treat, she does.

On our last day in Morocco, I wanted to take my mum back into Marrakesh – but she was too tired. So I went without her. I roamed the winding alleyways, starting off in the windswept Jewish cemetery – an oasis of gravestones in the Medina – and ending up in the Ben Youssef Madrasa, Morocco's ancient Islamic college – an intricate labyrinth of white marble, built in 1564. I wish my mother could have seen it.

As I wandered back through the souk, I found a tiny drapery selling rolls of cloth and I thought I might buy one for my mum. Most of the patterns were far too fussy for her simple tastes, but there was one I knew she'd like.

'How much?' I asked the draper. 'For you, 450 dirhams,' he said. I said I'd give him 150. He said he'd do it for 400. I said 200. He said 350. I walked away. I expected him to follow me and offer me 250, a price I would have paid, but he didn't. No worries, I thought – I'll find another one like it elsewhere.

I never found another one like it, and now I wish I'd bought it. I tried to retrace my steps to the shop where I'd seen it, but it proved impossible to find.

Back at the airport the next day, waiting for our flight home, I realised my mother was right not to haggle too hard, after all.

For information about Ezzahra, visit www.ezzahra-morocco.com

Empress Sisi of Austria was tall, anorexic, bulimic and died suddenly, just like Princess Diana. By *Thomas W Hodgkinson*

What a waist

She was 'so beautiful, in mind and heart, in person and spirit; and whether with a crown upon her head or without it and nameless, a grace to the human race'.

That was the author Mark Twain writing about the Empress Elisabeth of Austria and Queen of Hungary, who died 125 years ago this September, aged 60, murdered by an unhinged anarchist on the shores of Lake Geneva.

In this anniversary year, the Empress, also known as Sisi, is back in fashion.

An arty, gruelling film about her life, *Corsage*, has won awards. The Netflix series *The Empress*– a continental counterpart to *The Crown* – is getting a second series. It presents her as a free spirit, dubiously modern, a kind of cross between Princess Diana and the Duchess of Sussex.

The Diana parallels are rather striking, though. Sisi's death shocked the world, much as Diana's death would a century later. Like Diana's, Sisi's life now seems as much myth as history, a dark fairy tale of a girl who learned that the dream of being a princess was in fact a nightmare of constriction and contradictory demands, which would ultimately lead to her death.

Like Lady Diana Spencer, the Duchess Elisabeth Amalie Eugenie of Bavaria was born into a noble family, but without expectation of a crown. As with Diana, at first it looked as if the royal blessing might be bestowed upon her older sister.

In his twenties, Prince Charles briefly dated the older Spencer girl, Sarah, before turning his attentions to her willowy younger sibling.

In 1853, it was the older Helene of Bavaria being lined up for Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria. Yet as soon as he saw the 15-year-old Sisi, the Emperor knew which sister he wanted.

'Celebrity,' John Updike remarked, 'is a mask that eats into the face.' The

You could get two hands around the waist of Elisabeth of Austria (1837-98)

G L ARCHIVE / SUEDDEUTSCHE ZEITUNG / ALAMY

metaphor overlooks the fact that, especially for women, the body, as much as the face, is what is corroded.

From her wedding day, much of which she spent in tears, Sisi was obsessed with maintaining her enormous hair and tiny waist, which between them had caught the imperial eye.

The daily preparation of her hair was said to take three hours. Afterwards, Sisi was crowbarred into her corset, which took another hour. Although she was tall, at 5ft 8in, she had a waist you could almost get two hands around, measuring as little as 16 inches. Before going fox-hunting, she was sometimes sewn into her clothes to accentuate her figure.

Her beauty regime was savage. Sisi slept on an iron bed-frame with no pillow. For her face, she wore a silk mask packed with raw veal, or one laced with crushed strawberries and Vaseline.

And she hardly ate a thing. Her diet consisted largely of milk and eggs, and a thin soup made from the juice of beefsteaks. She weighed herself three times a day.

The Empress was not only anorexic, but also, like Princess Diana, bulimic. Anorexia means you starve yourself. Bulimia – the word comes from the Greek for the hunger of an ox – means that you binge-eat, and then purge. Sisi purged by exercise. Wherever she went, she took a mobile gym of dumbbells and gymnastic rings, from which she hung upside down like a bat.

While renting out Combermere Abbey, then in Shropshire now in Cheshire, for two years in the 1880s, she rode out to hounds six days a week. I am told by the Abbey's owner, Sarah Callander Beckett, that Sisi arrived with 17 horses from Austria. The train carrying her servants and kit had so many carriages that the nearby station of Wrenbury had to have its platforms extended.

The grim diet, the grinding beauty routine, the endless exercising – all were expressions of the misery that was her constant companion. And little wonder, when you think about it.

From the moment she became Empress, Sisi was told that her function was to produce children. When she did, her mother-in-law, Princess Sophie, took them from her. Sisi threw herself into maintaining her figure to please her husband. He repaid her by having affairs and giving her syphilis. She retaliated by staying away from court. Her mortified husband didn't dare complain.

She travelled relentlessly – from Hungary to Greece to Turkey to Egypt to Morocco – as if she might stumble by continual motion on the happiness that eluded her.

In 1898, Empress Elisabeth was stabbed by anarchist Luigi Lucheni on a Geneva jetty

Her absence from Vienna had another advantage: no one would see her grow old. Sisi refused to let anyone take a picture of her after the age of 30.

Wherever she went, she carried a fan. When she spotted a photographer, she flicked it open to hide her face. This was her version of the angry palm pushed into the lens, which we later saw from Princess Diana.

As with certain other members of royal families, one is torn between feeling sorry for Sisi and wondering whether she was especially interesting or nice. Some of her prejudices sound all too commonplace. She despised anyone overweight, for instance, sneering at the Empress of Mexico and her own daughter-in-law for this failing. She passed the bias on to her children.

In her defence, Sisi was plagued by bereavement. She lost a daughter in infancy. Her beloved cousin Ludwig drowned in 1886. Her only son, Rudolph, Crown Prince of Austria, killed himself in 1889, aged 30, at Mayerling, in a suicide pact with his 17-year-old mistress, Baroness Marie von Vetsera.

Nevertheless, as with many royals, the deeper tragedy of her life was located in a paradox inherent to monarchy: the gulf between her ordinariness and the extraordinary things required of her.

At Princess Diana's funeral, Earl Spencer compared his sister with another Diana, the goddess of hunting. In Corfu, after the death of her son, the devastated Sisi tried to create a classical myth of her own. On a headland, she ordered a palace to be built, dedicated to the Greek warrior Achilles. She called it the Achilleion and hoped she would be happy there.

The palace, which you can visit to this day, is more of a curiosity than a wonder. There's little sign that Sisi had much in the way of taste – with one exception. In pride of place on a terrace, there's a terrific neoclassical statue of the dying Achilles by Ernst Herter.

The soldier, naked save for his helmet, twists in agony as he tries to pluck from his heel the arrow that will kill him. The irony of his death was that this was fired by Helen's lover, Paris, the scurrilous pick-up artist, who dispatched with a cowardly dart the greatest fighter of all time.

Mark Twain drew a similar contrast in 1898 between the greatness, as he saw it, of Empress Sisi, and the paltry nature of the man who killed her, using a kind of improvised arrow.

On 10th September 1898, in Geneva, Sisi stepped out without a bodyguard. The Italian anarchist Luigi Lucheni approached her on the strand. He was armed with a four-inch file he had sharpened into a needle, which he plunged into her heart. Sisi didn't die straight away. Her corset restricted the bleeding. The killer was caught and sentenced to life imprisonment.

Twain let himself off the verbal leash, calling Lucheni 'a soiled and patched young loafer, without gifts, without talents, without education, without morals, without character'.

Yet as happened with Diana a century later, when Sisi died, all her sins were forgiven. 'Crowns have adorned others,' Twain concluded, 'but she adorned her crowns.'

Poetry and emotion

Pam Ayres loves Seamus Heaney, William Barnes – and Wordsworth's poem on the death of his son. By *Louise Flind*

What are your earliest childhood holiday memories?
I'm one of six kids and Dad worked for the electricity board. We lived in a council house, so there was very little money, but there would be day trips to Weymouth. When I was older, we went on a caravan holiday which, in retrospect, was absolutely awful.

The caravan was cold, there wasn't sufficient bedding and the toilet was a corrugated-iron shack. At the time it was a paradise.

Did you always want to be on the stage?
In infant school, I remember playing the part of a funny queen – somebody with a lorgnette – and being thrilled to be on stage and say a line and hear the audience laughing.

Do you write to perform?
The vast majority of things I've written are for me to declaim – with a sense of mischief.

What was Singapore like in the late '60s?
I had grown up in rural Berkshire, and to be plunged into Singapore in the '60s was like stepping into a Technicolor paradise, with a great abundance of handsome young men.

I was stationed at RAF Seletar. I had terrible tonsillitis and a raging temperature there, and I was running two boyfriends, and when I was isolated in hospital, they both came to see me.

When did you first start writing poems?
When I was about 12.

What's the difference between writing poems and writing prose?
I'm no expert, but if I'm writing a poem, I'm trying to make it all fit together like a jigsaw. If you're writing prose, you can just write what you feel.

What do you think was your big break?
BBC Radio Oxford, because many of the pubs had a folk club and I used to go and sing and recite daft poems. They had a folk programme, and they came round recording for it and I was declaiming at the time.

What's your favourite poem by you?
The Dinner Party *– about having a dinner party. The closer the day gets, the more you realise you have to do. The narrator hates 'the darlings of my heart', who are coming, and finishes up calling them a bunch of shites.*

What's your favourite line in English poetry?
William Wordsworth wrote, on the death of his son, aged six, from measles, 'I loved the boy with the utmost love of which my soul is capable, and he is taken from me – yet in the agony of my spirit in surrendering such a treasure I feel a thousand times richer than if I had never possessed it.'

Who's your favourite poet?
William Barnes, particularly The Turnstile, *and Seamus Heaney, but I don't know much about poetry.*

Who do you think is the best poet of the English countryside?
William Barnes wrote a lovely poem called My Orcha'd in Linden Lea.

Should poetry rhyme?
I think there's room for both rhyming and non-rhyming.

Were you ever cruelly mocked about your accent and your poems to begin with?
Some people liked it. Some people sent it up.

What's been the highlight of your career?
It was lovely to get the MBE from the Queen and wonderful to see my books in the Sunday Times *top ten.*

Do you write every day?
I like to write in the morning. I get a bit droopy in the afternoons.

What animals do you have now?
Just my little dog. But I've now bought a piece of land, which I manage as a wildlife reserve.

Where did you go for your honeymoon?
The Lake District.

Do you go on holiday?
With our son and his family to Cornwall. Because I was ill last year, my husband and I are going to Madeira for a proper holiday.

In Madeira, will you stay in a hotel or an apartment?
I'll stay in a hotel because I don't want to do the washing-up.

Is there anything you can't leave home without?
My hair tongs.

Is there something you really miss?
Everything – now I'm older.

What is the strangest place you've ever slept in?
I slept in the boyfriend's Mini at Paddington Station. We cramped.

What are your travelling tips?
Don't hang anything on the back of the bathroom door.

Pam Ayres's I am Oliver the Otter: A Tale from our Wild and Wonderful Riverbanks *(Macmillan) is out now*

Norfolk's best-kept secret

PATRICK BARKHAM

I'm breaking various promises by sharing this stroll.

It is one of those too-good-to-share, secret walks, a miraculous coastal wander along a beach that is unpopulated on the sunniest of days. But it also seems wrong to keep it to myself, when it is transcendently beautiful, and free.

The sense of liberation began when my friends and I parked in a muddy layby for no charge. We were close to the enigmatic white golf ball at Trimingham, a military radar station set on a high point that's visible for miles along the north-east Norfolk coast.

The mysterious rays from within the ball are invisible – on one occasion, many years ago, they scrambled cars' electrics when they drove past.

We've had an enervating wet and grey spring in the east but this was an intoxicatingly bright, windless interlude – one day only when the sun felt warm on my back for the first time, the sky was pale blue and the first brimstone butterflies burst from catkin-filled hedgerows, as if in celebration.

We crossed a field and entered a small, wind-gnarled copse. A troop of long-tailed tits skipped through branches. Out on the other side, there was a rough patch of grass and then the sea.

The cliffs at Trimingham are the highest in Norfolk because the land here rises to more than 160 feet above sea level, vertiginous by this county's standards. They are mostly made of bright yellow sand with layers of darker clay and a hint of chalk, and they possess a grandeur unseen in East Anglia.

One reason the beach is so quiet is that the cliffs are intimidatingly high; we had to use a rough, unofficial footpath down a slumped section of cliff to reach the beach.

Another reason for the absence of people is that these sands aren't always exposed at high tide, and so you need to know the tide times (easily found on the internet) to take this walk.

GARY WING

We turned north-east and followed the beach two miles to Overstrand, the North Sea an unusually cheerful blue to our right.

The water was the texture of a millpond, although the occasional flash of a white breaker out to sea had us wondering whether a porpoise was passing – pods swim quite close to the shore in these parts. Gulls floated and the occasional cormorant sweated past. Below them, turnstones and plump, busy dunlin perused the retreating tideline.

To our left were the cliffs, towering but also eroding. Trimingham is a fossil hot spot and my children, eyes down, were soon finding belemnites every few hundred yards among the layers of small stones sorted daily by the sea. Each bullet-shaped brown treasure looked as if it might have been a streamlined squid yesterday – not a creature that disappeared with the dinosaurs.

The children began willing strange-shaped flints to be neolithic tools, or splinters of sea-smoothed wood to be mammoth bones, which are routinely picked up by expert fossil-hunters. The thrill of the hunt kept them walking without complaint.

At Overstrand, we joined the coastal path along the top, and turned back towards Trimingham, passing some pretty cottages at Sidestrand, and then we took a path between the high cliff edge and huge, bleak fields, showing green shoots of winter wheat.

The land was farmed hard here, as if someone wanted to make the most of the soil before it slipped into the sea. Along the uncultivated edge, though, there was rough grassland, where a kestrel hovered, and little patches of gorse.

Their bright yellow flowers shone against the vivid blue sea and wafted the sunny scent of coconut through the air.

When I closed my eyes that night, my eyelids were decorated with the brilliant yellows and blues of this dazzling walk by the sea. Its peaceful exhilaration warmed me for several days, a candle against the gloom of our cold spring.

Park at TG274389 (what3words: scariest.into.washroom). The path down to the beach is rough and steep. Check tides before attempting beach walk. It's scary and potentially dangerous. It might be best to stay away (there, my conscience is clear now!)

EXPERT-LED ARCHAEOLOGICAL & CULTURAL TOURS FOR SMALL GROUPS

TOUR OPERATOR OF THE YEAR

2022 Gold Award, 2019 Silver Award, 2018 Silver Award,
2017 Gold Award 2016 Silver Award & 2015 Gold Award
- AITO (The Association of Independent Tour Operators)

ONE OF THE WORLD'S "TOP TEN LEARNING RETREATS"
- NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC


EXPLORING HADRIAN'S WALL


EXPLORING WESSEX

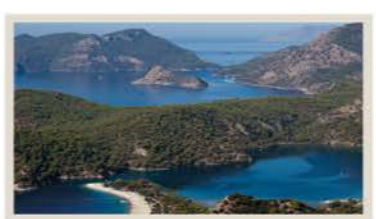

EXPLORING CRETE


EXPLORING MACEDONIA


CRUISING DALMATIA FROM DUBROVNIK TO SPLIT


CRUISING TO EPHESUS


A GASTRONOMIC GULET CRUISE


CRUISING THE LYCIAN SHORE


WALKING AND CRUISING THE LYCIAN SHORE

Visit: petersommer.com
Call: 01600 888 220
Email: info@petersommer.com

ESCORTED ARCHAEOLOGICAL TOURS,
GULET CRUISES AND
PRIVATE CHARTERS

AITO Association of Independent Tour Operators
ABTA ABTA No.Y6151

Genius crossword 426

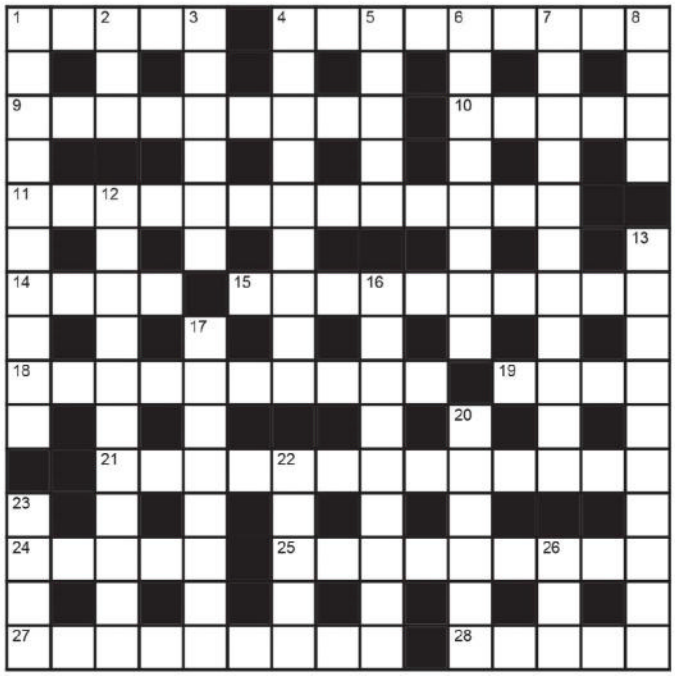
EL SERENO

Across

1 Spring edition (5)
4 Plot needing female with inferior teaching degree (9)
9 Sadly hated - and free as a bird, for example (9)
10 Not at work - ears oddly tender! (5)
11 Table set with supper before mass, say (6,7)
14 Feel Il Trovatore must incorporate a certain cadence (4)
15 Agreed damage done is fixed (10)
18 Bouncer offering walk round business (10)
19 Pull hard - there's a catch (4)
21 Old man wants to keep support for flier (5,8)
24 Feature of weather most – or many – must welcome (5)
25 Weapon with advantage in a precarious situation (5,4)
27 Free clues changed to include one for guys (9)
28 Start university in arrears (5)

Down

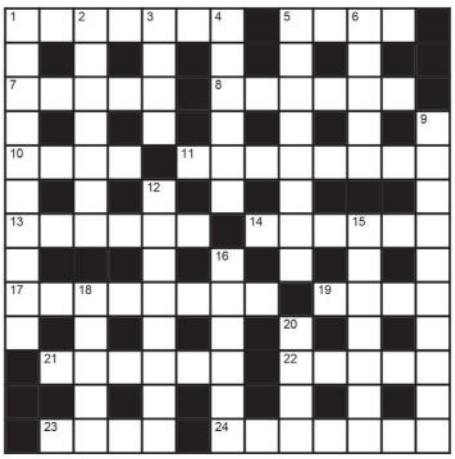
1 Playing away? Could be source of inspiration and tiny field possibly (10)
2 Part of Iberia with no popular resort (3)
3 Made a resounding retort (6)
4 Stop everyone going under the trees (9)
5 Brothers in law? (5)
6 European proposals may generate high feelings (8)
7 Polish setter? A new place between rivals (6,5)
8 Flash flood's final pictures (4)
12 Silly old nun with valid declaration after lawsuit? (4,3,4)
13 Youth may see sense attached to a benefit (10)
16 Chap sold out, keeping popular kitchen items (9)
17 Widespread outbreak of the skin doctor ultimately ignored (8)
20 Went with a good source of venison travelling north (6)
22 Bond finally fell for a country type (5)
23 Addict confined to revolutionary pressure suit (4)



How to enter Please scan or otherwise copy this page and email it to **comps@theoldie.co.uk**. With regret, we are temporarily unable to accept postal entries. Normal procedure will be restored as soon as possible. **Deadline: 31st May 2023**.
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 426



Across

1 Heavy (7)
5 Ticket profiteer (4)
7 Subject (5)
8 Achieve (6)
10 To harvest (4)
11 Boo-boos (8)
13 Partner (anag); snare (6)
14 Get away (6)
17 Dispossession of home (8)
19 Mimics (4)
21 Deeply religious (6)
22 Pulsate (5)
23 Relieved, pleased (4)
24 Drive back (7)

Down

1 Height reached in reservoir (5,5)
2 Palm nit (anag) (7)
3 German white wine (4)
4 Annually (6)
5 Small insectivorous bird (8)
6 Join forces (5)
9 Apparent (10)
12 Burgers, take-aways etc (4,4)
15 Clothes (7)
16 Medical practitioner (6)
18 Model of excellence, perfect (5)
20 Measure; pace (4)

Genius 424 solution

Winner: Jennifer Olney, Romsey, Hampshire
Runners-up: Susanne Sexton, Liverpool; Dan Mahony, Bromley, Kent

Moron 424 answers: Across: 1 Marked, 4 Wayne (Mark Twain), 8 Disco, 9 Illicit, 10 Abdomen, 11 Stun, 12 Dun, 14 Menu, 15 Arms, 18 Sit, 21 Acne, 23 Animate, 25 Succumb, 26 Azure, 27 Eject, 28 Meteor. Down: 1 Madcap, 2 Residue, 3 Enormous, 4 Weld, 5 Yacht, 6 Extend, 7 Fiend, 13 Navigate, 16 Measure, 17 Hassle, 19 Tabby, 20 Veneer, 22 Nacre, 24 Quit.

RAIL DISCOVERIES

CATALONIA & LITTLE TRAINS OF THE PYRENEES

Experience both the sparkling coast of Catalonia and the shimmering peaks of the Pyrenees as you spend time in both France and Spain on this enchanting holiday.

8 DAYS FROM ~~£949pp~~ **£899pp**

Day 1. London & Roses
Meet at London St Pancras and board the Eurostar to Paris, continuing to charming Roses for seven nights by rail and coach.

Days 2-3. Roses & the Little Red Train
Today is yours to explore beautiful Roses. You could head to the sweeping, sandy beach for a day of relaxation or find a quiet café on the promenade. On Day 3, journey on the fantastic Little Red Train today, travelling through the dense green of the Pyrenees in cheery red carriages from Rivesaltes to the small town of Axat.

Days 4-5. Girona & the Núria Valley Rack Railway
Visit Girona, a city of storybook history that's full of museums and terracotta buildings, and capped by an impressive cathedral. Day 5 features a journey on the Núria Valley Rack Railway, the only way to access this remote valley.

Day 6. Roses
Today you have another chance to explore beautiful Roses, an authentic Spanish fishing port.

Days 7-8. Figueres & London
Today takes you to Figueres for a visit to the Salvador Dalí Foundation. Later, visit the historic town of Besalu, with its striking 11th-century bridge. Leaving Roses on Day 8, travel by rail to Paris and join the Eurostar to London St Pancras.

INCLUDED IN THE PRICE

Expertise of a UK Tour Manager from start to finish

All rail & coach travel throughout your tour

7 nights' 4* Hotel accommodation

14 meals, 7 Breakfasts & 7 Dinners

All tour excursions

DEPARTURES BETWEEN MAY – OCTOBER 2023

"Excellent" ★★★★★ Trustpilot
based on 2,437 service reviews

ABTA The Travel Association

Dates and prices are subject to availability. Prices shown are per person, based on 2 people sharing. Prices may change prior to and after publication. Prices shown are inclusive of any applicable discounts. *Secure your place for only £99pp for a European holiday on new bookings when you book before 10th May 2023. Terms and conditions apply. Please see website for details.

To book and see our latest offers
Visit raildiscoveries.com/FRS
Call 01904 730280
Discover more.

George Loater, West, was full of himself after this deal from a friendly(ish) rubber. 'I was in such trouble responding to partner's take-out double (of Two Diamonds).'

No one looked up – they'd been there.

'I had to bid Three Clubs confidently or you'd have doubled me.'

No response.

Undeterred, he added, turning to South, 'But couldn't you have made Four Spades?'

South turned puce with irritation – but was Gloater right? Annoyingly, he often was.

Dealer South North-South Vulnerable

	North ♠ A 3 2 ♥ 7 4 3 ♦ A K J 9 ♣ 10 6 3	
West ♠ J 10 9 6 ♥ J 10 ♦ Q 7 3 2 ♣ J 7 5		**East** ♠ 7 ♥ K Q 9 8 ♦ 8 6 5 ♣ A K 9 4 2
	South ♠ K Q 8 5 4 ♥ A 6 5 2 ♦ 10 4 ♣ Q 8	

The bidding

South	West	North	East
1 ♠	Pass	2 ♦	Dbl(1)
Pass (2)	3 ♣	4 ♠	end

(1) Take-out – for hearts and clubs.

(2) No need to bid Two Hearts now – East having promised the suit.

West had led the knave of hearts, declarer winning the ace as East encouraged with the nine. Declarer had crossed to the ace of spades and returned to his king-queen, East discarding on the second round.

Needing West to have the queen of diamonds, declarer had successfully run the ten of diamonds, led a second diamond to the jack, and cashed the ace-king discarding both his clubs as West followed. He ruffed a club – nine tricks. However, there was no tenth – one down.

'Say you...' began Gloater.

'Maybe let me take over,' said North, Phil Smaker.

'You were so close,' Smaker told his partner. 'Just don't release dummy's ace of spades. After winning the ace of hearts, cash the king-queen of spades. Then cash the four diamonds via the finesses you correctly took. Away go both your clubs and you can ruff a club, crucially cross to the fourth spade and ruff another club. You've scored the first ten tricks.'

'Gosh, so I have,' said South. 'Thank you.'

Peacemaker turned to Gloater. 'Mind you, George, pard would have had no chance if you'd led a club.'

ANDREW ROBSON

Competition

TESSA CASTRO

IN COMPETITION No 292 you were invited to write a poem called *The Walk*. How good and numerous were your entries. Congratulations to those printed below, each of whom wins £25, with the bonus prize of *The Chambers Dictionary* going to Anthony Young.

I'm going home, it's nearly dawn,
My spangled skirt is slightly torn,
My mum would say I look a sight;
Shite more like.

The heel has snapped off my left shoe,
My shirt is stained and it was new,
Some sozzled tender words were said;
Bed more like.

Now I'm on the walk of shame,
I only have myself to blame,
I drank and danced and laughed and kissed;
Pissed more like.

I'm out alone, I can't look weak,
Mascara smudges down my cheek,
I've got my rape alarm prepared;
Scared more like.
Anthony Young

In my sleep I think I hear
The herald voice of Chanticleer,
His cry not 'Cock-a-doodle-doo'
But 'Time to totter to the loo' –
A call I've often heard before
And know it's one I can't ignore.
So I forsake the duvet and
With difficulty rise to stand.
One hand upon the friendly wall
To guide me and avert a fall,
I stumble on reluctant feet,
My destination the en-suite
Where stands my goal, the lavatory
With seat upright to welcome me.
To date I've always made it, though
It has at times been touch and go.
George Weston

My father lying sick, upstairs in bed,
His gravelly, graveyard bronchial bark
Reverberates to fill the house with dread.
My mother, craving air, swathes us in scarves.

The youngest in the pram, we trudge behind,
Along the churned-up, furrowed, muddy trail,
All round, half-built bleak houses, raw and blind.
Sleet flurries in our faces, turns to hail.

My mother talks of vanished sights and sounds –
The summer larks, which soared in steady rise –
Pouring their liquid, silver music down,
On swaying barley stalks, from cloud-stacked skies.

'Let's call this Lark Lane!' – blusters steal her words,
And scatter them like snowflakes, far and wide.
She steers the pram's prow forward, face set firm
Against the cruel, relentless concrete tide.
Fiona Clark

We're all a fool in some respect, and I'm a walking fool,
Initially to distance me from family and school.
I'd walk the Kentish beaches where the iron of wartime fell.
The wide sea liberated me. My bedroom was a cell.

Later, I'd find the London streets, patrol like them like a ghost
Whom nobody regarded, independent and engrossed.
The city was a complex maze, a cavern to explore;
Elsewhere, there loomed a host of opportunities offshore.

Soon holidays entailed full kit: backpacks and solid boots,
Plus studious maps to adumbrate the likeliest hiking routes.
The walk of walks? A breezeless, perfect day beyond the trees,
Through pasturage for docile cows, cross-border Pyrenees.

These days I have a four-wheeled gismo helping me around,
Not on the wild, erratic paths, but hard and level ground,
So though arthritis grinds my bones and hampers my kinesis
Like Felix I keep walking, with a virtual prosthesis.
Basil Ransome-Davies

COMPETITION No 294 Prompted by a reader, Nigel Chambers, I invite you to write a poem, please, called *Artificial Intelligence*, with enough evidence to show its author is a robot. Maximum 16 lines. Please send entries by e-mail (comps@theoldie.co.uk – and include your own postal address), marked 'Competition No 294', by Thursday 1st June.

Exhibitions

Personal

Mobility

Genealogy

Gifts

Congratulations

UK Travel

Wanted

Overseas Travel

Events

Books & Publishing

Clothing & Bedding

Health

UNDERSTANDING ATTRACTIVE CONTINENTAL LADY Offers memorable massage to discerning gentlemen in discreet Marylebone surroundings. 07932644459

Societies

Health

PETITE ORIENTAL BEAUTY Stunning Young Slim Classy Elegant and Friendly Lady. 2 mins from South Kensington. Call 020 7581 2144 IN/OUT calls.

MATURE ENGLISH LADY offers relaxing massage/social companionship, no rush, friendly service 07895534186

Gifts

Health

Food & Drink

Friendship & Dating

Video

Wanted

Ask Virginia

VIRGINIA IRONSIDE

Confused granddaughter

Q *My granddaughter of 15 has decided she was born into the wrong body and is now insisting everyone call her Michael, instead of Vanessa, which is how we've known her ever since she was born.*

I find all this ridiculous and so does her grandfather. She has now declared that unless we call her Michael, she's not going to come round to see us – and the idea really has destroyed us because we love her so much. Her mother is very upset about it all and thinks it's just a phase, but goes along with calling her Michael just to indulge her.

We feel very strongly that her name is Vanessa and always will be. Is there any way out of this situation?

Name and address supplied

A If it is a phase, why not indulge it? I'm sure when she was a little girl, you played tea parties with her and ate imaginary pieces of cake off imaginary plates, declaring it 'Delicious!' I'm sure you didn't balk at this and insist that there was no cake. Or when she performed magic tricks when she was older, I'm sure you said you were baffled at how she did them, even though it might have been perfectly obvious. She's only 14 – so indulge her until she either grows out of it or does indeed take it all further and become Michael. In the meantime, you can explain that as you're old and muddled, you'll find it very difficult to remember all the time and must forgive you if 'Vanessa' slips out occasionally.

In the meantime, I'd just call her 'Darling'. A ploy I often use when confronted with friends whose names I've completely forgotten.

Trapped at home

Q *I'm 45 and still living at home! When I was young, I left to go to university, got a job and a boyfriend and everything was fine (still living at home) until he dropped me, and I got another job and another boyfriend.*

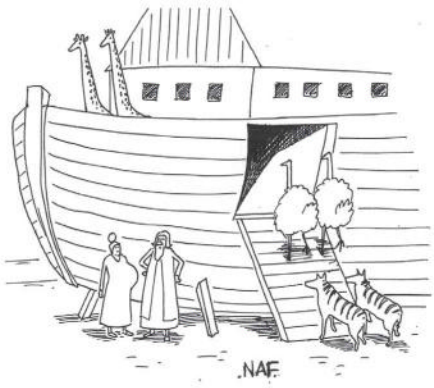
This time, I moved into his flat. So far, so good, but now the same's happened again, and I find myself back at my old job, with no boyfriend and back to living at home. I feel I'm in such a rut – caught in a vicious circle. I long to run off to Timbuktu – wherever that is.

How can I get out of it?

Gemma S, Salford

A It may feel like you're trapped like a mouse on a wheel but remember that nothing is ever the same. You and your parents are older – the scene from your parents' window has almost certainly changed slightly since you were first living there.

I can't imagine you're in exactly the same job as you used to be, even though it may be the same company. Remember, too, that you have changed. You have much experience behind you, which you used not to have. Nothing is ever the same from one day to the next for any of us. I'm not saying it wouldn't be an idea to look for other work in other places, but you're on a progression, not a wheel.



'It had better be twins'

Try meditating. That's one way to discover all kinds of new places and states of mind you've never experienced before – places that could open you up to a rich interior world far more interesting than hiking to Timbuktu.

The incredible sulk

Q *When she's upset, instead of getting angry or throwing plates – which I could deal with – my wife just goes into a sulk. She won't speak and the house is covered with a pall of gloom for days. Eventually she comes out of it, but how can I persuade her that losing her temper might be far more constructive and blow over far more quickly than these endless days of intolerable penance?*

Name and address supplied

A Your wife feels hurt about something you've done. She wants to hurt you in return. Why should she explode in a simple way that you can deal with, and which will be over in a couple of hours to suit you? She wants to inflict as much damage on you as she feels you've inflicted on her. So she sulks. It hurts you and drives you mad for days. She gets her revenge very successfully. It's more sensible, during a calm period, to talk together about what you do that hurts her so much and try to understand it, so that you can both live a more harmonious life together.

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

The Oldie is published by Oldie Publications Ltd, Moray House, 23/31 Great Titchfield Street, London W1W 7PA

ISSN 0965-2507. Printed in England by Walstead Group. Distributed by Seymour Distribution Ltd, 2 East Poultry Avenue, London EC1A 9PT; www.seymour.co.uk

To order a print subscription, email theoldie@subscription.co.uk, or call 01858 438791, or write to *The Oldie*, Tower House, Sovereign Park, Market Harborough LE16 9EF. **Print subscription rates for 12 issues**: UK £49.50; Europe/Eire £58; USA/Canada £70; rest of world £69.

To buy a digital subscription for £29.99 or a single issue for £2.99, go to the App Store on your tablet or mobile and search for 'The Oldie'.

The Oldie is available in audio and e-text format for the benefit of blind and partially sighted readers through RNIB Newsagent. Telephone 0303 123 9999 or visit www.rnib.org.uk/newsagent for further details.

RNIB Supporting people with sight loss

VALENCIA

FOR DISCERNING TRAVELLERS

Spain's third city is a fascinating short break destination, which combines wonderful Spanish cuisine (this was the birthplace of paella), with an historic old town, excellent museums and a world-class cultural complex in the striking modern architecture of the City of Arts & Sciences. In the spring and autumn the city offers warm sunshine and a cultural menu of opera, concerts and exhibitions, while the summer months are perfect for enjoying a morning on the broad sandy beach followed by a long tapas lunch in the old town.

MUSEUMS & EXHIBITIONS

Valencia's Museum of Fine Arts is the second most important art gallery in Spain after Madrid's Prado, and it has a magnificent permanent collection housed in a former school and seminary founded in 1683. Highlights include two extraordinary rooms dedicated to the legacy of Francisco de Goya and Joaquín Sorolla, the 'master of light' who was born in Valencia. The city's beaches and architecture provide the backdrops to many of his sunlight-infused paintings and to mark the centenary of his death this year, there will be two successive exhibitions. The first, "Sorolla. Origins" (until 30 June 2023) brings loans from the Prado and the Sorolla Museum in Madrid, as well as from Barcelona, Murcia, and Salamanca, to trace the artist's early years. Following directly after this is the exhibition of the Colección Masaveu (29 June until 1 October 2023), one of Spain's most important private collections, which will be loaning 46 pieces of work, including some of the artist's masterpieces depicting the Valencia coast and beaches.

CITY OF ARTS & SCIENCES

All Kirker Holidays include tickets for the futuristic City of Arts & Sciences, including L'Hemisfèric, designed by Santiago Calatrava, home to an IMAX cinema and planetarium and L'Oceanogràfic, Europe's largest aquarium. The spectacular Palau de les Arts Reina Sofía, opened on 8 October 2005, was the final landmark to open as part of the City of Arts & Sciences project. Designed by Santiago Calatrava, this is the tallest opera house in the world and has maintained a close relationship with Plácido Domingo, who mentors a young singers training program there. The current season concludes with a production of *Ernani* by Verdi (7, 10, 13, 16, 18 June 2023), as well as a ballet production of Bizet's *Carmen* on 29, 30 June and 1, 2 July 2023, with the Compañía Nacional de Danza. Speak to the Kirker Concierge for tickets and more information.

HOTELS

The Westin *****

The Westin, located in the centre of the city, opened after the renovation of a building dating from 1917. The original façade has been conserved and the interior fully redesigned combining a classic style with avant-garde technology. There are two restaurants, and guests can also enjoy an appetizer and aperitif in the hotel's lush garden surrounded by pergolas, fountains, palm and orange trees. There is a spa with an elegant indoor plunge pool, sauna, Turkish hammam and ten treatment rooms.

Price from £1,036 per person for a 3 night stay

Ad Hoc Monumental *** Superior

Small, privately-owned and very characterful with a delightful Colonial Spanish feel, the Ad Hoc Monumental is a classical 19th century building, located in a small street in the centre of Valencia, just 10 minutes' walk from the cathedral. The 28 bedrooms are spacious and individually decorated, many with original beamed ceilings and tiled floors.

Price from £778 per person for a 3 night stay

Speak to an expert:

020 7593 2288

kirkerholidays.com

VALENCIA VALENCIA

REGION OF VALENCIA

ABTA ABTA No. V6595 AITO

Kirker FOR DISCERNING TRAVELLERS

6-month free trial membership

Do you have **macular degeneration?**

You don't have to face macular disease alone. Join our community and we'll help you find your way with expert advice and support.

Become a member today and we'll send you:

- **Your Welcome Pack** – everything you need to know as a new member.
- **Sideview magazine** – packed with research updates, technology features, daily living tips and inspirational stories.
- **Monthly e-newsletter** – including advice on living with sight loss, and the latest research news direct to your inbox.

"Becoming a member has helped me a lot - and I know I'm not alone."

It's easy to join – all we need is your name and address.

Start your FREE membership trial today by calling **01264 350 551** or at **macularsociety.org/to**

Macular Society
Beating Macular Disease

Registered with FUNDRAISING REGULATOR

UK Membership: £22 per year; first 6 months free. Following the 6 month trial, we'll be in touch to ask if you would like to become a full member. UK residents only. For full terms and conditions please visit macularsociety.org/6monthsterms

MA23PAD035