HAROLD PINTER BY ANTONIA FRASER

MARY BEARD
MY ROMAN HOLIDAYS

The Oldie

'I think *The Oldie* these days is simply the best magazine there is – seriously, the best' – Stephen Fry

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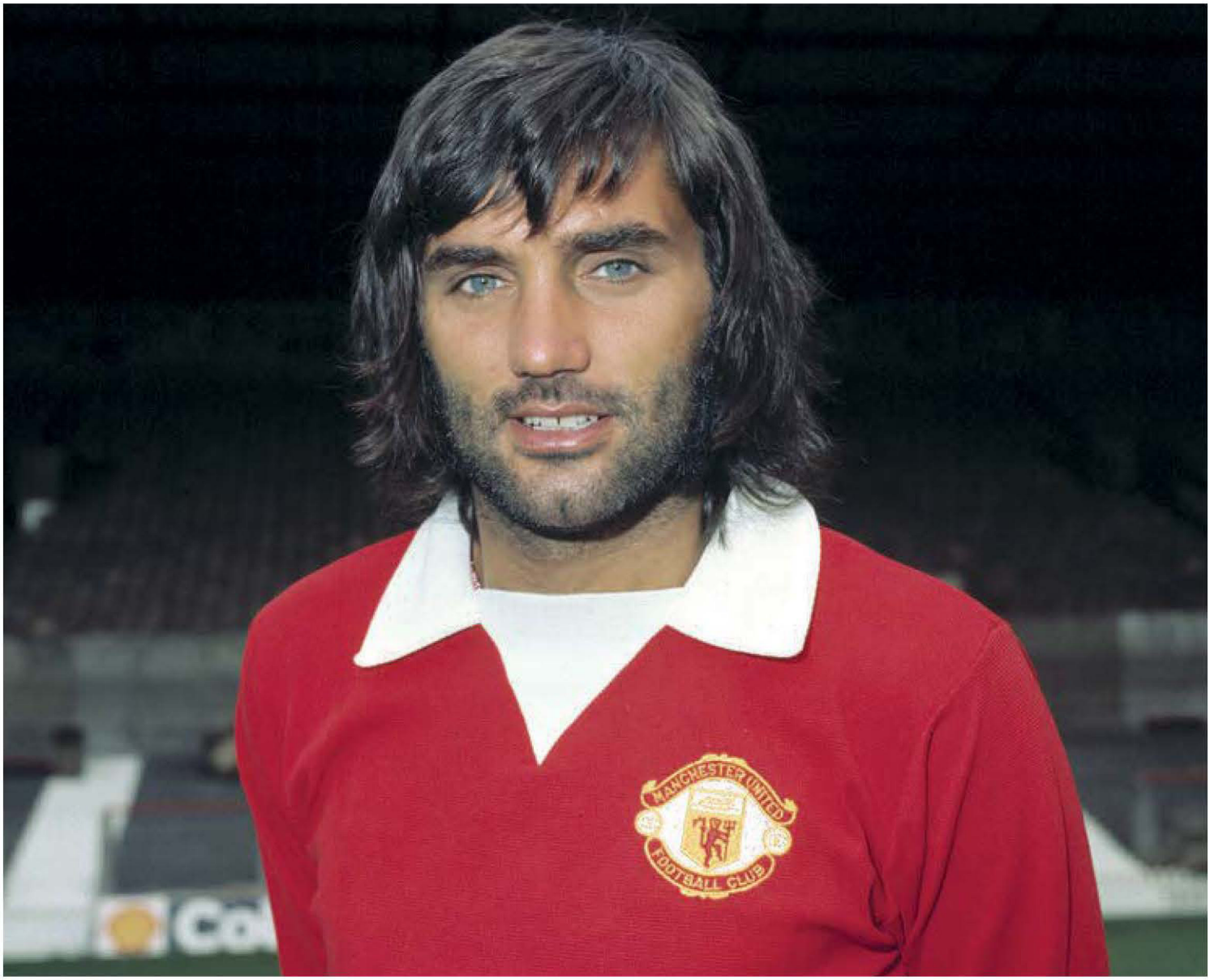

My Best Friend

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An orphan at 69 – Griff Rhys Jones

It takes two – Marks and Gran on how to write a sitcom

Prince Charmless – A N Wilson on Prince Andrew

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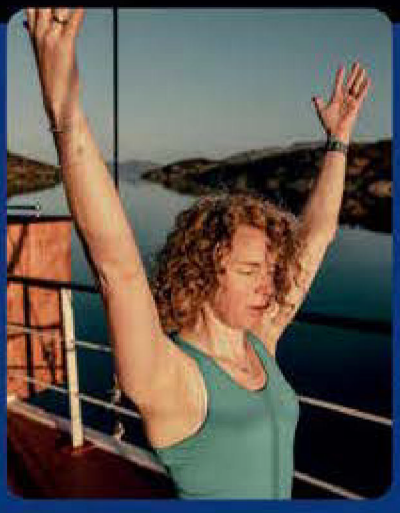





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The Oldie

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The Old Un's Notes

Decline CAN be reversed.

Five years ago, poverty-stricken Gloucester Cathedral dropped its ancient custom of employing choral scholars: three youngsters (one bass, one tenor, one alto) in their late teens, who joined the lay clerks of the cathedral choir and acted as musical dogsbodies.

These underpaid apprentices have been a part of cathedral cities since Chaucerian days. In nearby Hereford, members of the congregation often buy the scholars their beer after choir practice.

Gloucester's decision was seen as a sign of grievous cultural decay and there were fears other cathedrals would follow suit.

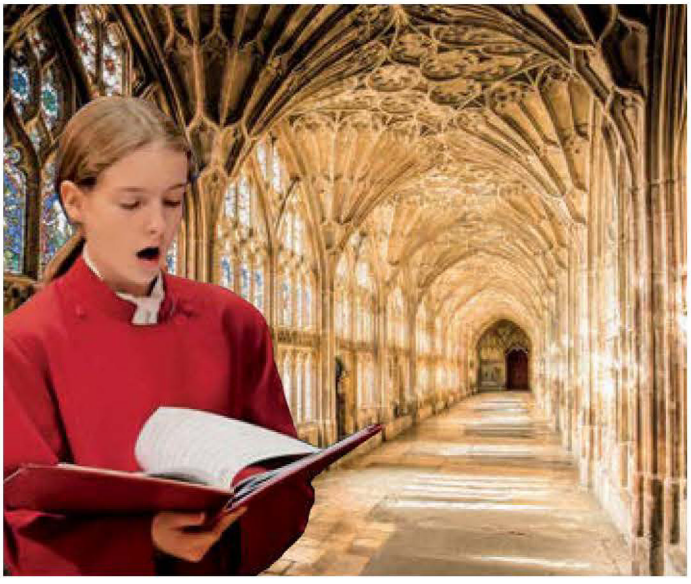
Now comes happier news. In early September, Gloucester, though still poor as a cathedral mouse, is holding auditions for a new set of choral scholars. The pay is a magnificent £4,000 per annum. Yet the C of E still lectures us about slavery.

Radio 3 listeners might not be the most obvious soccer fans, but the station enthusiastically plugged the UEFA Women's Football Championships and even came up with a playlist of classical music with footballing allusions.

Radio critic and *Oldie* contributor Michael Henderson noted several mentions of the footie during R3's once-lofty afternoon concert.

'Turn it round,' he said. 'Try to imagine a taster for a recital at Wigmore Hall thrust into coverage of a sporting event on Five Live.'

Given the cosmopolitan nature of the Premier League, could Rimsky-Korsakov, Gnessin, Mussorgsky and Kapsperger not be Arsenal's new midfield line-up?



Choir of angels: Gloucester Cathedral's cloisters

Among this month's contributors



Laurence Marks and Maurice Gran (p14) wrote *Birds of a Feather*, *Goodnight Sweetheart* and *The New Statesman*. Their new play, *Dr Freud Will See You Now, Mrs Hitler*, opens in September.



Lady Antonia Fraser (p16) wrote her first book, *King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table*, in 1954. Her new book, *The House that Spoke: The History of a Home*, is out on 23rd August.



Kenneth Cranham (p20) starred in *Shine on Harvey Moon*, written by Marks and Gran. He has appeared in many plays written by his friends Joe Orton and Harold Pinter. He was Noah Claypole in *Oliver!*



Peter McKay (p57) has worked for the *Daily Express*, the *Evening Standard* and the *Daily Mail*. He edited *Punch* and wrote the Grovel column in *Private Eye* with Nigel Dempster.

A friend of the Old Un tells me he has given up on the BBC.

Since he stopped paying the licence fee last April, he has received no fewer than 12 reminder letters, rising in their threats.

'Final notification' in black ink was followed by 'officers have now been authorised to visit your property' in red ink. And 'Will you be in on the 17th? You should expect a visit from an enforcement officer' (blue ink).

A second-class stamp is 85p and the office costs of a letter must be around £1. With more than 300,000 people having abandoned the licence fee in the last year, that would suggest the BBC has spent well over half a million quid on menacing letters in the last 12 months.

That's half a Lineker.

Hordes of eager politicos buzzed to Warwickshire for the summer wedding of *Telegraph* parliamentary sketchwriter Madeline Grant and the

NOT MANY DEAD

Important stories you may have missed

Less than 3% of ScotRail services cancelled in 2024
Herald



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Guardian

New toilet block back on agenda
Salisbury Journal

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Rev Fergus Butler-Gallie, vicar of Charlbury with Shorthampton, Oxon.

Among the young thrusters, we hear, was a certain Michael Portillo, a mere 72, sporting a blond hairdo. Michael used to be Iberian inky. Then he turned grey. Now he is Diana Dors blond.

The Rev Fergus may be able to get a sermon out of this miracle.



The children's author Allan Ahlberg, who has just died at 87, passed the bedtime test, in common with the late Raymond Briggs. Their picture books amused grown-ups as well as babies, even after 100 readings or more.

Both plundered similar childhood backgrounds: a washhouse in the back yard, an outside lavatory, a mangle and a coal shed, in the days when children could roam free all day and, according to season, play marbles or hopscotch, or build snowmen.

Each Peach Pear Plum, as Ahlberg confessed, didn't even need writing: it was a school-yard skipping rhyme, collected by the nursery-rhyme experts Iona and Peter Opie, in 1954.

The rhyme ended, 'I spy Betty Grable; Betty Grable is a star, S-T-A-R!'

At 18, Ahlberg was digging graves in Oldbury cemetery when the superintendent discovered he had A levels – and drove him at once to Bleak House Primary School.

Here he found he was a born teacher, who understood the child's mind.

At Sunderland Tech, he met his wife Janet, his perfect illustrator. He'd come in from school and tell her his latest idea. 'She would say, "Ching! Five hundred pounds, please."'

That was their publisher's advance in 1970.

Receiving the Kate Greenaway medal for *Peepo*, Ahlberg made a speech welcoming their newborn Jessica as 'not so much a baby; more a piece of market research'. After Janet's tragically early death, he eventually married his editor, Vanessa. And Jessica grew up to be his new illustrator.

Peepo alone sold in millions, enabling Ahlberg to buy a handsome house high above Bath, from a lady improbably called Jane Eyre.

The Oldie's Valerie Grove, visiting him there in 2013, noticed in his writing shed a display of greetings cards from other children's poets and writers, dating from when he moved to Bath.

Roger McGough's verse pointed out that southerners may say 'Barth' but Liverpudlians rhyme it with 'math'. In his poem to Allan, McGough wrote of Bath:

'Although a lovely place by all accounts,
Never have an operation you cannot spell
Or live in a town you mispronounce.'



Allan Ahlberg (1938-2025)

Do you remember the wry, mischievous ditties Jake Thackray (1938-2002) performed on *That's Life* in the 1970s?

Paul Thompson, co-author of a biography of the songwriter, has disinterred his equally entertaining columns for the *Yorkshire Post* and the *Catholic Herald* in a new collection, *Jake Thackray: The Unseen Writer*.

In those pieces, he introduced us to such characters as Mr Hargreaves, the dour Yorkshire teacher who, when asked by the Lower Sixth if he liked *Round the Horne* and *Monty Python*, said, 'It's all right ... if you like laughing.'

Although Thackray was a fervent if unorthodox Catholic, he was resistant to homilies that he thought turned the inspiring 'leap' of the Mass into a dreary 'unleap'.

He'd listened to 3,787 of them, he said, and on more than one occasion endured 'so opinionated a man, so out-of-touch a man, such a blathering, patronising, three-quarters-of-an-hour preaching-at-the-people man' that he couldn't blame the worshippers who started to play cards or restart their knitting.

Not what the readers of the *Catholic Herald* were used to hearing.

This year marks the centenary of the death of Sir Francis Carruthers Gould (1844-1925), the first staff political cartoonist on a daily newspaper in Britain and the first of his kind to be knighted. A kind-hearted satirist, he once said, 'I etch with vinegar, not vitriol.'

Regulars at *Oldie* Literary Lunches may have noticed some of Gould's framed originals – as well as his portrait in oils – on the walls

GETTY

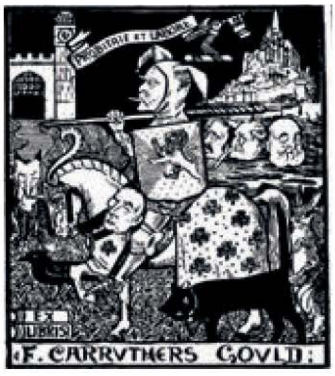
of the National Liberal Club, of which he was a long-standing member.

Liberal Prime Minister Lord Rosebery described Gould as 'the most valuable asset which is left to the Liberal Party'.

Rosebery appears as a cartoon Napoleon on a rocking horse (a spoof of the David painting) on the cover of a new book, *The Picture Politics of Sir Francis Carruthers Gould*, by Colin Seymour-Ure.

It's edited by *Oldie* contributor Mark Bryant. Lord Baker, in his foreword, says, 'This is a major contribution to our knowledge of British cartooning.'

This year also marks the 50th anniversary of the foundation of the British



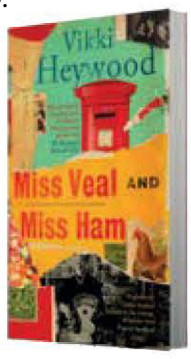
Francis Carruthers Gould, pioneering cartoonist

Cartoon Archive at the University of Kent, of which the late Professor Seymour-Ure was a leading light.

Its collection of around 200,000 original cartoons includes drawings by many *Oldie* cartoonists, past and present, and begins with the work of Gould.

The Post Office scandal is nothing new.

So you'll find in Vikki Heywood's new novel, *Miss Veal and Miss Ham (right)*.



It draws on the author's strong memories of the diminutive but feisty Mrs Johns, who ran her village sweet shop and sub-post office in the 1950s.

In a converted front room, the size of a postage stamp, Mrs Johns managed separate hours for her sweets and stamps. She would often refuse to serve a gobstopper from her dusty jar and a stamp for a postcard at the same time. Her rules were challenged at your peril!

The disappearance of these sub-post offices – vital to their communities through two world wars – is central to the novel's story.

After the Second World War, an earlier Post Office scandal affected many thousands of GPO staff. The parallels with the modern-day scandal, brilliantly brought to life by the TV drama *Mr Bates vs the Post Office*, are plain to see.

The fictitious Beatrix Veal and Dora Ham become victims of a real event. In 1947, our cash-strapped Civil Service began to close old-fashioned sub-post offices, to provide modernised jobs elsewhere for the returning men.

Several thousand part-time and 'temporary' post-office workers lost their jobs after many decades of service, with no redundancy pay and no pension. Many, like the elderly characters in Heywood's novel, were left in desperate financial straits.

So Mrs Johns had good reason for being so irascible after all.

In the ancient church of Alfriston, the Cathedral of the Downs, in Sussex, stone sculptures by the late John Roberts (1946-2002) will be uncrated after nearly 20 years.

The sculptor carved three of the life-size figures of 20th-century martyrs on the west front of Westminster Abbey – known especially for the sensitivity of his carving of the African girl Manche Masemola (1913-28).



Manche Masemola (1913-28), Westminster Abbey

She was killed by her mother for becoming a Christian as a teenager.

Roberts is also known for his striking seven-foot bronze abstract, *Angel on the Green*, in Islington.

Orphaned at eight, an only child, he was brought up by an aunt in Port Talbot, where his grandfather, an ex-miner, was the manager of the steel works.

The selling exhibition has been set up by his widow, the sculptor Silvia MacRae Brown. He would regularly visit her nearby cottage, roaming the Downs and cliffs for hours.

This is where he came to die, aged 56, from cancer, accepting his illness and death with calm.

The selling show is at St Andrew's Church, Alfriston, from 7th to 21st September.

The trade union of top mandarins remains strong. Simon Case, who had an unhappy spell as Cabinet Secretary during lockdown, was introduced to the House of Lords just before the summer recess. One of his two official supporters was Lord Butler, shop steward of the ex-Cabinet Secretaries club.

Case, with shaven head and two silver rings on his left hand, cut a trendy dash in his ermine robes, but he is very much part of a continuing line.

One of the great parliamentary survivors may finally be about to bite the dust. With the last of the hereditaries about to depart the Lords, it is understood the Lib Dems will save two of their four hereditaries by giving them life peerages.

The lucky duo are said to be Earl Russell and Lord Addington, meaning it's curtains for the Earl of Glasgow and Viscount Thurso.

John Archibald Sinclair, to give the 3rd Viscount Thurso his original name, has already been swatted twice. He lost his Lords seat in the first purge of hereditaries in 1999. Then he popped up as an MP for Caithness for 14 years.

When the voters kicked their laird out of the Commons in 2015, Thurso sailed back into the Lords, thanks to a hereditaries' by-election in 2016 following the death of Lord Avebury.

Before politics he was in the hotels trade, specialising in food and drink. After three sittings in parliament, it now looks like last orders.



P G Wodehouse's Plum Lines



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

'A melancholy-looking man, he had the appearance of one who has searched for the leak in life's gas pipe with a lighted candle.'

The Man Upstairs (1914)

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Our glamorous holiday – at home

We binge-watched *The Forsyte Saga* and then dined with its stars

I don't know where you went for your summer holidays, but we spent most of ours down Memory Lane.

It's a great place to go. There is no airport hassle, and at the end of the day you get to sleep in your own bed. Apart from a day trip to Broadstairs (in torrential rain), we have stayed in London, going for walks in parks and streets I knew as a child 70 years ago, and visiting – or bumping into – old friends.

We had a particularly happy chance meeting with Gail Rebuck, now 73, a dame and member of the House of Lords, and a titan in the world of publishing, as chair of Penguin Random House. Gail and I went to the French Lycée in South Kensington as children and worked together in publishing in the 1970s.

Intriguingly, simultaneously, we both remembered the same moment from those early years: our first encounter with Germaine Greer – now 86, then a firebrand feminist in her thirties – whose first book, *The Female Eunuch*, had made her a global household name.

We were after her next book. It was going to be about fertility. But Germaine – who both Gail and I recalled being wonderfully wild and alarmingly strident – was absolutely determined that the cover of the book should feature a close-up photograph of female pubic hair – preferably her own, or if we thought her own might be 'too grey, grizzled and unappealing', then she would consider 'a model's pubes; a fine, full bush, something you can grab hold of'.

We have been tripping down Memory Lane in the evenings, too.

Mostly, we are doing that at home, in front of the TV. Our go-to channel is YouTube, where we have discovered 76 fabulous episodes of *The Good Old Days*, the entertainment show that evoked the music hall of the late-Victorian era. For 30 years, from 1953, it came from the City Varieties Music Hall in Leeds, with the great Leonard Sachs in the chair and performers as brilliant as Arthur Askey, Ken Dodd and Roy Castle strutting their stuff and lifting our spirits.



Susan Hampshire and Martin Jarvis, *The Forsyte Saga*, 1967

My friend Dame Maureen Lipman wants to revive *The Good Old Days*, with cutting-edge contemporary singers and entertainers doing the old numbers.

If she gets it off the ground, I'll be pitching for the chairman's role.

For drama, we are binge-watching *The Forsyte Saga* – not the excellent 2002 Damian Lewis/Gina McKee version, but the great, original BBC 26-part serial from 1967.

There is no music, it is in black and white, and the filmed sequences and the studio scenes don't always quite match as they might, but it is wonderful. You can understand every word and the story-telling has you on the edge of your seat.

John Galsworthy won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1932 and, unsurprisingly, his Forsyte novels have been adapted for the screen time and again, with three silent films in the 1920s and a famous Hollywood version in 1949, with Errol Flynn as Soames Forsyte and Greer Garson as Irene.

In the 1967 version we are watching, Eric Porter is definitive as Soames and Nyree Dawn Porter (no relation) ace as Irene.

That Nyree Dawn Porter should turn out to be really good (as well as very beautiful) surprised me because whenever I hear her name I think of the quip (often attributed to Noël Coward): 'Ah, Nyree Dawn Porter – the three worst actresses in the business.'

That was an unkind jibe that stuck and, from what I'm seeing of Miss Porter in her prime, quite unfair.

By complete coincidence, while watching *The Forsyte Saga*, we had successive meals with two of its young stars, whom we are lucky enough to count as friends.

Susan Hampshire, 88, and Martin Jarvis, 84, are both still younger than springtime (in Susan's case, mind-bogglingly so) and both still working. Susan is filming yet another take on the Forsytes: a prequel to air on Channel 5 later in the year.

Martin Jarvis is arguably our greatest voice artist. There is no one I would rather hear on the radio.

When my wife, Michèle, and I had lunch with Martin and his wife, Rosalind Ayres, the morning after our dinner with Susan Hampshire, we gossiped about *The Forsyte Saga* (and how Eric Porter had a crush on Michael York, another youth in the series, still with us at 83).

Martin, joining us on our perambulation down Memory Lane, suddenly recalled appearing with an actress whose name (I am ashamed to say) meant nothing to me: Marjorie Westbury (1905-89). Her fame came entirely from her work on the wireless.

Martin was in the cast in 1983 when she chose to celebrate the golden jubilee of her first appearance on the BBC by appearing in a radio adaptation of N C Hunter's play *Waters of the Moon*.

Apparently, Marjorie Westbury's voice was so well-known and so loved that a fan – who had never met her – left her a cottage in their will. Those were the days.

Gyles Brandreth's Somewhere, a boy and a bear: A biography of A A Milne and Winnie-the-Pooh*, is out in September*



My stalking season begins

In our troubled age, I long for the kind diffidence of Michael Kitchen

MATTHEW NORMAN

Although what follows will surely be referred to the authorities – the police in the first instance; mental-health services after that – let this plainly be stated.

I am on the verge of stalking the actor Michael Kitchen.

Mr Kitchen should know that I mean him no harm, and wish only to be his friend. On reflection, that will be less reassuring than intended, it being verbatim what every stalker tells the stalkee a moment before the bundling into the car boot commences.

Yet it happens to be true. For years I have not only admired but been mildly obsessed with a performer you may know from various productions, most likely *Foyle's War*.



Quiet hero: Michael Kitchen in *Foyle's War*

In this defunct but beloved ITV wartime drama, Mr Kitchen is a senior detective in Hastings in a time before a triple-figure IQ became an automatic bar to advancement in the British police.

But it isn't the intellect that captivates. It's the reticence. Mr Kitchen (like one of those biddies who scream at soap baddies in Tesco, I cannot distinguish reality from TV fiction) is exactly that diffident, modest, firm but kind, understated, thoroughly decent English archetype, long since vanished from these parts.

When his son's away on RAF bombing missions, he doesn't bang on about the paternal terror. He permits his top lip to twitch an 18th of an inch, and leaves it at that.

Had Mr Kitchen stayed in coastal Sussex, catching German spies and black-marketeering spivs, he'd be fine. His misfortune is that he now lives in Dorset, a short drive from my semi-estranged wife, Rebecca.

'I really think it's time we went,' I announced during a recent visit, as another *Foyle's War* drew languidly to its close.

'Oh Christ,' said Becca, 'not f****** Shaftesbury again.'

It being a matter of public record that Mr Kitchen lives in that town, I have repeatedly suggested to Becca that we go there and hang around in the hope of bumping into him.

She was no keener on the notion than previously. 'He seems a very shy, reserved man, who'd be mortified by attention from any stranger. Let alone you. Please, please, leave Michael Kitchen alone.'

Although I reluctantly accepted the advice, within the hour serendipity struck. En route to (where else for pitiful old-timers?) a garden centre, we found ourselves behind a red truck.

This vehicle, dedicated to transporting organs (musical instruments, not body parts) to local fairs, bore the legend 'Di Bartlett of Shaftesbury'.

'It's an omen,' I said. 'Di Bartlett's bound to know him. She could introduce us.' Pushing my face through the window, I yelled 'Di, Di, Di, Di, Di…', much like Alan Partridge screaming at Dan in the field.

'Stop it at once,' hissed Rebecca. 'Do you not hear how shouting that at a lone woman could be misconstrued?'

Hearing it, I let Di Bartlett turn right without following her.

'Blimey, his phone number's listed,' I said that evening after some light googling. 'I could subscribe to 192.com and ring him for a chat.'

'And how did that go with Professor Stanley Unwin?' she enquired. 'Not great,' I murmured. Decades ago, one Sunday night in drink, I got his number from directory enquiries and rang the laureate of gibberish at home.

He and his wife were listening to their favourite radio show, he related, and didn't appreciate the interruptibold of the sabbath wiryless on the telephoid. Or something to that effect.

'But I adored Stanley Unwin,' I said woundedly. 'As I adore Michael Kitchen now.'

Becca went into caring-psychiatric-nurse mode. It is anything but her natural mode, and was all the more chillingly Nurse Ratched for that. 'Look,' she said, gently placing an arm on mine, 'I understand how you feel about Michael Kitchen. I do. He's a wonderfully calming manifestation of an Englishness we all miss. And he's got such a lovely face.'

'So wouldn't you like to see it close up?'

'Yes, but I wouldn't know what to say to him. Other than "I loved you in *Caught on a Train*".'

'Well, that's a good ice-breaker,' I said.

'But he doesn't know us,' insisted Becca. 'And, in the nicest way, he wouldn't want to know you. Sometimes, love means having to let go.'

Half-heartedly, I mentioned the Marks & Spencer food hall in Blandford Forum. Michael Kitchen has been spotted quite often there.

'But you can hardly ask the staff to alert you when he pops in, and then hold him indefinitely while you drive from west London. It's like bellowing what sounds like "Die, die, die" at women on the road. It must end in tears. And court.'

Crushed by her common sense, I fell into morose silence. She took pity. 'You could always write about your feelings,' she said, 'for catharsis.'

'Bugger catharsis,' I said. 'Do you think he'd get in touch if I did?'

'He wouldn't,' said Becca, 'but his solicitor might. And that could clarify the situation for you in a very helpful way.'

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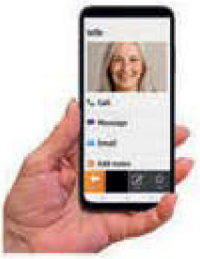

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OLDEN LIFE

WHAT WERE tail fins?

In February 1948, Cadillac introduced their latest Series 62, which featured 'rudder-type' tail fins, inspired by the Lockheed P-38 aircraft.

The management was concerned they would not appeal to conservative motorists, but fins became a Cadillac trademark for more than a decade.

The trend rapidly spread. By the early 1950s, owners of the Chevrolet Fleetline could buy fins for just $29.95.

Chrysler stated that 'Good stability in crosswinds eliminates some of the need for steering corrections by the operator.' In reality, the role of tail fins owed less to engineering and more to the desire to give a DeSoto Firesweep overtones of a road-going jet airline.

Many enthusiasts believed tail fins reached their aesthetic zenith with Virgil Exner's 1957 'Flite Sweep' model year designs for Chrysler. 'WHO SAYS TOMORROW NEVER COMES? YOU'RE LOOKING AT IT!', claimed one Plymouth advertisement.

General Motors made a concerted bid to win the Battle of the Fins. In 1959, the Cadillac Sedan de Ville sported flame-shaped tail-lights. Meanwhile, the Buick Electra 225 favoured canted 'delta fins'.

By the end of the decade, even modestly priced US saloons were chrome-encrusted testaments to conspicuous consumption. After such excesses, the next inevitable stage for the Great American Tail Fin was extinction. By 1965, they were merely a vestigial detail on the Cadillac Sixty Special.

Across the Atlantic, the influence of the tail fin spread to France, with the Simca Vedette, and Germany, with the Mercedes-Benz Heckflosse.

In this country, *Autocar* grumbled about 'soaring tail fins that uselessly slice the atmosphere on the hindquarters of the current US crop'. Such concerns did not deter Vince Taylor and His Playboys from recording *Brand New Cadillac* (1959), one of Britain's finest rock 'n' roll songs.



Cadillac Sedan de Ville, 1959

Fins even appeared on cars from marques associated with taste, decency and pipe-smoking. In 1958, the Wolseley 15-60 featured pointed tail-lights. In 1959, Daimler unveiled the magnificently befinned SP250, as driven by the London Metropolitan Police – like Richard Dimbleby wearing a Teddy Boy outfit on *Panorama*.

British cars often retained the same lines for years. The Humber Sceptre retained fins as late as 1967.

John C Keats ranted in his 1958 book, *The Insolent Chariots,* 'Cars do not swim; why give them fins?'

But fins were there precisely to lend another dimension. That's why a Chrysler Windsor Town & Country – or a Ford Fairlane 500 – resembled a Jupiter-C rocket; to give the impression of flight along the freeway.

And it is hard not to agree with Cadillac's 1959 claims they had created 'a modern masterpiece of automotive sculpture'.

Andrew Roberts

MODERN LIFE

WHAT IS fast tech?

Fast tech is the electronic equivalent of fast food or fast fashion. It refers to items of technology that we buy on the cheap, use for a couple of weeks and then chuck away, once they inevitably malfunction.

You know the sort of thing. The USB desk fan you saw for £6 in the middle of Lidl during the last heatwave. That portable phone-charger you picked up at the airport for £8.99. The light-up drone toy you bought on Amazon for £16.99 last Christmas, imagining hours of family fun – only to receive mere seconds of distraction before the stupid thing broke.

The research group Material Focus has calculated that the UK buys more than a billion such items per year – and throws away about half of them.

USB sticks, earphones, cables, disposable vapes and miniature fans are among the most commonly dumped. According to the *Guardian*, 7.1 million fans were bought in the UK last summer – and 3.5 million were discarded, with most of them ending up in landfill.

I swear, these items are becoming shoddier, too. I must have bought five phone-charging cables in 2025. They keep snapping, fraying or not quite fitting. Buying more expensive cables seems to make no difference.

Equally flimsy are the little adaptors I must now buy because Apple decided to remove the standard headphone jack socket from the iPhone and I'm not inclined just to throw away my old wired headphones in favour of some £129 AirPods.

Apple is one of the worst culprits here. It has somehow normalised the idea that a £399 phone containing precious rare-earth minerals needs to be discarded and replaced every couple of years.

But almost no one is free of blame. I'm sure most of us have a 'drawer of doom' with at least a dozen old phones and associated paraphernalia.

Mine is more of a cupboard. It contains five laptops, too, plus fragments of the souls of the Congolese child miners and Chinese factory workers whose labour has made this hollow plenty possible.

Most of this stuff can actually be recycled and the copper, gold, platinum and cobalt can be used again. Petition the companies. Visit your local household-waste recycling centre. Donate old technology to local charities.

But really the best thing is not to feed this ludicrous demand in the first place. If the actual environmental costs of consumer goods were baked into their price, they would be so expensive that society as we know it would cease to function.

Richard Godwin

Laurence Marks and *Maurice Gran* have written sitcoms – and argued – for 45 years

It takes two to tango



Marks and Gran at an *Oldie* lunch, 2025

Michael Grade, a giant of British television, once told us Nat Hiken (1914-68), a giant of US television, defined comedy as 'two Jews fighting'.

Hiken created the brilliant *Phil Silvers Show* (*Sergeant Bilko*, to you) and wrote or co-wrote most of the 144 episodes. So who are we to argue? Although we could, because Hiken's Law says so.

Nat wasn't talking only about the art of *playing* comedy, but about the art of writing comedy, which, in the 1950s, his heyday, was a Jewish speciality second only to the smoked-salmon bagel trade.

Of course, you don't have to be Jewish; we allowed other faiths into comedy years ago. But it certainly helps if there are two of you.

Though some classic sitcoms have been the work of single writers – strange, introverted, driven people – most shows emerge from the complementary art of two people trapped in a small room with a typewriter and a deadline.

Not two random people, obviously. You can introduce a couple of highly competent gag-smiths to each other and lock them in an office, and by teatime there could be blood on the keyboard and only one survivor.

As for ChatGPT, we asked it to give us a first scene of a *Birds of a Feather* – and what it produced, in seven seconds flat, wasn't funny and was badly structured.

No, you need two writers with a shared hinterland and similar, but not identical, senses of humour.

The quintessential comedy-writing duo were Ray Galton and Alan Simpson, young men who met in a TB sanatorium in 1948. They suffered and laughed together, and went on to create *Hancock's Half Hour* and to invent British situation comedy.

On the other hand, Dick Clement and Ian La Frenais, the creators of *The Likely Lads* and *Porridge*, came from opposite ends of the country and met in the early sixties in a Notting Hill pub. So feel free to ignore much of the above.

Hold on, though. What about us?

We're Jewish, we grew up a mile apart in north London, we both adored radio and TV comedy, and since we've argued every working day for 45 years, we certainly validate Hiken's definition.

As Barry Took, our first mentor, said, a comedy-writing partnership is like a marriage, except you keep your clothes on.

Why do comedy writers voluntarily surrender half of the money and fame? Because nothing can replace having someone in the room who laughs at your good lines and tells you when they aren't so good. Or indeed when they're dreadful.

More importantly, if you're trying to write that oft-maligned genre, situation comedy (the best genre in our not especially humble opinions), you need to be able to generate ideas, settings, stories and characters good enough to capture the nation's attention and affection.

Steptoe, Fletcher, Captain Mainwaring, Fawlty, Sir Humphrey, Blackadder and, dare we add, Alan B'Stard, were all produced by a pair of writers, almost certainly fighting.

It's possible that as *Fawlty Towers* was written (and performed) by a married couple, John Cleese and Connie Booth, the clothes did occasionally come off.



Another benefit of writing with a partner, as we often tell would-be writers, is that 'All writers have great ideas, but usually they don't know they've had them.'

Two of our most successful series

NEIL SPENCE; SHUTTERSTOCK



Alan B'stard (Rik Mayall, (1958-2014) in *The New Statesman,* 1987

would never have seen the light of telly if either of us had been working solo.

In 1988, Maurice took his family out for Christmas dinner in a posh Kensington hotel. It was intended to be a special treat, with turkey and all the trimmings to be taken in the penthouse restaurant overlooking Kensington Palace Gardens. With a bit of luck, they'd be able to watch Princess Diana walking off that extra portion of plum pudding.

Annoyingly, the hotel served lunch in the basement coffee shop, which wasn't very classy at all. However, at the next table there were two overdressed women in, respectively, gold and silver lamé, with husbands who looked like retired bank robbers (though they were quite possibly plain-clothes vicars with their good ladies).

When we reconvened in the New Year, Laurence asked Maurice about his Christmas outing. Maurice described those gangsters and their molls, and Laurence instantly said, 'Linda and Pauline.' Maurice knew he meant that Linda Robson and Pauline Quirke would be perfect playing those women, or Sharon and Tracey, as they came to be known. Thus was, or were, born *Birds of a Feather*, which ran for almost as many episodes as *The Phil Silvers Show.*

Maurice returned the favour a few years later. We were plotting an episode of *Love Hurts,* a comedy drama we were writing for Adam Faith and Zöe Wanamaker.

This episode was set in the Whitechapel Road, a major thoroughfare in the East End of London. À propos nothing, Laurence mused, 'There's a street a couple of turnings from here where nothing has changed since the Blitz.'

Maurice immediately said, 'I think you've just created our next series.'

Laurence had no idea what Maurice meant; Maurice didn't have much of an idea himself. He just knew, instinctively, that a comedy about a man who can slip from the present day – 1993 – into the London of 1940 would captivate an audience.

That idea became *Goodnight Sweetheart*, a show that still has a dedicated following, 25 years after the last episode was screened.

What delights us, even now, is not that we were able to recognise each other's moment of inspiration, but the speed with which we did so. The empathy built up over years and decades paid off. As for the fighting, well, it's been going on so long that we hardly know we do it.

We were compelled to accept that we disagree rather more loudly than other writers when we were working in the next office to Dick Clement and Ian La Frenais, in Hollywood. Dick and Ian, the writers of *Porridge*, *The Likely Lads* and *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet*, were our heroes.

And now they were script-editing one of our shows, in Hollywood! (Did we mention it was Hollywood?) Bliss.

But one day, when we were working quite calmly and maturely on one of our scripts, we suddenly heard a terrible argument erupt in the adjoining office.

We listened in horror as, on the other side of the thin drywall partition, the greatest comedy-writing team in Britain disintegrated before our ears.

'If that's your opinion, we might as well call it a day!'

'My opinion? You're the one who rejects all my ideas and treats me like a junior partner!'

'Maybe if you pulled your weight instead of your…'

This went on for endless minutes. The noise subsided, but we couldn't return to our script. We were too shaken.

A few minutes later, our door opened, and Dick poked his head round it. 'Coming to lunch, guys?'

We trooped downstairs to Hamptons, the burger joint next door. We perused the menu – 72 different burger combinations – and wondered at Dick and Ian's bewildering sangfroid.

Finally, one of us summoned the courage to ask, 'Are you two all right?'

'Of course,' said Dick, 'Why?'

'Well, we couldn't help hearing you shouting and screaming at each other.'

With a mischievous smile, Ian said, 'We just thought you should hear what you two sound like, pet.'

> It's like a marriage, except you keep your clothes on

Laurence Marks and Maurice Gran wrote The New Statesman, Shine On Harvey Moon *and* Goodnight Sweetheart

An orphan – at 69

After his mother died at 98, *Griff Rhys Jones* still felt subtle losses when she was no longer there

I am an orphan. I have been an orphan for nearly three years. My mother died aged 98. I was already 69.

I posted the news on my teenage addiction, Instagram, only because I thought it was quicker than the *East Anglian Daily Times* – and managed to upset my sister.

But here's the thing. I used a 1950s, black-and-white photo of us hugging our mummy.

To my astonishment, it got 60,000 likes and a wave of sympathetic comments – 'So sorry for your loss', 'Thinking of you' and so forth.

Some went further. They wondered whether I would need counselling – 'How are you coping?' 'Your loss will eventually heal.'

I was put out. She was 98. I thought that there would be a measure of mature expectation here, or am I wrong? Am I still searching for 'closure'?

I was once told off, writing for a travel magazine, when I said that I disliked organised tourism, so I should be careful about writing this in *The Oldie*: I learned that the last stage of life is not a thing you necessarily want to extend.

I accompanied my mother to her last meeting with her specialist. She loved doctors. She'd married one. But I had never seen her so intensely focused.

A doctor is paid to listen to your symptoms. He makes notes. He nods. He asks searching questions.

Obviously, I had listened to the doctor myself, probably while flipping through a newspaper or something, but even doctors ultimately call time. Her specialist had done what he could. She had degenerative heart disease. This was their last meeting.

She was instantly crestfallen. Not, I think, because of the tolling bell, but because she would miss the outings, the attention and the detailing of the symptoms.

I told her her birthday was in September. 'All the grandchildren and the great-grandchildren will be there…'

But, over her shoulder, as I was waffling, I caught the eye of the consultant. He shook his head and grimaced. It was the most telling of diagnoses.

'Best take each day as it comes,' he said.





***Top:* Griff (*right*) with his mum, 1955**
***Above:* son and mother, 65 years on**

She lasted another five years – with astonishing resilience. She went into a care home. She survived that care home. She got Covid. She survived Covid. She declined.

And she never stopped asking, 'Why is this happening to me?'

Her end was partly a release. There was shock, but, of course, acceptance, too. Her time had come.

And yet… There are subtle losses when we lose a mother. The other day I found myself thinking, 'Oh yeah, I can get across to visit her later.' Of course not. That regularity had gone.

I was a mummy's boy too. Aged six, I hated those nights when she would rustle in, all silk and perfume, to kiss us good night, knowing she was out to some dinner party. Lying awake, waiting for her headlights flashing across the ceiling – I can still summon up that feeling.

One of the tragedies of bearing children is that they grow away from you. In her little cottage one evening when I was in my fifties and I was on my own, my wife having gone off to London, she said, 'Why don't you stay the night?'

'Eh? Well, no, no…' I used the matter-of-fact voice we reserve for errant parental thinking, developed through our late teens. 'I have things to do.'

I lived only 15 miles away. I wanted my own bed and another episode of *The Sopranos*. My mother just wanted to look after me for a bit. But when I had a first night in the West End, she had to be there, and she loved it for the same reasons I did: the things that I wasn't allowed to express.

My name up there in cardboard! A party! Famous people! It didn't matter what Milton Shulman thought. She was the judge and she generally approved. She was largely unembarrassable (though capable of embarrassing me by gushing over a fellow actor). I remember taking her on a shortcut through Soho, past a couple openly copulating in the shadows. She briskly strode by. Why not? She had been a ward sister.

She coped with all my early girlfriends. And loved and adored my wife for ever. She liked lunch out to be a parade, an event, with the hat and the stick and the wheelchair. She anchored things like Christmas for us, which seemed to start in June – 'You are so difficult to buy for.'

Recently, I had a difficult period with some tests. What was weird was how much I wanted – needed even – to tell her about it. By that stage, she couldn't have understood and if she had, it would have been too much.

They say that young soldiers mortally wounded in battle call to their mothers. We never lose that, I guess.

And, most of all, as orphans, even geriatric ones, we miss that proper measure. Who else, after all, can correct bad behaviour? 'Oh, Griffith, bach.'

I have to say, though, my sister made quite a good fist of it when I stuck up that Instagram.

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

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At home with Harold Pinter

Antonia Fraser has lived at the same house for 66 years – 50 of them with the playwright



Lady Antonia's home, Campden Hill Square, west London – by writer Paul Johnson

In 1975, I left Hugh Fraser, the Conservative MP, for Harold Pinter, the playwright.

We had no regular house but rented a flat nearby. It was extremely small, especially considering the amount of children it had to house.

Gradually our relationship became resolved and hardened. The resolution brought even greater happiness. There remained the question of where we should live. Or, to put it another more emotional way, where our home was.

Then, with extraordinary generosity, Harold agreed to move into Campden Hill Square in Holland Park, west London, where I've lived since 1959, and live today.

He said that he thought of the children's feelings; their early memories. It was typical of his thoughtfulness where they were concerned.

What did the House think? I kept the question to myself. All the same, I couldn't quite resist talking aloud. Slipping through the dark trees, I spoke softly but clearly: 'Will the House enjoy the company of Harold Pinter?'

To my horror, I heard a loud voice in reply: 'Simon Gray is much more fun.'

And our real live friend, Simon – the playwright (1936-2008) – slid from among the trees.

After Harold and I had lived together with my children for a number of months, I asked him sentimentally, 'Is this your home?'

He did not answer the question. I don't think he heard it. But he didn't write. Or rather, if he did, nothing appeared. The West End was not bothered; nor was Judy Daish, his beloved agent.

One afternoon, he was sitting in the chair by the fire in the left-hand corner of the drawing room which, the moment we moved in, immediately became his.

'Home…' said Harold vaguely. 'Isn't there a house at the bottom of the garden that you went to?'

I remembered popping into a charming little house in Aubrey Road, which ran along the end of all our gardens, in my imagination uniting them. I had decided to buy it and informed my bank of the charming little price. The bank came back smartly: 'Dear Lady Antonia, we have to inform you that you cannot actually afford the house in which you now live…'

'I shall go and see it,' said Harold masterfully. I noticed that, unusually, he put his chequebook in his breast pocket.

Situated at the bottom of our garden, the little house was a quick stroll down the lawn; it took a whole journey by car.

When Harold arrived, he found the owner fuming. Two potential buyers had backed out, with muttered promises to let him know by the end of the month. At this, Harold smoothly slipped his chequebook out of his pocket, put it on the table and sat down.

'How much?' he said.

The owner was silenced.

Harold wrote out quite a large sum and said conversationally, 'After all, it's going to be my home.'

The House hissed in his ear, 'What about me?'

Harold paid no attention. He bought Aubrey Road and within a month had written *Betrayal* (1978), often thought to be his best – or, anyway, the favourite Pinter – play, with its exciting interplay of love, sex, marriage – and Venice.

The SuperStudy, as we learnt to call the house at the end of the garden, didn't play much part in my own life. That is, until 27th November 1980.

On that fortunate day, Harold and I were at last free to be married, his wife Vivien Merchant – the actress (1929-82) – having signed the fatal form she had so long avoided.

We decided to give a wedding party at the House and then spend the wedding night in the SuperStudy.

'There's a sofa,' said Harold carelessly. 'A double bed of a sofa.'

What midgets owned that sofa originally? But it didn't matter; nothing mattered but the fact I could sign myself Antonia Pinter at last.

In the morning, I woke to see Harold already at his desk, an enchanted smile on his face as though to say, 'It's mine; this house is mine.' 'How long are you staying?' he shot over his shoulder.







Clockwise from above (all taken at the house): **Antonia & Harold marry, 1980; his parents, Jack & Frances Pinter; Salman Rushdie & Antonia, Harold & Jung Chang, at her book launch for *Marie Antoinette* (2001)**

I wanted to say, 'All the rest of my life.'

Instead I slid off the unreceptive sofa and trailed back over the lawn to the big house. I was still wearing my Jean Muir wedding dress of heliotrope-coloured suede with the white lilies, my favourite flowers, dropping behind me as I went.

When Daniel Craig starred in *Betrayal* on Broadway in 2013, after Harold's death in 2008 at 78, he greeted me after the play with the words 'Oh I so wish Harold was here!'

I wanted to add, 'And I wish we were all three in Harold's SuperStudy in Aubrey Road. Looking back up the garden to the House that Spoke.

The first Christmas we spent in Campden Hill Square as a family in 1959, we had an extraordinary experience. At first the darkness drew in as it always did in winter, leaving shadowy banks and dark pools. At the same time, lights went on in the square here and there.

Suddenly the whole square seemed to light up, the houses like eager spectators.

Hugh and I sprang back from our post where we had been idly watching our neighbours, trotting up and down the hill, decorating Christmas trees or pinning decorations on the window.

'The square is alight' I cried. At that moment, the remaining doors and windows seem to light up. And flicker madly. They were decorated with candles of all shapes and sizes: some quite small and half-used up; others – just a few – huge candles, which seemed to have come off a cathedral altar.

At that point, my neighbour, always eager to inform me of how things were organised, dropped smartly by, mincing up our front path.



'It's history,' she said solemnly. 'The candles are part of the history.' And she explained how a woman, who had lived in our house for 30 years, had come from Philadelphia. There she had encountered Bavarian workmen, whose celebration of Christmas began with a blaze of candles.

Hugh and I agreed that the flickering candles were going to be part of our Christmas from now on. We hoarded candles during the year for the occasion.

As time went on, our little secret Christmas party became a piece of public fun. Harold came to live in Campden Hill Square and he particularly enjoyed the celebration of Christmas Eve. The party included all our most amusing friends from Kensington and gradually from further and further afield.

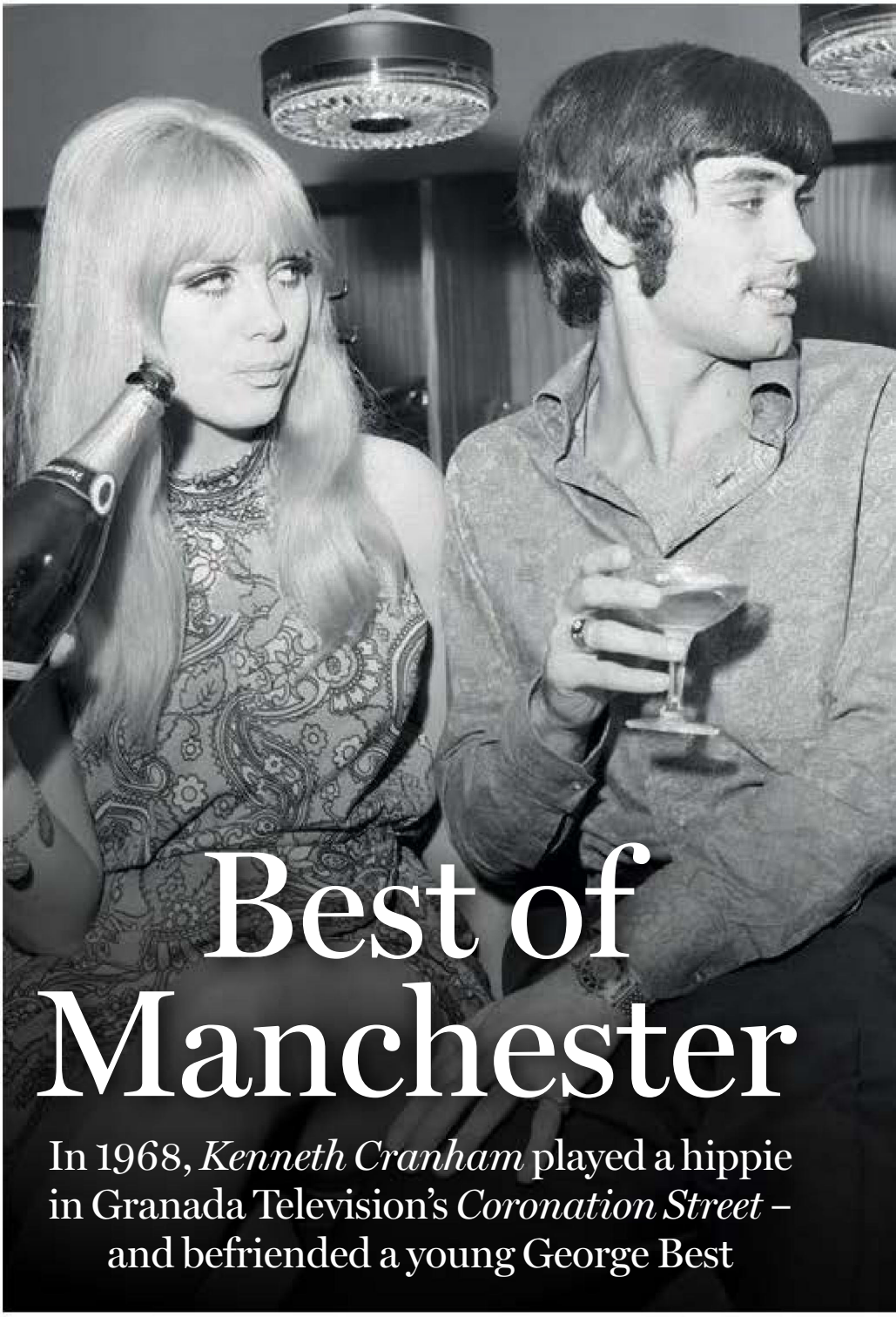
And then the shadows drew down and swathed Harold in their blackness. He died on Christmas Eve 2008 and, ever after, it was His Day. His Day of Sadness, said the House That Spoke.

As my son Benjie drove me home from Hammersmith Hospital where he died, the flickering candles of Campden Hill Square mourned with us. At the flicker of a candle, forever my thoughts go to Harold.

Antonia Fraser's The House That Spoke: The History of a Home *(Tandem Publishing, £10) is published on 23rd August*

Best of Manchester

In 1968, *Kenneth Cranham* played a hippie in Granada Television's *Coronation Street* – and befriended a young George Best



Mine's a double: Best opens Edwardia, his Manchester boutique, 1967

I left RADA at Easter in 1966 and managed to become part of the acting company at the Royal Court Theatre.

It was exactly where I wanted to be, doing small parts and understudying.

My father had taken a job in Hastings. So he bought a house in the Old Town and moved there with my mother and much younger brother.

I rented the actor Simon Ward's basement flat off the Essex Road in Islington. My rent was £12 a week and my wages were £15 a week. Television work made life possible.

I had already played a small part for Granada Television, founded in Manchester almost 70 years ago, in 1956, by Sidney Bernstein.

There was a new series planned: *City '68*, concerning social problems. My part was as Len (Husky) Huskisson, a football player whose violence on the pitch provoked violence in the spectators.

I told the director and producer I supported Millwall, which wasn't true. But I knew it would sound as if I knew about violence. I was suited and booted, had the right look and got the part.

The director was Michael Apted (1941-2021), famous for the great *Seven Up!* series. I worked with him throughout my career, lastly as Pompey in HBO's *Rome* (2005-7).

In *City '68*, James Beck (1929-73), the spiv from *Dad's Army*, was cast as a sports reporter. He told me I should stay at the Brown Bull, a pub with rooms on the edge of Salford – walking distance from Granada Studios. I had a single bed on the second floor.

The ground-floor bar was packed with the doyens of Manchester: Doreen Wells, an elegant, beautiful ballerina, later the Marchioness of Londonderry; Manchester United footballers; *Coronation Street* actors; and police officers. There was an upright piano.

They'd lock the doors and people would sing into the night. Frankie Vaughan's *Green Door* came to mind: 'There's an old piano and they play it hot/ behind the green door.'

Well, I was finding out. Thanks to James Beck, who was catching my eye from across the bar, I was with the Manchester Granada TV 'in' crowd.

Granada Television created a film company, Granada Films. They put me under contract for *All the Way Up* (1970), a version of the play *Semi-Detached* – a huge success for Leonard Rossiter but no one else. It was one of the last films to have a photo card outside the cinema. Granada Films didn't last long.

Granada Studios was a modern block facing a bomb-damaged area, overgrown with bushes and wild flowers, now used as a car park.

The men in uniform at the front desk were helpful and friendly. Facing them was one of Francis Bacon's screaming popes. The corridor that led to the canteen was an art gallery of 20th-century modern art; none of it abstract – wonderful northern landscapes. The uniformed men made sure you received your expenses.

There were two major television companies at that time in Britain: Granada in Manchester and the BBC in White City, London. Built within four years of each other, they were totally different.

The uniformed men at White City, some of them rumoured to be retired prison warders from Wormwood Scrubs up the road, would eye you suspiciously and not want to let you into the building. They were too busy perhaps doffing their peaked caps to the trio of fiddlers, Savile, Rolf and Glitter.

At the entrance hall at Granada, they were delighted you were there and fattened your pockets with expenses gladly. Nearby were the best Chinese and Italian restaurants I'd ever come across. No wonder I love northerners and northern cities – and have done all my life.

One day, they needed to film a sequence: a newsflash of my character, Husky, committing a foul on the pitch – and the crowd's reaction. A large number stayed on after the match; perhaps they thought they were going to be on *Coronation Street*, filmed at Granada since the first episode in 1960, 65 years ago.





Roy (Kenneth Cranham), *second left*, and Robert (Martin Shaw), *right*, *Coronation Street*, 1968

It was supposed to be a floodlit game at the Stockport County ground. Three of us walked on to the pitch. Two elderly costume ladies had given us football kit, still folded in creases from the packet. My opposing player was fat; the other one was skinny. None of us actors looked like footballers, especially alongside the real players, whose legs were twice the width of ours.

I had to knee one of them in the midriff and he had to hit the ground. The crowd, loving their chance to be on telly, clapped rhythmically and chanted 'Poof, poof, poof' in loud unison.

It was raining and muddy. In the changing rooms afterwards, we three weedy actors in the washroom were looked over by the real geezers.

I went to the Stockport County clubhouse and sought the company of the fruit machine. It had a cluster of silver sixpences nestled in its frontage.

On the third pull of the lever, I won the jackpot. The fruit machine opened and poured sixpences on to the floor. I gathered them up and had £15 in small coins. Bliss.

A few years later, Granada Television had a clubhouse and bar. If you were working there, you were a member. The North seemed to have kinder fruit machines. I loved sitting in the club watching Jean Alexander, the charlady Hilda Ogden in *Coronation Street*, dressed to the nines in smart coat and jewellery, armed with a stack of coins, playing her favourite fruit machine all evening. It was her date.

My friend Rick Stroud, now a writer and *Oldie* contributor, learnt to direct TV drama at Granada. Ena Sharples and Minnie Caldwell would tell him gently which camera angles worked best in the Rovers Return.

In 1968, I was cast in *Coronation Street* as a hippie. Elsie Tanner, much to my disappointment, had gone away. Her son, Dennis, had let a gang of hippies squat in the Tanner household. The hippies – Martin Shaw, Michael Attwell, Angela Pleasence, Veronica Clifford and I – sat cross-legged on the floor, crumbling Oxo cubes into cigarette papers.

Meanwhile, back at the Brown Bull, there was a snug bar occupied by an elderly couple with a beautiful shy young man. He'd been brought over from Belfast and was lodging with the sort of kind, older people he was perhaps used to. His name was George Best.

It was a great joy to go to a midweek game at Old Trafford and watch the magical trio of Law, Best and Charlton playing together – winning easily, no sweat.

When United won the European Cup in 1968, George ignored the containment that had been advised and made the night his own. At the Brown Bull, George volunteered to organise fish and chips for the crowded bar. Not only did he remember everything that had been ordered, but the owners of the fish-and-chip shop served it all on china plates.

A television show was made 20 years after the European Cup win for Manchester United. One of the TV excerpts in the show was of me as a long-haired hippie descending the stairs in the Tanner household in *Coronation Street*. I had a black wig and body paint in flower patterns.

At the bottom of the stairs stood the landlord of the Rover's Return and Dennis Tanner. I said to the two of them, 'What's for breakfast, man? If it's flesh, it's out.'

Manchester loved George, who died 20 years ago, aged 59. He would have been 80 next year. He was their crown prince; the fifth Beatle. I adored him, too.

He opened a Manchester boutique, Edwardia, and Slack Alice, a nightclub. There I watched him build pyramids of champagne flutes and fill them up – a torrentially epic way to lose money.

One night in the Manchester rain, I was at a bus stop. George pulled up in his white Jaguar. He opened the door and I got in. He drove me to the Brown Bull. No one saw me get in and no one saw me get out. It exists only in my memory.

And what a warm and lovely memory Granada Television is.

Kenneth Cranham was in Oliver! *(1968),* Shine on Harvey Moon *(1982-85) and* Hatton Garden *(2019)*



The sad old Duke of York

A new biography captures the horrors of Prince Charmless

A N WILSON

The moral of this tale is – when it comes to the royal sons – much depends on the wives.

If you had the patience of the author, Andrew Lownie, you could compile horror dossiers about King Charles III and Prince Edward: the same patterns of rudeness; the same weird, schizoid behaviour; one moment wanting to be liked, and the next climbing on their high horse and demanding to be treated as royal.

The first time round, Charles married a wife who could not stand it, and eventually went public, with catastrophic effect.The second time round, however, he married an ace companion, who is polite, normal and funny and who covers up for his character defects.

In a gentler but no less effective way, the Duchess of Edinburgh makes journalists and officials try to overlook the more squirm-making aspects of her ridiculous husband.

Andrew, by contrast, rather than marry someone who mitigated his intolerable character, managed – some feat – to find someone who was, if possible, even greedier, even grosser and even fonder of spending other people's money than he was.

The detail accumulated by Lownie in this book of the couple's voracious need to stuff their pockets with other people's money, and to have endless luxury holidays, is quite staggering.

At the time of going to press, Jeremy Corbyn had yet to name his new Extremely Left Wing Party, but I was agog to join it; and was even impatient for someone to set up guillotines in the Mall. I'd be there with my knitting needles for a front-row seat.

The spend, spend, spend attitude of Fergie has been present from the outset. As a relative newly-wed, flying back to England, having consulted her clairvoyant in Dallas, and the New York publisher of her *Budgie the Little Helicopter* books, the Duchess Fergiana's 51 pieces of excess luggage contained £33,000 worth of new-bought stuff – six pairs of shoes at £562 a go, a £515 teddy bear and so on.



GETTY

Right royal disaster: Prince Andrew

Andrew's role as Special Representative for International Trade and Investment was an excuse for a whole series of dodgy friendships with Chinses spies, Azerbaijan's corrupt president, Ilham Aliyev, and many another sleazy sheikh and emir.

And, of course, there is the friendship with Jeffrey Epstein, who allegedly settled Fergie's debts and sold many of Andrew's 'secrets' to Mossad, to the kingdom of Saudi Arabia and to the Libyan intelligence service.

Epstein was on record as saying that Andrew 'is like a brother to me. On the one hand he's Prince Charming and on the other hand he has the dirtiest mind I've ever seen. He's tormented.'

Lownie makes it clear that Virginia Giuffre was only one of many teenagers acquired by Maxwell and Epstein to service this awful lout.

What's disturbing about the book, though, is not the fact that the Prince is exceptional – exceptionally boorish, stupid and nasty. It is that the entitlement, the feeling that he's owed all the loot and the deference just because he's royal, is an attitude of mind he shares with the rest of the family.

The Duke of Beaufort is one of the cloud of witnesses attesting to he experience of dining with Prince Andrew. The Duke of York 'appeared to assume we were interested in the quantum mechanics of golf-club design or detailed technical aspects of his work in the Navy'. He peppered his heavy-handed attempts at humour, 'followed by guffaws of laughter', with 'some very bland stories about "Mother"'.

A female witness – there are quite innumerable women saying roughly the same thing in this book – tells us, 'One minute you're having your bum pinched and the next minute he's reminding you he's Your Royal Highness.'

Pity the poor underlings – the footmen clearing up 'the scrunched-up, soiled tissues', which lay scattered round the bed in the mornings.

A 2005 conversation at Hillsborough Castle has become famous. The head of the household, speaking of some storm damage, told Andrew, 'The only major piece, unfortunately, is the tree which was planted by the Queen Mother.'

The Prince then laboriously explained that this usage was for 'the public', and members of the household should say Queen Elizabeth, or Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother. Prince Andrew rudely asked him how long he had worked for the Royal Family. For years, it turned out.

'And you still don't know the proper way to refer to my grandmother. You f***ing imbecile. Get out.'

Andrew Lownie's Entitled: The Rise and Fall of the House of York *(William Collins, £22) is out on 14th August*

I'm tired of retirement

At 83, businessman *Richard Britton* has retired – and he's bored of doing nothing

For some time, I have followed an American YouTube chef called Jean-Pierre.

He recently announced that, after 50 years of almost non-stop work in the catering industry, he was going to take a break. He tells the story of meeting an old friend (literally 'old') and casually asking him what his plans were for the day.

'Nothin'. I ain't goin' to do nothin',' was the smug, contented reply.

For Jean-Pierre, the idea of doin' nothin' was completely alien after a totally absorbing, frenetic working life.

He had never experienced doin' nothin'. That led to his taking a break and finding out, for the first time in his career, what it felt like.



'Was that it?' Spike Milligan (1918-2002)

GETTY

Well, Jean-Pierre, I can tell you. It sucks. I inherited a strong work ethic from both my parents, who had to work hard through the war years to bring up their three children. Like them, I have worked hard all my adult life, totally committed to whatever I've been doing – and feeling fulfilled in being so.

After a career in the very early computer industry, followed by a variety of small businesses and, more recently, work as a county councillor, I have always been totally absorbed in whatever I've been involved with.

For the past 60 years, I have led a life of appointments, meetings, stuff to read and/or write, deadlines, things I should have done 'last week', places to go and people to see. But suddenly it's done. It's all over – finished. I'm retired at 83. No appointments, no deadlines, nobody waiting for me to call them – nobody calling me.

For six decades, work has been central to my life; my sense of purpose, identity and very being. It's been who I am. Now its absence makes me feel as if I have been plunged into a void and I'm somehow fading from the world's stage.

I sympathise with Spike Milligan's intention to have his gravestone read 'Was that it?' That idea was suppressed by the church authorities – although he was allowed to have 'I told you I was ill' in Gaelic on his Winchelsea grave.

I've still got so much to offer the world. It just doesn't seem right for me to accept that I have finished my life's work and that I am now expected to make a profound transition from that busy, absorbing life, not just into leisure, but into a new way of 'being'.

In this, the challenge is no longer to perform or produce, but to try to discover meaning and value in simply *being*. Surely that can't be all that remains to fill whatever number of years I have left.

People tell me that freedom from 'the shackles of work' is liberating – an opportunity to discover 'my true self' – but work *was* my true self! My emotional state still demands an economic purpose.

I just can't turn off the feeling that I have so much still to give and *need* to give: a lifetime of valuable experience; the motivation and drive to continue to play a part and make a contribution.

I'm just not ready for the world of doin' nothin' into which I have been plunged. It sucks.

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Soho's little Malta

In the '40s and '50s, the Maltese Syndicate were kings of vice in Soho, before disappearing for good. By *Jonathan Margolis*

One evening in 1963, my father came home from work looking distinctly out of sorts. He went straight into conclave with my mum in our suburban kitchen. Sensing a crisis, I listened through the door.

My dad owned a small clothing factory in central London, making designer knock-offs for a chain store alongside film extras' costumes for Berman's, the theatrical wardrobe people.

'We've had the bloody Maltese round demanding protection money,' my father was saying. This naturally meant nothing to an eight-year-old. Why was he talking so gloomily about Maltesers?

I have no idea how the problem was resolved, but it cemented the idea in my mind that 'the Maltese', whatever they were, were somehow sinister and criminal.

Ten years later, after my dad had died – not as a result of anything Maltese-connected, I should say – my mother was dating a Scotland Yard police commander.

Acquiring a senior London cop as my very-nearly stepfather, I began to hear about the dreaded Maltese again.

For 25 years, they had apparently been tearing up London with vice, prostitution and protection rackets, dirty-raincoat Soho porn cinemas, strip clubs, clip joints, pimping, dodgy restaurants and illegal gambling.

There had been dramatic Maltese-on-Maltese shootings and slayings and blazing tabloid headlines about the menace of 'the Maltese'.

Hilariously named Maltese gangsters such as the 18-stone Big Frank Mifsud and Nicky the Butcher were major characters in the Sunday nasties.

Their heyday had been in the 1940s and '50s. By now – the early 1970s – the Maltese mob was fading out as a result of a campaign to root out bent West End cops, a clean-up in which my almost stepdad had been instrumental. At least he said he had.

Maltese gang culture was also rampant in London's East End, Cardiff and South Shields. But pretty much nobody under the age of 80 has any memory of it.

The Maltese Syndicate (Il-Maltin ta' Soho in Maltese), as the mob was known to the police in the 1950s, has barely been celebrated in fiction or film.

I mentioned Maltese criminals to a retired Met detective superintendent in his sixties who said he remembered older coppers alluding to 'the Maltese' but knew nothing himself.

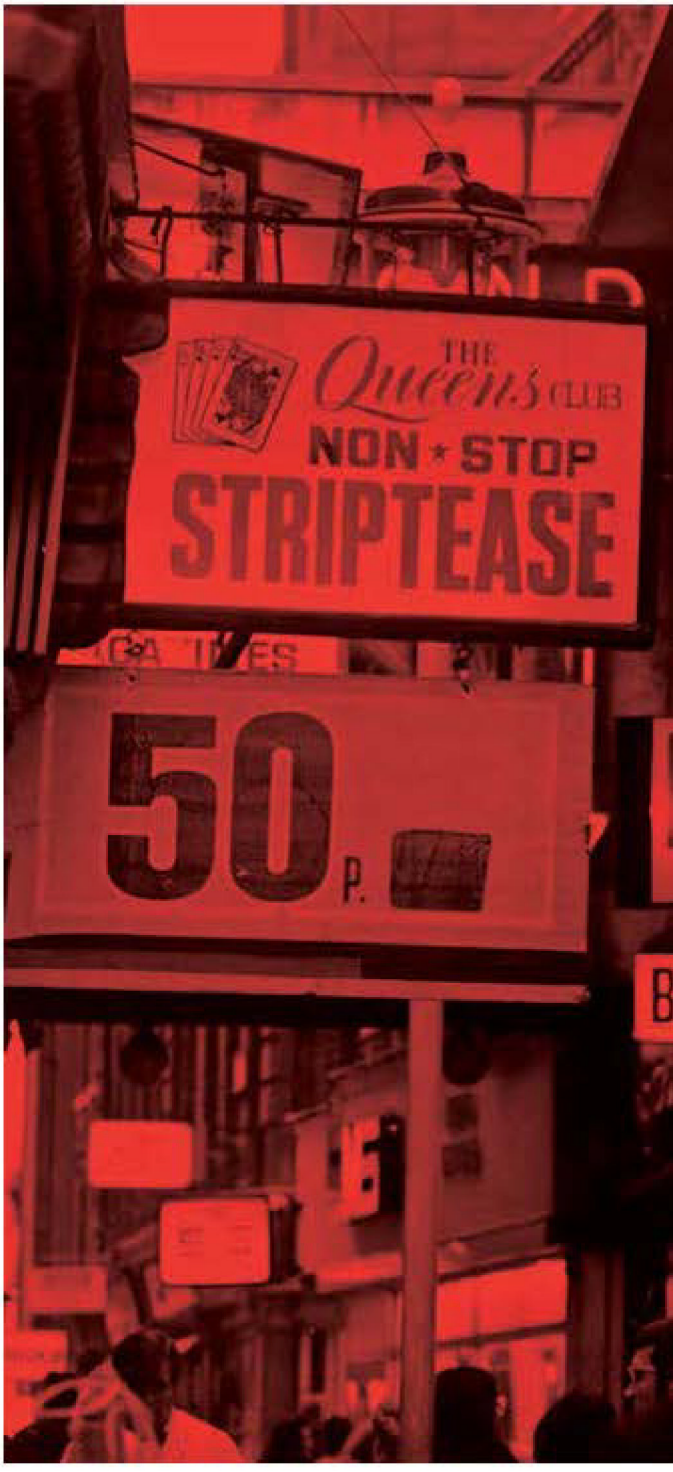
Most immigrants from the tiny, then-poor Mediterranean island were regular Joes, uninvolved in anything dodgy. People with Maltese roots today are anything from builders to middle-class professionals.

I recently went to Malta to ask the Maltese about the Soho gangster times. It seemed a bit rude, like the proverbial mentioning the War to Germans. But people were all too keen to chat about it.

The islands' most famous tour guide, Stanley Cassar Darien, had some knowledge of the Maltese gangsters in London.

Stan said Big Frank Mifsud, who had been a policeman in Malta, retired to the island after being cleared in 1977 of the 1956 gangland murder of the protection racketeer Thomas 'Scarface' Smithson. Big Frank had seen out his days living quietly on the Sliema seafront, playing cards with tourists in a torn old cardigan, spinning yarns of the glory days. He died in 2017, aged 92, at a home he owned in Dublin.

'It's strange to think that even the Krays were scared of Big Frank,' Stan said. 'I've looked around all the old gangster haunts in Soho and there are still traces of the way it was. I remember probably in the '90s or later finding a Maltese club in Soho where a guy with slicked-back hair was on the door looking as if he'd been standing there since 1950. It was all a bit faded, but almost touching.'



Right: **seedy old Soho**
Below: **Jean Agius and Mostafa Kamel Mostafa (later Abu Hamza) in 1984**



Maltese journalist Matthew Vella, author of a superb book on Maltese crime in Britain – *Passport to Vice* – doesn't minimise how nasty the worst Maltese crooks were.

He describes Big Frank as 'an illiterate thug' and writes of the Syndicate, 'For two decades, they built themselves into a tenacious unit of violent pimps who were hungry for property, capitalised ruthlessly on the sex trade, bribed London police top brass, suborned witnesses and, where necessary, got rid of their rivals with the force of the sword.'

But Vella puts the Maltese criminals into an interesting context. 'The criminal element leaves Malta in the '40s and the '50s. They might have been stokers and stewards in the Merchant Navy or the Royal Navy. They're a very small fraction of the greater Maltese migration, which goes to work in the factories in places like Ford of Dagenham.

'But now people here in Malta will say with some pride how Maltese guys made it big controlling Soho and the Cardiff docks, and they see it as symbolic, or even poetic, because it's the colonial subject colonising the coloniser – a kind of reverse colonisation feeling.'

A posh Maltese lady in Knightsbridge said she knew the one remaining gangster-adjacent Soho character, Jean Agius – a successful businessman rather than a gangster. He owned a quarter of a mile of Soho shopfront, with renowned restaurants, clubs, a model agency and a recording studio.

Aged 80 and recovering from a stroke, charming and amusing Jean phoned me in London and spoke for an hour about the old days.

He was charged in 1978, rather late in the Maltese gangster period, with conspiracy to live on prostitution and conspiracy to defraud, bailed for £1m and sentenced to five years' jail. He served part of this in an open prison, which he says he greatly enjoyed, until he was acquitted on all charges in 1984.

Agius was originally a journalist with the *Times of Malta*. At 17, when Malta was stuffy and under the thumb of the Catholic church, he started a magazine for teenagers. An aunt regularly used to greet him by asking, 'How's your Satanic tail today, Jean?'

Coming to seek his fortune in London at 21, he had a colourful lifestyle. Suave, educated and sophisticated, he was driven around in a Rolls-Royce Corniche, dressed in a racoon-fur coat and smoking a pipe.

His bodyguard for three years was a tough young Egyptian womaniser named Mostafa Kamel Mostafa, later Abu Hamza, the notorious hook-handed imam of Finsbury Park mosque, serving life for terrorist offences in an American supermax prison – where he has become a big fan of President Donald Trump.



Rocky Marciano and Big Frank Mifsud, Latin Quarter Club, Soho, 1960s

Agius was known in the contemporary press as the King of Soho, and also as the clip-joint king.

When I asked about the clip joints, where a Lucozade and Ribena (Milano Special) served by a topless hostess could cost £30, he was expansive:

'Look, anything could be called a clip joint. I could call a shop like Marks and Spencer a clip joint. We never coerced anybody to do anything or forced them to buy a drink. That was recognised unambiguously by the courts. And the prices of the drinks were clearly marked as they had to be by law. We had regulars who spent hundreds of thousands in our bars over a period of years. They wouldn't have kept coming back if they were being cheated, would they?'

The police, Agius says, wanted him to rat on genuinely dodgy Maltese, and harassed him for years because he wouldn't – for the most part because he didn't associate with them and couldn't help. But, he says, he was a supporter of the police, helping organise support for PC Yvonne Fletcher when she was shot by a gunman in the Libyan Embassy in 1984.

Having initially been suspicious, Agius and I ended our conversations on good terms, with an invitation to dinner in the quiet village where he now lives.

Oh yes, and he also wondered whether I was interested in buying his 1963 Bentley. Midnight Blue – one careful legitimate businessman owner.

Jonathan Margolis is technology correspondent for Air Mail

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Fortune-hunter

Lee Rodwell was on the edge of her seat when her statue of Diana the huntress was valued on *Antiques Roadshow*

The man behind us is dragging a Victorian high chair. The woman in front has her late grandmother's rings in her handbag. Fiona Bruce, willowy in a bright green maxi dress, wafts by with a camera crew. *Antiques Roadshow* has come to town.

The queues snake round the gardens of the Grade II listed house in Finchley, North London, given for the use and enjoyment of the people by Henry Charles 'Inky' Stephens, the heir to the Stephens Ink Company.

At present we are not feeling much joy.

My husband is wheeling a trolley. A large wooden box is strapped to it.

Inside is a statue of Diana the huntress that he bought ten years ago at a local antiques fair. He hopes it is a genuine art-deco piece and worth more than he paid for it – £600.

Diana is very heavy and her bow is fragile.

The queue moves slowly. Burly men and women in hi-vis jackets with hand-held body-scanners check people and their bags. Once through security, we are directed to an even longer line of grey-haired people clutching bubble-wrapped silver bowls and pottery, antique books and bric-à-brac.

An hour and a quarter later, we reach the desk in the reception tent and are told which of the *Roadshow*'s experts to head for. 'It's like being triaged in A&E,' says a woman behind us.

There are tents, tables and experts dotted around the grounds. We join the tail end of another long line for 'glass and ceramics'. It seems as if *le tout* Finchley is here, including the local mayor. Reluctantly I am persuaded it would be bad form to buttonhole him about potholes.

To pass the time, we strike up conversations with others in the queue. We meet the retired optometrists who have come with a pair of 19th-century candlesticks. Another husband and wife have brought an English Delftware plate.

Occasionally we hear ripples of applause as an expert gets to 'the big reveal', wowing the crowd with how much an object is worth. I wander off to see what is happening. Then I get a text: the husband is about to meet our expert.

He turns out to be *Roadshow* regular and Stourbridge auctioneer Will Farmer. He would like to film Diana. Do we agree?



Lee Rodwell and the statue of Diana, the Roman hunting goddess

The husband hesitates, but it is not a difficult conundrum. Our youngest son recently made his TV debut, winning a *Countdown* teapot. Of course the man who is never knowingly outdone says yes.

We are led across the lawn and to a row of chairs in a cordoned-off area. By now the trolley has been bumped over so much grass that it has shed a nut, and wheeling it anywhere is perilous.

After a while, Farmer comes back with a man with a clipboard. He says filming will probably take place at 3.30pm. It is now midday and we have already been here for two and half hours. We agree to stick it out.

We eat the egg sandwiches we brought with us. I regret not smuggling gin and tonic in our water bottle. The husband goes off and fetches coffee, tubs of strawberries, ice cream.

Time grinds by. At 3.30pm, we learn that filming has been pushed back an hour. By now I have no compunction about grilling total strangers. I turn to the young man sitting on the chair next to mine. He has a suit bag.

'What have you got there?' I ask. I am astonished by the reply: Betty Boothroyd's suits.

He explained that he'd been watching the online auction of Baroness Boothroyd's estate with a group of work colleagues. Baroness Boothroyd died aged 93 in 2023. The following year, her estate was auctioned off to raise money for six charities.

As a joke, he bid £30 for Lot 172, which had an estimate of £60 to £100. 'But no one else bid.' The joke, I decide, was on him.

The shadows are lengthening and the crowds are beginning to thin. At 4.30pm, we get the good news: filming will soon take place.

We make our way back down the grassy slope. Diana is placed on a stand and a crowd gathers.

Farmer enthuses about this year's centenary of art deco in general and our statue in particular. He says she was made in the 1930s, most likely by the important art-deco sculptor Ugo Cipriani.

And her value? £1,500.

We pack Diana the huntress back in her box and trundle off to the car. My feet hurt and I am looking forward to taking off my shoes and pouring a glass of wine when we get home. Diana will go back on the mantelpiece.

'So did you get the answers you were looking for?' I ask the husband.

'Well,' he says, 'I still think she's worth more than Will said.'

Lee Rodwell's statue of Diana will be valued on Antiques Roadshow *in the autumn*

My garden secret

Candida Crewe is ashamed to confess it to her friends – she hates gardening

Kingsley Amis once said gardening is like washing up outside.

So true. Just more bloody housework – only with weather. I have never been a fan of gardening but have finally learned to admit to it.

Recently, a friend came to supper and looked out of my window into the 'garden' or, rather, the long and narrow outdoor space at the back of my small terrace house.

There he saw a few ugly breeze blocks fashioned by my adult sons into structures on which they can barbecue T-bone steaks; a blackened frying pan; bits of old newspaper; empty beer cans; cigarette butts; and some chicken wire.

No 're' about the 'wilded' weeds and ivy everywhere; the muddy ground, odd tarpaulin, metal incinerator like an old-fashioned dustbin, broken, wooden chairs and, consuming the whole back third of the 'garden', a giant dustball of brambles so vast that it has swallowed a whole shed that hasn't been visible for years.

Inside, my house is immaculate – I'm teased for having OCD. My favourite sound is the *ktsss-k, ktsss-k* of antibacterial spray, followed by wiping. Outside, it's like a mini-New Age travellers' site somewhere between Bath and Stroud, c 1993.

My aghast friend has a notable castle with a garden of gasping beauty open to the public. The look on his face on staring out at the grim plot was memorable. I have never seen a man at such a loss as to how to arrange his expression. Despite all his charm and for all his consummate manners, he just couldn't contain his horror.

And I do not blame him. The truth is that no middle-class Englishwoman of a certain age in the history of the world has ever neglected a garden so manifestly. He was unable to compute that anybody whom, like me, he had known since he was at university 30 years ago, could be so wanting in the green finger department – and concomitant moral stature.



***Overgrown Garden* by Alfred East, 1883**

To give him his due, I don't know a single other woman who doesn't at least have a pot or two at her front door with geraniums or a camellia, a window box or a tiny terrace with some sort of foliage requiring watering. Let alone one who neglects her outside property so wantonly.

Gardening may not actually feature among the symptoms of the menopause listed on the NHS website. But it absolutely has a place alongside the hot flushes and mood swings.

I'm 60, don't grow a sprig of rosemary and can only just identify a peony. It's unique – especially given that my parents had a fabulous garden, when I was a child, in the Queen Anne house of my infancy. They had a gentle, full-time gardener who created a rose garden I still remember distinctly though we left when I was five. Further gardens followed, in London and the country, my mother keen and not unknowledgeable.

My friends took up the mantle of their own parents' gardens. My old friend Sarah Raven, author of *The Cutting Garden*, did the flowers and bouquet at my wedding and I marvelled at her skill. My stepmother edited *House & Garden* for 21 years. My boyfriend is one of this country's leading gardeners, whose knowledge of all living plants, flowers, shrubs and trees astounds and delights me every time we go for a walk.

> No Englishwoman has ever neglected a garden so manifestly

I may add that he is, in turn, delighted at my disinclination and ignorance. He couldn't stand to be with a gardening fanatic – he'd be bored rigid. I often remind him how lucky he is to have found me – female middle-aged gardenphobes are a rare species indeed.

Why has the bug passed me by?

Well, I lived in flats in Notting Hill till I got married. No outside space; only a communal garden that wasn't mine to tend.

Our first house in Brook Green had a triangular garden the size of a supermarket Parmesan. Later, divorced, with my ex-husband living in Belfast, and with three young sons, I had no time, energy or spare cash for a pot of basil, let alone a garden-centre habit. Gardening is expensive in anyone's language.

I could do it all myself. My now-adult boys are abroad and/or working full-time. But that is back-breaking and soul-destroying to us impatient people. Everything but weeds takes so darn long to grow. I'm physically lazy and would rather be inside by the fire, on a sofa with a book. And, even if I did tackle it alone, without teeth-rattlingly expensive help, I would still have to fork out arms and legs for gardening tools, plant pots, decking, gravel, turf, shrubs and roses. And before I had 'finished', I'd have to start all over again, like painting the Forth Bridge.

I love and appreciate a beautiful garden with the best of them. Most of my best friends are gardeners, amateur and pro.

But shoot me now – I'm with Kingsley Amis. I hate washing up – inside and outside.

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The Oldie

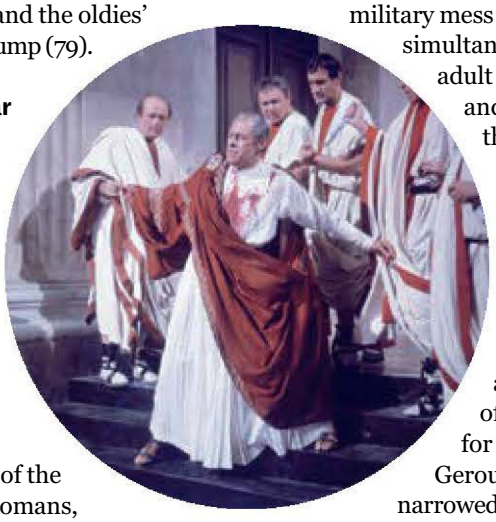
The *very* ancient world

Old men now rule the world – but it's nothing new. Oldies ran Greece and Rome, says *Professor Paul Cartledge*, aged 78¼

Aristotle – himself hardly old by today's standards (he died at a mere 62) – once observed that there's an old age of the body, as well as of the mind.

I can't surely be the only one to have noticed that much of the world today is ruled not only autocratically and democratically or a combination of the two, but gerontocratically. Specifically by old – sorry, elderly – men.

Members of the 70-plus (world) leadership club include Putin (72), Xi (72), Erdoğan (71), Netanyahu (75), Modi (74), Lula (79) and the oldies' cynosure, Donald J Trump (79).



Senile senate: Caesar (Rex Harrison) dies, *Cleopatra* (1963)

CAMERIQUE/GETTY

Clearly for all sorts of reasons this is not entirely a Good Thing. But hang on: there's nothing new under the sun here, surely.

As an ancient historian, a historian of the ancient Greeks and Romans, I've spent my working life studying various versions of seniority. The ancient Greeks – or more particularly the Spartans – and Romans were past masters of age-grading. Hence their oldie councils – the Spartan Gerousia, and the Roman Senate.

So is the oldie-leader pattern hard-wired into the human condition? Or is it just happenstance?

Ancient Sparta was peculiar – or at any rate significantly different – in the ancient Greek world of a thousand or so attested polities. One of its peculiarities was not its privileging of age as a political variable. That was common to many ancient Greek societies, including the Athenian democracy (where to be a Council member, one had to be over 30; to serve as an ambassador, over 50).

What was special was that Sparta's governing body, its equivalent of the House of Lords and the governing Cabinet combined, was an aristocratic council of 30 members, defined mostly by and named for seniority. The Gerousia was a governing advisory body of old men (*gerontes*) aged over 60.

The figure of 60 was not arbitrary. That was the age an adult male Spartan full citizen ceased to be obliged to do military service and fight in the crack heavy-infantry army of all Greece, until the Thebans did for it in the 370s BC.

At 20, a Spartan boy who had been in 'training' ever since the age of seven would be recruited by election to a military mess into the army and simultaneously into adult full citizenship and membership of the Assembly. For the next 40 years, he was liable to be called up.

Merely to survive to 60 was a feat. To add on a criterion of aristocratic birth for eligibility for the Gerousia further narrowed the field of potential candidates.

Election was for life – a classically aristocratic, anti-democratic feature. It was conducted by a procedure that sophisticated Aristotle found laughable.

Once installed, a Gerousia member would decide what policies the state would follow, especially in foreign policy.

There was one key exception to the minimum-age rule. Two of the Gerousia members were not necessarily 60 or over. They held their places ex officio, as the two kings of Sparta, drawn from two rival aristocratic families. In this regard only, the principle of hereditary dyarchy was thought to trump seniority.

The Gerousia – and thus Sparta – made mistakes, some major. But Sparta wielded undue power both at home and abroad for a couple of centuries. In Sparta, gerontocracy ruled OK.

What of Rome? Its political age limits were set rather lower. Being a republic from about 500 BC, Rome dispensed with kings and substituted two consuls as CEOs.

A peculiar mixture of aristocracy, oligarchy and democracy, the Roman Republican constitution prescribed that all elected office-holders on the ladder of office (*cursus honorum*) should be automatically members of the Senate – literally 'Council of Old Men [*senes*]'.

But the most junior were hardly old, being in their thirties. And the minimum age for the top executive jobs, the two consuls, was 42 – JFK was considered exceptionally young when elected US President at 43.

The Roman Senate was not a legislative body but a deliberative or pre-deliberative council. It passed not laws (*leges*) but advisements (*consulta*) – advice directed to the chief executive officers of state, the two consuls.

Rome's empire was developed first in Italy by the mid-third century BC. It then expanded overseas east and west. By the mid-first century, it embraced most of the Mediterranean world. All done under the auspices of the Senatus Romanus, very much the senior partner in SPQR.

But territorial expansion brought its political strains, as well as immeasurable riches for individual senators. The Roman Republic crashed down in a welter of exceptionally bloody civil wars, leaving as its ultimate triumphator one Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus, surnamed Augustus – the first Roman Emperor.

Augustus had been a young man in a hurry – an 'adolescent butcher', as one of his defeated rivals abused him. Calling himself Princeps or 'Boss' (something like Franco's 'Caudillo'), Augustus proceeded over a decade to assume or dominate every single magisterial office and thereby the Senate.

The Senate became in effect his cat's paw. Augustus became what Gibbon called a 'subtle tyrant'. And the constitution of Rome an autocratic dictatorship.

Sic transit gloria gerontocratica.

Paul Cartledge is Professor of Greek Culture emeritus at Cambridge

Model behaviour

When *Lucas Chancellor* moved from the London catwalk to the Manhattan runway, he fell for the American way of life



Lucas Chancellor in the Helmut Lang Spring Summer show, New York

My first trip to New York as an adult was around a year ago. I went for only three days, to 'walk' the fashion designer Peter Do's Helmut Lang show.

I was put up, just off one of Times Square's endlessly linear roads, in a VERY large hotel, constructed with long metal beams stretching into the sky.

In my 16th-floor hotel room, I felt like an oppressed ant in a metal cell, with 10,000 rooms, below, above and beside me – identical, from bedside tables to air-conditioner units.

The following day's fashion show was glamorous and – of course – much larger than any you'd find in London. After the standard procedure – hurriedly manoeuvred through a whirlwind of make-up bags, manicures and gossip – I prepared for the 'line-up'.

Because of my rather long hair, my allocated hairdresser had put in quite the effort – wrestling it with some very firm hair gel – to stop it from flopping around of its own accord.

Little did I know, as I strutted down the cathedral-size hall flanked with rows of glossy people, that the gel had failed. A single Vaselined icicle of hair – rigid and gleaming – had poked free in defiant rebellion. And yet no one flinched or smirked at the animal on top of my head. The Number One Rule of Fashion? Use stern confidence to mask the absurd.

The show was a success, and the excitement and commitment of all involved notable. But my delight was soon cut short. Leaving the building, I was faced with New York's unfortunate homeless problem. In front of me lay a man, unconscious and fully clothed, with nothing between him and the pavement.

This eerie contrast – the highly glamorous, affluent and fashionable indifferently passing within inches of this poor dilapidated soul – is the price of American ultra-capitalism.

Thanks to the individualist spirit, everyone strives for the American Dream. Everyone wants to make it, in an optimistic, expansive spirit. And everyone is open to helping one another achieve it. Largely because the alternative is so grim: no society safeguards; no free NHS/healthcare; no free government housing.

And if you don't make it, you have to confront the harsh realities faced by the man on the pavement.

When I returned to Britain from this brief trip, I hadn't yet been seduced by American life. But my second trip turned out to be incredibly enjoyable.

Much to my delight, I found myself in a very different part of New York: the East Village. Oh, the pleasantness of buildings not towering formidably over you. And the pizza – just excellent.

It didn't take long before I was taken – not just by the energy of the place, the bustling bars, and the access to everything you could wish for, but also by the people.

How friendly and open they were. Not only out and about on the streets, but also in their work ethos.

I took part in a J Crew billboard campaign, shot on top of a skyscraper – exhilarating stuff. There were eight of us, getting ready behind the camera to act as one big, joyous group of friends – interlocking arms or legs in affectionately close proximity.

We were told to smile and laugh at one another as if we were all incredibly witty. We weren't. It was difficult at first, but such mad, unprompted laughter becomes self-perpetuating by its own absurdity.

Never in my eight years of British and European modelling had I been subject to such gleeful nonsense. Usually, modelling is largely about being stern, nonchalant or brooding.

After the shoot, everyone involved was already making plans together – revealing an affability commonplace almost everywhere in New York.

This differs vastly from London. People are so closed off and suspicious that the majority venture no further than the five-friend circle they grew up with, even if they happen to be twats; your fate is sealed.

Brits want to settle. No more effort, small talk or novelty.

But America's social enthusiasm comes at a cost. I have been told by several people now that this optimistic pursuit of bigger and better dreams also extends to relationships, particularly in New York.

People are always trying to do better – and, given that there are so many good-looking people coming and going, I can see why. So the pursuit of the perfect life becomes a never-ending quest.

Lucas Chancellor is the son of the model Cecilia Chancellor and grandson of The Oldie*'s revered late editor, Alexander Chancellor*

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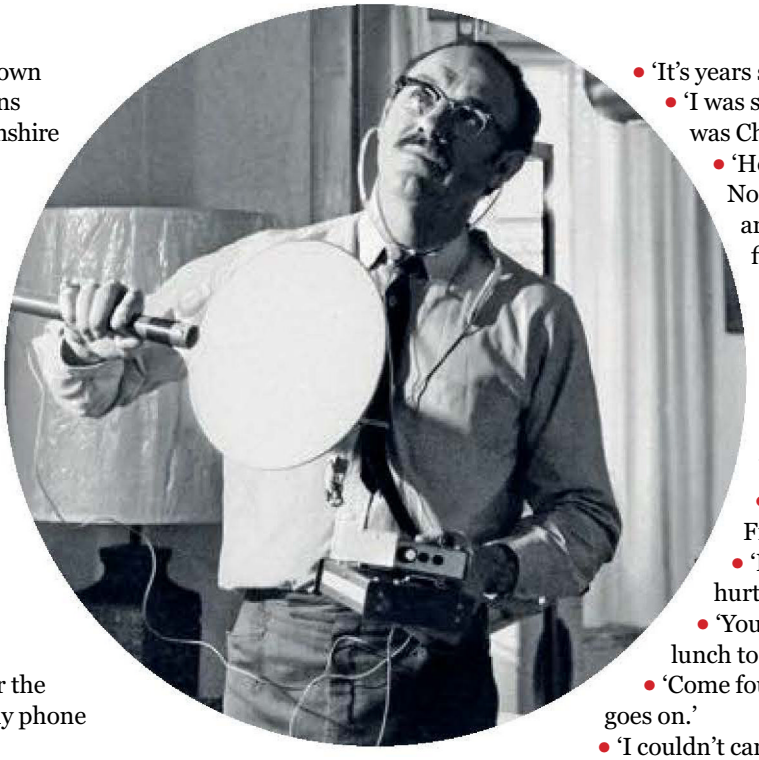
Nowt so queer as folk

Joe Cushnan has been eavesdropping on the public for decades. Here are the funniest things he's overheard

For years, I have jotted down snatches of conversations overheard in Nottinghamshire streets, queues, waiting rooms, barber shops, cafés, pubs and restaurants.



Curiouser and curiouser: Gene Hackman in *The Conversation* (1974)

ALAMY

- 'I'll see you on the 5th unless it changes to the 7th.'
- 'I told him I wanted all them presents wrapped by the time I get home.'
- 'It's all pins and pisswords – I mean passwords – these days.'
- 'I only need a small one, but if he gives me the large one at the same price as a small one, I'll take it.'
- 'Don't feed the wrong bread to birds. It sticks to their beaks.'
- 'I'd phone but I can't remember the number. Anyway, I haven't got my phone with me.'
- 'If it's not working, it'll be the snow on the satellite dish.'
- 'I don't like onions, but I love onion rings.'
- 'You can tell by the way he stands that he's about to hit somebody.'
- 'I'm going to Greece. He can come if he likes.'
- 'Are you going to walk the same speed as me, or what?'
- 'I'll grin and bear it for a while longer before bothering the doctor.'
- 'I've been at this stall for four hours and I haven't even made a quid.'
- 'You can pick and mix off the Valentine's Love Menu.'
- 'Shopping trolleys are handy, but they do get heavy.'
- 'I'll wait here for you. Don't come out the wrong door.'
- 'You carry this bag, and I'll carry that bag and we'll swap halfway.'
- 'He bought a brown suit. He bought a brown suit.'
- 'Every Christmas, I send him a long letter. I think he appreciates it. He's in prison, like. Nothing serious.'
- 'You'll have to come down yourself. They won't let me in the bookies with a baby.'
- 'Ach, I do miss him. He used to kill all the spiders.'
- 'You have rice with it. Everybody does. You don't have chips with Chicken à la King.'
- 'He must take it easy. They found a kink in his small intestine.'
- 'I don't think I will, but I know I could. Maybe I should. What's the worst that can happen?'
- 'Her birthday present will be a surprise. It's not what she wants but it's what she's getting.'
- 'At the funeral, somebody said that, for all his faults, he had lovely handwriting.'
- 'I can't get used to a Great Dane in the living room.'
- 'Every time you come shopping with me, you turn into an idiot. Go and sit on that bench over there until I'm finished.'
- 'Some days I need the stick and some days I don't. It depends on what my leg tells me.'
- 'It's against the law to call them Cornish. They're meat-and-vegetable pasties now.'
- 'Watch out. That puddle's wet.'
- 'I know it's only a pound more, but I begrudge giving it to them.'
- 'It's years since I did that.'
- 'I was so sure his middle name was Charles.'
- 'How many more times? No. No. No. No. No. Same answer to the next five questions.'
- 'Just tell him. Let him know. Draw a line.'
- 'That dog's disgusting. Front and back.'
- 'He can walk all right but it hurts when he turns left.'
- 'You need to bring a packed lunch to that Post Office.'
- 'Come four o'clock, the big light goes on.'
- 'I couldn't care less about my wobbly fat on a beach.'
- 'My shoes have memory foam.'
- 'I need a hobby. Nothing expensive.'
- 'Been to the doctor, but he's too young to understand.'
- 'That school is like a prison. Too many stupid rules.'
- 'No way can I drink coffee without sugar. Loads of it. The sugar police can do one.'
- 'I'm off TV for Lent, except for the odd catch-up.'
- 'It's my relationship. Nobody's business. Suits me.'
- 'She goes on and on and on. I just switch off.'
- 'I'd rather have a fracture than a break any day.'
- 'It's a brand new one. It's made of wood.'
- 'She wasn't even invited. The cheek.'
- 'You should see the list of things he gets free now that he's a pensioner.'
- 'What's the point of a tattoo if nobody can see it?'
- 'The bandit car-park machine wouldn't take my coins.'
- 'Stop touching my arm.'
- 'I'm his wife. Not a passenger.'
- 'He lies horizontal, and I lie diagonal.'



Hair necessities

Watch out for malicious hairdressers who hack away your locks

MARY KILLEN

Is there such a thing as a malicious hairdresser? A person who sets out to sabotage clients' happiness and self-confidence by urging on them the wrong colours, lengths or styles?

I certainly used to think so in the 1960s, when my mother would go out looking lovely and come back with her hair compressed into such tight little curls that her whole head resembled a nylon bathing cap.

This was the result of a perm or permanent wave. It suited no one yet every one of her contemporaries had one.

Fifty years on, I find that another disfiguring hairstyle is surging in popularity. When I go into our local high street and observe women of my own vintage, I ask myself, 'What has possessed so many of them to have the same brutalist haircut – literally a short back and sides?'

Even those with the potential for a glamorous 'shock' of grey hair are going for the so-called pixie cut. This is where the hair is thinned and cut close to the scalp in the shape of a pixie's cap.

This looks amazing on teenagers and twentysomethings with sharp jawlines, shell-like ears and lovely curvy necks.

But it's no good when pouches dangle where the jawline should be, when ears have grown in size and when necks are crêpy.

At that stage of life, why not veil the defects with hair rather than flaunt them? Is the hairdresser to blame? Or the woman?

The pixie-cut syndrome has three causes. One – the older woman doesn't want to look like mutton dressed as lamb by having longer hair than her contemporaries. Two, she wants to save money – so she has the hair cut as short as possible once she is in the salon to reduce the number of expensive appointments over the year.

(My own husband, Giles Wood, another *Oldie* columnist, always goes for what he calls a 'knuckle cut' or 'two haircuts for the price of one'.)

And three, sensuality plays its part. It is lovely having your hair tampered with by a hairdresser. So you let him or her keep snipping away and touching just so you can have more physical contact.

Sensuality has brought a revolution to the previously dull world of the barber shop. A friend's son, a stuffy sort, went for the first time to a Turkish barber.

There his hair was coated with conditioner and strong fingers drove it through as he lay back in the lap of leathered luxury. His head was tapped, massaged and yanked, all pleasurably, for many minutes. A 'lollipop' with warm wax was put into his nose and hairs pulled out – but pleasurably. His ear hairs were singed – again, pleasurably.



Brutal: haircut for Giles, Mary's husband

Unfortunately his order to the barber regarding style was lost in translation. Instead of coming out with a neat, conventional cut, he came out with two thirds of the head shaved and only the top third with a decent amount of hair. This haircut is popular with young men – the 'fade'. It has been problematic at his place of work – an estate agency. Trouble was, he had been fully aware of the drone of a battery-driven razor going up against his head but he was enjoying it too much to call for a stop.

Hairdressers do have power over us – their actions will determine our morale for at least six weeks. And they can wield too much power over the weak-willed. Another dear male friend, who would be 80 were he alive, used to appear at regular intervals with his hair cut savagely short. He explained that his Mayfair barber had been doing it that way for so many years that he didn't like to hurt his feelings by asking him to go easier.

'The fellow's retiring next year, so I can make some changes then,' explained Hugh. Not like the Duke of Edinburgh, who always had Wendy at Truefitt & Hill – she always did what he wanted.

When a friend of mine was 22, she was by far the most attractive woman of her age group. She had waist-length, thick, blonde hair – but sadly looked in the mirror too often.

She began noticing that her face was rather beautiful and wondering if the hair was veiling it off too much. She went for a pixie cut and cried for days afterwards.

She was still beautiful but the longer hair had showed off the beauty better than the shorter hair.

If you are thinking of having your long hair cut short, buy an old-fashioned hairnet at Boots. You can then 'hang' your hair at the proposed new length and get a very accurate idea of how your whole look will be transformed.

By the way, be careful about comments. I congratulated a previously long-haired *Oldie* writer on her new haircut, which really suited her face.

She snapped back, 'I'm really fed up with people telling me how much they like it. Why didn't they tell me years ago my hair was too long?!'

GILES WOOD

Title deeds

Eleanor Doughty on titles inherited by remote twigs on the family tree



Dying to succeed: *Kind Hearts and Coronets*

TCD / PROD.D / ALAMY

One day in 2014, the estate agent Sebastian Browne got an email from his sister Ulicia. She had just learnt of the death of their cousin Jeremy Browne, 11th Marquess of Sligo.

'She emailed me to say "You're now the Marquess of Sligo",' he remembers.

It was an unorthodox way to discover that your identity would change for ever.

Sebastian Browne is now the 12th Marquess of Sligo. He lives in Australia and still works as an estate agent. In time, his son, Christopher, Earl of Altamont, will succeed him in the title created in 1800.

Inheriting a title from your first cousin doesn't sound like a particularly onerous task. But Lord Sligo's future inheritance of the Sligo title was never a given. He wasn't to know that his cousin Jeremy would have five daughters and no sons.

'Jeremy knew what was going to transpire for him [as his father's only child], but I was never certain until it actually happened,' he says.

The process of actually becoming Lord Sligo took years and involved piles of paperwork. He needed his father's death certificate and his parents' marriage certificate. Since they had married in Switzerland, this raised a further complication – he didn't know in which province the wedding had taken place.

Having established his own claim, he had to repeat the process for Jeremy, who had inherited the title in 1991 having never proved his own succession.

'That gives you an idea of how little weight he placed on the value of the title,' says Lord Sligo.

The title was all he inherited. Before he died, Jeremy had gone to great lengths to break the entail – and specifically a 1963 settlement – on the Sligos' Westport House and its estate in County Mayo, which dictated that Westport could be inherited only by the eldest male heir. With five daughters, he wanted Westport to go to them. When he died, it did, but they sold it in 2017.

So the current Lord Sligo never had a chance of becoming custodian of Westport. Now, he says, it is 'hard to conceive' how the Brownes and Westport will ever be reunited. The introduction of the Trusts of Land and Appointment of Trustees Act 1996 ensures that no new entailed interests can be created.

Lord Sligo is far from the only peer to have inherited his title indirectly. About a quarter of the 793-strong hereditary peerage has an heir who isn't a son or daughter. Some of these are extremely distant relations.

In *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949), the finest succession story on screen, Louis D'Ascoyne Mazzini (Dennis Price, *pictured*) has to kill eight distant relations (all played by Alec Guinness) to become the 10th Duke of Chalfont, a title inherited through the female line.

Tim Byng, 11th Viscount Torrington, the father of three daughters (including Hatta, former editor of *House & Garden* magazine), will in time be succeeded by his fifth cousin, who lives in Canada.

'I suppose I would rather someone inherit it than have it die out,' Lord Torrington said of his title in 2013.

However well-prepared a family appears to be, extinction can strike. The twin tales of the Marquess of Marchmain and the 7th Earl Beauchamp – the patriarch of Evelyn Waugh's 1945 novel *Brideshead Revisited* and the man on whom he was based, respectively – demonstrate just that.

In *Brideshead* when Lord Marchmain dies, he's succeeded by his son Bridey, who we presume has no children. And when William Lygon, 7th Earl Beauchamp, died in 1938, his eldest son William, Viscount Elmley, succeeded him but died childless in 1979, both of his brothers having predeceased him with no sons. Both titles were extinguished.

The Beauchamp case was relatively straightforward. Other extinctions have taken longer to come to fruition. When the coal magnate William Wentworth-Fitzwilliam, 6th Earl Fitzwilliam, died in 1902, he had six male heirs in his immediate family and a net worth of more than £4 million.

Within 50 years, this comfortable reality would come crashing down. After Peter Wentworth-Fitzwilliam, 8th Earl Fitzwilliam, was killed in a plane crash in 1948 (alongside his girlfriend, Kick Kennedy, sister of JFK and widow of the Marquess of Hartington), the title passed to Eric, his bachelor first cousin once removed.

He died four years later, but not before a High Court case could prove his successor. Eric's second cousin Toby had long believed that should the title reach their branch of the family, he would be next in line. But, thanks to decades of lies from his parents, there was a question mark over his legitimacy, and he and his younger brother Tom argued it out in front of a judge.

Tom, who would never produce a male heir, was ruled the rightful next Lord Fitzwilliam.

By then, Toby had a son and a grandson – and now great- and great-great-grandsons – all of whom could have carried on as Earl Fitzwilliam.

As Lord Sligo says, 'We live in a strange old world – let's face it, a world where anything can happen.'

Heirs and Graces: A History of the Modern Aristocracy *(Hutchinson) by Eleanor Doughty is out on 4th September*

Wedding bells for Rioting Ron

Cleethorpes high society? Jailbird Crazy Jacko and a sandwich thief

JEM CLARKE

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



STEVE WAY

By your mid-fifties, evening wedding invitations have slowed to a blissful zero.

So former jailbird Crazy Jacko and I were out of our depth when we were invited to failed musician Rioting Ron's marital do.

When an ex-rockabilly marries a former Goth princess, what do the civilian guests wear so that we don't look square – or mental?

We both went with a rough-hewn, rustic waistcoat, collarless white shirt and red bohemian neckerchief.

Despite living in sheltered accommodation, Jacko is a genuinely gifted musician. He even gives free music lessons to the other tenants.

Still, there's something a little too insistent in his desire to teach music to everyone.

The minute he got me in the sheltered housing, he triple-locked his door – probably best in this place.

He then placed me on a pre-lowered piano stool, saying, 'You're not leaving here till I teach you the chords to *Stand by Me*.'

I was immediately triggered. I remembered my performance of *Row, Row, Row Your Boat* on glockenspiel being pulled from the end-of-year school music recital – owing to what the revised programme listed as 'quality issues'.

Jacko was a calm and patient tutor for the first 20 minutes. Then he barked, 'When the NIGHT is young, and the LAND is dark...' There was fraught menace as he bashed the rhythm out on the edge of the keyboard.

I held up my tiny stubby hands and pleaded, 'I don't think I have the handspan, you know.'

He said, somewhere between wisdom and despair, 'It's the same every time. I offer them free lessons. They offer me excuses, 'cos they don't want to do the hard work.'

At the wedding, our waistcoat-and-neckerchief combo doesn't go down well with a table of rockabilly musicians. One yells, 'Bloody Hell! Who invited Steptoe and Son!'

Groovy groom Rioting Ron says, 'Fion will love that you turned up. She's just outside having a cigar. She's a bit upset at the moment, to be honest.'

'Overwhelmed by the day?' I ask.

'No. She's that pissed, she just lit the wrong end.'

He shows us to the table reserved for the old pub crowd. Because of baby-sitters and early departees, it now consists of one man. We know him only as Yattering Man because he sits at the bar on his own, talking to himself and laughing at his own responses.

We can hear the bride's raised, animated voice.

'Probably impromptu karaoke,' says Ron.

Neither Jacko nor I recognise a song starting, 'I'm going stab this Hamlet in your eye if you say that again.'

Bernard leaves a collection of three pints of Guinness at different levels, and rushes round the table to hug me, squealing, 'Little Jem Clarke, I love you.'

Yattering Man emits an uncomfortable odour. He is aware of it, saying, 'Don't worry. I smell of fish when I hug people 'cos I've stolen all the sandwiches.'

He winks and taps a conspiratorial bulging pocket of his long jacket as he releases me, saying, 'Any chance of a lift later?'

Squinting through the French windows, I spot a scrum with two core groups of combatants: bridesmaids versus waiting staff and some of Ron's ex-bandmates.

'I think we should cut our losses and go,' says Jacko.

'But what about Bernard?' I say.

We look on, as the wobbly woolly-haired soak delicately walks four more full pints back to his table.

Jacko and I race back to his nifty sports car, leaving Bernard to his fate.

Foodies leave a bad taste

The journalists Paul Levy and Ann Barr invented the word 'foodie'. I'm not sure I thank them.

Their *Official Foodie Handbook* (1984) gave oxygen to the irritating obsession, now a nationwide affliction, of endlessly talking about food rather than just eating it.

It was (is – you can still get a copy from AbeBooks) informative, fun and a witty read. The cover boasts, 'A true Foodie travels with Gault-Millau; judges you by your veg; name-drops the world's 18 best restaurants; thinks Guérard is God; has outgrown kiwi fruit, and lives to eat.'

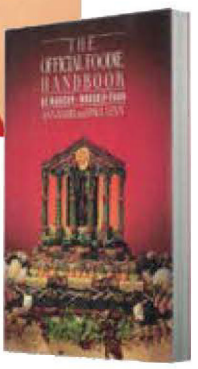
A fair summary, except today you might have to substitute Raymond Blanc for Guérard. Foodies, for whom being on trend is everything, have by now probably outgrown burrata, if not whipped feta and smashed avo on toast.

Pandering to foodies, menu-devisers now write essays on every course: 'Hand-dived Scottish king scallops, daily-picked marsh samphire from the Solway Firth, Arran Victory organic new potatoes' and on and on.

The night before we got married, my husband-to-be and I went to a Michelin-starred restaurant for an intimate (I hoped romantic) dinner. No chance of that. The waiter gave us a lecture on every course; we were handed a map of the location of the restaurant's suppliers and expected to read it. And at the end the chef emerged for praise and foodie talk and wouldn't go away.

Last week, I was in what used to be a good pub and is now a gastro temple. I ordered 'Sustainability-certified North Sea halibut loin, coated in tempura-style batter made from Hook Norton Ironstone lager and Billy's free-range organic eggs, served with locally grown Maris Piper potatoes, triple-fried in Cotswold Gold corn oil'. Translation: fish and chips.





Original foodie: Ann Barr and her parrot, Turkey. *Right: The Official Foodie Handbook* (1984)

Talking of chips, I made an ass of myself behaving like a foodie the other day. I had the best chips I'd ever tasted. They were magnificent, hand-cut and thick, skin on, crisp all over and tender in the middle, with great flavour. I asked the chef, 'How do you get that perfect fry? Is it triple-cooked? What variety of spud? Do you season with curry powder?'

'No idea, mate,' he said. 'We get 'em frozen from Brake Brothers.'

Added to the foodie nonsense is the TikTok nonsense: influencers standing on their chairs to get a photo of their food. A restaurateur friend says that's only the start. Young influencers will book a table in a Michelin-starred restaurant and order just one glass of bubbly and one first course between them – just enough to snap each other at the table, in the fancy ladies' room and outside the front door.

Back to chips: do *Oldie*-readers know about Black Country chips? I didn't. Apparently, they originated in Walsall. They are covered in batter coloured with turmeric, and then deep-fried, preferably in beef dripping. Heart attack on a stick.

I should be horrified. But I bet they're absolutely delicious.

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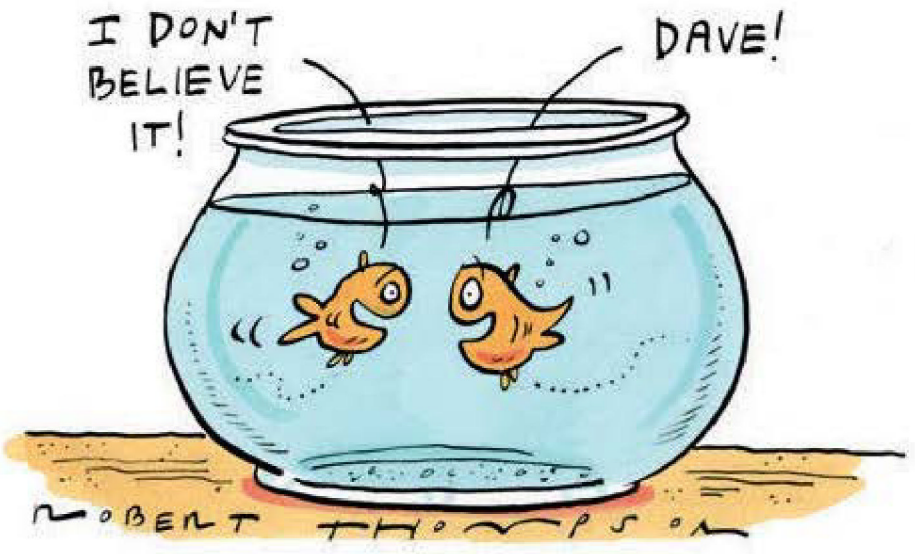
Town Mouse



Fancy seeing you here! My small world

TOM HODGKINSON



After cycling round London for ten years, I'm still constantly amazed by how often I bump into friends and acquaintances.

In a city of eight million people, it seems extraordinary that you should cycle past one of them on the Mall or Shaftesbury Avenue, but these chance encounters happen a lot.

I've lost count of the number of these bumpings-into in the last month. In Regent's Park one afternoon, I bumped into a friend I hadn't seen for 25 years and her daughter. In Piccadilly Circus, I bumped into Kevin Rowland, the '80s pop star in Dexy's Midnight Runners. I'd last seen him in the Colony Room Club in 1999.

In Uxbridge Road, I bumped into my friend Toby, crossing the road in front of me. In Chinatown I bumped into my old boss. In Jermyn Street, I turned a corner and bumped into Juliet who directed me in Dr Faustus at school – I played Sloth.

On the towpath near Paddington, I bumped into a stand-up comedian I was at university with. In Lincoln's Inn Fields I bumped into actor Tom Hollander, whom I hadn't seen for 30 years. On Hampstead Heath, I bumped into Michael Palin.

Every time, I had a brief but pleasant catch-up and then cycled off in a slightly elevated mood, thinking, as Louis Armstrong did, 'What a wonderful world.' London seemed for a brief moment to have become a village, a friendly community far removed from its image as vast, mechanical and alienating.

Bumpings-into are a central feature of the Anthony Powell series *A Dance to the Music of Time*, which has just celebrated the 50th anniversary of its completion. Over decades, characters bump into one another in unlikely places.

The novels have been criticised for these serendipitous meetings. But it has happened to many of us. Take airports. Last summer, I was sitting waiting in Heathrow Terminal 4 near the Pret A Manger when I glanced round to find I was sitting next to a friend from school and his wife. The previous year, I'd bumped into my old maths teacher while waiting at Perugia Airport.

What mystical currents are at play here? Maybe not many, though coincidences feel magical to the person they happen to.

There is such a thing as coincidence studies. The gloomy rationalists who carry them out argue that coincidences are no big deal. A recent piece in the *Atlantic* magazine argued, 'When you consider all the people you know and all the places you go and all the places they go, chances are good that you'll run into someone you know, somewhere, at some point.'

There is a professor of coincidence: David Spiegelhalter, Winton Professor for the Public Understanding of Risk at the University of Cambridge. 'A coincidence itself is in the eye of the beholder,' he told the *Atlantic*.

Prof Spiegelhalter ran a project that compiled coincidence stories. The fourth most common variety, he said, was 'meeting someone you know in an unlikely place'. His theory is that coincidences happen to certain sorts of people. They are on the lookout for them.

'Coincidences never happen to me at all, because I never notice anything,' Spiegelhalter said. He added, 'I never talk to anybody on trains.'

Not everyone you see is someone you want to have a conversation with. Sometimes the coincidence-seeker wishes they had not seen a certain person.

That's where being on a bicycle is so useful. You don't have the problem, memorably defined by Larry David, of the 'stop-and-chat'. In one episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, he's walking down the street with a friend when he bumps into an acquaintance walking in the opposite direction. The man says 'Hey!' in an enthusiastic tone.

Larry David replies, 'Hey, how you doing?'

The man says, 'Good!'

Larry David turns his eyes to the ground, keeps walking, and mumbles, 'Good,' clearly conveying the message *That's all you're getting*. His friend remonstrates and David explains, 'I don't have time for a stop-and-chat.'

On a bicycle, you can avoid a stop-and-chat without being rude to your acquaintance. When I'm cycling down my own street, I often see a neighbour. Not always having the time or inclination for a stop-and-chat, I give a cheery wave and say something like 'Hellloooo!' No one expects you to stop on your bicycle.

The bicycle gives you the wonderful freedom to indulge in a coincidence if you fancy it, or quietly to move on if you don't. You don't stop. You don't chat. But you still enjoy the thrill of the coincidental meeting.



The past is a foreign, joyful country

GILES WOOD

Those who recall the 1976 drought will be aware that this summer's version – which terrified the farmers – was played out against quite a different backdrop.

THEN – Pubs did brisk business. NOW – Pubs, apart from Wetherspoons, which manages to charge less than the others, are struggling to make a go of it, especially in the countryside.

THEN – Pubs wouldn't have dreamt of serving unfamiliar foreign 'muck'. NOW – Without that foreign muck, they don't stand a chance. Our own drinking pub, much appreciated by locals with tiny houses, had to close because the pub itself was too small to allow for kitchens, as opposed to just freezers and a microwave. Now that the young don't drink, smoking is banned and predatory police wait outside pubs, fancy food is the only way to attract the punters.

And now that Rachel 'Thieves', who robs from both the rich and the poor, is insisting on proper wages and National Insurance payments, the pub owners are despairing.

THEN – The seventies saw the first exodus of city-dwellers to the countryside in search of the Good Life as popularised by the eponymous TV show.

But, in real life, it was not wholesome couples like Richard Briers and Felicity Kendal, who came looking for dilapidated cottages which ramshackle farmers might rent out for as little as £4 a week. It was bohos and druggies.

In those days, the benefit system was not so widely gamed as it is now and with a lower population you were almost welcome to 'sign on' as you attempted to lead a creative life as an artist, writer or musician.

NOW – Property millionaires are swarming into the shires. They are millionaires courtesy of having sold some three-bed hellhole in Muswell Hill which translates into a seven-bed rectory 100 miles from London – but still commutable so they can bring all their urban tension with them to the rural idylls.

THEN – You used to be able to unburden yourself in the pub, or at the parish pump. You could banter freely, using that day's tabloid as your prop to test your interlocutor's views before going full guns with your own.

NOW – Any attempt to channel Lee Anderson as you put the world to rights will see Starmer and co coming for you. Hidden microphones in every pub snug, in every nestbox, in every camera doorbell....

THEN – The pace of life was relaxing. So many folk we knew had no fixed abode or visible means of support and yet they managed.

NOW – The populations seems divided. There are those who seem to work every hour of their target-driven day just to tread water. And those who are 'not seeking work/economically inactive'.

I have been reminded most viscerally of the seventies by watching the latest Adam Curtis production on BBC iPlayer. *Shifty* is hypnotically watchable, although this one suffers from an absence of Curtis's own usual cut-glass commentary.

No doubt the BBC has become phobic of white mansplainers who are guilty of being experts in their fields. The images of striking miners, power cuts and bursting bin bags in Fester Square are left to speak for themselves. It's fine for TV archaeologist Alice Roberts to be a womansplainer, of course, as she hails from the oppressed ranks.

Nevertheless I feel intense nostalgia for the seventies, probably because it was the era in which I peaked but also because in those days I understood the culture, the jokes and the politicians. Now I stare in bemusement at the mass hysteria around women's football, and all the politicians seem like joke figures.

At least I can relive the past by going to the still open pub in a neighbouring village which, thankfully, remains in a time warp, especially when it comes to the menu.

It has everything that was once served in a basket – scampi, gammon, chicken etc. It's now served on a plate but the prices are still reasonable. And the portions! Generous would be an understatement. Scrumptious is the only seventies word that does justice to the traditional fayre. Large, oval, white plates glistening with fish and chips, or two joke-shop fried eggs straddling three mighty slices of real Wiltshire ham – not re-formed ham with air bubbles, as bought in error the other day by my wife.

The navy vinyl pub menu was well-thumbed; no need to change it for 50 years. No foreign muck here.

A youngster, not even born in the seventies, joined me the other lunchtime for a pint or three of Wadworth's 6X served in straight glasses. Cool, not warm – why did John Major ever think anyone wanted warm beer? It's not a hoppy brew but smooth.

It might have been considered 'smarmy' in the seventies but it slakes the thirst today for those of us who fantasise about being latter-day reapers, labouring in the fields by day under a pitiless sun and slaking our thirst when the foreman brings us a welcome earthenware jug to keep us at it till sundown when the gleaners will come.

Pub heaven – just as in the seventies, swifts screamed overhead in formation.

They still still have their swifts in the next-door village to mine. A languorous afternoon awaits ... perhaps I will look in the attic for my lost stylophone. Or perhaps not – hasn't the stylophone been cancelled owing to its association with Rolf Harris?

Some seventies memories are better laid to rest.



'I was named prisoner of the year for ten years running'



The fight to be Irish President

Conor McGregor, Michael Flatley and *Mary Kenny* have all pondered going for the top job

Support for the monarchy is lower among younger people today. Some 65 per cent of the 18-24 age group say they would abolish the monarchy, and choose instead an elected head of state.

Perhaps British advocates for a president should watch, as a case study, the election this autumn of a new Irish President.

Anyone over 35 with an Irish passport, who can secure backing from four county councils (or 20 parliamentarians), can run for president. I even thought of doing so myself once – not from political ambition, but because I thought it would be amusing to call myself 'Mary the Third', following Presidents Mary Robinson and Mary McAleese.

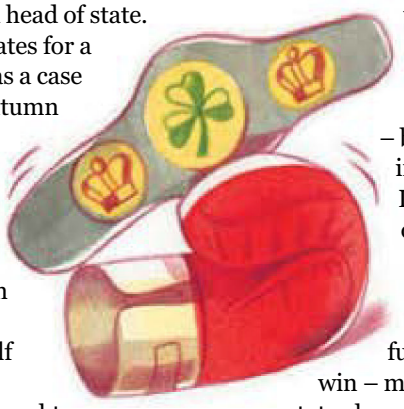
Michael D Higgins, 84, has been First Citizen for the last 14 years, and my only connection with the office is that long, long ago, I made his match. I introduced him to his very sweet wife, Sabina, at a wild 1960s party I hosted.

Michael D, a poet and an incurable old leftie, has been a popular figure because he says things that working politicians don't dare to say, though strictly speaking the head of state is supposed to be impartial.

But now comes the election of his successor, due before 11th November.

Celebrities with 'name recognition' have been highlighted as plausible candidates. Michael Flatley, the famous dancer, is one possibility. Rosie O'Donnell, the gay Irish-American comedian whom Donald Trump detests, is suggested. Conor McGregor, the mixed-martial-arts champ, ruled in a civil case to have raped and assaulted a woman (and praised by Trump), has presidential ambitions, though scant support from the political class.

There are some serious political contenders, such as the experienced former EU Commissioner Mairéad McGuinness (the safe pair of hands and the independent radical Catherine Connolly, 68 (sports a keffiyeh to show support for Palestine). Others will duly emerge.



The Irish President lives in a nice gaff in Dublin's Phoenix Park – built by the Georgians in 1751 as the Viceregal Lodge – and is paid over £200,000 a year. He/she is expected to guard the constitution and attend a lot of funerals. Anyone could win – more than one commentator has compared the presidential plebiscite to the Eurovision Song Contest. There are also plenty of rancorous comments on social media about the candidates.

Electing a president can involve nasty exposure in an age where social media rule: unsurprisingly, many worthy names have turned down the gig.

There are also public calls to abolish the position of head of state entirely, as 'a waste of time and money'. Be it noted that if monarchies can be abolished, so can any other offices of state.

A woman of my own vintage hailing from West Cork – Clonakilty, where the best black pudding comes from – told me recently that when she was a youngster, the definition of contentment was 'a tap in the yard, a bull in the field and a priest in the family'.

Outside water on tap was thought a terrific amenity. A bull in the field was a constantly renewed resource for the profitable siring of cattle. And a priest in the family meant access to education, status and even, possibly, power – and, we should allow, faith!

Upholding freedom of speech can present us with dilemmas. For example, swearing in public in Margate, Ramsgate or Broadstairs is to be banned and subject to a fine of £100 by Thanet Council.

On the one hand, it might be awfully nice if people returned to expletives such as 'Darn it', 'Curse this flipping thing', and Boris's schoolboyish 'Crikey' (originally a derivative of 'Christ'), instead of the usual stream of F-words and the like.

But should local authorities regulate even offensive speech? Surely this is another case where laws are seeking to replace manners.

I went for a day trip to Calais last month with two other Deal oldies, where I ate one of the best restaurant lunches ever.

The food was simple – but simple perfection: a cod dish in a delicious sauce; a pudding of Breton shortbread, strawberries and a lemon cream. The courses were interspersed with exquisite *amuse-bouches*.

The restaurant itself was pleasant but unpretentious, the service attentive but not fussy. You waited appropriately for your meal, because it was being cooked from scratch. The bill came to just under £40 each, including alcohol, mineral water and coffee. This is French cuisine at its best – not elaborate dishes presented with a flourish, but delicious, ordinary food cooked and delivered faultlessly.

If you should be passing through Calais, Le Grand Bleu on the Quai de la Colonne, facing the port, is worth a stop-over.

Calais gets a bad press because of the migrant crisis – not to be underestimated. Yet it's an attractive seaside town, with fine beaches, decent shops, good restaurants and a small but elegant Museum of Fine Arts, with a Rodin gallery illuminating the life of the great sculptor. Dover could learn a lot about having nice things from its Channel twin.

TOBY MORISON

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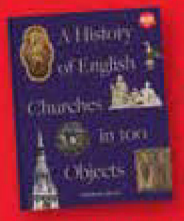

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Reasons to be cheerful

Some things today are much better than in the old days. By *Mark Palmer*

Mustn't grumble! But, naturally, we do – with increasing regularity.

And yet, just occasionally, it's worth considering those things in modern life that have improved. Some times, it pays to look on the bright side of life.

Home delivery

The weekly trek to a supermarket with no architectural merit never lifts the spirits.

There's the parking; the trolley with dodgy wheels; the queueing at checkout or wrestling with the self-service machine. Not any more. Instead, you wait for a knock on the door and a usually friendly delivery person is standing there, laden with all the goodies you've ordered.

Decent coffee

Not so long ago, a sought-after coffee meant unscrewing a jar of instant Gold Blend and dispatching a scoop or two into a mug. It was watery, tasteless and smelt of nothing in particular.

You had to travel to the continent to get an enjoyable espresso or cappuccino. Today, even a motorway service station offers a proper caffeine hit.



The way we were: Gold Blend coffee

Cars that start

Many of us can remember those freezing winter mornings when you (or your mother or father) turned on the ignition and prayed the engine would fire up before the battery died. Often, it didn't. Seldom, whatever the weather, in 2025 does a car not start.

The smile that gets you noticed

We're not talking about the overly perfect Hollywood smile, but there's no question that dentistry and toothpaste have come a long way in dealing with years of red wine, coffee and Marlboro Lights.

White, composite fillings have replaced hideous metal-grey.



Simpsons Book of British Smiles

Crooked teeth can be straightened by lightweight mouth guards rather than painful heavy braces.

And local anaesthetic in the dentist's chair is a godsend.

Thy Kindle come

Technology can be nightmare. But being able to store books on a Kindle is a joy.

They come in especially handy when you're travelling or on holiday, not least when flying with an airline that charges you for bags according to how much they weigh. Kindle screens now make it possible to read properly even in blazing sunshine.

Drive through and drive on

Yes, it's an American import and not a particularly attractive one, as cars line up behind a speaker linked to an anonymous voice.

But it *is* convenient. Just wind down the window, place your order and pick it up round the corner from a cheerful young person earning a crust before going to college.

A more stylish dip

Swimming pools used to be garish, chlorine affairs. Some big hotels on the Costas still have them, but the new trend is for pools to blend in rather than stand out.



Fry's delight: cool trainers

Natural pools that rely on plants and micro-organisms to keep the water clean are a further improvement – and they tap into the freshwater swimming fad.

Fancy paint colours

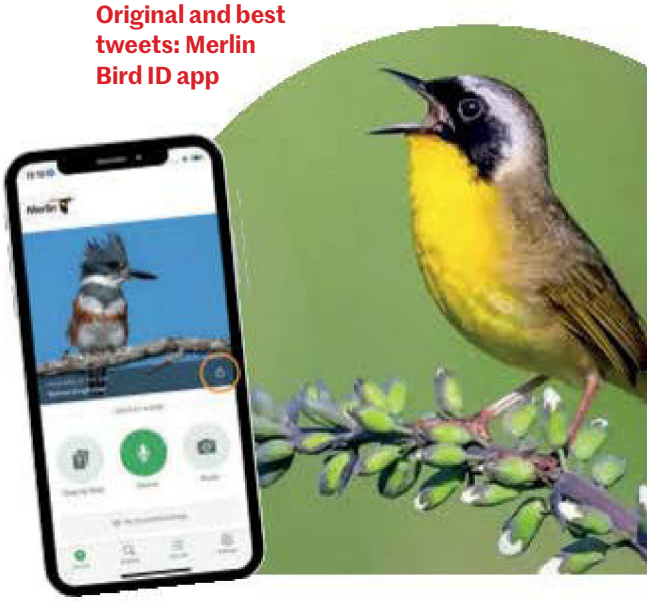
Magnolia had its moment in the 1980s – but the colour chart now is off the wall. Farrow & Ball may have the silliest names (Elephant's Breath, Broccoli Brown) but there are all kinds of other companies offering restful, restorative and revitalising colours.

Even good old Dulux has gone down the creative route.

Birding made easy

We're meant to be a nation of birdwatchers but it's easy to feel like you're a dunce. Help is at hand.

The Merlin Bird ID app is outlandishly clever. Just hoist your mobile phone into the air, press the sound button and you'll be told what bird is singing.



Original and best tweets: Merlin Bird ID app



Trainers at the ready
There's no question that trainers (plimsolls in old money) are more comfortable than stiff leather brogues. But it's only in the last five or six years or so that trainers have been regarded as legitimate footwear – whatever the occasion. Sir Stephen Fry even wore a pair of black trainers (*pictured*) to go with his morning suit when receiving his knighthood from the King at Buckingham Palace.

Literary festivals
They're happening all over the country and they come in big and small sizes.

Everyone loves them. Authors sell a few copies of their books and get to sign their names, punters have a chance to ask questions and the atmosphere is always resolutely convivial.

Some take place abroad. The Jaipur Literature Festival is hugely popular.

It's OK to be gay
Homosexuality was still illegal until 1967 – and, even then, was allowed only between two consenting men over the age of 21. It's all got a bit complicated and let's not get into the torturous debate about gender recognition.

But it's surely right that people of the same sex should be allowed to love each other, both physically and emotionally.

Duvet days
Long gone are nylon sheets and yellow cellular blankets (add a couple extra in winter). Duvets come in various togs and sizes – and just need to be plumped up in the morning. Farewell hospital corners and backbreaking bed-making.

THE ROYAL FAMILY/X; GETTY



Disability access
Getting out and about for the elderly and frail has never been easier – once you've gone through the various hoops to receive a prized Blue Badge, that is.

Almost all venues have disabled parking. Life is still not easy for wheelchair-users on public transport, but it's considerably better than a few decades ago.

Attractively warm
Let's face it, radiators are seldom pretty and the heat they give off is often localised. People didn't trust underfloor heating until a few years ago – but they do now. What's more, it frees up much-needed space for furniture.

You can nail it!
Manicures and pedicures have never been easier. No more trying to paint your right-hand fingernails with your left hand – or vice versa.

Just take a seat and it's all done for you. Nail bars are a big growth area on the high street – and are ideal for those with busy lives.

Funny old game gets serious
You didn't have to be a footie fan to doff your hat at the England women's team for winning the Euros in July. It surely did a lot for women's sport – and it was also a reminder of how overpaid and overindulged many male professional footballers are, with uncouth manners and inflated egos.

Feel the power
No one is suggesting you should experience guilt when taking a leisurely soak in the bath – but the power shower is a wonderful development. It's quick, efficient and eco-friendly. Cheaper, too, now that water companies insist on installing meters.

Bread of Heaven
It used to be sliced white or nothing. Then along came Hovis ... and now we can devour sourdough, rye, focaccia and all manner of other exotic artisan breads (at absurd prices, of course). What's more, they can be good for you. The same can never be said for Sunblest.

Popping down to the boozer
Traditional pubs with swirly whirly carpets and pickled eggs are closing at an alarming rate – but many have been rescued and transformed, serving decent grub and offering attractive rooms for overnight stays. All hail the gastro pub.



Champion: Chloe Kelly lifts the European trophy

In vino veritas
Mateus Rosé was once regarded as the height of sophistication. No one drinks it any more, because there is so much decent plonk out there. We're spoilt for choice when it comes to wine. All budgets are catered for. And English wine has deservedly entered the market, with the sparkling stuff championed by our dear late Queen.



It's coming home: embroidery is back

What a good yarn
With the Bayeux Tapestry coming to the British Museum next year, stand by for a renewed interest in embroidery and knitting. Gone are the days of single and double knitting wool in dreary colours: you can buy cashmere, alpaca, silk, pure cotton in an array of cheerful colours.

Knitting is meant to be good for your mental health, too.

Mark Palmer was Travel Editor of the Daily Mail

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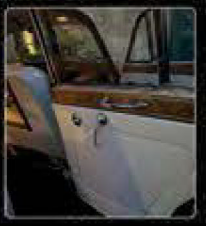

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The history man

A new biography of Asa Briggs salutes one of the last great dons

DAVID HORSPOOL

Do we have public historians any more? If not, would we want to?

If anyone knows the answer, it is Adam Sisman, biographer of A J P Taylor and Hugh Trevor-Roper, the best-known public historians of the fairly recent past. Sisman has now turned to Asa Briggs (1921-2016), a historian who, while less of a household name than Taylor or Trevor-Roper, arguably made more of an impact.

Briggs was a moving force behind that quintessential 1960s institution Sussex University. He was there from its opening in 1961, and became its Vice-Chancellor – ie the man in charge – in 1967. He was also instrumental in setting up the Open University.

Sussex was the leading 'plate-glass' university, built for an expanding body of students, configured to break down barriers between disciplines – even between the arts and the sciences. It was spiced up, almost from its origins, by student activism.

As Vice-Chancellor, Briggs found himself negotiating with students whose anger, in more and less righteous causes, dismayed and offended some of the faculty and many outside the university.

A councillor in Brighton called Sussex a 'hotbed of Communism', reminding us that, like bolshie students, political overreactions are also always with us.

Briggs's approach sounds eminently fair-minded. He tried to talk to student leaders, understand their point of view and allow them to protest peacefully, while drawing the line at rudeness, intimidation and violence. He sounds like the sort of wise leader many universities – not least Sussex itself – could do with today.

As Sisman points out, being a historian gave Briggs another reason for deploring the times when student activism tipped over into offence or violence. He felt acutely that the revolutions of 1848, to which there was much giddy reference in the '60s, had been anything but a template for positive change. In fact, across Europe, they had spawned violent reaction, and set back the cause of democracy. Briggs was a reformer, not a revolutionary.

Despite his appearance on innumerable committees and eventual elevation to the House of Lords – not bad for a lad from Keighley whose father's grocery shop had gone bust – it was as a historian that Asa Briggs wanted to be remembered.

Nobody could accuse him of lack of effort. Sisman calls him 'indefatigable' in his title, and Briggs claimed to write 'at least' 1,500 words every day.

If a late colleague of mine was to be believed, there were no exceptions to that rule. On Christmas Day, he told me, Briggs was known to join the family for lunch, wish them the compliments of the season, and then return to his study to write.

True or not, that chimes with the picture Sisman paints of a man snatching every spare moment to write – in the car, in airports (wags called him Lord Briggs of Heathrow) and on various holidays. His wife, Susan, collaborated with him on a book, perhaps so as to see him a bit more.

The result was a shelf of 45 books and hundreds, if not thousands, of articles. Briggs was a regular broadcaster, not only presenting history programmes but also as a panellist on *The Brains Trust* and *Any Questions*. If he had lived into the podcast age, he would doubtless have been a stalwart of those too.

Despite all this piston-like motion, it is hard to argue that Briggs really got anywhere as a historian. His magnum opus was a multi-volume *History of Broadcasting*, commissioned by the BBC, that took decades to deliver, and which invariably disappointed readers and reviewers when each instalment arrived.

> On Christmas Day, he'd join the family for lunch and then return to his study to write

All admitted its solidity and impressiveness, and a few thought he 'pulled out plums', but Malcolm Muggeridge spoke for many when he described Briggs as writing 'like a man diligently plodding his way across the plain, boots laden with slush, but resolutely resolved to reach the other side'.

His passion was for the Victorian age, which he did much to rehabilitate after the blow inflicted on it by Lytton Strachey's catty assaults.

Briggs wrote a trilogy – *Victorian People*, *Cities* and *Things* – as well as *The Age of Improvement* for the Longman's *A History of England*. But these were all published by the time he was 42, with more than four decades of publication ahead of him.

Briggs became a popular historian almost by attrition, by bombarding the public with so many books – illustrated histories, official histories, business histories, guides, anthologies and editions – that they respected his knowledge, even if they weren't sure what he thought of anything.

Public historians today – of the Max Hastings, Tom Holland and Andrew Roberts type – tend not to be academics.

Perhaps that's because universities don't pay as well as they used to. In 1960, the Professor of English at Liverpool University earned more than Liverpool FC's striker, before the footballer's maximum wage was abolished in 1961.

But perhaps it's also because there is less deference to institutions. Lord Briggs, who was always in favour of opening up education and breaking down barriers, might have approved of that.

The Indefatigable Asa Briggs: A Biography *by Adam Sisman is out now*



Agony and ecstasy of my school stroke

SOPHIA WAUGH

On 25th April, I was walking down the English corridor at school towards the last lesson of the day, when God picked up his biggest, heaviest frying pan and hit me very hard on the back of the head.

I did not pass out, but I could not see and, clutching my head in an effort to keep my brain inside my skull, I staggered like an animal to its hole towards my classroom.

I was vaguely aware of voices: 'Miss, Miss, are you all right?' But I could not respond. It was not – until a teacher said my actual name, fielded me and guided me into my room that I began to have any awareness of what was going on.

It turned out, after endless scans and lumbar punctures, that I had had a subarachnoid haemorrhage and am very lucky (a) to be alive and (b) not to be permanently damaged.

I was told not to go back to work until September and to concentrate in the intervening months on resting my brain.

It turns out that reading does not rest your brain – so at first I was even proscribed that recreation for any length of time at all.

Listening to music or podcasts or watching films does not rest your brain either. In fact, nothing does except an absence of experiences and sleep. So I had a lot of thinking time.

I thought a lot about school. Every time a doctor asked what I did and I told him or her, there was an eye-roll and a longer time off work assigned to me. It turns out that doctors rank teaching as a very unrestful profession – and they are right.

So what did I worry about? I had the haemorrhage a few short weeks before the Year 11s' GCSE exams were to begin. School was amazing, and swooped in to cover them with English specialists rather than cover supervisors, but even so I panicked about my miscreants.

In reality, by then there was very little any of us could do to save the ones who had already doomed themselves to failure. When I received a text from a teacher saying that a pupil had asked who Duncan was in *Macbeth*, I knew that at that point it made no difference at all who was standing in front of the classroom.

I worried about my form – in particular the two boys who cause me most grief and whom I still, babyishly, think I can somehow save from themselves.

More selfishly, I worried that next year I would not be given any GCSE classes in case I became ill again. After two years of bottom sets, I felt I was due a top set, but might now not be given upper school at all.

And then, after two months out of sight, I dropped into school to reassure the English department that I was normal and could be trusted. The first person I saw, wandering a corridor with a mobile in his hands in the middle of a lesson, was one of my chief concerns from the tutor group.

He caught sight of me, went bright red, cried, 'Miss! You're all right!' and rushed towards me with his arms outstretched, tears in his eyes. As he reached me, he came to a swift halt, looking very embarrassed.

'It's OK,' I said, and hugged him. It was against every rule in the book, but we hugged.

We had a long talk, and I walked him to his lesson so he would not get in trouble for skiving (which he had been doing, and often does). We parted, with him promising the earth in terms of good behaviour if only I'd be back in September.

I can't deny I was overwhelmed with joy at how much I'd been missed, and convinced that, on my return, he would indeed change his wicked ways to please me.

Ten minutes later, I found him wandering another corridor with his mobile in his hand. So that hadn't lasted long.

But I have been given a top-set Year 10 next year, so all is not lost.



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God

SISTER TERESA

St Jerome, the Bible's Latin lover

The Bible is taken for granted – both by those who read it and those who don't.

This is surely not ideal, whether one agrees with it or not, and whether one likes it or not. The Bible is the first substantial book to have been printed in Europe. It has never been out of print.

Its history is fascinating by any standards. The world's debt to St Jerome (342-420) defies description. I once heard him more or less dismissed in a sermon as a 'crusty old bachelor' – not a helpful way of designating one of the greatest Biblical scholars the world has ever known.

In the late-fourth century, Jerome translated the books of the Bible into Latin – not only from Greek, which he knew, but also from Hebrew, which he had to learn in order to do the work properly.

The result of his efforts was that his translation was used in Europe, almost unchanged, for 1,000 years. His version of the Old and New Testaments, known as the Vulgate, is still in print and is also available on the internet.

His scholarship was meticulous. In the days before print, the likelihood of scribes' making mistakes when writing by hand was all too common. These mistakes had to be examined and cross-referenced with other similar scripture passages and a decision made as to what was correct. That the texts of scripture have survived at all is no small miracle in itself.

Jerome was well-travelled. He needed to be. Part of his labour was to collate several hundred fragments of scripture from far and wide. He moved throughout Palestine, the Near East, North Africa and Antioch to find them, finally settling in Bethlehem in 386.

Things have changed little in the last 1,500 years. Jerome's translation was highly controversial in his time, and it took decades for it to be approved. The same sort of arguments have been going on ever since. Think of the Reformation.

As I write, there is stormy disagreement over the new texts submitted by the Vatican for use in Roman Catholic liturgy. I can't say that I like them, but they nevertheless raise a smile when I think that exactly the same sort of hullaballoo was taking place in the fifth century. It is at least a sign that interest in scripture still exists.

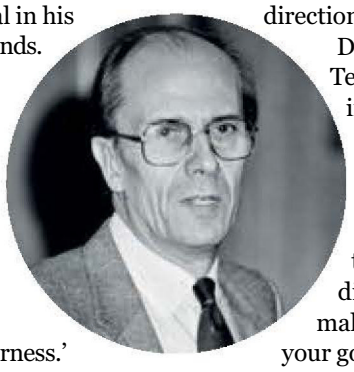
This interest will, I hope, lead to a serious revival in all that pertains to faith. Such quarrels are of course an absurdity to outsiders, but it remains a fact that people feel very strongly indeed about the wording used in their public worship.

And most of them can become very stubborn when their favourite expressions are threatened.

Funeral Service

Norman Tebbit (1931-2025)

The funeral of Norman Tebbit, former Chairman of the Conservative Party and Trade Secretary, was held at St Edmundsbury Cathedral in his home town of Bury St Edmunds.



Lord Dobbs, author of *House of Cards* and Lord Tebbit's former special adviser, gave the eulogy.

Michael Dobbs said of Tebbit, 'You were one of the bravest men I've ever known, morally as well as physically. You were also a man of extraordinary tenderness.'

Referring to the Labour leader Michael Foot's dig at Tebbit, Dobbs said, 'You even incorporated polecats into your coat of arms – I assume they were polecats of the semi-housetrained kind?

'And, my dear Norman, that motto you chose … *Qui tacet consentit* – "He who remains silent gives consent." Well, as I recall, there weren't many things you ever remained silent about.

'Yes, you told people to get on their bikes. Because that way, they might go as far as they wanted. And in whatever direction they chose.'

Dobbs paid tribute to Tebbit's late wife, injured in the 1984 Brighton bomb:

'While you and Margaret lay for hours, buried in the ruins of the Grand Hotel, you didn't think you would make it. You held hands; said your goodbyes.

'But you did get out – Margaret paralysed; you also injured, far more seriously than many know, or you would let on about.

'I remember how it left you in pain every day. But you carried on. You would not be beaten.'

'Yes, you lived for two Margarets, but there was never any doubt which Margaret came first. Your devotion to your wonderful wife was total. You were skinhead turned saviour; bruiser turned carer.

'At Margaret Thatcher's memorial service, you were on the steps of St Paul's, and the crowd broke into sustained applause.

'You looked around. "Who are they clapping?" you asked.

'"You, you daft old Norman."'

Lord Sterling read 'The Lord's My Shepherd'.

Lord Tebbit's children, William, Alison and John, shared family stories.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith, former Tory leader, read from *Hamlet*.

Music included Elgar's 'Nimrod' variation. Hymns included 'Abide with Me' and 'I Vow to Thee, My Country'.

The RAF Central Band honoured Lord Tebbit, an RAF and commercial pilot, with the Last Post and the 'Royal RAF March Past'.

HARRY MOUNT



Golf's biggest handicap

A new study suggests golf courses give you Parkinson's

DR THEODORE DALRYMPLE

I have always despised golf – perhaps unreasonably so.

It has always symbolised for me a decline into fatuity, by comparison with which Shakespeare's seventh age of man is a consummation devoutly to be wished. Golf is, as someone once said, a perfectly good walk spoiled.

As for golf, in which the players do not even walk, but ride round the course in their ridiculous little carts, my powers of invective fail me completely.

Now I have another argument against golf: it adds to the risk of developing Parkinson's disease.

A study from the United States found that the further away from a golf course people lived, the lower their chance of developing the disease: the risk declines with a measurable effect up to 18 miles from the course.

The hypothesis was that – because golf courses use large quantities of weedkillers and pesticides to stay pristine, and exposure to many of those weedkillers and pesticides, such as organophosphates and others, has been associated with the development of the disease – it was worth investigating the relationship between proximity of habitation to a golf course and development of the disease.

Compared with people who lived six miles away from a golf course, people who lived within one mile had more than double the chance of developing Parkinson's disease. And people who lived with a water supply derived from an area with a golf course also had a greater risk of developing the disease.

The authors tried to control for a number of variables. But, given the vast number of variables of human existence, it was obvious they could not control for everything of possible relevance.

For example, there was no control for level of education, and it has been suggested that Parkinson's disease affects the educated more than the uneducated, though those who are uneducated have worse symptomatology when they *do* contact the disease.

Nor was occupational history controlled for, and the disease is not equally distributed between occupations. Interestingly, the authors did not make any attempt to assess the actual golfing habits, or lack of them, among the subjects of their study.

Is it implausible to suggest that those who lived nearest golf courses (a) chose their domiciles precisely because of that proximity and (b) played the game more often than those who lived further away?

The association of distance from a golf course with the disease was not evident for the first three miles. The authors explain this as (possibly) due to a saturation effect – a weight of 20 tons will crush you as surely as a weight of 200 tons.

But this explanation suggests that the authors were wedded to their hypothesis that the association of proximity of habitation to a golf course with the development of Parkinson's disease was not merely statistical, but causative. Given the crisis in the reproducibility of medical research, it would be wise not to take these results as definitive. It is to be hoped – though not to be expected – that other researchers will repeat these authors' research.

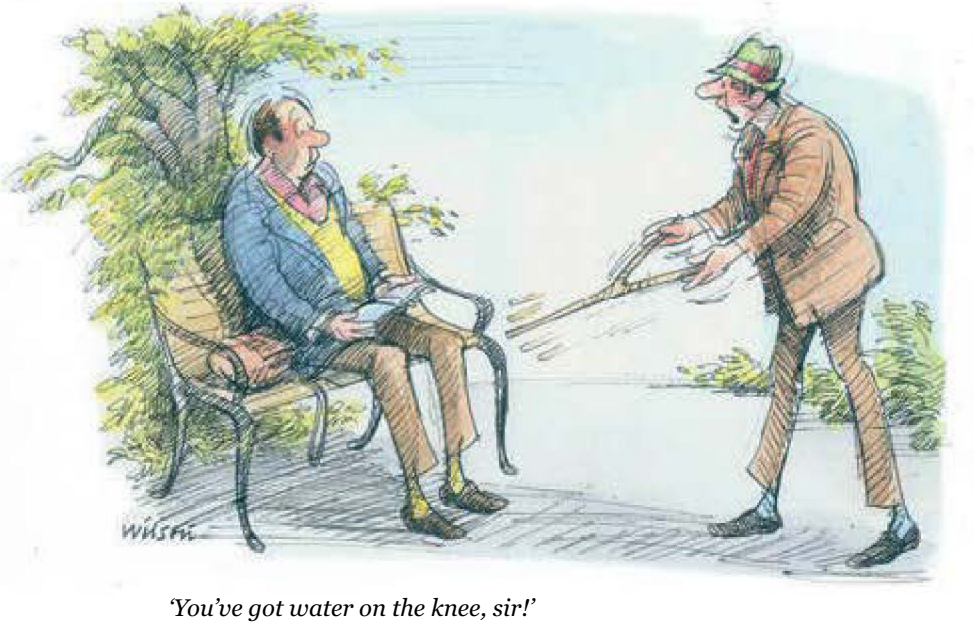
Such research is, however, time-consuming and not very glamorous from the point of view of fame and reputation.

It requires determination rather than originality, and the latter is the more valued quality. No one likes to think of himself or herself as a mere under-gardener in the garden of science.

However, there is an opportunity here. The paper states that European golf courses often use only one 15th of the weedkillers and pesticides American courses employ.

If in Europe the association of domicile's proximity to golf course with the development of Parkinson's disease holds, the explanation that it is explained by chemicals would be weakened.

In the meantime, my advice to golfers is … throw down your clubs and live!



'You've got water on the knee, sir!'

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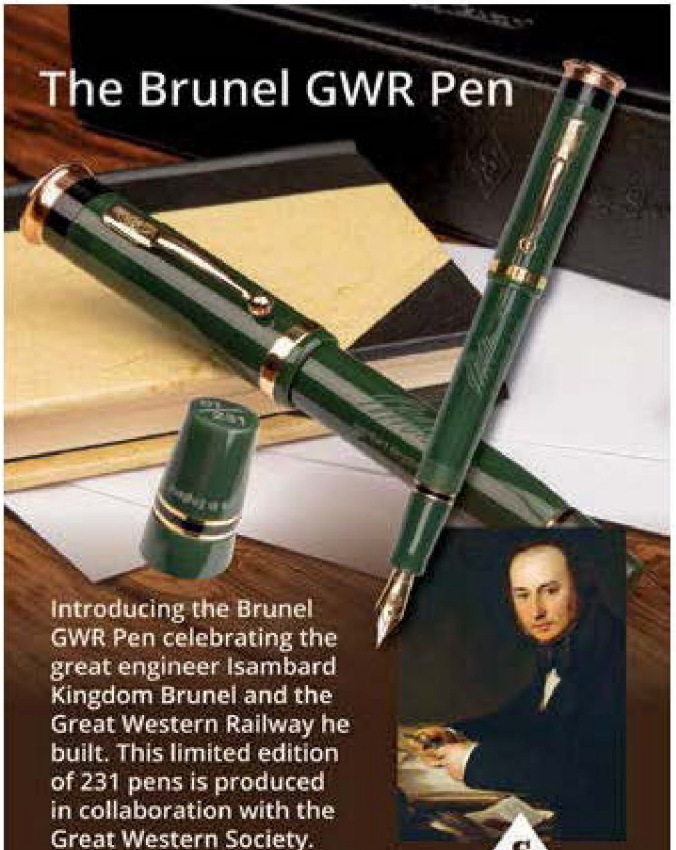

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I Once Met

Jessica Mitford

The Mitford sisters are back, in the new TV series *Outrageous*. I once met one of them in the flesh.

In 1983, I was a 24-year-old journalist, and extremely proud, and somewhat terrified, to be asked to research and co-write a television series for the then new Channel 4.

Called *The Outsiders*, it was a collection of nine half-hour interviews with people who were in some way outside the mainstream.

It's how I came to meet Jessica Mitford (1917-96), one of the famous or infamous clan, committed Communist, and author of *The American Way of Death* (1963) and the compelling memoir *Hons and Rebels* (1960).

She was 66 when she flew over from her home in California to our studio in London; she had lost none of the energy and sense of mischief that had informed so much of her life. When I asked her if she was still a Communist, she said she'd left the party but not the ideology:

'Very difficult to do so when I'd spent so much of my time memorising all that Marxist literature. Rather came to my rescue actually, because one day a GI home on leave tried to rape me. Poor soul. I began to recite the Communist Manifesto to the fellow. Tried to bore him "unstiff", as it were. He stopped, said he was sorry, and walked away.'



Jessica Mitford, 1984

She'd lived in the US for many years when we met, but her accent was as crisp, patrician and pre-war British as it had ever been.

'I know, I know, but when I went home after a decade in the States to visit my family, they said to me, "Darling, we can't understand a word you're saying." Utter sweethearts.'

She had the ability to see humour in the midst of clawing darkness. During the anti-Communist witch hunts in the US, she was told that her name was on a list of dangerous subversives. She was advised that if things got any worse, she could even be arrested and sent to an internment camp.

'The children overheard the conversation and became very excited. They were jumping up and down singing about going to summer camp. I didn't have the heart to disillusion them.'

We discussed her sister Unity, devotee of Hitler, who attempted suicide when Britain declared war on Germany. 'I'm still convinced that there was mental illness involved,' she said. 'I don't think I'm being too forgiving. Oh Lord, I hope I'm not. Fascists in the house, what a thing to live with. My sister Diana married to that brute Oswald Mosley. Oh dear.'

She was known as the 'red sheep' of the family, and was proud of it. 'I suppose I can laugh about it all now but you must remember what the '30s and '40s were like. There was a strong theme of antisemitism in the class to which I was born, a detestation of the left, even the liberal left, and a quiet or sometimes not so quiet admiration for first Mussolini, and then Hitler. It made me absolutely sick. Frightened me, too.'

At the end of the afternoon of filming and chatting, she wished me cheerio and then told me a wonderfully naughty joke about Hitler buggering Himmler – one that if told in public today would probably lead to the teller's being cancelled.

How different the left has become; how unlike the lovely Communist Jessica Mitford.

By Rev Michael Coren, an Anglican priest in Canada

MEMORY LANE

Young Peter Sellers, the movie love rat

As a pretty 17-year-old in the summer of 1942, Joan Lawrence, my late mother-in-law, went on holiday to Blackpool with a girlfriend.

Walking on the seafront, they were approached by two airmen who befriended them. The girls were flattered by the attention of two young men in RAF uniform.

One of them introduced himself as Peter and told them he was appearing in a show at the resort. They were given free tickets and saw him perform hilariously as a conjuror where, using funny voices, he capitalised on fluffing his act.

Peter appeared to be very attracted to Joan. One day, when the four of them were listening to a band play in a tearoom, Peter jumped up, asking if he could play the drums. He was, clearly, good at it.

The next morning, when the girls were eating their breakfast in the boarding house, the door burst open and Peter strode in and marched up to Joan, brandishing a small box. He took a ring out of the box, declared his love for her, and asked her to marry him. He put the ring on her finger while all the guests stood up and applauded. Joan was too flabbergasted to reply.



Joan Lawrence in 1943, aged 17

It was Peter's habit to telephone his mother each night from a call box while Joan waited outside in the street. After being given the ring and believing herself to be engaged to him, she expected Peter would want her to speak to his mother.

But this never happened.

The night before the girls were due to return home, Peter took Joan to the pictures. She had previously enjoyed chaste kisses and cuddles, but Peter's strong passion and wandering hands upset her greatly.

He appeared taken aback and apologetic but this did not stop Joan from running from the cinema and throwing the ring into the gutter.

The girls went home the next day and Joan never saw him again – until, years later, in the cinema, there filling the screen was the same Peter Sellers she had been engaged to for three days in the summer of 1942. Sellers would have been 100 on 8th September this year.

By Lyn Lawrence, Chester, who receives £50

Readers are invited to send in their own 400-word submissions about the past

READERS' LETTERS

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Dancing Socrates

SIR: I always hope that there will be at least one item in my *Oldie* mag that will make me laugh out loud. I am seldom disappointed. Sure enough, in the August issue there is the statement that 'Towards the end of his life, Socrates took up dancing lessons', in Town Mouse's 'The Socrates Guide to a Happy Death'.

Can this be right? True or not, at dismal moments in the future, such as accidentally watching the news, I shall just picture Socrates in his dancing shoes and all will be well.
Anne Penney, Hamble, Hampshire

Saucy sign

SIR: Re your tasty Garton's HP story (August issue), I bought a large, ancient enamel sign (5ft x 3ft 6in) from a junk shop when I lived in Birmingham many moons ago – an early addition to my expanding enamel-sign collection.

I will always remember the smell of HP sauce at certain times of the day as I drove into Birmingham via Spaghetti Junction.

I now live in Somerset with a variety of different smells, and have a rather large collection of signs which I am trying not to add to.



Peter Sheldon's treasured advert

A friend mentioned my Garton's sign to a Mr and Mrs Fry who asked if they could visit and see it. It transpired that the nice Mr Fry was a descendant of the Fry's Chocolate empire, and Mrs Fry was the descendant of a certain Mr and Mrs Garton, of the aforementioned Garton's HP Sauce Company.

Their first meeting must have come as a sign from the gods.

Best wishes to all at *The Oldie* – my best read every month.
Peter Sheldon, Batcombe, Somerset



'No – he doesn't have mummy issues!'

Golf with Gerald Harper

SIR: Referring to Gyles Brandreth's piece about Gerald Harper (August issue), who can forget when he burst into the public view through a block of ice in *Adam Adamant Lives!* – a highly unlikely storyline that would surely not get made today.

But he was charming and debonair, both traits of which he used to great effect when he fronted *Sunday Affair* for Capital Radio, in which he gave out champagne and roses to swooning female admirers.

Many years later I played golf against him when he turned out for the Stage Golf Society at Richmond Golf Club – still charming. The captain that day was one Philip Glenister who kept his love of golf under the radar as it hardly went with his hard man *Ashes to Ashes* image.

Actors, eh – don't we just love 'em!
Nigel Scandrett, Cobham, Surrey

It's 'ect', as any fule kno

SIR: Your correspondent Peter Hillman spoke for many of us in his comment (Letters, August issue) about the appallingness of the expression 'pre-order'. Alas, he then dismisses people who write 'ect' for 'et cetera'.

My sister, brother and I have for many years been using this abbreviation while corresponding with each other, in loyal tribute to Nigel Molesworth, the curse of



'Let's watch something else tonight. I'm getting tired of the beheadings'

st custard's, hero and sole narrator of the books by Geoffrey Willans and Ronald Searle.

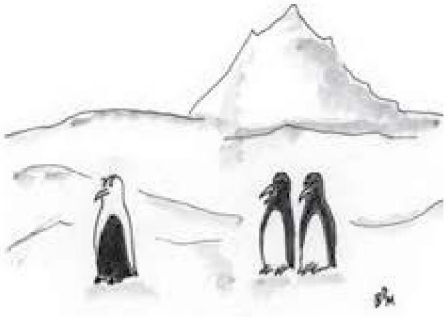
In *How to Be Topp*, for instance, we read 'Whenever anyone mention fr.all the eleves sa oo gosh ugh French weedy ect', and in *Back in the Jug Agane,* 'Wot of it, o weedy wet? It will be the same as any other, all geom.fr.geog.ect and weedy walks on sunda.'

You kno he's rite if you remember yor skool days properly, my deres.
Hilary Temple, Coventry

French fancy

SIR: 'No sex please – we're British' (Letters, August issue) reminded me of my French au-pair girlfriend in London in the late 1960s.

When I was singing to her she would say, 'You 'ave an 'orrible voice.' When she left me for some Greek guy, she said, 'No 'ard feelings and I wish you 'appinis all your life.'
John Kenny, Acle, Norfolk



'Carl is so negative'

Russia's Profumo Affair

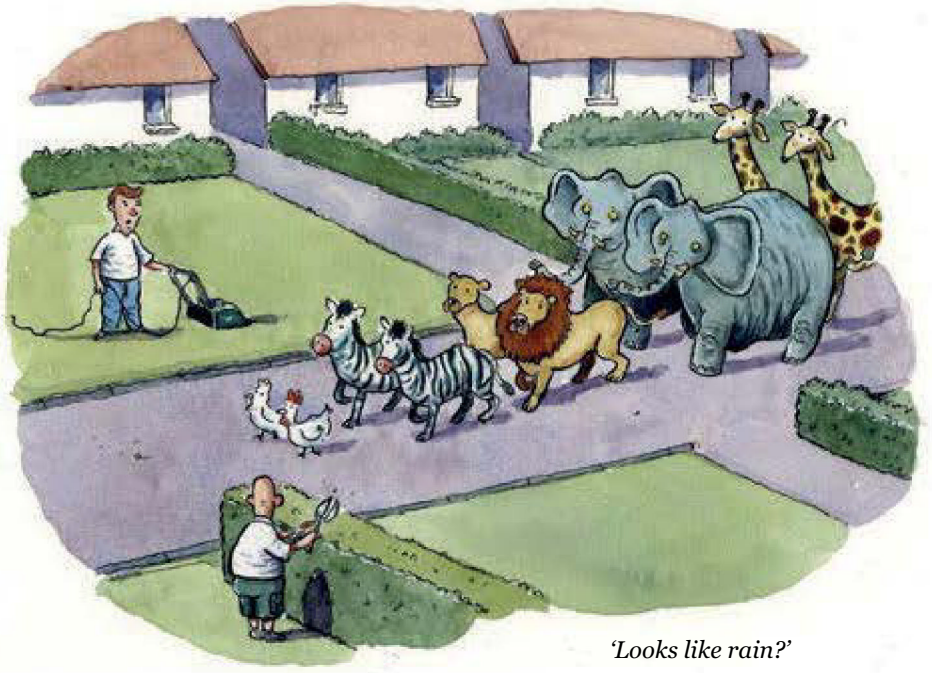
SIR: Gilbert Lewthwaite's piece about Moscow in the 1960s (August issue) reminded me of a story told by one of my late colleagues in the shipbuilding industry.

In the early '60s he made a number of trips to Russia, trying to secure a deal for a supply of dredgers to the USSR and became very friendly with one of his Russian contacts, named Ivan.

On one occasion, in 1963, shortly after a certain scandal broke in the UK, he arrived in Moscow to be greeted by Ivan: 'Ah Tony, we are so glad you have come.

'We have been puzzling our heads over the meaning of this word PROFUMO. Perhaps you can enlighten us?

'We think it must stand for Public Relations Officer for Fouling Up Military Operations.'



'Looks like rain?'

Of course, the word he used was a little less delicate than 'fouling'!

Yours sincerely,
John Dearing, Reading, Berkshire

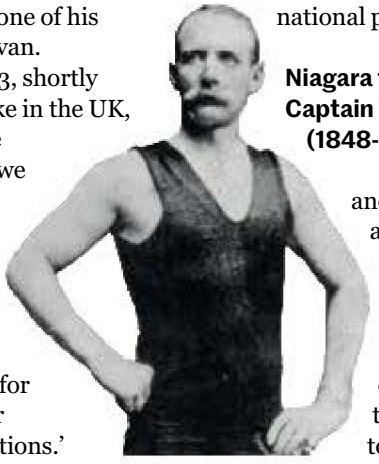
Captain Webb's last swim

SIR: In her article about her unsuccessful Channel swim (August issue), Ettie Neil-Gallacher states that she is aged 45. But your magazine is called *The Oldie*.

If you had wanted the story of a real 'oldie', two clicks of a mouse would have revealed the remarkable one of an old friend and fellow ex-graduate of Newcastle Medical School, Roger Allsopp, a retired surgeon from Guernsey.

In 2006 at the age of 65, Roger swam the Channel and at the time was the oldest Briton to do so. Later, aged 70 years and four months, he repeated the swim, then being the oldest person in the world to succeed. Both feats allowed him to raise almost a million pounds for breast-cancer research.

There was surprisingly little national publicity about such challenges, perhaps because of Roger's innate modesty and where he had lived and worked.



Niagara fails: Captain Webb (1848-83)

His world record has since been surpassed by two others from other countries. Ettie states that Captain Webb tried to swim across the rapids beyond Niagara Falls for a prize of $2,000 – a huge sum in 1883.

If you stand, as I have, at the spot where he dived in, you will immediately realise that the feat is quite impossible.

The river is a frightening, raging torrent. The poor man must have felt extreme pressure to perform, and must have known he faced certain death. His body was recovered days later, well downriver.
David Clarke, Yarm, North Yorkshire



'Can you do that face again? The one when I said no? I'd like my friends to see it'

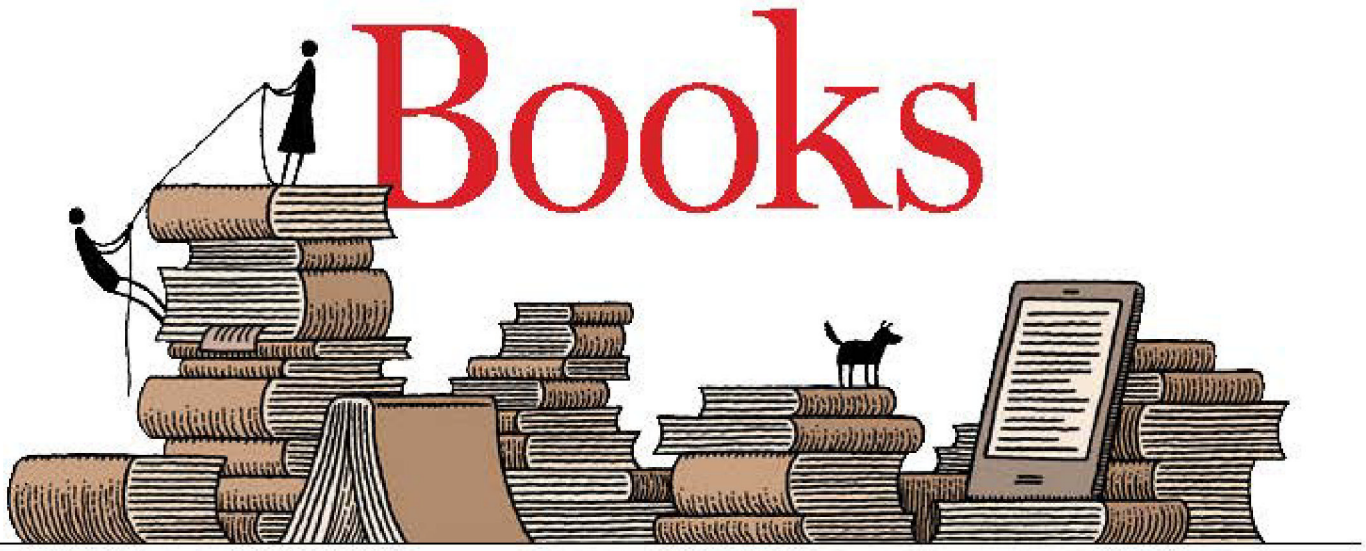
Boycott's boycott

SIR: Joel Hancock's article on when he once met Lemmy (August issue) reminds me of a recent conversation with a friend. He said 'I once met Geoff Boycott.'

My initial thought that this could make a suitable article for *The Oldie* was quickly dashed with his next sentence. 'He told me to bugger off!' Apparently my friend had asked for an autograph.

Yours faithfully,
John Gilbertson, Dunino, Fife

Books



Doomed King of Hay

ROGER LEWIS

The Bookseller of Hay: The Life and Times of Richard Booth

By James Hanning

Corsair £22

By the time I met Richard Booth (1938-2019), 'the world's largest second-hand bookseller', he was not at his best. He'd been felled by a stroke and presented a sorry spectacle, drooling and dribbling, pink champagne and cake flying everywhere.

Yet, by James Hanning's account, in this wonderful and astute biography, Booth, from the first, was an unsavoury character: 'eccentric, maddening, shambolic', in addition to being 'egotistical, capricious, unreliable'.

As Marianne Faithfull put it, 'What you have to understand is that Richard Booth was completely mad.'

Margaret Drabble would be in agreement: 'I didn't really like Richard.'

Hanning himself is compelled to conclude that Booth was 'some distance from being a silver-tongued smoothie'. He kept his trousers up with baler twine.

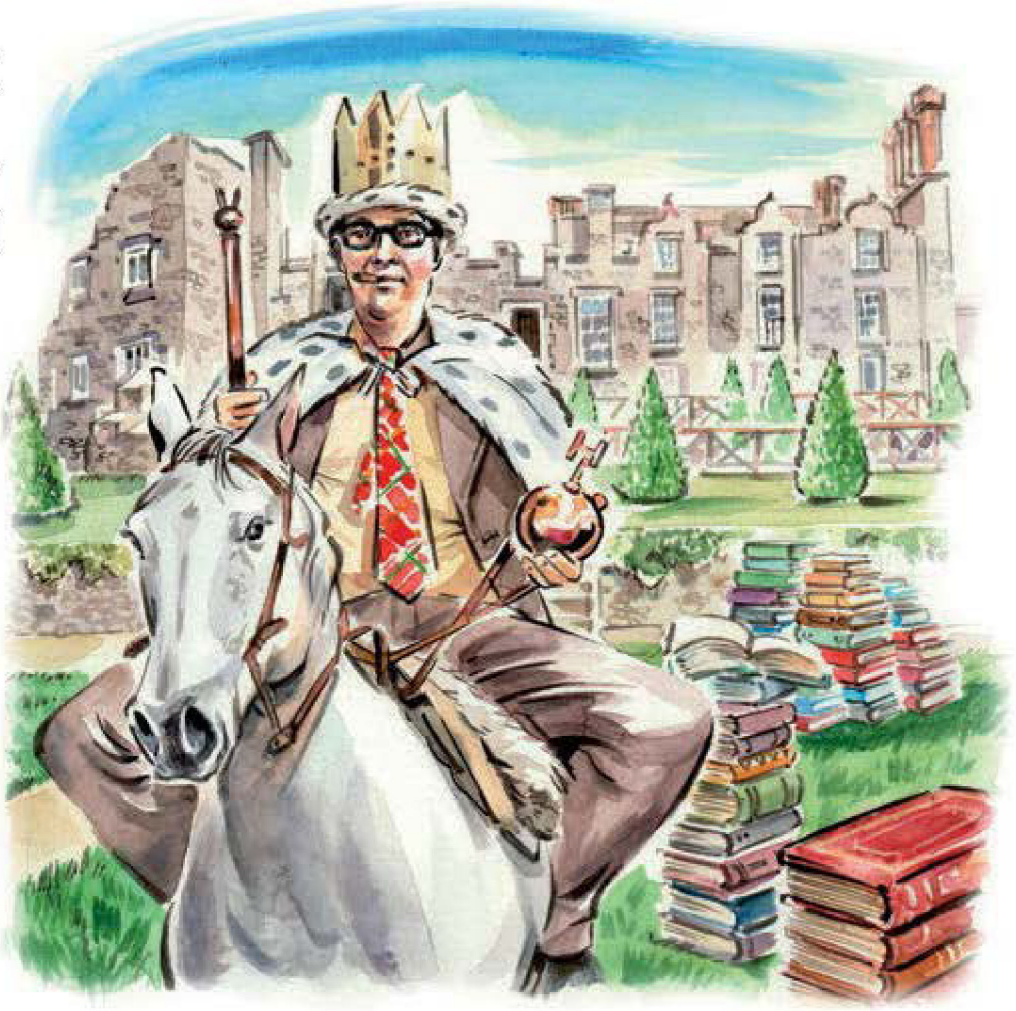
It was Booth's idea to create the world of books in Hay: 'His force of personality transformed an obscure border town into an international phenomenon.' Setting up his first shop in 1962, Booth eventually had 25 miles of shelving, with a stock of more than a million titles. Shelves, decreed the boss, 'were to be within easy reach of a five-foot-two woman'.

By 1968, turnover was £100,000 a year – all down to Booth's 'extraordinary single-mindedness, drive and determination' – not bad when he'd been warned, 'Nobody reads books in Hay.'

In fact, as Hanning explains and describes in full, this community on the edge of the Brecon Beacons (sod Bannau Brycheiniog) had a notably high bohemian and cultural atmosphere, the pubs and cafés filled with people such as Penelope Betjeman, Arnold Wesker, Jan Morris and April Ashley. The latter broke the ice by enquiring, 'Do you want to see my tits?' I'd give a lot to know the identity of the 'now senior Conservative' who 'slipped into a tutu at midnight'.

There were wealthy hippies, 'spoilt rich kids', film people and rock musicians keen on magic mushrooms. To enter the saloon of the Blue Boar or the Mason's Arms was 'like walking into the bar in *Star Wars*', and the broad vistas of the adjacent landscape were used by Kubrick in *Barry Lyndon* and by John Carpenter in *An American Werewolf in London*. Booth's regular browsers included Patrick Moore, Ken Dodd and Dennis Potter.

Hay, which today provides 'smug retreats for the middle class', is a



Royal flush: Richard Booth at his home, Hay Castle, with his orb, a lavatory ballcock

GARY WING

strange, isolated spot, on the road to nowhere, and Booth never really lived anywhere else. He grew up in a Victorian mansion, Brynmelyn. His family for generations were officers, gentlemen and nabobs. He was expelled from Rugby, and didn't take Oxford seriously, leaving without taking a degree.

There was one particularly ugly episode, which was mostly hushed up. Booth, who drove a Rolls-Royce Phantom complete with cocktail cabinet, killed a passenger in a car crash.

'How much Booth smelled of drink cannot be known,' but he'd been overheard in Crickhowell saying he'd downed three large brandies. The coroner's report, like that of the police enquiries, suggests negligence.

Booth never apologised to the victim's family. He took 'what cannot be cured must be endured' to extremes.

Lasting all of three weeks in an office job, and suffering from a septic boil on the buttocks he feared might prove fatal, Booth returned to Hay and acquired his first premises, the former fire station.

This he filled with stock picked up from South Wales's workingmen's halls, which were sadly disposing of their libraries, the proletariat having resisted self-education.

Booth also began buying other Hay buildings, such as the cinema and workhouse, to use as storage facilities. It soon became evident he had a collecting mania, travelling miles 'in the hope of further conquests'.

Examining obituary columns, Booth would turn up outside the home of a grieving widow of a professor, offering to relieve the family of any cumbersome library – 'I'll take the lot.' He plundered rectories and Victorian schools. He bought hundreds of thousands of books from America or, as an employee described it, 'He bought eight containers of crap from America. We had to handle three-quarters of a million books in one delivery.'

Booth's notion was that 'quantity was going to impress people', rather than quality. It's comical, in fact, Booth's disregard for specific literary treasures.

'If you buy a library of five thousand volumes for ten thousand pounds,' he reasoned, 'you are going to find two volumes that will earn you back what you have spent.'

Theoretically. Booth priced first editions of Sir Thomas Browne for a fiver and Dickens for £4.10, when they were worth hundreds. He'd remove plates for mounting and framing, hence destroying books worth a mint. In a château in Belgium, Booth found Napoleonic rarities, which he sold for hardly anything.

'If that stuff had been marketed properly, it would have made someone a millionaire ten times over,' Hanning was told by a London dealer.

Booth and his attitude to money is a vastly complex issue, as 'control through chaos' seemed to be his philosophy.

He outwitted waves of managers, accountants and lawyers. Hanning suggests there was even some involvement with the mob. Numerous books for sale in Hay seemed to have been purloined from the New York Public Library, as they bore the library's stamp – and sinister gangster sorts turned up in Herefordshire, prompting Booth to go into hiding.

Always spending more than he made, 'annoyingly impulsive and wasteful', Booth left bills unsettled for years and was proud to announce, 'I never repay my loans.' Staff were paid intermittently and in cash, Booth personally pocketing the amounts he said were deducted for tax and National Insurance.

There's a sort of medieval buccaneering heedlessness about all this, and Booth no doubt saw himself as a public-spirited lord of the manor, or lord of misrule. Somehow – possibly funded by the winnings from a bet – he'd managed to buy Hay Castle, with its 17th-century interiors (though no heating or hot water).

Deeming it a suitably monarchical seat, in 1977, 'based on not the slightest public mandate', and to the dismay of Brecknock Borough Council, Booth declared Hay an independent micronation and himself King of Hay.

Dressed in a tinfoil crown, and carrying an orb made from the copper ballcock of a lavatory cistern, Booth paraded down the street on horseback, handing out titles and honours and knighting children. 'One local drank so much, he couldn't remember if he was the Foreign Secretary or Prime Minister.'

The Minister for Social Security was excellently qualified, as he'd been on the dole for six years.

Soon afterwards, in bed and thinking the crowds were applauding him, what Booth actually heard was the crackle of the castle in flames. 'Burning oak panels, staircases and timber beams lit up the night sky.'

Jacobean plasterwork was destroyed by the firemen's hoses. Booth used the insurance money and restoration grants to buy more books.

Eventually, and inevitably, in 1984, Booth was declared bankrupt – so went round 'lording it up in restaurants, drinking double whiskies and smoking cigars'. I suppose that is admirable in its way – the defiance, the indefatigability.

But there's a lot of thoughtlessness and insensitivity in the Booth story. He was a nasty neighbour, for example, cutting off the water supply and dumping manure in the drive – 'Richard was always doing things like that.' He'd hire people and sack them on a whim.

He was grim with his wives – neglectful, taking them for granted. One he married in Spain, and after 24 hours left her in Madrid Airport.

One thing did strike me as decidedly hilarious. Booth, who died in 2019, was interested in books not as literature, only as commodities, like patio furniture or wristwatches. He himself read only non-fiction about serial killers. In his shops, he wanted not an educated, scholarly staff – only people to pack the books and drive container lorries.

Indeed, Booth didn't much like literary people as a breed, and university academics he dismissed as lazy and pretentious (quite right).

For these reasons, and also because he hadn't thought of it first and instigated it, Booth took against the Hay Festival, drowning out speakers in the tent by tooting his car horn and starting up a chainsaw. His 'carping, complaining, knocking and protesting' was that of a king who feels deposed, as well as of an old man who's gone a bit nuts, like Lear. It's this depleted character I encountered, at a reception given by Duncan Fallowell, a Hay stalwart and April Ashley's memorialist.

Should it star Toby Jones or Simon Russell Beale, *The Bookseller of Hay* will, I have no doubt, make a classic, rollicking, award-winning film, in the manner of the Boulting Brothers or Ealing. Had I the loot, I'd snap up the rights instantly.

Roger Lewis, born and brought up in South Wales, is author of Erotic Vagrancy: Everything About Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor



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Golden age of glossies

RACHEL JOHNSON

Empire of the Elite: Inside Condé Nast, the Media Dynasty That Reshaped America

By Michael M Grynbaum

Coronet £22

You wait ages for a juicy, insiderish account of the glamorous world of magazines, only for a gush of them to spurt forth – a delicious geyser of gossip and anecdote.

It began with Tina Brown's *The Vanity Fair Diaries*. Then there were Nicholas Coleridge's *The Glossy Years*, Dylan Jones's *These Foolish Things*, Graydon Carter's *When the Going Was Good*...

The most recent addition to the glossy genre is *New York Times* reporter Michael M Grynbaum's unauthorised biography of Condé Nast, *Empire of the Elite*. Although my enjoyment was enriched by my having already read all the above – I have a penchant for books that are basically like being invited to a big fat fabulous party full of interesting people without the effort of having to get all dressed up and go yourself – it more than stands on its own merits.

A quick glance at the cover and index tells us where the author's hungry gaze has fallen. The triptych of galacticos on the cover are Carter, Anna Wintour and Tina Brown, glad-ragged as if for a gala (Graydon and Anna) or a book launch (Tina, holding a wineglass).

The index's longest entries are for those three super-editors and for Samuel Newhouse I – 'the wealthy but obscure owner of a national newspaper chain' – for his son Samuel Iriving 'Si' Newhouse Jr, and Alex Liberman, Si's mentor and influential 'editorial director' of the group.

Sam Newhouse, the fable runs, went out to buy his pocket rocket of a wife, Mitzi, a copy of *Vogue* and 'came back with the company'. He died in 1979 and then his son, Si, who'd been running the magazine arm of his father's empire – the limb his father considered girly and unserious – took over.

On the day of his father's funeral, Advance Publications (the parent company) was worth $2bn. By 1988 it was worth $8bn and Si had revived *Vanity Fair*, bought the *New Yorker* (for $168m – about $475m in today's money) and launched *Gourmet*. Under his watch, 'Condé went from a publishing laggard to the centre of the culture-making industry.'

This arc – the rise to dominance, and then the decline of Condé Nast, all driven by Si's Oedipal determination to prove his undemonstrative, critical father wrong beyond the grave – is the most fascinating aspect of a fascinating book.

But everything is enjoyable, especially the pen sketches and piquant anecdotes about the three editors who fascinate the author most. Edward Enninful, *Vogue*'s first gay, black, male editor, who is regarded as a personage of tremendous consequence in London – particularly by himself – merits only one brief entry. Only New York matters.

When Si started his mission to make over the magazines, New York was an understated town where it was chic to wear 'threadbare Shetland jerseys' and drive station wagons with those wooden panels on the side. When he finished, it was a secular cathedral where greed was good, consumption conspicuous and lunch for wimps. This transformation is well told through the panoptic reporting of one publishing company.

Editors were told not to speak to Grynbaum, but I bet they all did. The notes are testimony to the elbow grease and foot leather this hack has expended to bring us this portrait of Condé in its pomp. The details are jaw-dropping.

Editors were told there were 'no budgets', and had to live as high on the hog as they could, especially by Liberman, who thought the propagators of Condé Nast's 'luxurious dreamland' ought to live the lives they plastered on the page. Taxis, private jets, bouquets, unlimited expense accounts, Concorde, suites at the Dorchester – all this was chickenfeed compared with the millions the company lent editors interest-free so they could live in the high-rolling style expected of these early influencers.

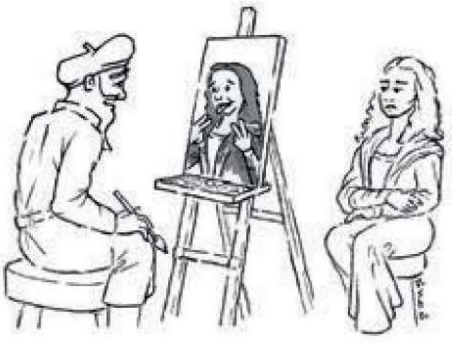
Often the loans were never called in, 'which effectively added the ownership of a multimillion-dollar property to their compensation packages', Grynbaum reveals – an eye-popping detail.

A cover shoot would routinely cost half a million dollars. Photographer Annie Leibovitz's expenses for one shoot alone were more than a year's salary for most jobbing New Yorkers.

This is a book about much more than Condé Nast and its fags, mags and hags.

It's a tale of excess and the end of empires, the decline and fall of magazines, thanks to the internet. But oh boy, when the going was good, there was nothing better. This book is a glittering, golden epitaph for that prelapsarian age.

Rachel Johnson was Editor of The Lady *magazine*



'Let's do one more – this time try an enigmatic smile'

The wife's tale

PETER MCKAY

How Not to Be a Political Wife: A Memoir

By Sarah Vine

Harper Element £20

Politics, writes Sarah Vine, 'trampled my health, my happiness, my marriage, my sanity; it placed intolerable pressure on my loved ones, especially my children; it twisted my sense of self, it tainted everything I did or said...

'These are the recollections of a survivor but they are also a love letter to all that was lost in the wreck.'

She thought 'long and hard' about writing this memoir. She confides – not entirely convincingly – that 'I've done so not to settle old scores or plead my case; more because I hope it's a tale worth telling...' So this is her story – 'the way I remember it, written with no fear, no favour – and, frankly, no f***s left to give.'

On Friday 24th June 2016, a mobile phone rings at 4.45am in the Notting Hill home she shares with her then husband, Tory minister Michael Gove. It's his 'incredibly handsome' special adviser, Henry Cook, who says, 'We've won!', referring to the Leave vote in the EU referendum. Drowsy, Leave-supporting Gove, propped up on his elbows, says, 'Gosh, I suppose I had better get up.'

Sarah Vine writes, 'There you are in your pyjamas in your 1930s, two-up, two-down on the No 7 bus route in North Kensington with its slightly rubbishy loft conversion and garden laid with plastic grass and dog turds and suddenly the whole world [the media] is staring at your front door.'

The problem was that Gove had not made it clear to Remainer Cameron that he was a committed Leaver. This was tied up, to a degree, with his adoptive father, whose fish business in Aberdeen had been damaged by the EU.

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The performance of your investments was left to the mercy of the markets. When challenged, the standard response was that reacting to market conditions was too difficult and that "time in the market" was more important than "timing the market".

Douglas Chadwick, the founder of Saltydog Investor, doesn't agree.

He spent his formative years in the Merchant Navy before going to Sussex University, as a mature student, to read theoretical physics.

In 1975, after various production roles in UK manufacturing companies, he set up a flat-pack furniture manufacturing business. Ten years later, he successfully sold it and invested some of the proceeds in two Investment Bonds through an Independent Financial Advisor.

Fifteen years later, he took a proper look at his investments and had two nasty surprises. First, there had been little capital growth. Second, his money was still stuck in the same sectors as when he started. It had just been sitting there, forgotten, for 15 years, despite the dramatic changes in the investment landscape.

Determined to take control, he began a journey that eventually led to the creation of the Saltydog trend investing system.

Crucially, he approached the process with an open mind. He wasn't a value investor, contrarian investor, passive investor, or trend investor - just someone with a talent for analysing numbers and a simple idea: to make money, you need to be in the market when it's going up and out when it's going down. But how to achieve that?

He started meticulously analysing data from around 70 funds. Soon, patterns started to emerge. Some funds moved together, rising and falling as if in tandem. After further research, he realised these funds belonged to the same sector. It sounds obvious now, but at the time, working with raw fund data, it was a breakthrough.

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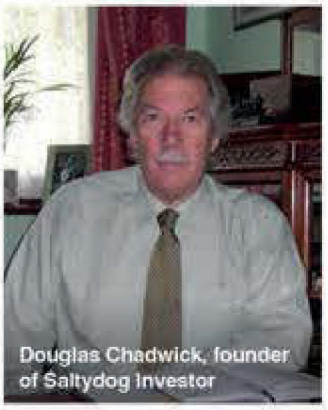

Douglas Chadwick, founder of Saltydog Investor

out of all recognition from what Douglas was doing by longhand in the early 2000s for the limited number of funds that were available to him.

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Sarah had felt she was on uber-friendly terms with the prime ministerial spouse, Samantha Cameron, and was the family's 'staunchest advocate' at the somewhat Dave-intolerant *Daily Mail*, for which she remains a prizewinning columnist. Cameron rang and shouted at Gove down the line, says Sarah, following it up with a text saying, 'You must realise that I divide the world into team players and wankers. You've always been a team player. Please don't become a wanker.'

Not that Cameron had gone out of his way to support Education Secretary Gove, shuffling him out of this Cabinet post when the sensible-sounding reforms he was introducing came under predictable fire from the teaching unions. 'A shabby day's work, which Cameron will live to regret,' predicted the clairvoyant war historian Sir Max Hastings.

When Cameron resigned as PM rather than face the political turmoil his referendum had caused, Mrs Gove (they're now happily divorced, she says) was unimpressed. 'What a massive man baby. Throwing all his toys out of the pram because he hadn't got his way.'

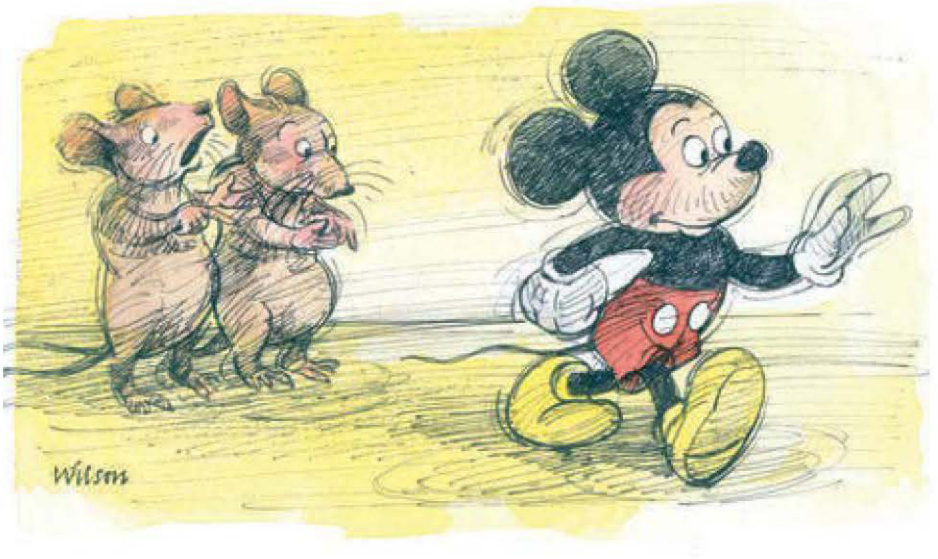
Meanwhile, she adds, 'I was told in no uncertain terms that the order had gone out to send us both to social Siberia.'

However, the final words of thanks in her book – might it be an olive branch? – are to 'the last but not least, Samantha, for being a good friend, while it lasted'.

Sarah says that, with her cosmetics skills, she 'loves making friends look beautiful'. She was a 10lb 4oz baby, two weeks overdue, 'covered in dark hair and with remarkably large feet'. She wasn't considered beautiful by her tax-exiled, Welsh-born father, Roger, who told her, had she been conceived six months later when abortion was legalised, 'That would have been my fate.'

As for talk that Gove was a homosexual, she says, 'Gay, no; metrosexual, yes' (metrosexual: 'a heterosexual urban man who enjoys shopping, fashion and similar interests traditionally associated with women or gay men'), adding that he was 'invariably more fragrant than even the famous Lady Archer; his favourite aftershave was Penhaligon's English Fern, alternating occasionally with Blenheim Bouquet'.

As for his supposed lover, the former Tory adviser Dominic Cummings, she says, 'The ladies in their office deemed it necessary to acquire some scented candles to dampen the scent of his masculine musk.' The alleged source of the Gove-Cummings story – the former Tory chief whip Gavin Williamson – was reported to have dashed into No 10 in the heat of the bitter EU campaign to brief Cameron about the alleged Gove-Cummings amour.



'I bet he's had cosmetic surgery'

Cummings's wife, Mary Wakefield, later wrote in the *Spectator*, 'Even before I knew Dom was one of the Brokeback Brexiteers, this seemed a very curious tale. The story was written as if somehow Williamson thought a gay romance shed light on the otherwise inexplicable success of Vote Leave.'

Mary also mentions what has always puzzled me about Cameron's fury with the Goves and Brexit: 'Not then, nor now, does David Cameron accept that his pal Gove – a lifelong Eurosceptic – chose to Leave for the sake of the country.'

She wonders if Gove was judged to have picked the wrong DC – Dominic Cummings, rather than David Cameron.

Could be!

Peter McKay has worked for Private Eye *and the* Daily Mail

Rhodesian amnesia

DANIEL HANNAN

The Colonialist: The Vision of Cecil Rhodes

By William Kelleher Storey

OUP USA £30.99

The years have not been kind to Cecil Rhodes (1853-1902).

His early biographers saw him as a visionary and philanthropist, a man whose restless energy had called whole countries into being. As the 20th century progressed, there was more interest in his sharp business practices. Then he became a symbol of racism and imperialism.

During the demented Black Lives Matter summer of 2020, crowds gathered outside his old Oxford college, Oriel, demanding the removal of his statuette.

By now, he had ceased to be a flesh-and-blood historical figure and become an avatar for Evil Colonialism. The protesters' placards denounced everything from slavery (abolished 20 years before he was born) to apartheid (established 46 years after he died).

The Colonialist seems to have been written during that fevered time, and already feels dated. It is a thorough and serious book, offering detailed analysis of how Rhodes persuaded London politicians and investors to back his schemes.

But it is one-dimensional. Some of the sentences read like the work of an angry undergraduate. Rhodes, we are told, 'believed that African people were lesser beings who should be subject to discrimination'.

There is no analysis of why, as contemporaries attested, he enjoyed unusually close personal relationships with Africans. His ambition is acknowledged, but not his warmth or his generosity. Rhodes lived simply and gave away his wealth, not least to Oxford. But that would not fit with the image of the cartoon baddie.

The author, a history professor in Mississippi, tells us that his theme is the 'disassembly line', a concept borrowed from environmentalism. Just as Rhodes's diamond mines threw up mounds of earth, removed stones to distant cities and then disassembled them further by cutting them into gems, so the magnate disassembled the traditional social structures of whole tribes.

Sure – just as those tribes had done to the peoples they conquered; just as

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the Afrikaners were to do to English-speaking South Africans after 1948; just as democracy was to do to the Afrikaner supremacy after 1990. History is a process of constant disassembly.

Rhodes himself, though you would not guess it from this biography, favoured a transition to majority rule, wanting to tie the franchise to literacy or property. 'My motto is: equal rights for every civilised man south of the Zambezi,' he wrote. 'What is a civilised man? A man, whether black or white, who has sufficient education to write his name, has some support or works – in fact, is not a slacker.' Storey does eventually mention that text – on page 410 of my 420-page copy.

Recognising Rhodes's complexities and contradictions would have made for a more interesting book. Storey is aware of them. He admits in a rush (and, again, in his closing pages) that Rhodes campaigned for black men to vote in Cape Colony; that he insisted that 'no student shall be disqualified for election to a [Rhodes] Scholarship on account of his race'; that he funded *Izwi Labantu*, the newspaper of what is now the ANC.

He suggests, in a pursed-lipped tone, that this last was because its Xhosa editors 'took for granted that Black people had fallen behind white people'. Given the technological disparity in the 1890s, was that an unreasonable thing to think?

Rhodes was no saint. He cut corners. He persuaded African chiefs to give him concessions in return for money and guns, often being deliberately evasive about the small print. As he put it himself in a speech at Oriel towards the end of his life, he had 'done things which savoured rather of violence'.

But his violence is described without context. Storey mentions, so quickly that you would miss it if you blinked, that the king who had signed away the concessions was so angry with the counsellor who had advised it that he had the man's entire household massacred. These were violent times.

When local resentments burst into conflict, we read that 'for a short time, Rhodes was prepared to put aside his racism to save his colonialist aspirations'.

A less tendentious way of putting it would be to say that, at great personal risk, he rode out to meet Ndebele forces and secured a peace because of the regard in which they held him.

All this would have made for a more readable as well as a more balanced story. But we are still at the stage where white men in 19th-century Africa must be cast as villains, the Alan Rickmans of the drama. So many facts; so little depth.

A pity, really.

Lord Hannan was at Oriel College, Oxford, Cecil Rhodes's college

Tree story

PATRICK BARKHAM

The Genius of Trees

By Harriet Rix

Bodley Head £25

The cocoa tree, *Theobroma cacao*, was isolated in a pocket of South America during the last Ice Age. As the world warmed up, the tree spread across the continent astonishingly quickly.

Trees can't walk, but many – or their seeds – hitch a ride. The cocoa acquired mobility because it produced alluring theobromine, which is irresistible to primates. When they ate it, the monkeys got high, dancing through the canopy for miles, dispersing the seeds of future cacao trees as they swung.

Humans followed, and Mayan civilisation was one of many societies to be shaped by its relations with one tree, just as pistachios became a keystone species for communities in Turkey; olives in Crete; and walnuts in Kyrgyzstan.

The idea of trees' manipulating animals may be eye-opening, but in *The Genius of Trees* swiftly makes complete sense. 'The Agency of Trees' would have been a more accurate (if dull) title.

We may be the authors of a planetary epoch which we have named the Anthropocene. But the lonely, burdensome prospect of being responsible for all ills on Earth draws us to stories that give power back to plants, fungi and non-human animals.

And so, argues Rix, trees are not static, passive victims, exploited and chopped down by us. In an elegantly structured, shibboleth-shaking book, she explains how trees have shaped the elements and then played dynamic roles in influencing the evolution of species in all kingdoms of life: fungi, plants and animals like us.

Trees developed into trees – woody plants each with one erect perennial stem – 386 million years ago, bringing calm to a once-chaotic world. They organised rivers, used transpiration to cycle water inland, broke up rocks and created soil. They made land green, pleasant and habitable. But they also became disrupters and fire-starters.

The Aleppo pine is one of the most pyrogenic (fire-promoting) trees in the world. The fact that it regrows extremely quickly from seeds that remain on scorched trees, while its rival trees languish behind, means it pays to be flammable, encouraging a frequent cycle of devastating fires every 15 to 30 years.

Here we start to see examples of the ignorance and arrogance of humans when faced with what Rix calls 'the ravishing complexity of trees'. The Europeans who settled on the west coast of North America suppressed naturally occurring, small forest fires that the great redwoods comfortably survived, leading to the build-up of flammable material that caused more catastrophic blazes.

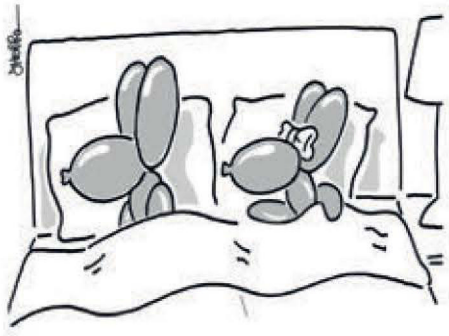
The only trees that Rix dislikes are the 'terrifying and toxic' *Eucalyptus* genus, because these species have adapted to work with fire to the detriment of surrounding species. Eucalyptus is fast-growing – up to 11 feet per year – and so has been exported from Australia to 20 million hectares of forestry across 90 countries: an accident waiting to self-immolate.

Rix challenges prevailing thinking on planting trees as a fix for global heating and the beautiful analogy of the woodwide web.

The idea of tree roots exchanging nutrients with subterranean fungal networks has captured imaginations this century, creating simplistic visions of forests as socialist utopias or survival-of-the-fittest dystopias.

There is strong evidence for mycorrhizal connections with trees, but evidence of trees connecting through these networks is inconclusive, Rix writes. Such connections are messy. Trees form 'careful associations' with fungi because the mycorrhizal network has its own agenda.

And the idea that a 'mother tree' will support its offspring is strongly disliked by Rix. Older trees may support but can also hold back younger trees. 'Putting a



'It happens to a lot of guys. Maybe you just need a little helium'

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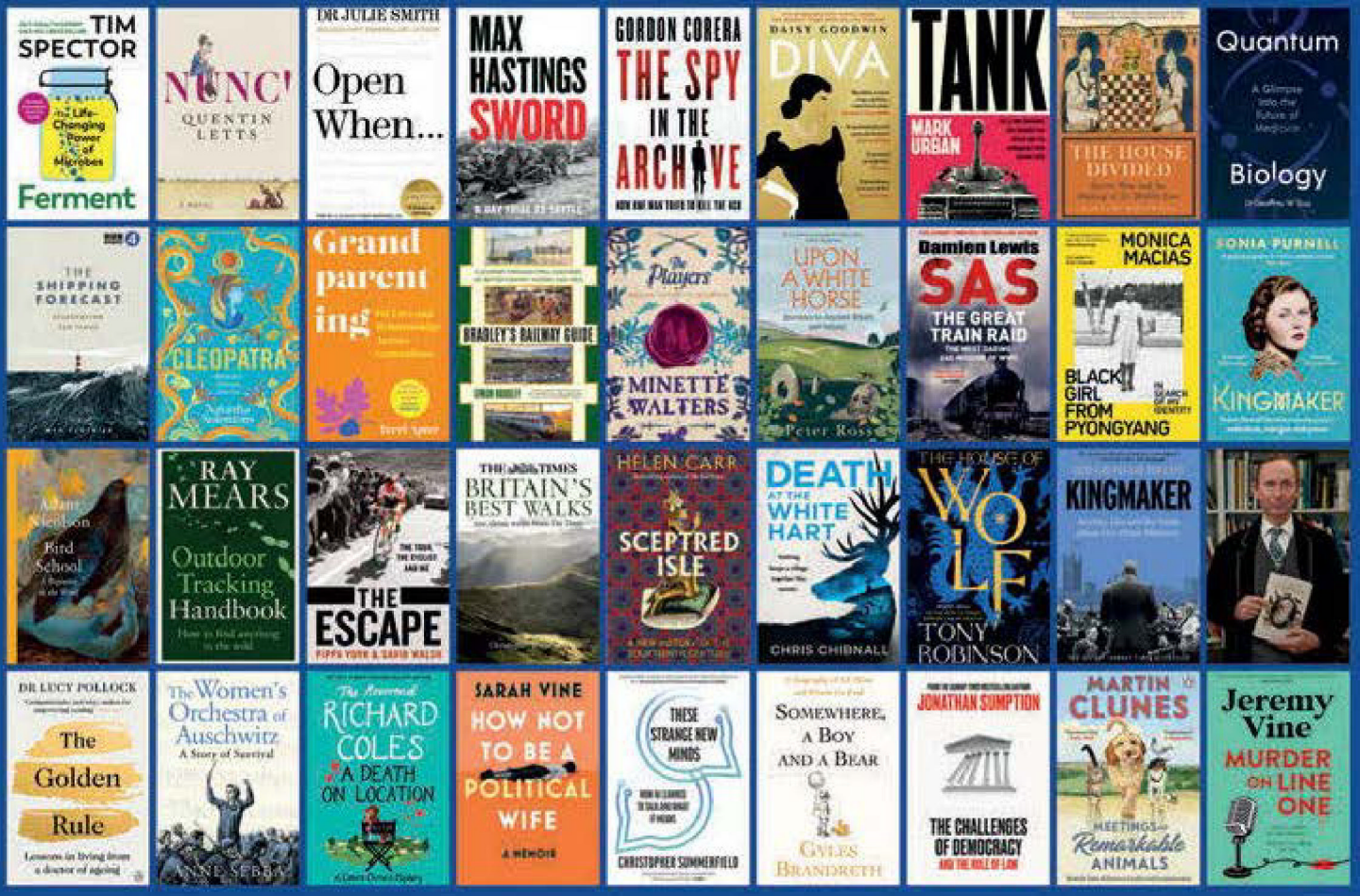

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nurturing mammalian face' on to forest giants is 'a massive betrayal of the complexities of an organism that could be thousands of years old', she thinks.

What about us? No animal has been more shaped by trees than humans, Rix declares – a big claim I don't think she quite delivers on. The oldest known fossil of an upright-walking hominin was Lucy One, a young Ethiopian who may have fallen out of a tree.

The human brain, the human hand and human leg evolved during our ancestors' lives in trees.

Rix tells a neat story of how primates' nest-building in trees allowed them a decent night's sleep, which in turn helped big-brain development. Trees are vital in our development as humans and yet so is plenty else, from our ancestors' lives in water to our mastery of fire to cook food.

This is an impressive, globetrotting book combining deep history, hardcore biochemistry and fascinating anthropology. It's unashamedly intelligent, and may have readers reaching for their dictionaries.

And few will disagree with Rix's warning: when our need of trees is ignored, our suffering may exceed theirs.

Patrick Barkham writes The Oldie*'s Taking a Walk column*

Scottish power

MARK BOSTRIDGE

The Mirror of Great Britain: A Life of James VI & I

By Clare Jackson

Allen Lane £35

You wait ages for a biography of King James I of England and VI of Scotland and then three come along in a row.

You can imagine desperate-eyed publishers flipping through Ye Olde Desk Calendars and discovering with joy that it's 400 years since James's death. Clare Jackson's is the third book in six months to mark the anniversary and is undoubtedly the best.

It loses something from her refusal to give us a straight narrative, substituting a more thematic treatment that leads occasionally to chronological confusion. At times, too, her writing is dry as parchment.

But overall she understands the importance of looking at James through his own words – and as he was the first British monarch to publish his *Collected Works*, there are plenty of these.

I've always loved Lord Macaulay's demolition of James. Macaulay described the King as 'stammering, slobbering, shedding unmanly tears, trembling at a drawn sword, and talking in a style alternately of a buffoon and a pedagogue'. And, it seems fair to add – according to one courtier – kissing favourites, such as Robert Carr and George Villiers, 'after so lascivious a mode in public'.

Jackson can't entirely erase this impression, though she makes a convincing posthumous diagnosis of James as a sufferer from a rare disease, Lesch-Nyhan syndrome, resulting in neurological and behavioural abnormalities, including James's habit of walking in circles.

What she does do is persuade us that James was our brainiest king. His postmortem testified to his 'infinite judgement' when his skull was found to be 'so full of brains'. He published on all manner of subjects: Divine right, theological controversy, witchcraft, his famous *Counterblaste* against tobacco.

Like Florence Nightingale, three centuries later, James was an early opponent of smoking, likening the habit to 'the horrible Stygian smoke of the pit that is bottomless' – ie Hell.

James is enshrined as the motivating force behind one of the major glories of the English language, the King James Bible. His love of wordplay has led to his being quoted 650 times in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

He inaugurated the words 'Anglican' and 'anorexia' – and that's just the As. Always a glutton, he was reputed to have knighted a tasty loin of beef. Hence the cut of meat known as 'sirloin'.

Jackson describes the extraordinary drama, rooted in violence, of James's own story. His life was endangered *in utero* during the murder at Holyrood of David Riccio, secretary to his mother, Mary, Queen of Scots. When James was still a baby, his father, Lord Darnley, was murdered at Kirk o'Field, outside Edinburgh. James was separated for ever from his mother at the age of ten months.

James was a 'cradle king' of Scotland. He was crowned at Stirling in 1567, following the deposition of Mary, Queen of Scots, who was soon to escape to England to be her cousin Elizabeth I's prisoner.

He would eventually become the first Scottish king to die of natural causes since Robert the Bruce in the 14th century. However, the early years of his rule were plagued by further tumultuous events, as James attempted to leave the years of his minority behind and assert his personal rule. In the Ruthven Raid of 1582, when James was 15, he was kidnapped and detained against his will for ten months by a group of nobles led by the Earl of Gowrie.

In 1603, James at last succeeded to the English throne on the death of Elizabeth. She had resolutely refused to name her successor, but James had assiduously courted her, sending her embarrassing love poems as a teenager, and addressing her as 'dearest mother' – admittedly prior to Elizabeth's executing his own mother at Fotheringhay in 1587.

James's accession marks a momentous juncture in British history, uniting the English and Scottish thrones.

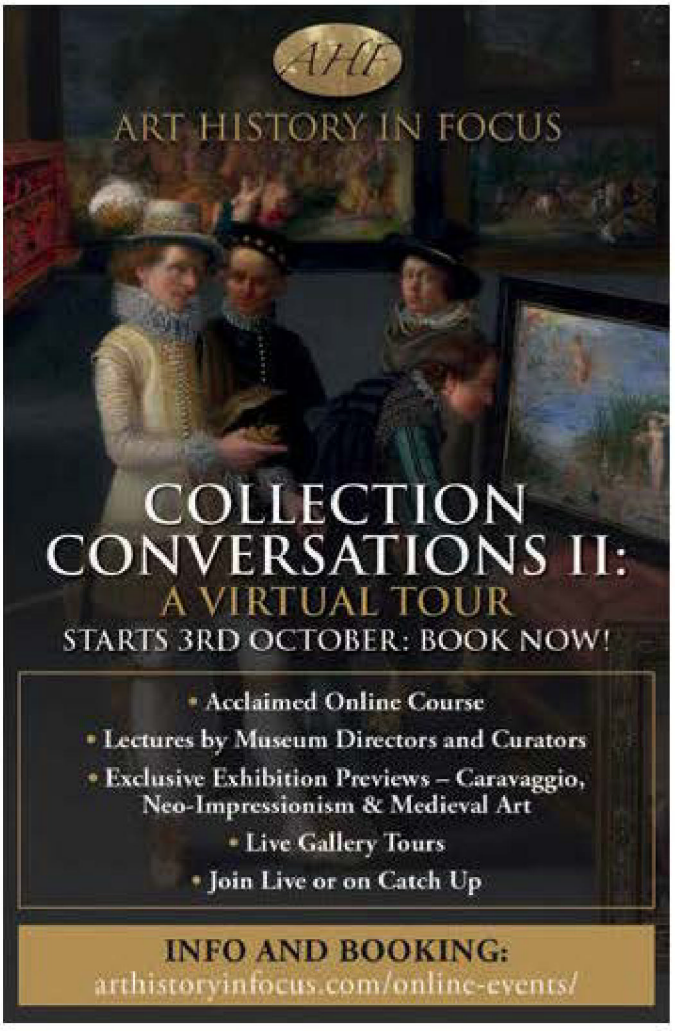
Yet, though he worked hard for it, ultimately his vision of a united Britain was doomed to failure during his lifetime. He saw the logic of greater union, but faced scepticism in both countries along all the familiar lines: loss of identity, laws and currency.

English MPs at Westminster feared opening the floodgates to penniless, scrounging Scots. English parents indulged their Scotophobia while teaching their children archery – they encouraged them to take aim, saying, 'There's a Scot! Shoot him!'

Today we have the first union flag – the Union Jack (named after Jacobus, ecclesiastical Latin for James) – flown at sea from 1606, to remind us of James's efforts. Two designs were eventually approved to answer the inevitable complaints. English ships displayed the cross of St George superimposed on the Scottish cross of St Andrew. Scottish ships flew the flag with a reverse design.



Mark Bostridge's latest book is In Pursuit of Love: The Search for Victor Hugo's Daughter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Commonplace Corner

Exhilaration is that feeling you get just after a great idea hits you, and just before you realise what's wrong with it.
Rex Harrison

I would rather watch somebody buy their underwear than read a book they wrote.
Andy Warhol

Of course one should not drink much, but often.
Toulouse-Lautrec

I've always been the breadwinner and men don't like that. They turn on you. They bite the hand that feeds them. Eventually, too, they become very jealous of the love one has with an audience.
Shirley Bassey

We learn from history that we do not learn from history.
Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel

Something attempted, something done, has earned a night's repose.
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

All humanity inspires me. Every passer-by is my unconscious sitter; and, as strange as it may seem, I really draw folk as I see them. Surely it is not my fault that they fall into certain lines and angles.
Aubrey Beardsley



Rex Harrison (1908-90)

If there weren't any women, all the money in the world wouldn't matter.
Aristotle Onassis

When a man gives his opinion, he's a man. When a woman gives her opinion, she's a bitch.
Bette Davis

Never argue with stupid people; they will drag you down to their level and then beat you with experience.
Mark Twain

Scratch a pessimist and you find often a defender of privilege.
William Beveridge

To claim for socialism that it is a class war is to do it an injustice and indefinitely postpone its triumph. Socialism offers a platform broad enough for all to stand upon. It makes war upon a system, not upon a class.
Keir Hardie

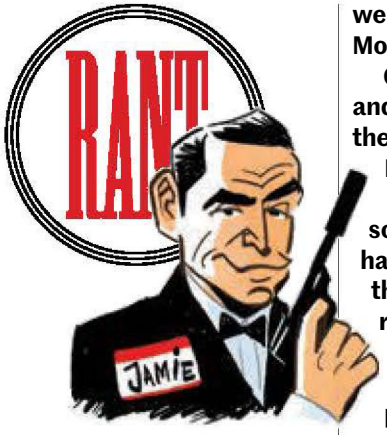
Beware of little expenses. A small leak will sink a great ship.
Benjamin Franklin

Are you happy now? Are you likely to remain so till this evening? Or next week? Or next year? Then why destroy present happiness by a distant misery, which may never come at all, or you may never live to see? For every substantial grief has 20 shadows, and most of them shadows of your own making.
Sydney Smith

I'm not a religious person, but I prefer God to money.
Bruce Robinson

Being jealous of a beautiful woman is not going to make you more beautiful.
Zsa Zsa Gabor

The avoidance of taxes is the only intellectual pursuit that still carries any reward.
John Maynard Keynes



TOM PLANT

Surnames

Where have all the surnames gone?

From Netflix to British Gas, from Wiltshire Council to sellers of solar panels, every communication kicks off with a cheery 'Hi Matthew'.

My children's friends don't seem to know that I even have a surname; they call me Matthew and Matt (and sometimes 'mate') as if we've been friends for years. Most unsettling.

Go to any party these days and people introduce themselves with just 'Hi, I'm John.'

If you want to know someone's surname, you have to root it out. Why is this? Maybe surnames remind people of school. Or is divulging one's surname just what posh people do, hoping it will reveal a connection or relationship for the other person to exploit?

There are plenty of characters in literature who are happy parting with their surname. 'The name's Bond, James Bond.' Or 'I'm Harry. Harry Potter.' And 'Rhett Butler. I am sure you have heard of me.'

First name plus surname can tell you so much: who the person is related to, whether you might have met before and sometimes their nationality and background.

In *Gladiator* (2000), Russell Crowe's introduction 'My name is Maximus Decimus Meridius' tells you all you need to know. The explanatory lines – 'Father to a murdered son. Husband to a murdered wife. And I will have my vengeance, in this life or the next' – are not really necessary.

Perhaps the most compelling reason to use both names is to avoid social awkwardness, and this may appeal to readers of *The Oldie*. The older we are, the more people we've met and the more faces and names there are to remember.

'You don't know who I am, do you?' are words you never want to hear. Best friend from school, former lover or long-forgotten cousin ... they all need to be recognised. Giving both names spares the other person the task of flipping through their mental Rolodex or scrutinising your face for clues of past connection.

So let's make it easy for one another: share your surname!
MATTHEW FAULKNER

SMALL DELIGHTS

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YOLAND BROWN, SHREWSBURY



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Arts



FILM

HARRY MOUNT

JAWS (12A)

Just when you thought it was safe to go back in the water… 50 years after *Jaws* came out, it's being re-released in cinemas and on DVD.

And it's still bloody scary – not least thanks to the spine-tingling music by John Williams, which director Steven Spielberg, only 29, admitted was crucial to the film's megasuccess.

Williams rightly won an Oscar – the other two Oscars were for Best Sound and Best Film Editing. 67 million Americans – a third of the population – watched it. And the summer blockbuster was born.

Yes, some bits seem a bit preposterous now. The fake shark – nicknamed Bruce by Spielberg after his lawyer – looks ludicrous, particularly when it's gobbling Robert Shaw at the end. The human remains look real enough – when the first victim's body is found, Spielberg got a crew member to poke her arm through the sand for verisimilitude, because the prop arm looked too plastic.

Still, Bruce is on screen for only four of the film's 124 minutes, and appears for the first time a full 81 minutes in.

Spielberg's genius was to realise that fear of the shark's imminent approach is much greater than revulsion at the actual gory attacks.

When Bruce strikes, he's always tentative in his initial nibbles: bumping against gorgeous, topless Chrissie (Susan Backlinie) in the film's opening scene before scoffing her; nudging at a floating tyre before munching Ben Gardner (Craig Kingsbury); and then ever so gently tugging at Robert Shaw's fishing line before swallowing him whole.

Spielberg's other masterstroke was to film from the shark's-eye view – those underwater shots made us think for years after how appetising our dangling legs must look. No wonder shark culls soared after *Jaws* – a tragedy given that great whites pose little threat.

Once Spielberg has begun feeding on our fear with the first attack, every time the camera goes under water and John Williams strikes up Bruce's theme, our hearts start to palpitate. When two boys stage a fake attack with a cardboard fin, the 'thump-thump' music, with the signature notes, E and F, isn't played.

Bruce's absurd look is outweighed by the seriousness of the rest of the film. Carl Gottlieb's script is a tight version of Peter Benchley's 1974 novel. Martha's Vineyard is well-cast as Amity Island – all clapboard houses and Edward Hopper lighthouses, infused with the fizzing joy of holidaymakers, many of them convincingly played by Massachusetts locals.

Against the souped-up horror of the shark, the agony of the victims and their families is achingly honest – not least when Mrs Kintner (Lee Fierro), mother of a young victim, slaps Police Chief Brody (Roy Scheider) for keeping the waters open after an earlier mortal attack.

The shoot was a logistical nightmare. A quarter of it was shot at sea level to make viewers think they were paddling in the perilous water, too. The second half of the film all takes place at sea, with just Robert Shaw, Richard Dreyfuss, Roy Scheider and Bruce on screen. The mutual antipathy between Quint and Hooper didn't have to be faked – Shaw and Dreyfuss hated each other.

But, for all the tension on the marine set, serendipitous improvisations took place. Roy Scheider ad-libbed *the* line of the film, 'You're gonna need a bigger boat', after seeing Bruce for the first time.

Shaw provided inspired lines for Quint, the half-sweet, half-menacing, know-all Oirish seadog: from 'Farewell and adieu to you, Spanish ladies' to this sublime epitaph:

'Here lies the body of Mary Lee; died at the age of a hundred and three. For 15 years, she kept her virginity; not a bad record for this vicinity.'

When Spielberg asked Shaw who wrote it, so he could get clearance, Shaw said he'd seen it on a tombstone near his County Mayo home. No such tombstone has been found.

Hard-living Shaw died in Mayo in 1978, from a heart attack, aged only 51, three years after *Jaws*. What a loss.

Scheider is convincing as the insipid, neurotic police chief who heroically finds his sea legs.

And Dreyfuss is wonderfully irritating as the clever rich kid who knows all the posh words for sharks.

But Shaw steals the show, even if he ends up as Bruce's lunch.



Final cut: Bruce the shark and Quint (Robert Shaw)

THEATRE

WILLIAM COOK

THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR

Shakespeare's Globe, London, until 20th September

Standing in the drizzle at this ersatz Elizabethan theatre, among the modern groundlings in their plastic anoraks, I wondered, heretically, whether anyone would bother to stage *The Merry Wives of Windsor* if it had been written by anybody else.

It's a good way of assessing which of Shakespeare's plays deserve reviving – and which ones would be better left alone. Most of his tragedies and histories would still be revered, even if someone else had written them. But I can think of several comedies that fail this test, and this erratic play is one of them.

Shakespeare buffs adore *The Merry Wives* because it's so different from his other dramas. Unusually for Shakespeare, it's predominantly written in prose rather than blank verse, which makes it less poetic and more naturalistic. And, uniquely, it's set in a realistic English location. If you're at all familiar with Windsor, you'll recognise many of the references. A lot of places in the play are still much the same today.

Feminist academics also like this play because it depicts two self-assured, independent-minded women (the merry wives of the title) who see off an avaricious suitor rather than succumbing to his shallow charms. Social historians like it too, because it paints an attractive picture of the emerging Elizabethan middle classes – more moral and also more astute than their silly aristocratic overlords.

There are lots of clever talking points for Shakespeare obsessives and completists, then. But, as Shakespeare knew better than anyone, a play should be a live event – an entertainment, not a treatise – and this is where this flimsy comedy falls down.

Like most Shakespearean comedies, the plot is implausible and convoluted, but you could say the same of timeless classics such as *Much Ado*. Where *The Merry Wives* falls short is in its crude and clumsy characterisation. Shakespeare boffins have deduced that he wrote it in a hurry, and it shows. There are far too many cardboard cut-outs. Even the central characters lack his usual depth.

For England's greatest poet, the script is surprisingly prosaic. Many of the gags are downright corny. The language rarely dazzles ('The world's mine oyster' is one of the few memorable lines). Why is it such a dog's dinner?



GARY SMITH

Not so merry: Mistress Page (Emma Pallant), Falstaff (George Fouracres) and Mistress Ford (Katherine Pearce)

The unusual genesis of this drama has a lot to do with it. Apparently, it was prompted by a request from Queen Elizabeth, no less.

Legend has it that Elizabeth I saw a production of *Henry IV* and asked Shakespeare to write a play about Falstaff in love. Like most tales about his life and work, this yarn is far from certain – but it has the ring of truth. Why else would he take a character from one of his finest histories (a character he killed off in *Henry V*) and shoehorn him into a comedy set 200 years later? Surely only the Queen could persuade him to carry out such a scheme.

That this rendition of Shakespeare's slimmest play more or less breaks even is a tribute to this fine cast and the Globe's superb production team – even the house band is full of fun. Sean Holmes is one of Britain's best directors (his *Bugsy Malone* was magical) and he's old enough and wise enough to play this sticky wicket with a straight bat.

The casting is reassuringly conventional (no daft experiments with gender, thank goodness) and so are the costumes – it's always better to see Shakespeare played in doublet and hose. The acting is lively and incisive, from the bit parts to the leading roles, though it did make me wish they'd devoted their efforts to a drama more deserving of their talents.

Part of the magic of the theatre is that nearly every show, however flawed, contains something wonderful. The source of wonder in this show is George Fouracres's Falstaff. The Falstaff in *Merry Wives* is a pale shadow of the one in *Henry IV* – yet Fouracres gives him wit and grace; even a touch of tragic grandeur. It would be easy to play him as a fool or knave – but for this mongrel play to work at all, we need to have some sympathy for this drunken, deluded rogue, even though he does nothing to deserve it.

Against all odds, he achieves it. I'd love to see him play Falstaff again, but in *Henry IV* next time.

RADIO

VALERIE GROVE

What is the difference between a programme and a podcast? Perhaps listeners no longer make any distinction, but you always know a programme when you hear one.

In *New York 1925*, a four-part series produced by Katy (*Start the Week*) Hickman, she defined programmes as 'made for a specific slot on radio, with a time limit'. Podcasts can ramble on as if we've got all day, and make us wait until host and guest finish joshing each other, boasting of their minimum of three careers ('I'm Greg Jenner, public historian, author, broadcaster') or advertising things.

It's laughable when spinmeister Alastair Campbell promotes Fuse Energy (without, admittedly, much conviction), followed by someone advertising incontinence pants. Perhaps my impatience stems from those Luxembourg years when we longed to hear the Everly Brothers but kept being interrupted by Horace Batchelor from Keynsham – that's K-E-Y-N-S-H-A-M – whose Infra-Draw method would help you win the pools.

New York 1925 came from the Artworks umbrella. It focused on a singular year a century ago, in which *The Great Gatsby* was published, the *New Yorker* magazine was founded, *No, No, Nanette* opened on Broadway – featuring 'Tea for Two' by Irving Caesar – and a handsome figure called Jimmy Walker, corrupt, mistress-flaunting, full of Irish charm, was elected mayor. Georgia O'Keeffe, 30 floors up, began her series of skyscraper paintings.

Between the First World War and the Wall Street Crash, New York buzzed with innovation, exuberance and merciless consumerism. John Dos Passos's novel *Manhattan Transfer*, which reflected this, was likened to Ulysses. I found it all exhilaratingly evocative of the city's scale and energy, the rush and noise of its streets, the Prohibition-era speakeasies and jazz dives of Harlem. Each programme was preceded with a warning about the use of 'the language of its time' – eg 'negro'.

The *New Yorker* flopped in 1925, explained its current editor David Remnick. Only when Irving Berlin's future wife, Ellin Mackay, wrote a comic piece 'Why We Go to Cabarets', did sales take off.

Meanwhile *Gatsby* failed to impress, while Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers* about tenement life for an immigrant Jewish family on the lower East Side was a bestseller and then fizzled out. A hundred years later, in 2025, *Gatsby* still sells 500,000 copies a year. Katy Hickman took us inside the apartment of the novelist Jay McInerney, to see his shrine to Fitzgerald, with his collection of *Gatsby* first editions.

I was struck by the programme's presenter, Soweto Kinch. He's a famous saxophonist and rapper, son of a playwright from Barbados. Soweto was born in London, attended an ancient public school, Bromsgrove, and read modern history at Hertford College, Oxford, where he is an Honorary Fellow.

Since the BBC always avoids shelling out royalties for playing music, we heard just ten seconds of Irving Berlin's 'Always' – but Soweto invited Giacomo Smith and his band to devise a creative and convincing compilation of background jazz.

What I recommend on BBC Sounds is *The Speed of Light*. Laura Cumming, the *Observer* art critic, who speaks beautifully, reads her own words about five pioneering photographers of the 19th century, who captured, inter alia, Dickens, J M W Turner, Karl Marx and Abraham Lincoln, nailing their distinctive images in perpetuity.

Times Radio seems to be doing well, despite hectic ads between intelligent discussions. Matthew Parris and Trevor Phillips are welcome fixtures. I've just heard Parris recommend the Kipling poem 'The Gods of the Copybook Headings', which, like so much Kipling verse, remains useful today.

Trevor Phillips, on the day of Norman Tebbit's funeral, asked Michael Cockerell about him. Cockerell recalled Tebbit's saying, of the close alliance Blair struck up with Clinton, 'Well, Blair is just Bill Clinton with his trousers zipped up.'

TELEVISION

FRANCES WILSON

In his memoir, *Friends, Lovers, and the Big Terrible Thing* (2022), Matthew Perry, then 53, described how he spent his days 'sitting in a huge house, overlooking the ocean, with no one to share it with, save a sober companion, a nurse, and a gardener twice a week'.

He forgot to mention that 59-year-old Kenny Iwamasa, now facing 15 years in prison, also shared his huge, empty house in the Pacific Palisades. Perry, aka Chandler Bing in *Friends*, might have seen Iwamasa as 'no one'. But Iwamasa described himself on his LinkedIn profile as having been Perry's 'executive assistant' for '25 years (on going)'.



NBC

'I thrive in chaotic situations which call for order,' Iwamasa wrote. 'I am discreet, loyal and honour absolute confidentiality'.

Perry, a chronic addict, was the definition of a chaotic situation, and Iwamasa's jobs included injecting his boss with ketamine. It didn't matter that he lacked medical training, or that the recreational use of ketamine is illegal. His role was to provide order, and this is what the infusions apparently achieved.

'Shoot me up with a big one,' Perry instructed on 28th October 2023, before asking Iwamasa to prepare the jacuzzi in which he drowned later that night.

In *Friends*, Chandler Bing's mother, played by Morgan Fairchild, is an erotic novelist who snogs Joey, while his father, played by Kathleen Turner, is trans.

Perry's own parentage was equally unusual. He was raised in Ottawa, Canada, where his mother was assistant to the prime minister and his father,



Odd one out: Chandler Bing (Matthew Perry), second left, in *Friends*

John Bennett Perry, was the Old Spice man. His parents divorced when Matthew was a child, after which he saw his dad mainly on the TV. He now decided that television life was probably happier than reality.

Matthew Perry: A Hollywood Story (ITV) is a lacklustre 'documentary' about the actor's addiction and death.

There is a lot of bleating about how Perry, who comes across as weak and self-obsessed, was a martyr while Chandler touched the lives of everyone who ever saw an episode of *Friends*, with only a nanosecond of sympathy spared for poor Iwamasa.

This sympathy is offered by Jennifer O'Neill, a former celebrity assistant who explains that the job requires you to do whatever is asked of you, regardless of legality: 'This is your livelihood on the line. If you say no, they'll just find someone else who'll say yes.'

The Greek chorus is provided by Katy Forrester, a bird-brained US *Sun* correspondent, who speaks only in platitudes.

'There's nothing like Hollywood,' Katy says. 'Fame is hugely important to a lot of people that come here. A lot of people come here to make it.'

The focus of the programme is Dr Salvador Plasencia, who pleaded guilty to distributing ketamine to Perry. It also deals with Jasveen Sangha, the Hollywood 'Ketamine Queen', who allegedly was Perry's additional supplier.

'I wonder how much this moron will pay?' Dr Plasencia wrote in a text message. 'Let's find out.'

Over one month, Plasencia sold Perry 20 vials of ketamine (worth $12 each) for $55,000. In the three days before his death, Perry asked for 27 shots. 'We're talking about ketamine,' Katy explains darkly. 'We're talking about drug rings in LA. We're talking medical malpractice.'

Perry was last seen on screen in *Friends: The Reunion* (2021), a one-off special in which the programme's six stars were brought back on to the set.

A bloated wreck, he clearly didn't want to be there. 'You can track the trajectory of my addiction if you gauge my weight, from season to season,' he wrote in his memoir. 'When I'm carrying weight, it's alcohol. When I'm skinny, it's pills. When I have a goatee, it's LOTS of pills.'

His alcoholism began when he was 14 and discovered that a bottle of wine was the key to happiness. His opioid addiction began in 1996, when, following an accident while filming, he was prescribed OxyContin – as he knocked back 55 tablets a day, his colon eventually burst.

The ketamine addiction began in a clinic in Switzerland where he was given measured infusions to combat anxiety and depression. 'It felt like being hit on the head with a giant happy-shovel,' Perry said.

By the time he died, Perry had attended 6,000 AA meetings, detoxed 65 times, and parted with $9m in an attempt to get sober. More than half his life was spent in treatment centres.

'What is Perry's legacy?' Katy Forrester is asked.

'His legacy,' she replies, as though in a job interview, 'will be this is where you don't want to end up. On the flip side, he's trapped in time, almost, as Chandler Bing.'

Except, of course, she remembers, 'there is a sense that he never got Chandler Bing's happy ending'.

There is also the sense that Matthew Perry had no friends.

MUSIC

RICHARD OSBORNE

ERIC COATES

Eric Coates (1886-1957) is the only guest to have appeared on *Desert Island Discs* preceded by his own music, his waltz serenade *By the Sleepy Lagoon*.

Not that there was any risk of Mr Plomley's docking Mr Coates one of his allotted eight discs. What a chill that would have cast over the Garrick Club lunch to which guests were invited before repairing to Broadcasting House and the famous old BBC Record Library, where the individual discs would be chosen.

As a prolific conductor of recordings of his own music, Coates would have been no stranger to the library, as I've been discovering after several enchanted weeks spent exploring the complete run of the studio recordings he made between 1923 and 1957. They've just been released by Lyrita in a superbly annotated and modestly priced seven-CD set, *The Definitive Eric Coates*.

I've also been learning more about the man himself, his adorable wife and long-



Command performance: Eric & Phyllis Coates at a royal garden party, 1946

term muse, Phyllis (Phyl), and their no less extraordinary son, Austin, author of *Myself a Mandarin*. That wise and witty book was based on Austin's time as a legally untrained magistrate in Hong Kong in the 1950s, with its rare insights into the Chineseness of Chinese civilisation.

By the Sleepy Lagoon was sketched on the beach at Seaford, where the family had a holiday retreat. The waters, said Coates, were 'as clear, and almost as warm, as any you would find in any South Sea lagoon'. He also relished the view across the bay to Bognor Regis 'glowing pink in the evening sun'.

He'd met Phyl in 1911, a day short of her 17th birthday. Her success as a West End actress helped sustain them financially after Eric was sacked from the Queen's Hall Orchestra by that

obstreperous old curmudgeon Henry Wood – irked, it's alleged, by the success his brilliant young viola player had enjoyed conducting the orchestra in Coates's valsette, *Wood Nymphs*.

Coates later said he'd have been perfectly happy to be Mr Phyllis Black. But after Austin was born in 1922, Phyl transferred her literary and storytelling skills from the stage to the nursery – captivating first her son, and then her husband with versions of fairy tales every Coates-lover will recognise as the source of those beguiling 'phantasy suites': *The Selfish Giant*, *The Three Bears*, *Cinderella*.

'The country for dreaming, the town for work' was Coates's mantra. He and Phyl loved London, of course, dining at the Savoy and dancing the night away with the Savoy Orpheans. It's everywhere in Coates's music, not least in the concluding waltz to his suite *From Meadow to Mayfair*. He sketched the waltz commuting between Seaford and London, while Phyl nursed the nine-year-old Austin back to health, in the wake of the 1931 measles epidemic that nearly claimed his life.

The wonderful phantasy *The Three Bears* had been written to meet the four-year-old Austin's demand for a musical version of his favourite bedtime story. When it was played in Eastbourne in 1926, Edward Elgar – no slouch himself where nursery suites were concerned – asked if he could sit behind the percussion section. The audience was astonished.

Elgar adored Coates's music. So much so that he managed to wear out his 1926 set of Coates's *Summer Days* suite. He was also the unwitting inspiration of Coates's 1954 *Dam Busters* march. Coates had declined an invitation to write music for the film: after being forced to give up smoking, he'd found that composition had given him up. What he offered instead was the Elgar-style march he'd recently amused himself sketching.

How Elgar would have loved Coates's 'Knightsbridge' march, used by the BBC to introduce its first celebrity chat show, *In Town Tonight*, in 1933. Coates said he never entirely understood its enduring popularity. Simon Heffer had a go recently, shrewdly cataloguing those 'several fabulous tunes, richly idiomatic, instantly appealing and, 90 years on, entirely illustrative of a time, a place, and a culture'.

And there's another thing. Those trademark orchestrations – fruits of Coates's time as an orchestral musician under Beecham and Wood – keep all Coates's music eternally fresh. Decca's decision to sign him as a recording artist was made because of this. No music better demonstrated the transparency of detail provided by their state-of-the art ffrr – 'full frequency range recording' system.

We hear that in *Calling All Workers*, the signature tune of the BBC's twice daily *Music While You Work*. Again, it was Phyl who'd come up with the idea of a piece to cheer up her fellow volunteers in the local Red Cross sewing depot. In the event, it cheered up the entire nation.

And it went on doing so long after the war. I remember it as the signature tune of my own early childhood – irresistibly happy music that seemed to hold out the promise of still more happiness in sunlit uplands yet to be discovered.

GOLDEN OLDIES

MARK ELLEN

CAT STEVENS: THE MOVIE!

Why on earth haven't they made a movie about the life of Cat Stevens, now 77? It's an edge-of-seat story rippling with friction, folly, sex, faith, triumph, multicultural ambition and near-death experience. It ticks every box.

Ben Whishaw playing the great man? Maybe Paul Mescal?

I see the opening now. The camera pans across Shaftesbury Avenue in the early '60s and discovers an impossibly handsome boy – part Greek, part Swedish; great 'origin story' – at a window above his parents' restaurant, listening to the sound of the musicals drifting over the rooftops from London's Tin Pan Alley. He picks up a guitar and strums.

Cut to a scene where he's bullied at school for being 'artistic'; then trains to be a cartoonist; then sets out as a moon-eyed folk troubadour in Soho coffee bars surrounded by swooning girls in miniskirts.

Wrong moves ensue, for dramatic purposes – involving a brash, cigar-chewing manager. He records a single unwisely titled 'I'm Gonna Get Me a Gun' and promotes it posing with a firearm. Then sells the copyright to 'The First Cut Is the Deepest' – later a repeat bestseller – for a pitiful 30 quid.

But pirate radio promotes him – anti-establishment! He tours Britain supporting Jimi Hendrix – wild scenes of bohemian mischief! Then an abrupt switch to a hospital bed where he's battling tuberculosis before bouncing back as a deeply spiritual, meditating vegetarian who has massive hits with the deathless 'Morning Has Broken' and the ever-current 'Peace Train' – cue crowds of period-dressed hippies waving banners saying 'BAN THE BOMB'. This is intercut with trips to swinging nightclubs with two of his charismatic sweethearts, posh model Patti D'Arbanville and screen-melting siren Carly 'You're So Vain' Simon.

But the emotional gear is about to change. Ominous orchestral music; thunderclaps. We find Stevens caught in a rip tide while swimming off the coast of Malibu in 1976. Panicking as he's dragged out to sea, he shouts to the clouds that he will dedicate his life to any God that might save him – and a miraculous cross-current delivers him back to dry land (all absolutely true).

He converts to Islam – indeed changes his name to Yusuf Islam – and we power through almost 20 years of near invisibility as he devotes himself to reading and teaching the Koran, amid long, calming shots of mosques and temples.



Wild World: Cat Stevens

And then … a gradual return to record-making, sprinkled with dramatic scenes of a public spat with Salman Rushdie and his deportation from America en route to re-work the mighty 'Peace Train' with Dolly Parton, when his new Muslim name was thought to be on the government's 'no-fly' list.

The film ends with this September's surely triumphant tour, as Yusuf/Cat Stevens, and the arrival of his long-awaited memoir. The biopic, billed as 'an iconic musical odyssey to self-discovery', would come with a Tik-Tok-boosted bestselling soundtrack.

Gripping. Affecting. One-hundred-per-cent real. And it couldn't be more contemporary. I'd buy a ticket. Be honest – so would you.

GETTY

EXHIBITIONS

HUON MALLALIEU

AFTER THE FLOOD

Art Space Gallery, London N1,
5th September to 17th October

The title of this show is a statement of fact.

A couple of months ago, the gallery in St Peter's Street, Islington, was flooded, thanks in part to Thames Water's antiquated pipes. They had not been fully upgraded, despite the devastating December 2016 flood in nearby Camden Passage.

The latest burst meant that Art Space's exhibition programme had to be rapidly rearranged. The show is made up of new or recent work, fitting the obvious theme of water, by five gallery artists with one distinguished extra, Maggi Hambling.

Art Space, run by Michael and Oya Richardson, is one of many around the country that steer a middle way between the expensively modernist and the worthy traditional.

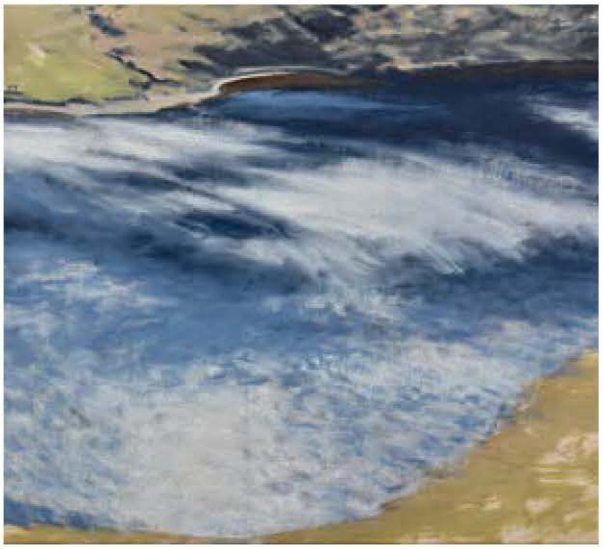
That Manichaean division, dating back to the revolution in European art in the first two decades of the 20th century, no longer rules the market. There is a great deal more tolerance between schools and styles, not everything has to be 'challenging', and painting and drawing have come back from near extinction.

Even land and seascapes are not derided now, and these six artists are all painters of land and sea, among other things. Maggi Hambling's work is often controversial, especially her sculptures; her impastoed wave paintings are superb. One can hear her wild seas smashing on piers and scumbling the shingle on Suffolk shores.

Two of the gallery artists also use impasto to produce an energy similar to Hambling's. Scottish-born George Rowlett has been painting the London Thames for half a century, and his preferred tools are fingers and spatulas. London-born Nick Miller has lived in the west of Ireland for three decades.







ART SPACE GALLERY

***Top to bottom: Splash,* Jeffery Camp, 2009. *Wave Breaking, Morning*, Maggi Hambling, 2007. *Small Water*, Julian Cooper, 2024-25**

He is a landscape and portrait painter, and is currently reinventing the still life for our time. Furthermore, he is passionate about waves and storms.

Julian Cooper's interest is in the ways in which water sculpts the landscape of his native Lake District. Ann Dowker concentrates on Nile floods near Luxor, and Jeffrey Camp gives us Chagall-like lovers floating over Beachy Head or Venice.

As it happens, these are all oldie artists. Jeffery Camp died in 2020 a couple of days short of 97. The others, including Hambling, are still with us and were born in the 1940s, except for Nick Miller, a mere 63.

In recent years, though, I have seen encouraging numbers of younger artists re-occupying and reinventing this middle ground between modern and traditional.

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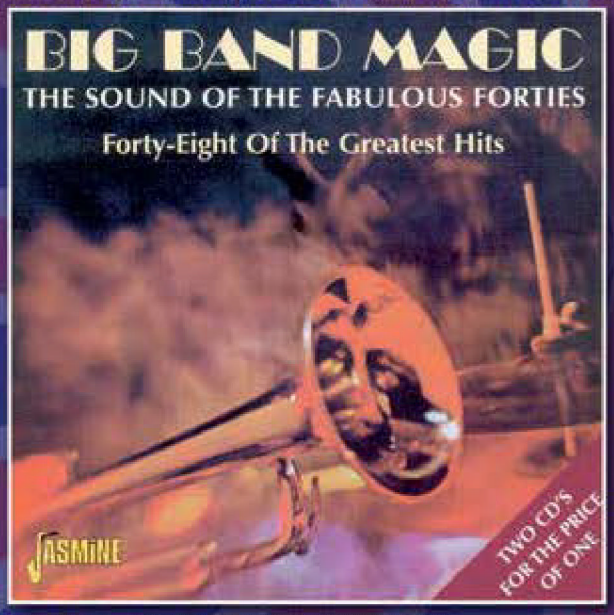

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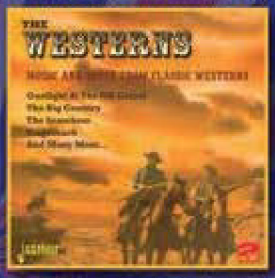

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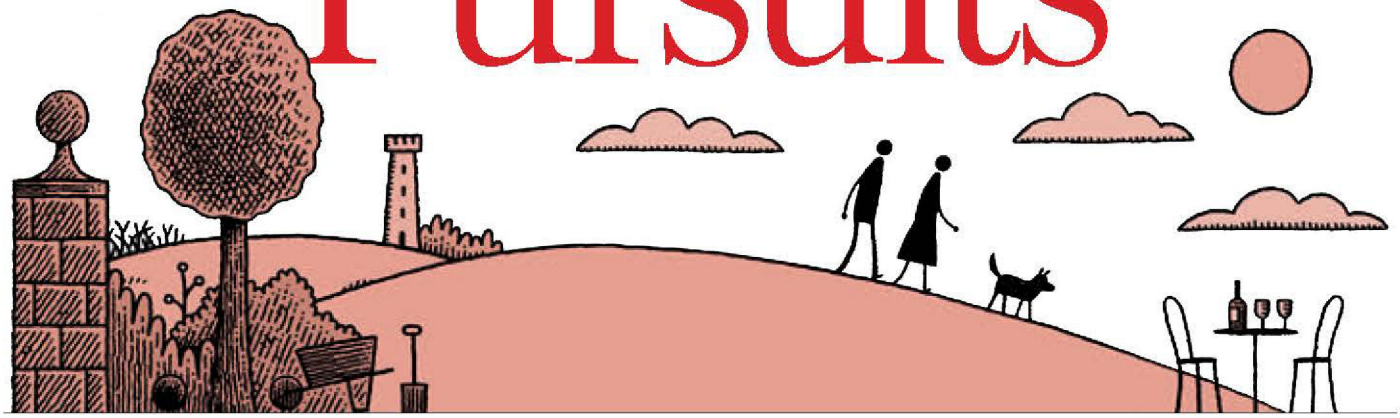

GARDENING

DAVID WHEELER

EASTERN PROMISE

Perovskia. I imagine him striding across the pages of an epic Russian novel, radiantly uniformed, high-booted, much bemedalled, sporting showy epaulettes, sashes a-plenty, sabre tip rattling against spurs.

But no. My perovskia is a plant – more subtly uniformed than our fictional *bogatyr* – upon which, in the popular and easily sourced variety 'Blue Spire', myriad small, long-lasting, late-summer pale lavender flowers appear among aromatic, ghostly grey leaves, borne on similarly-hued airy, semi-woody stems.

Its common name is Russian sage, botanically known as *Perovskia atriplicifolia* until being re-classified in 2017 as *Salvia yangii*. But it's not from Russia. It emanates from south-western and central Asia. So why the misleading vernacular moniker?

One theory suggests a plant was given by a Russian botanist to honour the Imperial Russian general and statesman Vasily Perovski (1794-1857). Why? I don't know. Elsewhere, I've read that it was first described by eminent English botanist George Bentham, based on a specimen collected by British doctor/naturalist William Griffith in Afghanistan in 1848.

Regardless of such trivia, Russian sage is bone hardy and among my mid- to late-summer indispensables. It's free-flowering, self-seeds agreeably and is untroublesome, although its tap root has been known here to break through terracotta pots. Hence I prefer it in open ground (as poor as you like) among ornamental grasses where, at this time of the year, it bestows an enchanting, gauzy *quelque chose* to a kaleidoscopic assembly of feathery seedheads, burnished bronze, buff, manila and fawn.

The sapphire heads of late-flowering agapanthus further enrich the scene; cerulean Michaelmas daisies too, and indigo gentians…

Of the latter my choice is the willow gentian, *Gentiana asclepiadea*, a robust perennial up to 3ft tall and across, with stems pleasingly arching under massed, cobalt-blue trumpets.



Perovskia atriplicifolia

In a previous garden, I had them spectacularly interwoven among the remains of earlier-flowering herbaceous peonies. By now, they sport jovial seedheads reminiscent of a court jester's headgear, as their foliage mutates to hues of old Bordeaux.

And should your venerable peony clumps have adopted a bloated, Falstaffian spread, you might consider splitting and replanting them. If so, now's the time. Give the divisions a deep, well-loosened new planting hole to allow for vigorous new root growth, and remember to replant the pieces no deeper than their previous depth. Peony roots like to burrow deeply; surface stem buds require no more than a thin covering.

September only hints at autumn's forthcoming gala of blistering foliar colour. We can wait. Flowers continue to rule. Dahlias, chrysanthemums, heleniums, clematis, the aforementioned Michaelmas daisies (asters), nerines, crocosmias…

And, of course, the perovskia's multitudinous salvia cousins, boasting towering spires of magenta, purple and (in *S involucrata* 'Boutin') fluorescent pink, by now reaching to the shoulders of a 6ft grown-up. It's the blues, though, that do it for me. The most covetable is the inky *S guaranitica* in such named varieties as 'Black and Blue', 'Souper Trouper', 'Blue Enigma' or – paler – the alluringly named 'Argentinian Skies'.

Unlike our phoney Russian hero, these Latino sages (from Mexico and Central America) need some winter protection against our cold. A mound of straw, leaf mould or wood chips over the crowns should give enough protection in our milder regions.

Elsewhere, if doubtful of winter survival, take cuttings of flowerless shoots now and cosset them until Whitsuntide next.

Pictorial satisfaction guaranteed.

David's Instagram account is @hortusjournal

KITCHEN GARDEN

SIMON COURTAULD

BLUEBERRIES

Strawberries and raspberries are unquestionably British summer fruit, though inferior substitutes are available from elsewhere. But blueberries? Is there anything British about them? They are generally imported from North and South America, and various European countries, and can be bought here all year round.

So I was surprised to see blueberry plants offered for sale recently in the *Daily Telegraph*. I was also surprised to learn that almost ten per cent of all blueberries eaten in this country are grown here, most of them on fruit farms in southern England.

Growing your own in the kitchen garden is not really recommended, unless – which is not mentioned in the *Telegraph* offer – you have acid soil or keep the plants in containers filled with ericaceous compost. At least ten varieties of blueberry are available.

Some years ago, I tried growing a

single plant. This was a mistake as, although described as self-fertile, blueberries will do better if accompanied by one or two other plants of a different variety. After a couple of years, I had enough fruit to fill a small wineglass.

However, the flowers and foliage of the blueberry are delightful. In spring, the white flowers, which may be tinged pink, resemble lily of the valley, while in autumn the leaves of the bush turn orange and purple.

Regular – even daily – watering of the plants in hot weather is important; also feeding with a liquid fertiliser once a month between April and September. Potted plants should be moved under cover in late autumn if cold weather threatens.

The dusky blue fruit, which should appear in midsummer, are attractive, but the English blueberry is perhaps best treated as a decorative plant, while we enjoy eating the plentiful foreign produce.

Though blueberries have always been harvested from the wild, they were first cultivated in the USA, where Fats Domino sang of Blueberry Hill in the 1950s. (Amazingly, the song was once performed for charity, 15 years ago, by Vladimir Putin.)

We have our own Strawberry Hill – not a song but a famous Georgian Gothic revival house in Twickenham.

COOKERY

ELISABETH LUARD

CHUNKY CHUTNEY

Time to batten down the hatches, tidy up the store cupboard and make chutney.

This isn't an excuse for a general clear-out – call it a seasonal repurposing.

Take a stash of windfall apples, courgettes that have turned themselves into marrows, pumpkins not needed for Hallowe'en and plums picked too early to ripen. Chutney forgives them all.



ELISABETH LUARD

Marrow-and-apple chutney

An all-purpose recipe that works with any vegetable-fruit combination. Chop the main ingredients to more or less the same size, taste as you cook and don't add the sugar till everything else is soft.

Serve with cold roast chicken, ham, pork pies, baked potatoes and anything else that needs a little excitement. Enough to fill 4 jam jars.

About 1.5kg overgrown courgettes, peeled, de-seeded and chunked
About 1kg firm green apples (or 2 Bramleys), peeled, cored and chunked
About 500g onions, skinned and roughly chopped
About 150g sultanas or raisins or dried apricots (diced)
1 tbsp salt
1 tbsp mixed spice (cinnamon, clove, nutmeg, ginger)
300ml malt vinegar
500g dark brown sugar (muscovado)

Pack everything except the vinegar and sugar into a preserving pan, add just a splash of water, bring to the boil, turn down the heat, lid and simmer for 30-40 minutes – stop before the pieces collapse completely. Add the vinegar and sugar, and stir until the sugar has dissolved.

Bubble up again, turn down the heat and simmer for another 40 minutes or so, stirring regularly, until the mixture is dark, rich, thick and spoonable.

Pumpkin-and-pear chutney

A fiery golden chutney. Particularly good with thick-cut York ham, Scotch eggs, ploughman's lunch, macaroni cheese, fishcakes. Enough to fill 4-5 jam jars.

A 2kg pumpkin, peeled, de-seeded and chunked
1kg hard (unripe) pears, peeled, cored and chunked
About 150g fresh ginger root, peeled and diced
3-4 garlic cloves, skinned and crushed
2-3 dried chillis (the fierce little pointy ones), scissored into strips
3-4 cloves
1 tbsp salt
500ml cider (or malt) vinegar
500g golden or plain white sugar

Put everything except the sugar into a roomy preserving pan. Bring to the boil, reduce the heat to a simmer, and allow to cook gently till pumpkin and pear are both perfectly soft – about 30 minutes.

Stir in the sugar, bring back to the boil, allow one big belch, turn down the heat and cook gently, stirring regularly and scraping the base (chutney is a terrible sticker) for another hour or so, till the mixture is rich and thick.

Plum ketchup

Somewhere between a relish and a spiced fruit sauce – very medieval. Tomato ketchup is so last year. Makes about a litre.

2kg not-quite-ripe plums, halved and de-stoned
1 large cooking apple, peeled, cored and chunked
1 tsp salt
1 tsp mustard seeds
1-2 tbsps mixed spice (cinnamon, clove, nutmeg, ginger)
500ml malt (or cider) vinegar
300g soft brown sugar

Put everything except the sugar in a heavy pan, stir thoroughly, bring to the boil, turn down the heat and lid loosely. Leave to bubble gently, stirring regularly, till the plums are soft and mushy (40 minutes or so).

Push everything through a sieve or mouli-legumes, tip it all back into the pan, stir in the sugar, bring back to the boil, lid loosely and simmer for another hour or so, stirring regularly and adding a little water if it looks like drying out.

Pour into clear-glass bottles, well-stoppered, and store in a cool, dark place. Once a bottle is opened, store in the fridge. If the top should grow a little green hat, remove it carefully, re-boil the mixture and re-bottle.

RESTAURANTS

JAMES PEMBROKE

DORSET'S BAY OF NAPLES

My least favourite work expression? 'Today, I'm gonna have lunch "al desko".'

We spend all year cowering from the weather, uncertain whether even to nip to the shops for fear of a thunderclap. And this everlasting summer's lease is about to expire – so we must make hay.

Best place to start is on a farm. My best outdoor lunch this year was at the Parlour, set on Bredy Farm near Bridport, close to the Seaside Boarding House at Burton Bradstock, purveyors of the best cocktails. The owners have turned a barn on their 300-acre farm into an Italian restaurant, complete with pizza oven and a mural of the Bay of Naples and Vesuvius.

The Italian wine prices are half those of London Italian restaurants and the list offers a far better selection than most, concentrating on small *cantine* and *fattorie* from Piedmont, Puglia and Tuscany.

The food is pure joy: bass and beef carpaccio, roast porchetta with duck-fat potatoes for just £22 and red mullet with Greek salad for £26. The whole place rocks with laughter.

Then, last month, we took my cousin

Sarah out to lunch in East Sussex. I chose Tillingham, the organic vineyard owned by Lord Devonport near Rye, where they produce around 60,000 bottles of red, white and rosé a year.

Even if you'd rather drink beer, you can't help loving the peace of the barns, one of them converted into a pizzeria, and the views across those rolling vineyards.

God, the food was good. They serve a three-course lunch daily for £40. I am not convinced 19th-century ploughboys would be familiar with a dish such as cured trout, yuzu ponzu, wasabi emulsion, charred carrot purée and purple shiso, but they'd down tools for the braised Morebread Farm lamb, creamy mash, mangetout and rosemary gravy. Tillingham has bedrooms, too.

Shamefully, London councils seem to have forgotten their post-lockdown largesse, when tables filled pavements and streets. I tracked down a garden – not just any garden, but the one at the Garden Museum, next to Lambeth Palace.

Who better to take than Alex, whose dad taught Justin Welby politics at Eton? This mild-mannered man can claim quite a classroom. His other pupils included Crown Prince Birendra of Nepal, who massacred the royal family in 2001, and our own little despot David Cameron.

The Garden Museum, started in 1972, is housed in the deconsecrated church of St Mary-at-Lambeth, which contains the burial place of 16th-century plant-hunter John Tradescant. The café is set in the lovely courtyard garden designed by Dan Pearson and serves delicious lunches under the rule of chef Myles Donaldson, of Noble Rot and St John. Alex chose the garlic-and-parsley soup, which she raved about; I had the most enormous poussin with lentils, for just £22. We couldn't resist the peach clafoutis for pud.

And then we took a stroll around the gnomes and early lawnmowers. Another very English day. Little wonder, the café won best restaurant museum in the world.

DRINK

BILL KNOTT

INTOXICATING CHEFS

Has food become less boozy?

I have been trying to devise a menu for a retro-themed dinner party, and almost everything I can think of has alcohol in it.

Bœuf bourguignon, *coq au vin*, *moules marinières*, *œufs en meurette*: all classic, all French, all cooked with wine.

In the mid-1980s, my first professional kitchen was awash with booze. Quite apart from wine, there were bottles of Pernod (for fish stew), marsala (for scallopini of veal), kirsch (for Black Forest gâteau), dry vermouth (for myriad sauces), Armagnac (for preserving prunes), rum (for setting fire to bananas)... Admittedly, not all of them made it into the food – a rather delicious bottle of Tobermory single malt failed to yield even the two tablespoonfuls needed for a cranachan – but still.

By contrast, today's restaurant menus seem practically teetotal. Is it because our national diet now embraces food from cuisines in which alcohol is not traditionally an ingredient? Or are chefs eschewing booze in their dishes to cater for non-drinkers?

Modern chefs drink kombucha and practise 'mindfulness' instead of going for a fag break. Maybe the impetus to keep a well-stocked liquor cabinet is lacking.

Of course, old-school cooks – for savoury dishes, at least – use beer, wine, spirits and liqueurs simply for flavour. The alcohol evaporates during cooking, to be enjoyed only by the angels, as distillers say. But a splash of Noilly Prat to deglaze a pan of sautéing shallots adds a gently herbal acidity to a sauce for fish. Whisk in some little cubes of cold butter and your Dover sole will thank you for it.

Beer, on the other hand (I am thinking of *carbonnade flamande*, in which beef is marinated in Trappist ale, then slow-cooked in the marinade and vegetables), becomes unbearably bitter when used for deglazing. Use stock instead, and add the beer later.

Red wine used in cooking should certainly be good enough to drink (if in doubt, pour yourself a glass and check) but your *bœuf bourguignon* doesn't need Gevrey-Chambertin. In fact, I think young, fruity wines work better than their more venerable counterparts. Young Côtes du Rhône is my default cooking wine for beef or venison.

For dessert, simmer blackberries and *crème de mûre* with some sugar, strain, then reduce to a syrup. It makes a splendid sauce for vanilla ice cream, or a ripple if you make the ice cream yourself. Raspberries with *framboise* and blackcurrants with cassis are similarly effective.

I am pleased to report that not all today's chefs have swapped the off-licence for the gym. Some still have a bottle or two to hand. Or, in the case of Nieves Barragán Mohacho, the Michelin-starred chef/proprietor of Sabor, in Mayfair, and the newly opened Legado, in Shoreditch, four. She once shared with me her recipe for *zarzuela*, a riotously elaborate Catalan fish stew. It calls for white wine, manzanilla sherry, Ricard and Spanish brandy.

More chefs, I think, should get back on the sauce.

The Oldie Wine

This month's *Oldie* wine offer, in conjunction with DBM Wines, is a 12-bottle case comprising four bottles each of three wines chosen with summer in mind: a pale and interesting Alvarinho from northern Portugal; a ripe, rich and peachy Chardonnay from the south of France; and a pleasantly fruity Pinot Noir from California. Or you can buy cases of each individual wine.



Alvarinho, Quinta da Calçada, Portugal 2024, offer price £10.50, case price £126.00
Albariño, but from the other side of the border with Spain: crisp and light, with a whiff of apricot.



Chardonnay, Bernières Blanc, Pays d'Oc 2024, offer price £10.95, case price £131.40
Chardonnay from the sunny south: rich, faintly nutty, and very good with roast chicken.



Pinot Noir 'The Path', California 2021, offer price £12.50, case price £150.00
At the smooth and fruity end of the Pinot spectrum: a strawberry-scented red that will take a slight chill.

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SPORT

JIM WHITE

ARISE, SIR LOU MACARI

Almost as soon as the Lionesses had won the European Championships, attention turned to how to reward their endeavour.

The cry went up: make Hannah Hampton a Dame for saving penalties, turn Chloe Kelly into a Baroness for scoring them and appoint the manager Sarina Wiegman as Prime Minister.

That's one of the lovely things about this country: we have a system in place to honour our heroes and heroines, sporting or otherwise. But, as with every system, the omissions leave you scratching your head. The other day, I was interviewing Ron Atkinson, the long-retired manager and television pundit. He had something on his mind he wanted to share.

'Tell me, why has Lou Macari not been knighted? It's getting beyond a joke that he hasn't.'

And he's right: it is. Given we consistently bung honours at people who have just done their job, why is it that a man who has dedicated the past 20 years to giving practical assistance to the most vulnerable people in society has been ignored by the gong-givers?

Because this is what Macari, the former Manchester United footballer and manager of Celtic, West Ham and Stoke does every single day: he helps the homeless. Hundreds of people have benefited from his time, his energy, his generosity. The man really is remarkable.

It all began when he was asked to join a charity sleep-in at Stoke City's stadium. It was staged to raise funds for the homeless in the city. Driving home afterwards, freezing cold after his night in a sleeping bag, Macari noticed quite how many were sleeping rough on the city streets.

He decided to do something more practical than a sleepover. He recalled that his daughter had recently been on a glamping trip, staying in a hut on a farmer's field.

So he thought, 'Why not buy a couple of dozen of these huts, put them in one of the city's many abandoned factories and invite the homeless in?'

And he did it. Using his celebrity to leverage buildings and cash, he saw to it that within a couple of months the first Lou Macari Centre had opened, offering 32 homeless people a little place of their own.

But Macari was not happy just to lend his name to the project. He was there every day. He wanted those he called his guests to be properly fed – so he got food donated from local supermarkets. He persuaded a company to give a television for each hut. He was anxious that his guests feel at home. And he was always there, happy to chat. He became, for those at the very bottom of the pile, not just adviser and helper, but a mate.

Not that he wore rose-tinted specs. When he gave me a guided tour of one of his centres, he was under no illusion about the problems and difficulties.

'Some of them are absolute prats,' he told me. Though he used a word rather more derogatory than 'prat'.

That didn't stop him trying to help, linking them up with medical care, getting treatment for addiction, sorting their precarious finances. Most of all, because they now had an address, he could help steer them into work. Over the years, dozens of those who came to him destitute have moved on into proper employment, and homes of their own.

The trouble is, he says, he has no end of clients. The last time I saw him, when asked how things were going he simply shook his head.

'I'd like to say we've solved the problem,' he said, 'But it's getting worse every day.'

Not that he is giving up. Macari has never done that. He fights on, doing his best for those at the bottom. In truth, if anyone from the sporting world deserves our collective recognition it is Lou Macari, Stoke's knight of the homeless.

MOTORING

ALAN JUDD

WITTGENSTEIN ON THE ROAD

Asked a question I couldn't answer about tyres, my first thought was to turn to the late L J K Setright (1931-2005), who died 20 years ago this year.

Then doyen of motoring correspondents, he was a tall, rabbinical, bearded patrician, provocatively pedantic, engagingly discursive, courteous and eccentric.

Who else could tell you that the speed of a raindrop unaided by wind is 18mph? Or that there were more deaths on British roads in the first two years of the Second World War than in the armed forces? (The blackout was largely responsible.)

He proudly held the record for appearances in *Private Eye*'s Pseuds Corner. When asked by an editor to tone down his style, he submitted his next column in Latin.

He became known as the Wittgenstein of the motoring press, closer, according to design guru Stephen Bayley, to Isaiah Berlin than to Jeremy Clarkson. But, like Clarkson, he knew his cars. His favourites were sporting Mercedes and, at the launch of an SLK, I almost met him.

With his fedora and chain-smoked Sobranies, the scholarly figure stood out among the motoring hacks and I was determined to nobble him on return from our track circuits. But he loved speed and was so much faster than me that by the time I clambered out, he'd finished and gone home.

Bristols were one of his obsessions – among his two dozen books was an expensive illustrated history published by the Palawan Press. For his own daily drives, he trusted Honda engineering, a six-cylinder motorbike and an aged Prelude coupé. Tyres were his other principal obsession.

Unlike Wittgenstein, he was not a trained engineer. His perorations on the qualities and variations of car tyres are, I understand from people who design them, more remarkable for their enthusiasm than for their technical accuracy. Sadly, therefore, when asked to explain the figures you read on the wall of your tyre, I succumbed to second thoughts and didn't recommend Setright exotica.

It works as follows. The figures on my old Defender tyres read 235/85/R16. That means the width of the tyre measured from rim to rim is 235 millimetres. The figure 85 means that the depth of the tyre sidewall – height, if you prefer – is 85 per cent of the width. R means that the tyre is of radial construction, as most are. The figure 16 means that the diameter of the wheel on to which it has to fit is 16 inches.

Other figures refer to the date of manufacture – 2324 means the 23rd week of 2024 – and its load and speed ratings. But what I couldn't answer was why the mixture of metric and imperial?

I turned to Setright. Doubtless he explains it somewhere but, I lost myself among his Gothic intricacies – until dear old *Classic Car Buyer* came to the rescue.

Tyres have to fit wheels; not any old wheel or future wheels, but existing wheels. Wheels are measured in inches because mass production emanated from the USA, which uses imperial.

In 1975, Michelin tried going metric with the TRX tyre, which required different wheel rims. Peugeot, Citroën and BMW dallied with metric but were defeated by the law of supply and demand: why would anyone make tyres that don't fit any other of the world's 1.644 billion vehicles? Best stay in inches.

I think Setright would have welcomed that. A man who could persuasively argue that the 1969 Fiat 128 was the most influential of popular post-1945 cars would have had no trouble reconciling imperial and metric.

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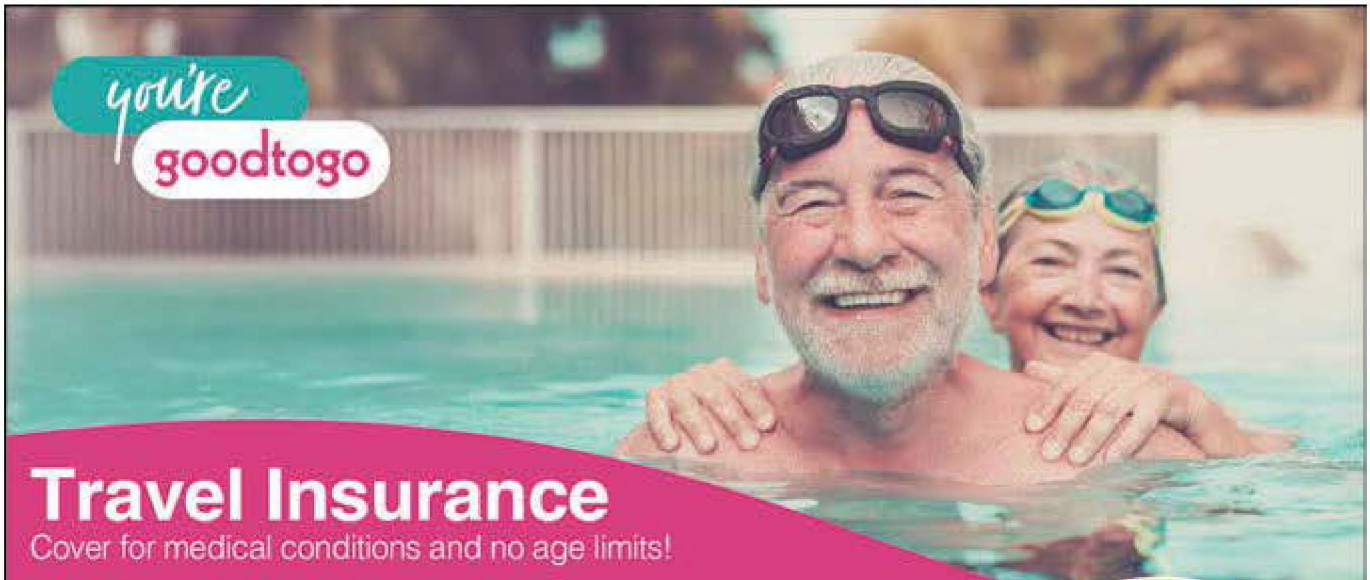

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Matthew Webster: Digital Life

Just Giving – and just taking

The internet has simplified many things, not least giving money to charity.

I am a trustee of a small charity. In the old days, we had to collect cash or cheques (card payments were prohibitively expensive), do lots of paperwork to balance the books and submit complex paper returns to collect the Gift Aid.

We didn't mind, and cash and cheques are still welcome, but nowadays the bulk of our income from the public comes through the internet.

This became possible through the development of the many online services that manage the process for us. But how do these web-based businesses work?

Make no mistake, by the way – they are businesses. There is certainly money to be made. Among the best-known, JustGiving.com made a profit of £29m and GoFundMe.com made about £24m in their most recent accounts.

There are two sides to their services. First, they provide the 'click here to donate' button on a charity's website. Secondly, they provide the means for individual fundraisers to channel their supporters' cash to a particular charity.

From a charity's perspective, especially a small one with no staff, they're a boon. They handle all the card processing, Direct Debits and Gift Aid for us.

Mind you, nothing is really that easy. We have used four providers since we started. Two of them closed down and one was hopeless.

Now we use the Charities Aid Foundation (CAF), which is a charity itself, and provides financial services to charities. They are not the cheapest, and the search for them has been tedious, but I now highly recommend them.

On the other side of the coin, we can't – and we wouldn't want to – stop people who want to support us using any online platform they choose. But some platforms are rather astute (to put it generously) in their efforts to extract money for themselves.

The most calculating, in my experience, is JustGiving.com. You want to support your marathon-running granddaughter, and she sends you to her JustGiving.com page. You enter how much you want to give, and then go to the payment screen. So far, so good.

Then JustGiving.com sidles up and, in the manner of an oleaginous tour guide asking you not to 'forget' him, suggests you might like to give it what it has the cheek to call a 'small tip'. Its definition of 'small' is a whopping 17 per cent – so a £50 donation would cost you £58.50.

On that page, you can reduce your 'tip' to 12.5 per cent, but no less. It takes a further few clicks to eradicate this 'tip' altogether, and the route is not especially obvious.

I've no problem with commercial organisations charging for their services, but calling your fee a 'tip' is disingenuous at best. I suspect they know that if they called it a 'fee', there would be resistance, even though that's exactly what it is.

To make it worse, JustGiving.com will not share the financial details of the donation (card fees, Gift Aid collected and so forth) with the charity unless it signs up for a paid subscription.

This compares starkly with the GoFundMe platform which has a quite different business model.

They charge charities very little: they make their money from non-charitable fundraising efforts, and I suspect they regard the extra charity-related work as generating goodwill. There are other platforms that also make no charge to the donors; our provider, CAF, is one.

So if you are thinking about raising money online for a favourite charity, I do urge you to think carefully about which platform to use. In my view, JustGiving.com's style of trading should not be encouraged.

Not, at least, by the sensible readers of *The Oldie*.

Webwatch

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Neil Collins: Money Matters

King of the supermarket price wars

Long ago, Allan Leighton headed the team that rescued Asda.

In November last year, he was invited to do it again, under tougher conditions – and, boy, does the supermarket chain need the treatment.

Since he left in 2000, the stormtroopers from Lidl and Aldi have arrived and are running amok. Where there were four big supermarket groups, there are now six.

If you want an example of how competition works for the consumer, this industry is a shining example.

In 1999, Walmart bought Asda for £6.2bn. Walmart may bestride the US like a colossus, but UK food retailing defeated it. In 2020, the Americans admitted defeat and sold the business for the same price. The buyers were the Issa family, who ran a successful chain of petrol stations, but they borrowed nearly all the price, taking advantage of the artificially low cost of money at the time.

As reality has returned, the financial pressure on the business has increased. In an industry where changes in market share are measured in fractions of 1 per cent, Asda's has plunged. Its latest share is 11.9 per cent, down from 14.8 per cent when the Issas bought it.

An IT programme was botched, while empty shelves and tired stores drove shoppers away. Meanwhile, that cheap money had to be repaid with new debt at higher interest rates. In June, Asda reported a

pre-tax loss of £599m, after interest payments rose from £160m to £611m.

This might signal terminal decline, but Mr Leighton disagrees. He fired 200 people over the botched IT upgrade, cut out a level of middle management and axed bonuses for those remaining.

He has warned Asda's investors (mostly now private equity) of another loss this year, as the already tiny margins are sacrificed to rebuild market share. He is also using the tactic behind every supermarket-operator's favourite phrase, a 'price war'.

Like all wars, price wars can be very expensive. Price cuts always look good on the page or the telly, but Tesco and Sainsbury's do not appear to be bothered. They suspect Mr Leighton is firing blanks.

Both have plenty of financial ammo if the war hots up. As Clive Black, Shore Capital's star analyst, points out, 'The market is, as ever, competitive, but also rational; no price war is evident.'

It could yet hot up: the market is oversupplied with food retailers, and we are all old enough to remember the fate of Woolworth, once a fixture on every high street.

Mr Leighton has a task to tax the ability of the fit 72-year-old he is. We will soon find out whether the Asda oldie is up to it.

Neil Collins was City Editor of the Daily Telegraph

The Oldie invites you on a unique reader trip

'Absolutely fantastic holiday' in a castello near Rome

with Huon Mallalieu 27th May to 2nd June 2026

In June 2019, 20 lucky *Oldie*-readers stayed with Alexandra White at her home, the magnificent Castello di Mandela. The tributes came flooding in ... 'best ever'. We promised a unique tour because lots of Alexandra's friends opened the doors to their palazzi. And she delivered. Well, she wants us back ... with a completely different itinerary. It would be impossible for any of us to have this experience as chance visitors, rather than as her guests. DON'T MISS OUT. We are in the hands of a great hostess and expert guides.

We shall eat splendidly either at the Castello, with local produce and family-produced olive oil and wines, or in a range of restaurants.

ITINERARY

Wednesday, 27th May – Arrival
Depart Gatwick on easyJet 8325 at 09.05; land at Fiumicinio at 12.40. Light lunch followed by tour of the Castello and its magnificent gardens (http://www.castellodelgallo.it). Welcome cocktails; talk by Huon.

Thursday, 28th May – Rome
We will visit the magnificent gardens of Villa Medici, the Gardens of the Aventine and the Abbey of the Tre Fontane, on the site where St Paul was beheaded.



Friday, 29th May – The summer retreats in the hills of Rome
Morning tour of the palace and gardens of the Pope at Castel Gandolfo; afternoon in Ariccia, a Chigi palace by Bernini, with wonderful collections in their original place. Visconti filmed the ball scene of *The Leopard* here. The gardens will be opened for us.

Saturday, 30th May – Subiaco and Trebula Suffenas
Tour of the Monastery of Saint Scholastica, Monastery of Sacro Speco and the Rocca Borgia, where Lucrezia was born. Lunch, followed by visit to Trebula Suffenas, the ancient Sabine city.

Sunday, 31st May – Abbey of Farfa
Visit the medieval abbey and hamlet, and eat in a private palazzo near Farfa.

Monday, 1st June – Monte Cassino
Very special tour of the Abbey and visit to the library.

Left: **Castello di Mandela**
Below: **Villa Medici**



Tuesday, 2nd June – Blighty
Depart Fiumicino on easyJet 8326 at 13.25; land at Gatwick at 15.15.

Full itinerary and terms and conditions at:
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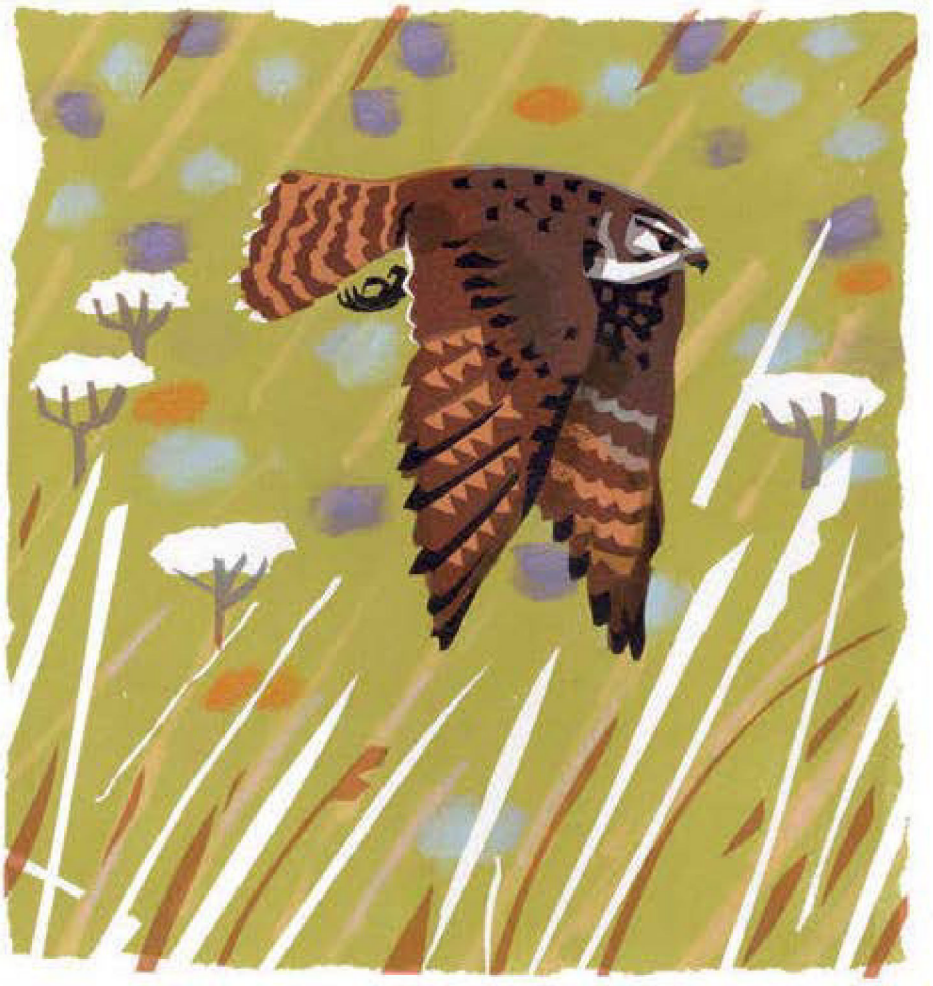
BIRD OF THE MONTH

Merlin

BY JOHN McEWEN ✱ ILLUSTRATED BY CARRY AKROYD



In *A Journey Through Birds*, James Macdonald Lockhart presents a list of the three species and 15 examples of birds of prey that breed in the British Isles.

Collectively, they are the Accipitriformes. These are subdivided: the Pandionidae are confined to the osprey; the Accipitridae cover the ten broad-winged harriers, hawks, kites, buzzards, eagles; and the Falconidae are the narrow-winged kestrel, merlin, hobby and peregrine.

Of them all, the merlin (*Falco columbarius*) is the smallest – not much bigger than a blackbird. Currently it is amber-listed, with 1,000 pairs. The number is increased in autumn by a passage of Continental birds along the east coast and a lesser passage in the west from Iceland and Scandinavia.

Lockhart also emphasises the incredible eyesight of birds of prey. Their foveal area in the retina is densely packed with photoreceptor cells.

A human eye has about 200,000 of these cells. He cites the common buzzard (*Buteo buteo*) as a raptor example, which has one million. In addition, images are magnified in a raptor's eye by about 30 per cent.

He conducted his research by concentrating on each bird's favourite habitat. In the case of the merlin, an upland bird, partial to heather moors, he chose the Flow Country: 'the Flows' of West Caithness and East Sutherland.

Ironically, he saw his first merlin on Orkney, a habitat he had chosen for its hen harriers. The merlin was infuriated with a kestrel that had invaded its territory. Lockhart was astonished by the difference in size, the merlin 'a speck' in comparison.

In the ancient hierarchy of falconers, beginning with an eagle for a king, the exquisite merlin was for a lady.

Mary, Queen of Scots (1542-67), was a keen flier of merlins and even allowed to do so from a window, when imprisoned by her first cousin once removed Elizabeth I (1533-1603).

Just how exquisite a merlin is astonished me when I found a dead one on a Berwickshire road. Its hooked beak and talons offered no hope for blackbirds – emphasised by Americans' referring to it as the 'pigeon hawk'.

Falconers prized it for its 'ringing' of skylarks. J A Baker (1926-87) describes this in his classic *The Peregrine*:

'It had seen the lark go up, and had circled to gain height before making an attack. From behind, the merlin's wings looked very straight. They seemed to move up and down with a shallow flicking action – a febrile pulsation – much faster than any other falcon's. It reached the lark in a few seconds, and they fell away towards the west, jerking and twisting together, the lark still singing. It looked like a swallow chasing a bee.'

Lockhart calls the merlin 'the missile of the moor', and that fits these birds' speedy tendency to suffer fatal collisions. They pursue rather than stoop, overtaking prey or surprising it.

Oft had she taught them with a mother's love,
To note the pouncing merlin from the dove.
John Leyden (1675-1711), *The Corn Crake*



To Norway with Hope

Jonathan Hope follows in his father's snowy footsteps, 85 years after the disastrous, chaotic Narvik campaign

My father died 29 years ago and I miss him.

He often reminisced about his interesting political career. Born Lord John Hope in 1912, the younger twin son of the Marquess of Linlithgow, Viceroy of India from 1936 to 1943, he served as an MP under Churchill, Eden and Macmillan, before being made a peer, Lord Glendevon, in 1964. He died in 1996.

His time in the Scots Guards throughout the Second World War had been of the utmost importance to him and on occasion he would tell my brother and me stories of his time in Norway, during the Narvik campaign.

In 1939, he and his elder twin, 'Charlie' Hopetoun (1912-87), later the Marquess of Linlithgow, joined up to fight Hitler.

Charlie was sent to France with the Lothians and Border Yeomanry, only to be captured around the time of Dunkirk, ending up a prisoner in Colditz Castle for moe than three years. As the son of the then Viceroy of India, Lord Linlithgow and thus a *Prominente*, he had little chance of escape. The same fate could have befallen my father had he been captured – fortunately he never was.

In 1940, my dad found himself as Second Lieutenant Lord John Hope in command of No 10 platoon, within B Company, first battalion, sailing through



Lord John Hope by Richard Murray, 1941

turbulent seas to Narvik, on northern Norway's coast. This ice-free port was essential to the enemy for transporting iron ore from Sweden. It was early spring and the Germans had occupied Oslo and much of the south.

Scots Guards B Company and Right Flank rifle company were landed at a small fishing village called Sjøvegen while the rest of the battalion established a headquarters at Harstad on Hinnøya island. They had been assured by the War Office that the annual snow cover would have disappeared – this was not the case.

A quick course in cross-country skiing was undertaken and fighting broke out almost at once, as the two Guards companies marched and skied their way inland to join forces with the embattled Norwegian Army.

After a long march through a blizzard, my father and his men entrenched themselves in the snow.

They then ascended a steep hill, skis on their shoulders, to check on the enemy's presence a few miles away, skiing back to their base at considerable speed, falling intentionally since no one had taught them how to stop.

They were then ordered to install themselves in and around the small city of Mo i Rana. They covered for their colleagues, who were systematically destroying all the bridges in the region – despite being outflanked by enemy troops who had landed by parachute on a frozen lake further north.

When the bridge at Mo was dynamited, they found themselves completely cut off in heavily wooded mountain terrain. It was snowing and they were unsure how to proceed.

They had been joined in Mo by an intrepid Swedish officer, Count Erik Lewenhaupt, who was fighting with the Norwegians, dismayed at his own country's neutrality. He attached himself

JOHN HAMILTON



Royal Navy sinks German ships, Narvik Harbour, 10th April 1940, by JA Hamilton

to the Scots Guards and instantly bonded with my father, who had been ordered to lead a retreat to the coast, where a destroyer was waiting to take the company home. The Battles of Narvik (9th April to 8th June 1940) had been a chaotic disaster on land, although there was something of a victory at sea.

Count Erik remembered seeing a simple bridge over the streaming wild river preventing their descent.

It was somewhat rickety, with a rope for a handrail. My father, who suffered from vertigo, was the last to cross, his men cheering him on. They continued their retreat, lingering in a wooded and rocky valley, hoping for some rest. A fierce skirmish broke out after a sniper's bullet whizzed past my father's ear.

Nonetheless, the company, which had been missing for 36 hours with no means of communication to HQ, reached the coast and boarded their designated ship with minutes to spare. They travelled back to Scotland, protected for much of the journey by an opaque sea mist.

A couple of years ago, I received an email from Count Erik's grandson, Calle, who was planning a trip to London. He wished to know whether my father was Lord John Hope, who had fought in the Narvik campaign alongside his heroic grandfather.

We met, became friends at once and planned a visit to Mo i Rana. Calle arranged everything with two remarkable local archivists-cum-museum curators, Kikkan and Johnny, who are constantly updating records of the events of the Second World War in their district.

I learned that the story of the Scots Guards' gallant action and the apparently 'lost company' was a local legend. They had planned an extraordinary three-day tour for us, retracing the footsteps of our forebears in this stunningly beautiful part of Norway.

The countryside consists of rock-strewn valleys, streaming rivers, waterfalls and hillsides forested with birch and pine trees. There is still a scattering of painted clapboard houses with grassy peat roofs. At an open-air museum, several houses have been arranged as a small village, with their lovely original interiors – all iron stoves, spinning wheels and painted furniture.

We met a local retired farmer, still living in his family's generations-old farm, who remembered a visit from my father's hungry platoon. They bought all the eggs available and boiled them, then used the water to make tea – which the family found hilarious.

He told me that his elder brother – not present and over 90 – actually remembered chatting with my dad, who would have made a striking figure in his Guards uniform. I found this very moving. Surveying the russet-painted buildings and surrounding hills, I felt transported in time.

We were shown a simple monument in a tiny village churchyard, four feet high, commemorating the Scots Guards.

'They fought for our freedom,' reads the simple inscription. Nearby stand the gravestones of eight guardsmen killed in action, two of whom were just 19.

Our Norwegian friends had located the exact site of that humble bridge with its rope rail, now disappeared. I collected a flat stone from the mound on one bank, which is all that remains. It makes a fine paperweight. Calle and I felt we were touching history repeatedly during our days in and around Mo i Rana.



Captain Count Erik Lewenhaupt, 1940

We stayed at the Hotel Meyergarden, which had served as the Scots Guards HQ. The original wooden building remains, although the comfortable guest rooms are in a modern extension.

We spent our first evening in the old reception rooms, which have hardly changed since the 1910s. I wondered whether my father had briefly occupied a particular leather upholstered chair carved with 'troll' faces.



Ancestral pilgrims: Jonathan and Calle Lewenhaupt, Erik's grandson, Mo i Rana

Perhaps the most exciting moment was a visit to the valley, mentioned earlier, where there had been some fierce fighting. Just before the action started, my dad had removed his new and uncomfortable dental bridge, placing it on the ground.

Once the shooting was over, they had to move on at once, with no time to spare, and the denture was lost.

When we visited this site, our friends had brought a metal detector and I had a faint hope of locating it, buried under the moss. No luck, but we did find countless 303 bullet casings, one or two live rounds and a complete Bren-gun magazine – an exciting moment.

This beautiful valley, with a river flowing through it, is a Nordic idyll today. I spotted an enchanting wooden cottage at the water's edge.

I'm tempted to rent it for a few days' fishing next year – when I shall continue my search for that dental bridge too far.

Glasgow's magic carpet factory

The Templeton Carpet Factory, a mighty Venetian Gothic palace, was converted to flats 40 years ago

LUCINDA LAMBTON



The Venetian Gothic factory, designed by William Leiper (1889)

We must thank our lucky stars that one of our greatest Victorian buildings survives – even thrives – to this day in Scotland.

What a beauty, what a perfectly glorious beauty there is to be found on Glasgow Green – now known as Templeton on the Green.

It was designed with tremendous aplomb by William Leiper in 1889.

'There is nothing finer to be found outside of Italy,' crowed the designer's junior partner, the Scotsman W H McNab.

Its colours and form are indeed quite tremendous, with a wealth of brilliant hues picking out the finest architectural features.

Bright blue, Venetian Gothic detailing wars splendidly with the vividly red Guelf battlements on high.

What with such variety and such splendour on such a massive scale, the shock of it all quite blows you asunder. Built of red sandstone, with the glorious contrast of multicoloured glazed polychromatic brickwork, it is a brilliantly vivid companion to so many of Glasgow's fine buildings.

What makes Templeton such a particular rarity is that it started life as a carpet factory – a powerhouse for James Templeton and Company to propel their business forward, helping it to become, during the 19th and 20th centuries, one of the leading carpet-manufacturers in the land.

Incidentally, James Templeton's fine neoclassical gravestone can be revered in the noble Glasgow Necropolis.

The Templeton factory served state occasions and produced carpets for luxury liners (including the *Titanic*). Many of the patterns designed by Leiper, notable for their artistry, were woven into the design of the building.

Their patented spool Axminster carpets were created in 1888. On the evening of 1st November 1889, owing to faulty fittings, there was a fearful accident when a high wind blew, causing the factory façade to collapse completely, killing 29 women.

A fatal factory fire in 1900 was movingly commemorated with a female figure, built on the highest point of the building. There she is today, for ever embraced by a wealth of Gothic glories.

A most stirring poem was written to honour those who had perished in the earlier accident. It is entitled 'Lines on the Great Loss of Life in the Bridgetown Carpet Factory', and every word is worth relating:

'There is great sorrow in Bridgetown and Calton,
Where happiness reigned but a short time ago;
There was brothers and sisters and old aged parents,
And tears from their eyes do constantly flow.
The 1st November we will remember,
That dreadful disaster in William Street,





Clockwise from left: **a souvenir of Templeton Carpet Factory, 1905; the monument to workers killed in a 1900 fire; the carpet finishing room, 1950**



With the fall of a building on that fatal evening,
Many young females met their untimely fate.
The carpet-weaving factory in the green head of Bridgetown,
To Messrs Templeton does belong;
An addition to that building in course of construction,
Was nearly completed and was thought stout and strong:
But the wind it blew high and without any warning,
That building gave way with a most dreadful roar.
It fell on the shed where the females were weaving,
And numbers were killed and we'll see them no more.
The news spread like lightning thro' Bridgeton and Calton
And the people in hundreds ran frantic and wild;
Aged fathers, their grey locks are tearing,
Crying, 'Where is my daughter, oh where is my child?'
Oh! Who can console the bereaved and afflicted
And the heartbroken mothers over burdened with woe;
Brothers, and each kind relation,
The tears from their eyes like a fountain doth flow.
There is many a female by that dreadful disaster
Led into the grave in youth's beauty and pride,
And never again will be seen walking Arm-in-arm with their lovers on the banks of the Clyde;
And many a young man laments for his lover,
By that disaster are laid in their gore.
They are gone from this world a short time before us,
And we all hope to rejoin them where partings are no more.
The oldest now living in the city of Glasgow,
Such a loss of life cannot but remembered be,
And that which occurred in the carpet factory.
Its equal I hope we will never more see.
May we all be prepared at the moment
For life is uncertain, all men do know;
And those who mourn for their daughters departed,
May they find a balm to comfort their woe.'

By John Wilson

A memorial garden was created in front of the great factory with a pathway that displayed all the names of those who had died, with the words, 'This garden commemorates the death of 29 women and girls named here who died on the night of 1 November 1889 at 5.15pm.'

In 1983, Templeton merged with A F Stoddard, linking the two great carpet manufacturers of Scotland. In 1984, the magnificent factory closed its doors to carpets. I fear that flats are now the order of the day. It cost £22 million in 2005 to create the vilely named 'mixed lifestyle village'. Still, you can also cheer yourself up at the rightly popular and famed West Beer Hall in the old factory.

In its heyday, 3,000 people were employed in this building, giving it a richly deserved renown. It is as fine a building as can possibly be imagined – and surely the most beautiful factory the length and breadth of the land.



▲ Red door is no.49, Blue door no. 51



▲ Your hosts, Andrew & Lissa



A charming home from home in Aarhus, Denmark

Probably the prettiest and most interesting place you've never heard of.

Aarhus (pronounced OAR-hoos) - Denmark's second city (pop. 350,000) - is a lively university city, with a 12th-century cathedral, a world-class art museum, an outstanding museum of Danish town houses, and a striking prehistory museum. It is a coastal city with white sandy beaches and wonderful forests to explore. The concert hall hosts a wide range of events, and the city offers excellent theatre and dining, including one 2-star and two 1-star Michelin restaurants plus several Bib Gourmands.

We rent two tiny houses on a very charming cobbled street in the heart of the city, within walking distance of most sights. Both houses have a ground-floor kitchen, sitting room and bathroom, a first-floor bedroom (fairly steep stairs), and a small south-facing garden. Ideal for one or two adults and up to two children.

Prices from £100 per house per night. Denmark is warm in summer and milder than expected in winter. Supermarket prices are similar to UK prices, and most Danes speak excellent English.

Getting here from the UK: Ryanair and Norwegian fly to Aarhus (AAR) and Billund (BLL) from Stansted and Gatwick; KLM offers connections to Billund via Amsterdam from all UK international airports. Buses run from both airports to central Aarhus; from there it's a short walk or a 5-minute taxi.

The guest houses are number 49 (red door) and 51 (blue door). Your hosts, who live next door in number 53, are Andrew (from Ilkley, Yorkshire) and Lissa (from Aarhus) – both professional musicians. Lissa is also an accomplished potter with a workshop and gallery on site. Of course they are Oldie readers.

The houses have been favourably featured in many publications including The Guardian, Vogue, The New York Times, and Lonely Planet.

We look forward to welcoming you to our pretty little city.

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My Roman pin-ups

Emperors could be brutal, genocidal maniacs, says Mary Beard, but she'd love to meet Nero and Hadrian. By *Louise Flind*

What do you really miss when you're away?
Putting my feet up, my own bed, reading the papers in print rather than on my phone.

Do you travel light?
Very light. People are always amazed when you show up for an American lecture and don't have any checked baggage.

What's your favourite destination?
Somewhere in Italy, because it's a great combination of things that relate to my work; really good food; and things that don't relate to work. And I can speak enough of the language to feel at home.

What are your early holiday memories?
We always used to stay in a little cottage in Snowdonia by a lovely mountain stream, and for me that was just heaven. We went to Belgium when I was about ten, and it looked like England – a bit disappointing.

What was your favourite subject at school?
Latin, which I learnt at my secondary school [Shrewsbury High School]. And it sounds very nerdish, but I loved the sense of being able to grasp a language without having to bother speaking it.

What was Cambridge like in the mid-'70s?
Terribly male. Just over ten per cent of students were female. I felt very pleased that I'd gone to an all-girls school because that had inoculated me against some of the silliness of male culture.

What sparked your interest in the Romans?
The thrill of the museum in Shrewsbury: these rather dusty tombstones of Roman squaddies who died near where I lived. And you could touch the tombstones in the museum, and that visceral sense of physical contact with the ancient world is really what got me going.

What was the magic spark that produced the genius of Greece and Rome?
As in the Italian Renaissance, things seem to come together to produce something that, for its good and its bad points, has made a lasting contribution to the culture of the world.

Who's your favourite Roman emperor?
I would be curious to meet Nero, Hadrian and Augustus's Livia, and the girl who swept the baths at the end of the day; the ordinary people.



Who was the biggest historical villain?
Many of the Romans were brutal, genocidal maniacs. Julius Caesar committed genocide. It's interesting to look at the emperors who were assassinated, Domitian, Nero close to being assassinated, forced to suicide, Caligula... You could say they must have turned into brutal monsters because they ended up being assassinated.

Did you set out to popularise the classics?
I don't know quite what it would be like to study a subject that you didn't want to share with other people. That seems a basic moral responsibility for an academic.

Which do you think was the greater civilisation – Greece or Rome?
Greek and Roman cultures were intertwined – that's the baseline. Then you might want to draw out certain distinctions later between them.

Has classics been dumbed down at Cambridge?
I think there's a myth about past competence. I went back and looked at some of the exam papers, and our undergraduates would have romped through them.

In modern society and political times, do you see reflections of Roman times?
I think you do. People often ask me which emperor Donald Trump is most like and I don't think it's a useful question. But you can see political structures in Rome that help you understand some of the structural things in modern politics, such as the emperor changing his mind...

You've been an academic, a writer, a media star – what do you see yourself as?
An academic, because all the rest follows from it.

Are you a reluctant celebrity?
If nobody ever asked me to give an interview or be on telly or radio again, I'd be slightly regretful because I enjoy it.

How have you coped with the abuse that you've received, particularly from the late A A Gill, who was rude about your looks?
It can be upsetting. If you get a message saying, 'We're going to blow up your house at 10.27 tomorrow,' I don't think anybody says, 'Oh, silly bloke.' But most online abuse comes from people who are sad. I sometimes reply. They're not all sweeties, but most are prepared to apologise.

Where did you go on your honeymoon?
We didn't have a honeymoon. I was eight months pregnant.

Do you go on holiday?
This year, I'll be on a little boat in the Aegean.

Do you lie on a beach?
My husband [the classicist and art historian Robin Cormack] can't stand sand, and I rather like the idea of a lounger on a beach and a vodka martini.

What's your biggest travel headache?
Travelling does turn me more passive, but when the flight's cancelled and I've got a meeting or a lecture, then I'm not the most compliant traveller (and I feel embarrassed about losing it).

What are your travelling tips?
Beware of the bargain, pay a little more and don't get up at one in the morning.

Emperor of Rome *by Mary Beard is out now*

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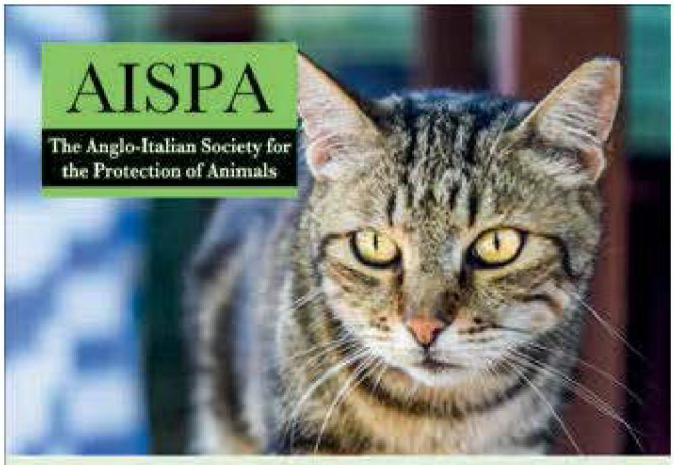

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Genius crossword 456

EL SERENO

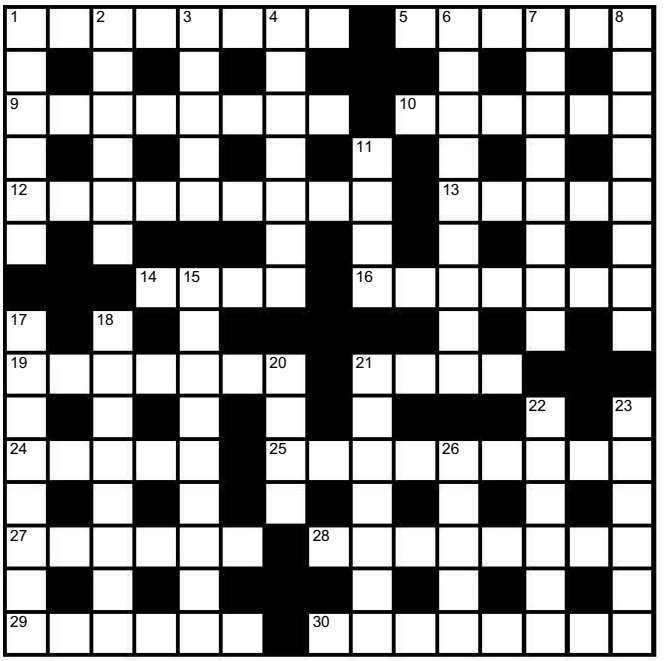
*For clues marked *, write in the solution given by wordplay. An expanded solution shares the addition of a 3-letter word*

Across

1 Place cycling game forced takeovers (8)
5 *Where paparazzi gather to moan and eat out of area (6)
9 A game US soldier's American defence (8)
10 Capital of a country in Africa backed by Belgium (6)
12 One might explain poor sex – it must be adapted (9)
13 Prepare national boxing stadium (5)
14 *Off playing football? (4)
16 *Thought moodily changing sides, being virile (7)
19 *Mostly look up to a Liberal flyer (7)
21 Special forces hospital band (4)
24 Primate or church member on one (5)
25 Numbers may produce such an effect (9)
27 Reject complaint – the French must be weak (6)
28 Primate protecting twisted pagan perquisite (8)
29 News that might prove a trial for Californians (6)
30 Rag-and-bone men must cross river for horses (8)

Down

1 *Energy needed in factory producing Mars (6)
2 Romeo wears trimmed hairpiece in theatrical company (6)
3 * Emergency responder's burden (5)
4 Threw out planned edict supporting sources of electric vehicles (7)
6 Freak rings, absorbed by fighting manuals (9)
7 Seeing money made from venture, sets out (8)
8 Drink with golf partner in bag store (3,5)
11 Mostly dirty food (4)
15 Tourist attraction of fashionably cool Paris (9)
17 Cautious and half-cut, possibly supporting wife (8)
18 Threatening setter's fund – not without heart (8)
20 Inadequate list (4)
21 *Might one shoot fish? (7)
22 What may be left by right of choice, say (6)
23 Gentle touch of son oppressed by worries (6)
26 *Cool star (5)



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Two runners-up will receive £15.
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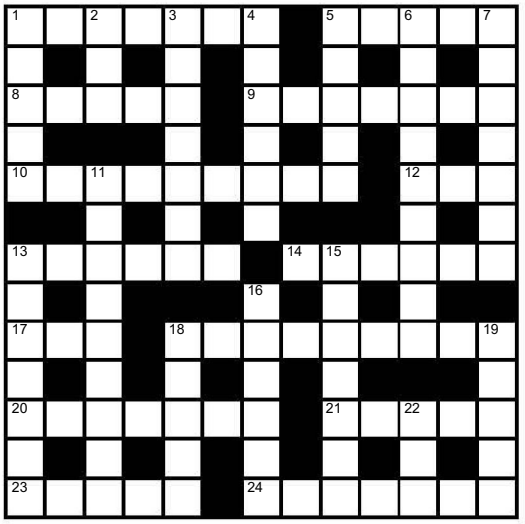
Moron crossword 456



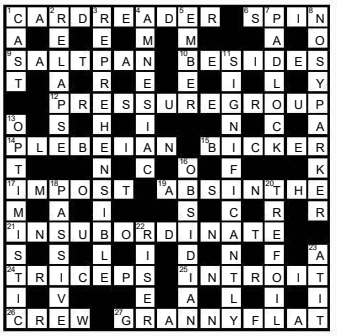
Across

1 Is a bearer (7)
5 Mount, steed (5)
8 Scrumptious (5)
9 Lose oar (anag)(7)
10 Washing machine cycle (6-3)
12 Mischievous tyke (3)
13 Kidnap (6)
14 Compassionate (6)
17 Pelt, hair (3)
18 Basis of a savoury dip (4,5)
20 Sort of fretwork (7)
21 Feeling skin irritation (5)
23 Threads; stories (5)
24 Heartfelt (7)

Down

1 Vault (5)
2 Weird; spirit (3)
3 Perfect, bucolic (7)
4 Burns with hot water (6)
5 Harass, beset (5)
6 Send down (from university) (9)
7 Obscure, block out light (7)
11 Intermediary (9)
13 Terribly (7)
15 Balm, unguent (7)
16 Compulsory force or threat (6)
18 Parodies (5)
19 Perhaps, who knows? (5)
22 Stage prompt (3)

Genius 454 solution



Winner: Brigid Gunn, Sparkford, Somerset

Runners-up: Justin Bendig, Banstead, Surrey; Matthew Berry, Sutton Coldfield, West Midlands

Moron 454 answers: Across: 1 Foray, 4 Nurse (Foreigners), 8 Tea, 9 Elbow grease, 10 Tequila, 12 Yonks, 13 Shaggy, 14 Ocelot, 17 Ogres, 19 Annoyed, 21 Thatcherism, 23 Lei, 24 Chess, 25 Taper. **Down**: 1 Fleet, 2 Rub, 3 Yawning, 4 Normal, 5 Ready, 6 Eternally, 7 Babysit, 11 Quadratic, 13 Shortly, 15 Contest, 16 Dances, 18 Scare, 20 Demur, 22 Imp.

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RANTS AND RAVES FROM THE INTREPID DUVET LADY

SIX OF ONE, HALF A DOZEN OF THE OTHER

Some months ago, in this very column, I threw down the gauntlet and asked readers to entertain me with their stories of unique accomplishments and claim to fame. With the prospective prize of one of our amazing wool duvets, readers responded and delighted me.

So I can report that the winner is Nick B whose claim to fame is that he got booted out the London Underground's Cake Club. This Cake Club used to meet once a month, with each member taking turns to bake a cake for sharing during their departmental morning coffee break. Nick only lasted 2 cakes before been given his marching orders.

I could have warned him about the perils of using wholemeal flour but what resonated most for me was his egg muddle. You see, he accidently used 2 size 3 eggs instead of 3 size 2 eggs.

The dreaded egg blunder immediately took me back to 1994 when, on our honeymoon no less, my then husband and I had a spot of bother which nearly catapulted us directly into the divorce courts.

Being a very early bird, my husband woke up at his usual 4am in our lovely Cabana in Mauritius and decided, unbeknown to me, to order me breakfast in bed. At 4.45am, I was woken up to find a tray in front of me, laden with not 2, 6-minute boiled eggs but, you guessed it, 6, 2-minute boiled eggs.

Now, I really enjoy eggs but they need to be at least 80% cooked. I cannot eat raw egg at the best of times but at the crack of dawn, this was all a bridge too far. My refusal to eat his well-intended offering caused him to take severe umbrage and the resultant Mexican standoff lasted well into the next day.

Jessica

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Cardinal John Morton was a feared tax collector during Henry VII's reign.

Travelling from abode to abode, he collected from those living lavishly – they obviously had money to spare – and also from those living frugally, who had clearly stashed their money away.

This reminds me: I had a school friend called John Morton – who had a brother, Chris. No one rated Chris's chances of getting into his parents' chosen public school (I think it was Radley), but get in he did. When asked for prose or poetry in his English paper, he was the only candidate who wrote a poem. Why? Apparently, he'd done this because he didn't know what prose was. The school naturally thought he was an original thinker – I hope he flourished there.

Bridge-players love a Morton's Fork – the Cardinal, not my friend's brother Chris – and here is a 3NT in which East is forked twice.

Dealer East Both Vunerable

North
♠ K43
♥ 7543
♦ J2
♣ AQ32

West
♠ 9872
♥ 2
♦ 8765
♣ 10987

East
♠ AJ10
♥ QJ10986
♦ A109
♣ 4

South
♠ Q65
♥ AK
♦ KQ43
♣ KJ65

The bidding

South	West	North	East
			1♥
1NT (1)	Pass	3NT	end

(1) As an overcall, 1NT shows 15-18 with hearts stopped.

West wisely led for his partner – his hand being a dead loss. As declarer, you win the heart lead and must channel John Morton. Cross to the ace of clubs and lead the two of diamonds.

East must play low, or he gives you the requisite three diamond tricks (and you don't need a spade trick). Your king wins and you cross to the queen of clubs to lead a low spade. East again has to play low, whereupon you win the queen and (perhaps after cashing the king-knave of clubs), lead a second diamond to the knave. You score a spade, two hearts, two diamonds and four clubs – nine tricks and game made.

ANDREW ROBSON

Competition

TESSA CASTRO

IN COMPETITION No 322 you were invited to write a poem called *The Last Night*. By far the most popular subject was death. They were stark, funny and sad. Terry Baldock's acrobat fell on the last night that the circus was in town. Philippa Bower's narrator's regret began with her cousin's suicide. Con Connell's narrator regretted unsaid words. Ann Hilton's narrator looked back on the night of her death.

Martin Elster's theme was the last night that the Moon overslept: 'Wolves refused to howl, while owls,/ instead of hooting, cried.' John Moore's was the dinosaurs' last night before the asteroid struck. Mike Morrison celebrated the last night in 2002 of Grouts the draper's in Palmers Green. Peter Hollindale's night was the last before a village was drowned for a reservoir. Erika Fairhead's poem was narrated by a bat in a theatre.

Commiserations to them and to Charles Leedham-Green, Heather Uebel, Sue Smalley, Julie Wigley, Sheila Skinner, Rob McMahon, Jenny Jones, David Dixon, David Thompson, Janine Stratton, Mike Douse, Diana Cutler and Bob Morrow, and congratulations to those printed below, each of whom wins £25, with the bonus prize of *The Chambers Dictionary* going to Vivien Brown.

Ordinary things. Beans on toast, a worn settee,
The crossword, then the *News*, a cup of tea,
When it should have been the finest fillet steak,
Chianti and your favourite chocolate cake,
My posh dress, pearls, not this old dressing gown.
We could have danced, my arms wrapped tight around,
Or looked at photos, talked and reminisced,
Slept entwined, said 'I love you', kissed...
If I'd only known, before we went to bed,
That when I woke up in the morning, you'd be dead.
Vivien Brown

On the last night of peace, in warm September,
I was making pastry for an apple pie. I remember
The dahlias blazing in the garden, and gave no thought
To bombers who would tear the summer sky.
Red-gold, the dahlias flowered as they ought,
But then we had to hang them up to dry
And, in their place, plant kale to keep us fed.
The roses in the border were uprooted; potatoes –
Early whites and main crop – came instead.
All through the days of war, they broke the ground,
Feeding us faithfully, while chaos roared around.
And so the years went past. In '45,
Peace was declared. We'd made it, we were still alive.
And though our faith in what we'd known was shattered,
We put the dahlias in again. Somehow, that mattered.
G M Southgate

The last night in his cell, he watches stars
Flickering on and off, their circuits faulty –
He licks away the tears but, hot and salty,
They cut their furrows still. The Moon and Mars

Sit watchfully within some sterile sky,
Till darkness falls and he sees them burning brighter.
He lies there, feels his throat becoming tighter,
Composes final words, a short goodbye.

He's never liked the dawn, now fast approaching,
And soon he'll join in rigmaroles of prayer:
His final meal awaits. And then the stair,
The greetings *sotto voce*, the arms encroaching.

The taxi comes at six. The nightjars chunter,
Hiding from light. He's due to cross the border,
His vows have lapsed, he's left the blessed order –
And God is dead! He couldn't be much blunter.
Bill Greenwell

COMPETITION No 324 It sparks out, makes a sharp edge and builds into dark walls. Please write a poem called *Flint*, in any sense. Maximum 16 lines. We cannot accept any entries by post, I'm afraid, but do send them by e-mail (comps@theoldie.co.uk – don't forget to include your own postal address), marked 'Competition No 324', by Thursday 18th September.



On top of the world on Skiddaw

PATRICK BARKHAM

Moorland is most magnificent in late summer, when its rolling expanses glow purple with heather and the air smells of honey.

So it was a good time to take a walk up Skiddaw, a Lake District fell I had only ever admired when I was climbing busier peaks. Skiddaw is distinctive, standing aloof and alone in the northern Lakes, admired by Wainwright for its 'smooth' lines and 'graceful' curves.

It was the summer holidays and the rest of the Lake District was rammed, but I parked easily and, astoundingly, for free in a granite-walled car park on a rough lane. The northern fells must be for connoisseurs.

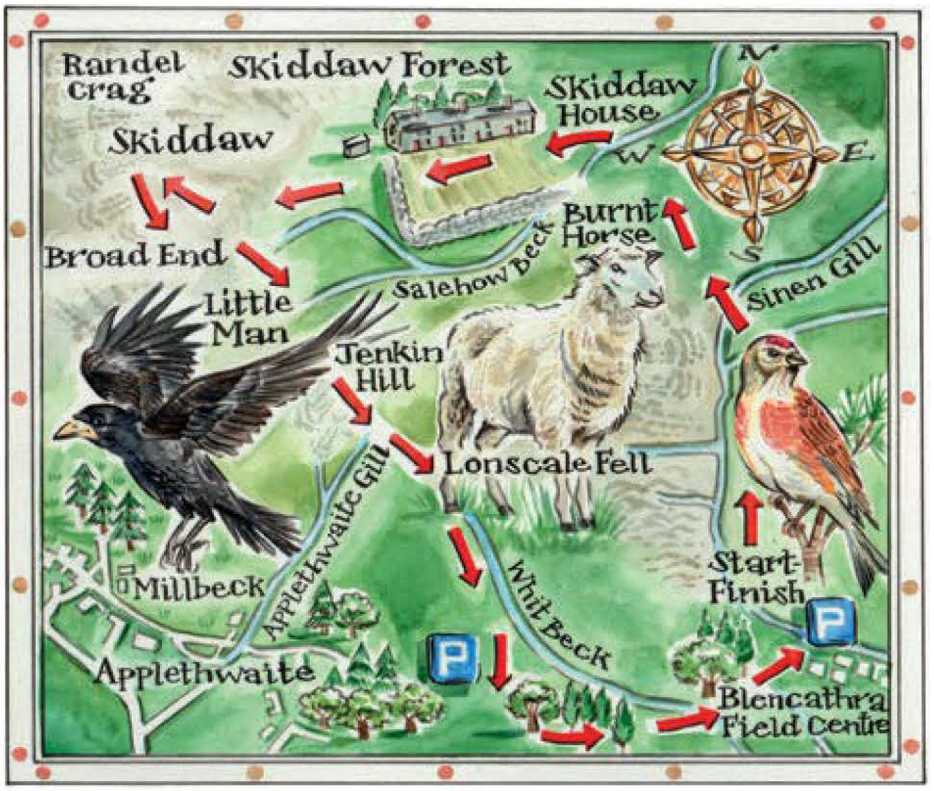
I took a granite track bending around the end of Blencathra and following a stream into the Skiddaw massif. This is known as Skiddaw Forest, not because it was once dense woodland but because, historically, this was hunting terrain.

The air smelt sweet on the moor, whose scale and openness evoked Scotland. I climbed steadily but not steeply to Skiddaw House, the highest hostel in Britain at 1,550ft. Long, low and surrounded by an island of firs, it was built in 1829 as a keeper's lodge and grouse-shooting base.

Nearly two centuries as a grouse moor came to an end last year, when Cumbria Wildlife Trust bought this 'forest'. Although restoring 'Atlantic rainforest' is the new aspiration, the heather won't disappear under dense woodland because of wind scour, while the wet, peaty expanses wisely won't be planted with trees.

Skiddaw House looked tempting for a long stop, thanks to its lounge, with no big screens or Wi-Fi in sight – just a piano, board games and books – but I stepped onwards, the incline steepening beyond the hostel. Unusually in the heavily tramped Lakes, the path was still a smooth, grassy one, rather than strolled to stone.

The wind intensified and when I reached the ridge, I suddenly met the full force of a westerly gale from which the slope had sheltered me. My glasses were nearly torn from my face.



Suddenly, despite being high summer, it could've been any month of the year. The top of Skiddaw impersonated winter rather magnificently. A solitary crow appeared to agree. The weather created its own world in this high place.

I strode along the ridge over some mini peaks to the summit, known as High Man, or Skiddaw Man. To the south was what's known as a subsidiary summit, the splendidly named Little Man (which has its own subsidiary, Lesser Man).

I'd met hardly a soul on my ascent, but now there were several dozen people huddled around the stone cairn. We enjoyed top-of-the-world views, prospecting over the Solway Firth, peeking into Borrowdale and savouring the clustered fells of the southerly Lakes.

Rather than retrace my steps (or follow the sensible round depicted on Gary's illustrated map, above), I descended the green flank of one of Skiddaw's hills because it looked the most direct route. I found myself in a near-gulley, on the wrong side of a stream. 'Private' signs warned me away; the beck, invariably, looked much more daunting when I reached its level.

I slung my boots and socks round my neck and, fretting about losing my balance on slippery stones, waded across. Normally I savour a wild swim, but this water was so cold it made the bones in my feet ache. A few inches of fast-flowing water can be unexpectedly intimidating.

It was a rough scramble out of the valley and when I finally reached some grazed meadows, I cheered a silent 'Hooray' for the sheep.

Then I weaved through a maze of fields, scaling stone walls and steeling myself for a telling-off by reciting Withnail's retort to trouble in t'Lakes: 'We're not from London, you know!'

Finally, relief – a gate that led out on to the old stone track. Oh, I adore the clarity and security of a public right of way!

Parking above Blencathra Field Studies Centre at what3words: drooling.painted.crunchy

GARY WING

A new season of learning

After our summer holidays, September can seem like a fresh start – an opportunity for some autumn resolutions.

This is the time to take up a hobby, or learn a language or practical skill, as numerous institutes, community centres and colleges open their doors for a new term of adult learning.

My local community centre in west London offers courses in maths and IT alongside a variety of keep-fit, pottery, art and sculpture classes. There's an Elders Programme with a weekly tea club and creative courses, including arts and crafts and theatre workshops.

Or opt for an online course and learn from highly skilled professionals, including interior designers, novelists and chefs, at BBC Maestro. Bake bread with Richard Bertinet or write a children's book with Julia Donaldson.

London's biggest provider of adult learning, City Lit ('We've got you covered'), teaches in person and online anything from performing arts and creative writing to speech therapy for a stammer and – useful for many oldies – lip-reading.

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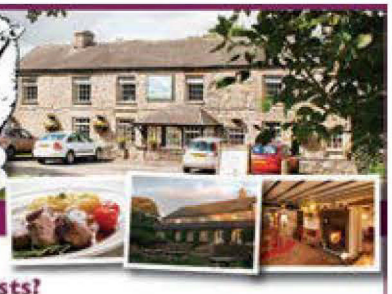

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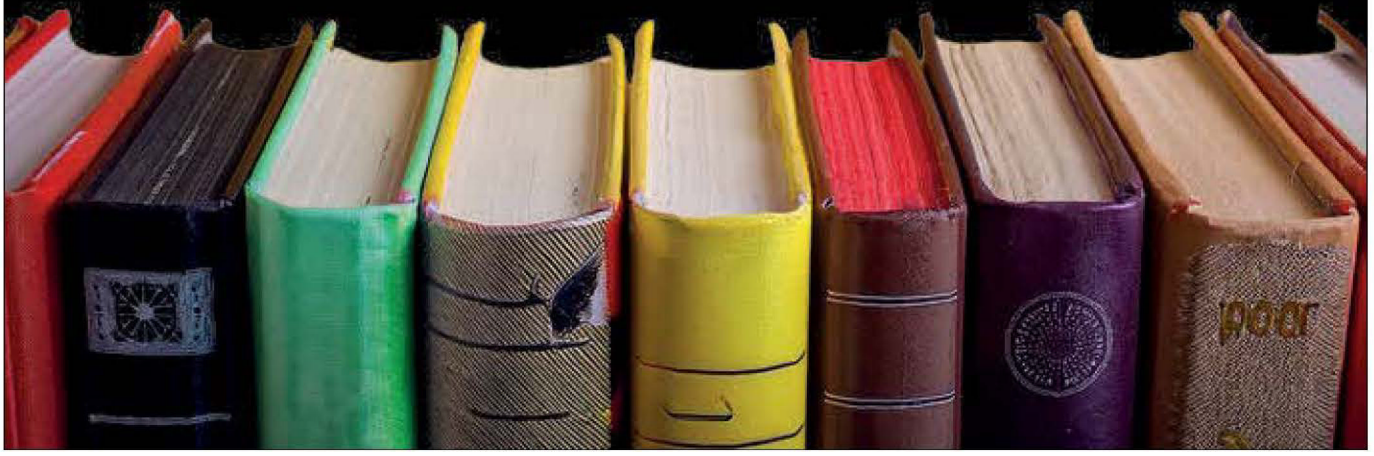

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Ask Virginia



VIRGINIA IRONSIDE

Prudish daughter

Q My daughter upset me during the summer holiday in Greece by saying she thought I was too old for a bikini – and even short skirts! She also implied that it was time to go grey! At 75, I think I've still got a nice figure and a decent pair of pins. Should I listen to her?
Name and address supplied

A Obviously you can wear what you like, but if your daughter feels embarrassed by your mutton-dressed-as-lamb look, wouldn't it be kind to tone it down when you're out with her? I remember being terribly embarrassed by friends of my parents when we went on holiday. The man's swimming trunks were too loose, and the acres of red, leathery skin his wife exposed on the beach made me feel squeamish.

I'm sure your legs are lovely, but it wouldn't be difficult to look fantastic even if you're a bit more covered up, just to spare your daughter's blushes. We all need someone to tell us painful home truths now and then, and children have a way of homing in on things that even our best friends might balk at telling us.

You don't want your daughter to have a memory of trying to disown you on the beach.

My hopeless lovers

Q Ever since I was young, I have always fallen for hopeless types. My first husband was an abusive drug addict; my next boyfriend was an alcoholic. Luckily I then fell for a lovely man – but he quickly developed Alzheimer's and I looked after him till he died last year.

Now, at 70, I am horrified to find I'm back to my old tastes – an alcoholic pensioner. We get on well – we have lot of laughs and at least he's got his own flat, unlike the other three – but I wish he wouldn't get drunk every night. I know it's not good for him. It would be wonderful to have a proper, healthy relationship before I die!
Name and address supplied

A What makes you think you're not having a 'proper healthy relationship?' Don't fall for that fashionable bit of nonsense – that there's such a thing as a 'healthy' relationship. There may be a few couples who discuss all their problems and 'work through them' together, but most couples have guilty secrets behind closed doors.

Odd sexual preferences, the occasional violent row, uncomfortably different views about money – and even an upsettingly destructive affair now and again.

Sometimes we – men and women – try to find someone whose personality replicates one of our parents. Perhaps one of your parents was an addict of a sort. You can't change that. Your relationships seem to be getting a bit happier than they used to be and that's what matters. And an ability to laugh together is a wonderful asset.

Cherish what you've got – and hang whether it's 'healthy' or not.

Cheap knickers

Q I don't know if this would interest any readers, but I read that you have a stoma, and wondered if you knew that Marks & Spencer now sell stoma knickers. They're cheaper than the ones you buy through medical supply websites, and prettier.
Margaret, by email

A Thank you! Yes, you're right, and stoma knickers are a pretty niche subject – and it's great that they've come out of the closet as it were. If M&S sell them, it means people are becoming a lot more open about what used to be a taboo subject.

Dream Christmas present

Q My son has three children whom I adore, and they quite frequently make the trip to see us during the year. But we've never been asked for Christmas. I've often suggested it, but they always find an excuse not to come – and go to see his wife's parents instead. My husband and I are so hurt by their neglect at Christmas. I don't know what to do.
L S, Poole, Dorset

A I tell you what you do: make a 'gratitude list'. Say 'thank you' for your wonderful son; then give thanks for his being so thoughtful that he makes the trip 'quite frequently' to see you both. Give thanks for having a partner so you don't have to spend Christmases alone. And remember you're lucky. Many people don't have children, and many have children who've moved far away and visit only rarely.

Then decide on a day, perhaps next summer, when you ask them all to stay for a weekend, and give them a special time. It would be particularly nice to ask the other grandparents, too.

When the children are old enough to come and stay on their own, you'll be able to have them all to yourselves!

Please email me your problems at problempage@theoldie.co.uk; I will answer every email – and let me know if you'd like your dilemma to be confidential.

The Oldie

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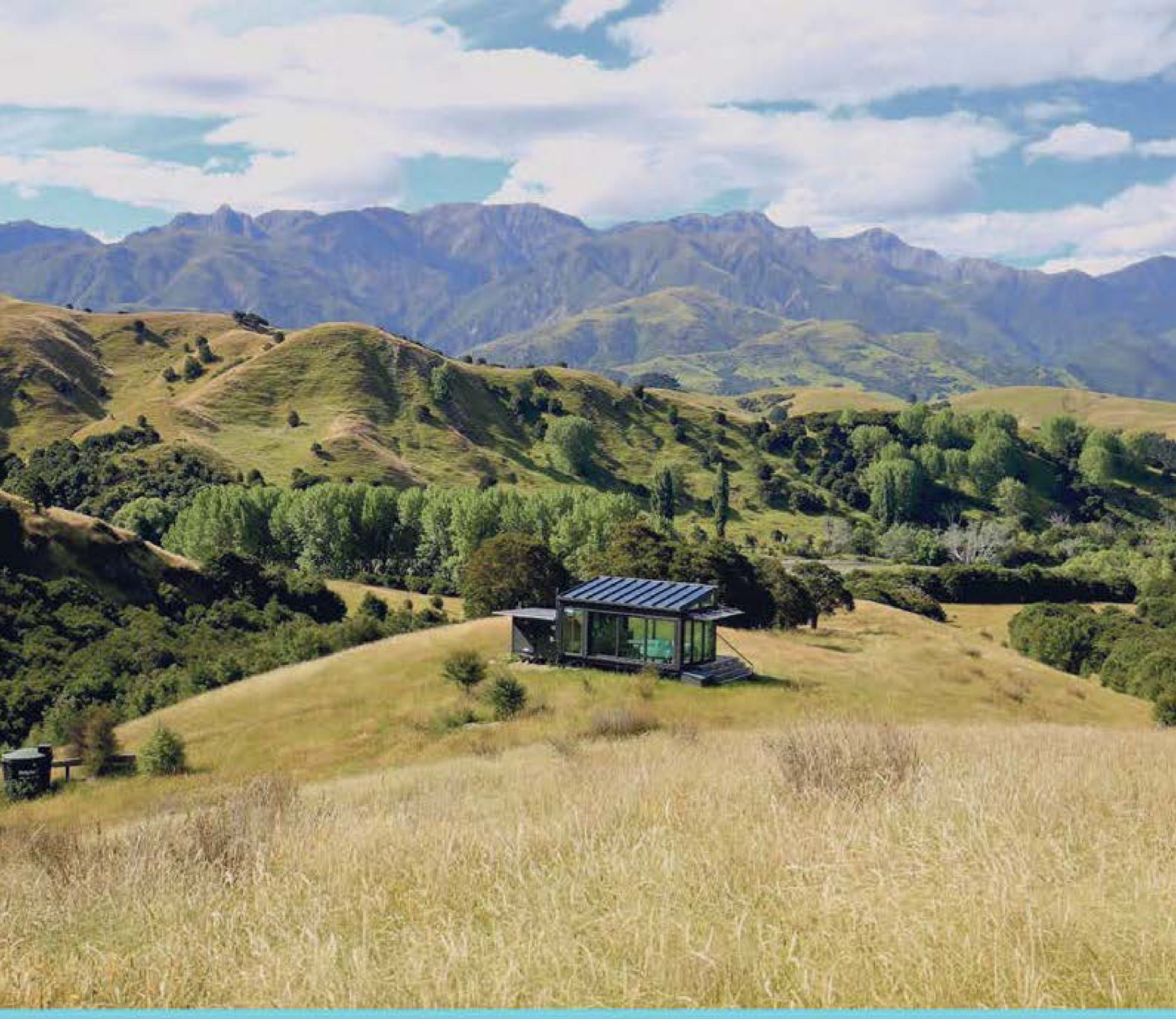

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