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The Oldie

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Oscar Wilde, my grandfather

By Merlin Holland

Great Bores of Today – Michael Heath on Soho legends
Margaret Thatcher at 100 – John O'Sullivan and Nicholas Garland
Bluestockings are back! Olivia Hurton

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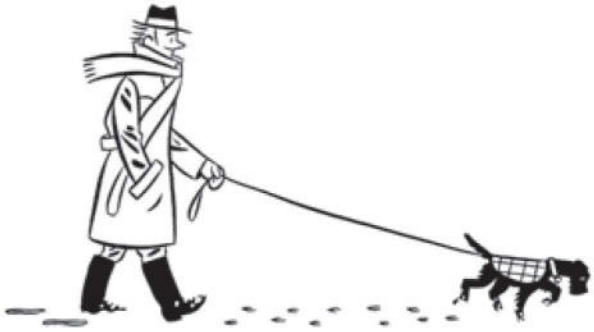

The Old Un's Notes

Nipper is saved!

Thanks to a generous public, the Huguenot Museum in Rochester has raised £1,500 to buy the portrait of a favourite Huguenot family dog. Painted by his master, Francis Barraud, Nipper starred in the logo for His Master's Voice.

Born in Bristol in 1884, Nipper died 130 years ago, in September 1895. Thought to be a Smooth Fox Terrier, a Jack Russell or a part Bull Terrier, he was given to nipping at people's legs – hence the name.

Buried in Kingston upon Thames, he sprang to posthumous fame in 1898, when Francis Barraud painted Nipper listening to a phonograph. When he replaced the phonograph with a gramophone, His Master's Voice was bought for £100 by the Gramophone Company.

The picture was used on record labels from 1909 and for the HMV shops from 1921. The portrait that's been saved is a huge 1937 version, at 12 foot by six foot six, used for the flagship HMV shop in Oxford Street.

When the shop closed, it was bought by a Tufnell Park barber. Now that the barber is moving to Cyprus, Nipper is staying here at the Huguenot Museum. The Huguenot Barrauds originally worked as clockmakers and watchmakers in London.

To celebrate the acquisition, the Huguenot Museum will be holding an event on 22nd October with Jeremy Barraud, a relation of Francis Barraud, about the Barraud family, and Richard Scott, Chairman of the City of London Phonograph and Gramophone Society.

On 12th November, the Museum will also host a book launch at the French Protestant Church, Soho Square, for our Huguenot art critic, Huon Mallalieu.

Huon's new book is *The Ear of the Beholder*, about how artists have managed to place sounds in our minds.

His Master's Voice: Nipper (1884-95) by Francis Barraud

Among this month's contributors

Merlin Holland (p12) is Oscar Wilde's only grandchild. In this issue, he writes about his new book, *After Oscar: The Legacy of a Scandal*. He is author of *The Wilde Album* and *The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde*.

John O'Sullivan (p26), Margaret Thatcher's special adviser (1986-8) and speechwriter, helped her write her memoirs. He wrote *The President, the Pope, and the Prime Minister*.

Nicholas Garland (p27) was the *Daily Telegraph* cartoonist, 1966-2011. With Barry Humphries, he created Barry McKenzie for *Private Eye*. He worked at the Royal Court and has just turned 90.

Peter York (p34) co-wrote *The Official Sloane Ranger Handbook* (1982) and wrote *Dictators' Homes* (2005). He financed *Modern Review* and co-founded SRU, the management consultants.

A New York filmmaker named Allan Konigsberg celebrates his 90th birthday on 30th November. You may know him better as Woody Allen.

He has just published a novel – *What's with Baum?*, a thinly disguised autobiography.

Opinions vary as to whether Allen is best remembered as the lovable Jewish nebbish who brought us classic comedies such as *Bananas* and *Sleeper*, and the idiosyncratic romantic drama *Annie Hall*, or as the elderly sex pervert who cheated on his partner Mia Farrow with Farrow's 21-year-old adopted daughter.

More seriously, he was subsequently accused of sexually abusing another adopted daughter, who was aged seven, though he was never charged in the matter.

Like his fellow nonagenarian Roman Polanski, Allen stands as

NOT MANY DEAD

Important stories you may have missed

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a human link to a largely vanished cinematic era, but with a permanent question mark hanging over his personal behaviour.

The Old Un encountered Allen when he was in London filming his 2005 contribution to that underexplored genre the tennis thriller, *Match Point*.

The director expressed his delight at being in the UK, and at being able to shoot scenes in the 'real England'. In this case, that largely meant some eye-wateringly expensive properties around Regents Park and the manicured lawns of the Queen's Club in West Kensington.

Allen even had kind words to say about the British climate. 'The light here is usually grey, which is perfect for shooting film. New York in summertime is like Benghazi.'

The director was also curious about local slang.

'I finally understood what people mean by ordering a G and T, and how they say "dodgy" when I'd say "dicey".

'But someone sniggered the other day when I used the term "fanny-pack". What's so funny about fanny over here?'

Somehow one hadn't the heart to tell him.

Margaret Thatcher would have turned 100 on 12th October, as her adviser John O'Sullivan writes on page 26 of this issue.

When she became Tory leader 50 years ago, in 1975, another candidate was the late Sir Hugh Fraser MP (1918-84).

On Radio Oldie, his ex-wife, the historian Lady Antonia Fraser, remembers the contest.

'Hugh said that he didn't think it was time for a woman to lead the Tory party,' says Lady Antonia. 'I was rather cross. I said, "Why not?"'

'I was totally on her side. One of the things about her was that she was a very pretty woman. I thought it was absolutely time a woman should win and I always admired her from beginning to end.'

'Can I talk to you when you're unable to talk?'

As Melvyn Bragg steps down from presenting BBC Radio 4's *In Our Time* after 26 years, another veteran broadcaster goes on and on.

Sociologist Laurie Taylor, now 89, often thought to be the model for Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man*, has been hosting the Radio 4 programme *Thinking Allowed* since 1998, making him the station's longest-serving regular presenter.

The former York University sociology professor, whose latest series ended in July this year, began his broadcasting career as a contributor on Robert Robinson's *Stop the Week*.

This year is the 50th anniversary of Bradbury's bestselling satirical novel about the right-on lecturer, womaniser and Marxist poseur Howard Kirk, which was turned into a TV series starring Antony Sher in the 1980s.

'People decided that I was definitely Howard Kirk – I used to try and deny it,' Taylor told the BBC in 2000.

He then got a phone call from Sher, asking if he could come to see how a sociology lecturer conducted a seminar.

'I had to say, "Look, I've never met Malcolm Bradbury in my life; I don't know how *The History Man* could be based on me."

'When the programme came out, I was dreading it. Although I detected certain things in his mannerisms that were a bit like mine, I was really rather pleased. So, all of a sudden, I was really rather popular – it was good to be Howard Kirk.'

It was several years later, said Taylor, that he met Bradbury, adding, 'When I read *The History Man* now, I think how well he captured the period. I'm now able to sit back and think, "Good heavens, was I a little bit like that?"'

Taylor's next series of *Thinking Allowed* is due to be aired in the new year.

'Declaring an interest' is what parliamentarians do when, in debates, they touch on subjects in which they have a financial interest.

Is this drive for probity being taken to excess? A recent debate on the Planning and Infrastructure Bill found the Earl of Lytton on his hind legs.

'I declare an interest,' His Lordship said, 'as I have nine water butts, all collecting rainwater when it rains.'

His Crossbencher colleague Lord Cromwell added, 'I had better declare that I too have some.'

Lady Hodgson also broke down under questioning, admitting that she owned a butt. Who said our ruling class was no longer awash with privilege?

Oscar Wilde died 125 years ago in Paris, on 30th November 1900, aged only 46.

His grandson, Merlin Holland, writes movingly about him on page 12.

One of his finest works, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), remains forever gripping. For his 90th birthday, Michael Heath has borrowed from the story of the picture in the attic for his own self-portrait (*right*).

And the Old Un was lucky enough to see one of the two pictures (*Before* and *After*) of Dorian Gray used in the 1945 film *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Both were painted by American artist Ivan Albright.

Before: portrait in film of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1945)

After: portrait of old Dorian in the same film

The *After* painting is now in the Art Institute in Chicago. The *Before* painting is owned by the kind *Oldie*-reader who let the Old Un have a viewing – and reminded the Old Un of his own beauty before the ruins of old age set in.

Before Sir Keir Starmer's ministerial shuffle the *Times* assessed the chances of the Cabinet Office's soft-spoken Pat McFadden. Might he have the makings of a deputy prime minister?

The paper reported the comment of a 'Downing Street insider' that McFadden was 'the archetypal number two'.

Was that meant to be a compliment?

★ GREAT BORES OF TODAY – SOHO OLDIES ★

Self-portrait by Michael Heath, 90 (with acknowledgements to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*)

Only the good Soho types die young. All gone now – Auberon Waugh, Willie Rushton, John Wells...

Cooky was taken far too soon. Demon drink!

Remember when Jeff was sick in his hat? Priceless! But that's the price you pay for genius, you see. And a bottle of Stolly a day...

Soho isn't what it was. Full of sweetshops. Bloody Costa Coffee. *Où sont les sex shops d'antan?* Did I tell you I knew Paul Raymond? Bloody legend.

Of course they all live for ever in Soho. Richard Ingrams is 88. Nick Garland's just turned 90 – so has Michael Heath...

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.

If there is one thing I dislike, it is the man who tries to air his grievances when I wish to air mine
Love Among the Chickens (1906)

PG WODEHOUSE ESTATE/CAZALET FAMILY

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RIP dearest Jilly

Greetings from the BBC Breakfast green room in Salford. I am on air at 7.50am, with seven minutes' plugging time between the sport and the weather.

I am on the road again, flogging my latest book, from St Austell to St Andrews. Ilkley next stop. I've been doing this, year in, year out, for over half a century.

My first book was published in 1972. It was not a great success. Unsurprisingly. Called *Created in Captivity,* it was a book about prison reform. It sold 837 copies. Not bad really, when you consider the subject matter.

In 1973, my next book (*Brandreth's Party Games*) did rather better. It had broader appeal and a publisher (Geoffrey Strachan at Eyre Methuen) who taught me the value of taking your wares on the road.

He hired a bus and took all his authors – the entire cast of *Monty Python's Flying Circus,* Leslie '*Virgin Soldiers*' Thomas, the late Jilly Cooper and me – on a charabanc outing round the country. I sat at the back of the bus, holding hands with Jilly Cooper and talking about sex. (For the record, I initiated the hand-holding; she did the talking about sex.)

Fifty-plus years on, Dame Jilly and I were still at it: still holding hands, still talking about sex, still flogging our books.

We were at it again last week, in Derbyshire, and congratulated each other on our staying power. Jilly, 88, was fruitier than ever. She seemed immortal.

Jilly Cooper (1937-2025)

My fortunes as an author were transformed 35 years ago, when my wife (then a publisher) sent me to meet the great Ed Victor (1939-2017) who she said was 'the best literary agent in the world'.

Ed (an Anglophile American) gave me breakfast at the Savoy. I had the 9am sitting. Frederick Forsyth had joined him at 8am. Nigella Lawson was due at 9.30 am.

I had only 30 minutes to eat my scrambled eggs and make my pitch. I produced a piece of paper with some ideas for books I thought I might like to write.

Ed told me to put it away. 'Your wife was gracious enough to call me the best agent in the world,' he said.

'Gyles, let's be clear. You're not the best author in the world. Don't you want to hear what the best agent in the world thinks you should be doing?'

He told me I was too parochial. He told me I had to write about subjects (fiction and non-fiction) with universal appeal that could be sold around the world. I followed his advice and he quintupled my income.

That's why my latest book is about Winnie-the-Pooh – big in Britain, bigger in the US and huge in Japan. (There is even going to be an edition in Ukraine.)

Where were you on the Sunday when the national Emergency Alert System was tested? Did your mobile phone spring to life at 3.00 pm as planned?

Mine did. I was attending the wedding of my friend Dame Maureen Lipman. The rabbi conducting the ceremony explained to us before it began that he had contacted the Prime Minister to tell him about the *Coronation Street* star's upcoming nuptials.

Sir Keir had replied to explain that he couldn't attend the wedding in person as he would be in Balmoral in attendance on the King, but that he had arranged for the sounding of sirens across the land to celebrate the happy union.

On cue, as the bride and groom came together beneath the chuppah (this was a traditional Jewish wedding) a hundred mobiles throbbed and chirruped in unison. It was oddly moving.

The wedding itself – the joyful coming together of a widow and widower, Maureen and David Tuner, each in their 80th year, surrounded by their children and grandchildren – was profoundly moving. Mazel tov!

If Maureen's was the wedding of the year, Timothy West's memorial service was in a class of its own.

It had the lot: brass band, massed choirs, a re-enacted radio play (complete with live sound effects), Mozart, G & S, wild laughter and grateful tears.

All theatreland was there, with the exception of Tim's widow, Prunella Scales, at home in Wandsworth with dementia but, we were told, also with her daughter-in-law enjoying her morning coffee – and one of her favourite biscuits.

Tim's actor son, Sam, organised it all with the flair of C B Cochran – and when he realised that the invitation to the service that he had sent out was directing people to St James's Church at 97 rather than 197 Piccadilly, he recalled his father's performance as Thomas Beecham in the West End in 1980.

At one point, West as Beecham had turned to the audience and said, 'Ladies and gentlemen, in 40 years of conducting I have never known a programme be printed correctly. Tonight is no exception, and therefore with your permission, I shall now play you the piece you think you have just heard.'

Oldie Towers is in mourning for Jilly Cooper, our patron saint and dream contributor. **By Harry Mount, Oldie Editor**

She was a natural journalist. That chatty style is deceptively tricky – much easier to be obscure than addictively readable. Her words were so original and spot-on. In this issue's Christmas Gift Guide (which went to print before her death), she calls her beloved greyhounds 'sofaholics'. Classic Jilly!

In our first issue in 1992, she wrote about her pin-ups in that sublime style. They included the late Duke of Beaufort ('a mega-giggler'); Byron ('ideal toyboy material'); and Horatius who kept the bridge ('Being Roman, he was probably gay').

From her breezy manner, you might think Jilly was cavalier. In fact, she was meticulous. When she addressed the Anthony Powell Society this year, she re-read his books and anxiously took copious notes. She was enchanting, of course.

On my desk, there's a hallowed pile of thankyou cards. Jilly sent one whenever she wrote a divine article for us. I should have been thanking her. She finished that last piece, about greyhounds, only days ago. The last line is 'They're so loving and they give so much back.' It applies to her in spades.

The nagging ghost in my machine

My new Audi won't stop telling me what to do

MATTHEW NORMAN

When my mother died some two years ago, it seemed beyond the power of human imagination to conceive that the roads would ever again host so anxious and pernickety a passenger.

'Stop driving like a lunatic – you're going to kill us' was the automatic back-seat refrain whenever the speedometer nudged 17mph.

'Swerve, swerve … for God's sake, SWERVE' went her ritual injunction when she sighted a pigeon roosting insouciantly atop a post box on the other side of the road.

It's a well-known paradox that what we tend to miss most about dead loved ones is whatever most drove us mad about them in life.

So it was that, for 18 months after her departure, the eerie absence of neurotic warnings drew a veil of poignancy over outings on His Majesty's thoroughfares.

And then, miraculously, I found a companion to make my old mum seem the poster girl for travelling chill. The one minor oddity about the new deranged fusspot is that it happens to be the car itself. Apologies if what follows is wearily familiar to owners of modern cars, but until recently I had no idea about these developments in wanton interference.

The only warning of trouble ahead offered by my first car, a 1957 Morris Minor, took the form of smoke, and now and again the odd flame, wafting from the bonnet.

The subsequent sequence of second-, third- and fourth-hand Audis took a barely less laissez-faire approach. One came to a juddering halt in the fast lane of the M6 (if there is such a thing as a 'timing belt', that's what went) without so much as mentioning any disaster ahead.

The current model, an Audi A3 e-tron (whatever the hell that means), is the first I've owned to feature a bewildering array of gadgets. Apart from the heated seats and cruise control, I've no idea what they are, how to deploy them, or what they do.

But the incessant warnings are harder to ignore than the pointless tech. Every few seconds on every journey there's a beeping, a flashing of lights and a dashboard message. 'Warning,' reads one favourite, 'tyre pressure low.'

A trip to the garage, and the expenditure of a bargain £2 for a little air, inevitably reveals that the tyre pressure is in fact perfect. 'Warning,' beeps another every 20 to 30 seconds, 'front cover unlocked.'

Audi's fault: the e-tron dashboard

This is correct but incomplete. The front cover is broken. And considering that replacing this flimsy rectangle of plastic would cost hundreds, broken it will remain.

'Warning, traffic-sign recognition restricted' goes yet another, apparently aimed at those too blind to take in the signs. 'See owner's manual.'

While I can undeniably see that chunky booklet, I cannot read its contents, these being printed in a typeface too tiny for a sparrowhawk with full access to the Hubble Space Telescope to penetrate. Not that I'd comprehend any word of it if I could read it.

The warning symbols are easy to count, however, and, having taken the trouble, I am pleased to report the numbers as follows:

'Red symbols' (extremely serious): 20.

'Yellow symbols' (a bit serious): 50.

'Further indicator lamps' (presumably couldn't matter less): 50.

In total, then, the car has the potential to warn of about 120 problems of varying magnitude. And it never stops warning about one or another – and often several at once – until the incessant beepings and flashings put you in mind of a holding ward, off A&E, in which every patient is in cardiac arrest all the time.

To think that Basil Fawlty gave his red Austin a savage beating with a branch for no worse an offence than refusing to start when he was desperately trying to get the duck back to the hotel for 'gourmet night'.

Yet there is genuine comfort to be cleaved from all the hysteria, as I never felt more keenly than one recent morning on the A40.

Approaching the picturesque Hanger Lane Gyratory System, the car braked sharply of its own volition. Up flashed the message 'Audi pre sense'.

The car had discerned a grave danger, it seems, and pre-empted it accordingly. What the danger was is hard to say, given that there was no other vehicle within 20 yards to front, rear or side.

Perhaps the car's sensors had detected a pigeon roosting insouciantly on the central reservation 60 miles west, near the M4 turn-off for Swindon.

The greatest danger here, it seems to me, is of the car that cried wolf: that the bombardment of needless warnings will cause the fatigued driver to ignore one that is real, and perish as a result. In that case, the manufacturer, by way of a memorial tribute to this loyal customer, might care to rename the model the Audi Cassandra.

And yet, for all that, never since she went have I felt as close to my mother as when the car so insanely overreacted to a menace that plainly didn't exist.

But then pre sense, as the old saw has it, makes the heart grow fonder.

OLDEN LIFE

WHAT WAS whistling?

The other day, I was listening to Otis Redding's 'The Dock of the Bay' when it hit me: no one whistles any more! The sound of someone whistling while they work or just walk down a street is one of those – like the rattle of a milk float – that have all but disappeared from British life.

Sometimes I wonder if there really was a Britain of whistling postmen, factory workers and dustmen. Did dads whistle while washing the family car on a Sunday – or is this just my nostalgia for a time that never was?

Cultural historians will tell you that, yes, we were once a whistling nation. In *A Brief History of Whistling,* authors Allan Chatburn and John Lucas evoke a Britain where whistling was a common practice among coal miners, factory workers, errand boys and hotel doormen. They argue it was mostly a part of working-class culture, practised by men more than women.

Before and after the Second World War, whistling was a popular form of entertainment, heard in music halls and vaudeville, where popular professional whistlers – such as Ronnie Ronalde and Fred Lowery – would imitate birds and wildlife calls.

In the 1960s and '70s, whistling superstar Roger Whittaker took whistling to the pop charts with such hits as 'Mexican Whistler', 'Finnish Whistler' and 'Scottish Whistler'. That's a lot of whistle from one man!

For many of us, the whistle is what made films memorable. In David Lean's 1957 classic *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, British prisoners of war defy their Japanese tormentors by whistling the 'Colonel Bogey March'. Even today, people who don't whistle will whistle along to 'Always Look on the Bright Side of Life' from *Monty Python's Life of Brian*.

Whistling was an uplifting tonic for troubled times, or just to relieve the tedium of the working day. Disney's seven dwarfs advised us to whistle while we work. Today's remaining whistling advocates claim it's a great stress-buster and mood-enhancer. I know of no better way to dispel a gloomy mood than to whistle along to that 1967 pop classic 'I Was Kaiser Bill's Batman' by Whistling Jack Smith. Just try it and you'll be amazed.

For every fan of whistling – humorist Alan Coren planned to whistle a merry tune when he met his maker – it had its detractors. Winston Churchill hated the sound so much he had it banned from the War Office. In 2013, a Leicestershire milkman was banned from whistling by irate residents.

So why and when did whistling die out? It was the appearance in 2002 of the first generation of iPods – and later the rise of the smartphone – that marked the death of the whistle. Why bother to whistle when any song you wanted to hear was at your fingertips?

And we don't live in a whistling kind of world any more. A lot of factory jobs have gone and so have variety shows. And in the age of Uber, nobody needs to know how to whistle to summon a cab. Whistling now has largely negative associations – the wolf whistle, the dog whistle and the whistle-blower.

But I miss the sound of the whistle. It had a kind of cheerful defiance to life's problems and setbacks – a just-get-on-with-it nonchalance we need today more than ever.

Cosmo Landesman, who founded *Modern Review* magazine in 1991 with his then wife, Julie Burchill, and Toby Young

MODERN LIFE

WHAT IS a Labubu?

Labubu is a furry creature with pointy ears, large eyes and a mouth filled with many sharp teeth.

It was dreamt up in 2015 by Hong Kong-born illustrator Kasing Lung as part of a series called *The Monsters*, and turned into a series of vinyl plush dolls by Chinese toy company Pop Mart.

Pop Mart has released over 300 different Labubu dolls in this calendar year alone, ranging from £14 Labubu pendants to larger dolls, on sale for £80.

People have brawled, kicked and scrapped to get their hands on these things. After a bloody riot at a Pop Mart outlet in east London in May, the company announced they would now sell the items only online. This has, naturally, further increased demand.

'It's a battlefield,' one fan, Alison Bushey, 32, of Northamptonshire, told the *Daily Mail*. She had spent over £1,000 on Labubus and devoted hours each day to hunting down more. 'I'm not even a big collector in the scheme of things. If you go into Facebook groups, I mean, some of them are insane.'

The most expensive doll yet sold was a one-off four-foot-tall doll that went for £125,000 at auction in Beijing in June. The CEO of Pop Mart, Wang Ning, 37, is thought to be China's youngest billionaire, having made over $21 billion in 2025.

The popularity has a lot to do with the by-now familiar combination of influencer marketing and algorithmic targeting, meaning that if you're a 15-year-old on TikTok, Labubus will certainly have colonised your feed.

Labubus also speak to the increasing power of Asian pop culture. A member of the South Korean pop band Blackpink was credited with first turning the toys into fashion items.

Like any savvy modern fashion label, Pop Mart has been clever at choosing its collaborators: there have been highbrow Labubus available exclusively at the Louvre. There have been mass-market Coca-Cola Labubus. For the kids, there is an anime series, Labubu and Friends, due to drop any moment now.

There is also an element of gambling in any Labubu purchase. Most come in 'blind boxes'. So, as with Pokémon cards, you don't know exactly which one you are going to get – you hope for a rare, valuable one that you can resell for thousands of pounds online.

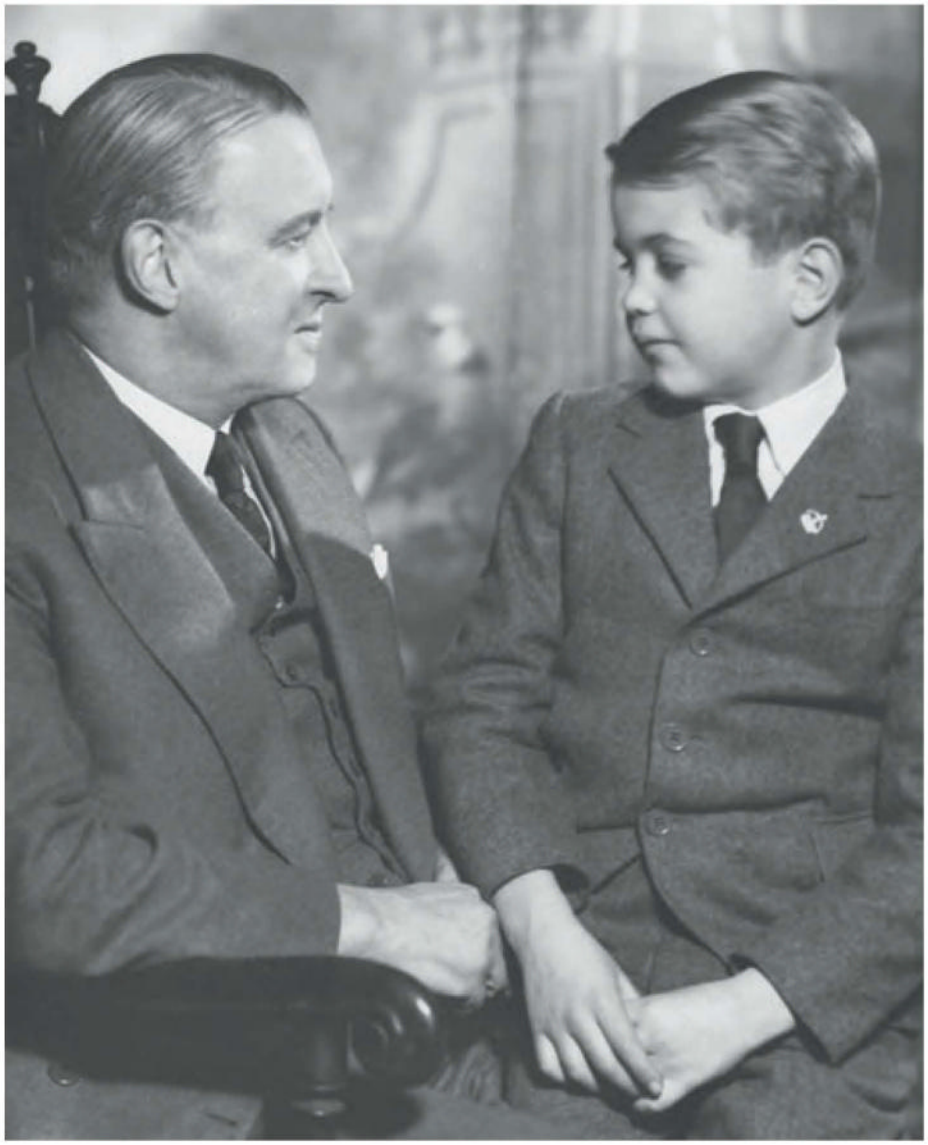
And the dolls themselves? Well, they're hideous – somewhere between one of the creatures from Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* and a terrifying item from a haunted 1950s nursery. But this is the point. The Labubu will amuse you. It will comfort you. It will obsess you and possess you.

It is the spirit animal of the internet.

Richard Godwin

125 years after Oscar Wilde's death, his grandson, *Merlin Holland*, separates fact from fiction

Wilde lies



Vyvyan and Merlin Holland, 1953

How does a son accuse his father of not telling the truth?

With difficulty – normally, the roles are reversed. It's all the more difficult when you're having to do it publicly and in print – and he can't answer back because he died nearly 60 years ago.

It's a problem that has often tortured me while I've been writing about my father, Vyvyan Holland, in *After Oscar* – my new book about the dramatic posthumous 'life' of his own father, Oscar Wilde, and the role he played in it. Oscar died in Paris 125 years ago, on 30th November 1900, aged 46.

I was constantly having to weigh up filial love against an obsession with historical accuracy; and feeling terrible pangs of guilt when I allowed history to prevail over family loyalty.

As a child in the 1960s, I was discouraged from taking much interest in my grandfather. If anyone, aware that there was some connection, asked whether I was related to him – a reasonable question since the family surname was changed from Wilde to Holland after his conviction and imprisonment – I used to reply, 'Yes, but he died a long time ago and I never knew him,' and change the subject.

When I was at Oxford, the editor of a new literary magazine in America asked if I would write an article for him on Oscar and Aestheticism – about which I knew next to nothing. As a language student, I proposed instead the influence of French literature on him, which was enthusiastically accepted.

I wrote excitedly to my parents about it. They replied with the only letter I ever received signed by both of them, telling me not to: 'This is not only a family matter, but something that could be very deleterious to you in any future career you wish to take up.'

The article was never written. Another 20 years would pass before I published anything on the subject of my grandfather.

It was Richard Ellmann's biography of Oscar in 1987 that changed all that.

Before publication, I heard that Ellmann was using an old rumour that Oscar contracted syphilis at Oxford and died of it 25 years later as one of the more sensational conjectures in his book.

My mother, Thelma, who would apply liberal coats of whitewash to any part of her father-in-law's life that she found distasteful, had also heard about it from one of her busybody friends, who enjoyed stirring up trouble between us in matters Wildean.

In this case, I found myself taking her side, as there was a growing tendency to over-sensationalise that life – quite sensational enough in its own right without the help of others trying to capitalise in some way on flimsily supported conjectures.

Since Ellmann's book was set to become the go-to biography for the next decade, I immersed myself for several weeks in contemporary accounts of Oscar's life and his own letters, as well as the posthumous literature and correspondence between his friends, looking for clues and trying to track down a reliable source for the story.

It was inconclusive, as was my consulting STD specialists on the likelihood of Oscar's suffering from the disease – though it led to the final quashing of the syphilis rumour by an eminent neurologist a few years later in the *Medical and Health Annual* of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

It was through doing that research

Above: **Oscar's great-grandson Lucian Holland, Stephen Fry and Merlin Holland unveil Maggi Hambling's statue of Wilde, 1998.** ***Right:*** **Oscar, Cyril and Constance Wilde, 1892**

that I began to realise just how unreliable much of what was written about Oscar after his death could be. Myths were created and, by regular and unverified repetition, they eventually became enshrined in apparent fact.

People who couldn't distance themselves fast enough from this 'monster of depravity' in 1895, when he was tried and imprisoned for what was quaintly called gross indecency, found it expedient by the 1920s to slip a few paragraphs or even a chapter about him into their memoirs.

In 1929, Gladys Palmer, childhood playmate of Vyvyan and daughter of the eponymous Reading biscuit-factory-owner, tried to maintain that her parents had 'helped him both financially and morally during his trial'.

Nothing could have been further from the truth. Her father's ambitions to become an MP (which he did in 1900) would have been fatally compromised had such a thing become known. Besides this, Oscar acknowledges the fact nowhere in his correspondence, which he certainly would have done – and as he did with others who stood by him.

Paul Fort, the French Symbolist poet, claimed in a 1925 interview that he and his wife had been the only friends left to Oscar in his last days in Paris – completely ignoring the care and attention lavished on him, as he was dying, by his two closest friends at the time, Robbie Ross and Reggie Turner.

As the Irish writer and literary scholar Declan Kiberd so perfectly described it in another context, these were 'latecomers to the feast … obsessed with inserting themselves into the narrative'.

Such discoveries made me start to question anything relevant to the whole Wilde story written after his death. Inevitably, that included my father's autobiographical memoir, *Son of Oscar Wilde* (1954).

I write 'inevitably', but it wasn't inevitable; it happened by chance. A year after Richard Ellmann's biography appeared, Oxford University Press wanted to reprint Vyvyan's memoir and asked me to write an introduction.

I knew that Thelma had been somehow instrumental in getting him to write the book and wanted to give her credit for it.

Above**: Bosie Douglas (1870-1945), Oscar's nemesis, 1900.** ***Below left:*** **Vyvyan Holland (1886-1967) married Violet Craigie in 1914. In 1943, he married Merlin's mother, Dorothy**

'Not only did I get him to write it,' she told me, 'but it was my idea to say that Constance [his mother, Wilde's wife] should appear to him in a dream and tell him to do so. It sounded better.'

I had only her word for it, but nowhere in Vyvyan's daily diary entries between 1948 and 1953 does he mention such a dream as prompting him to start. Since he frequently recorded significant dreams, he almost certainly would have done had it happened.

I didn't find her admission particularly shocking; it was a sort of poetic licence. But it did make me wonder if there were other passages that owed more to Vyvyan's imagination than to the historical facts.

One of the more dramatic incidents that my father recounted in his

Right: **Cyril, 1912, killed in the First World War at 29.** ***Far right:*** **Thelma and Vyvyan Holland, Merlin's parents, 1943**

book was his expulsion, together with his mother and brother, Cyril (killed in action in the First World War in 1915, aged 29), from the Swiss hotel where they were staying after Oscar's last trial and conviction in the summer of 1895.

Apparently, the manager, on learning that they were related to the infamous Oscar Wilde and realising that if his other clients were to find out it might be bad for business, asked them to leave.

As Vyvyan's first taste of the 'fall-out' from the scandal, it was a hugely repeatable and poignant family story – and for years I did just that.

A while ago, I visited the municipal archives in Montreux, the nearest large town to where they were staying. I was shown a weekly newspaper published at the time, which recorded the arrivals, departures and continuing presence of foreign guests in the local hotels.

Vyvyan, Cyril and Constance are listed as having stayed the entire summer in the same hotel. Clearly, no one asked them to leave. It turned out that they were simply moved into the annexe, as the main hotel was fully booked months in advance and they were late arrivals.

In *Son of Oscar Wilde*, Vyvyan wrote affectionately of his father. Oscar would go up to the nursery in their Chelsea house to play with his children, mend their toy soldiers and crawl round on the floor, pretending to be different wild animals.

Years later, when Micheál Mac Liammóir asked him to write a programme note, 'Oscar Wilde by his son', for his one-man show *The Importance of Being Oscar,* he would write in his diary:

'A very difficult job to do … I had to invent stories about Papa playing with us. I really doubt very much if he ever went up to the nursery.'

I first read that with dismay and began to wonder how much of the chapter in *Son of Oscar Wilde,* which he entitled 'The Happy Years', could be relied on.

Why, having given such a sympathetic portrait of his father in 1954, did Vyvyan want to destroy the image he had created?

When my father started writing his memoir, it was at a time, pre-Wolfenden, when prominent figures such as Edward Montagu, John Gielgud and Peter Wildeblood were being prosecuted under the same 1885 Act that had put Oscar in prison.

For Vyvyan, it was both a revisiting of his childhood to lay some ghosts to rest, and a desire to show his father in a more favourable light – as something other than the perverted criminal all too many British people still tended to consider him in 1954.

Cyril Wilde with his mother, Constance, 1889

It was the fusion of these two aims that expressed itself in the depiction of Oscar as a sort of gentle giant, a man who loved his children (which he undoubtedly did), who told them stories and played with them in the nursery.

Vyvyan idolised his father in order to rediscover him emotionally and did it by turning the exceptional in their relationship into the norm.

I know, because I did it too. I lost my father when I was 21, not as early as Vyvyan lost Oscar, but I'm sure the emotions were similar – and that Oscar's nursery visits did take place, but they weren't every day and precisely because of that they were memorable.

Do I have the right to say this, or should I just be perpetuating the myth? Even breaking the myth can be instructive – especially in this case, for what it tells us about the enduring 1950s homophobia and the continuing echoes around the whole Wilde story – but having to do it is troubling.

I take down *Son of Oscar Wilde* from the bookshelf and see the inscription 'For Merlin with fondest love from his Daddy. September 1954' and I feel a jolt of perfidy at what I'm doing, though I know it has to be right.

It is saying, 'I understand why you wrote what you did when you did and embellished a few things,' and that, in the end, it's unimportant, for the reality behind it all is often more poignant than what Vyvyan depicted.

The fact that Constance and her boys weren't actually told to pack their bags and leave a Swiss hotel doesn't matter.

The fact that my father could still, 60 years later, feel that he and his family had been expelled as 'undesirables', and that it all had something to do with his father, is more important.

After Oscar: The Legacy of a Scandal *by Merlin Holland is out on 16th October*

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Holding out for a hero

Modern men may work out and pump iron – but they're still cowards. By *Annabel Venning*

We've all been there.

You're reading your book when a fellow passenger plays music on their phone at full blast.

Many of us will sympathise with Radio 3 presenter Petroc Trelawney. He complained about the phenomenon but admitted he was 'quite a coward'. So, rather than remonstrate, he chose to 'seethe internally'.

Trelawny's confession coincided with an American study of 4,500 participants. It revealed that both men and women find a willingness to intervene more attractive than mere physical strength.

A potential partner who stepped in to save a hypothetical victim from a threat or altercation was thought more desirable than one who hung back, however handsome.

Unsurprising perhaps. Yet it *is* revealing. While people do their Ironman runs, build bulging biceps and post pictures of corrugated torsos, what really counts isn't muscles but the moral courage to intervene. Partly because, like Trelawney, we recognise how difficult and potentially dangerous it is to do so.

We don't always get to find out whether we – or our partners – are cowards or crusaders. But when a situation arises that reveals the truth, it can be surprising.

I loathe confrontation. But I get wound up by selfish behaviour. If I see people dropping litter, leaving their car engines running, vandalising a monument or stealing seashells from the beach, I remonstrate. Sometimes they stop. Sometimes they tell me to sod off.

When it comes to violence, I find it so unbearable – I view Attenborough programmes through my fingers – that I feel compelled to step in.

I've tackled a man who was hitting a toddler in a buggy – how could anyone not? Yet plenty of people walked past.

I recently saw a thug assaulting his girlfriend at a petrol station. This vast, shirtless, meat mountain of a man was backed up by his mate, who claimed to be a knife fighter – and showed me the scars to prove it.

The thug towered over the girl, fists clenched, shouting about what he would do to her, as she whimpered, crouching on the floor, her arms over her head to protect herself.

She was 19 – barely older than my 18-year-old daughter. My protective instinct roused, I rushed over, told the men to leave her alone and assured her that I could take her somewhere safe; that she shouldn't tolerate this.

Another passer-by – a man – backed me up. We were hardly intimidating adversaries; the passer-by was shorter and slighter than me and I'm no tank.

As the men chased the girl around the forecourt, we alternately remonstrated and stood between victim and assailants, who alternated between obsequiousness and threats towards us.

Despite our efforts, she eventually got back in the car with her assailants, who drove off with her. I hate to think what happened next. The petrol-station staff had inexplicably failed to call the police.

Some studies suggest that women are more likely than men to get involved in an altercation, perhaps because of empathy. But the stats are inconclusive.

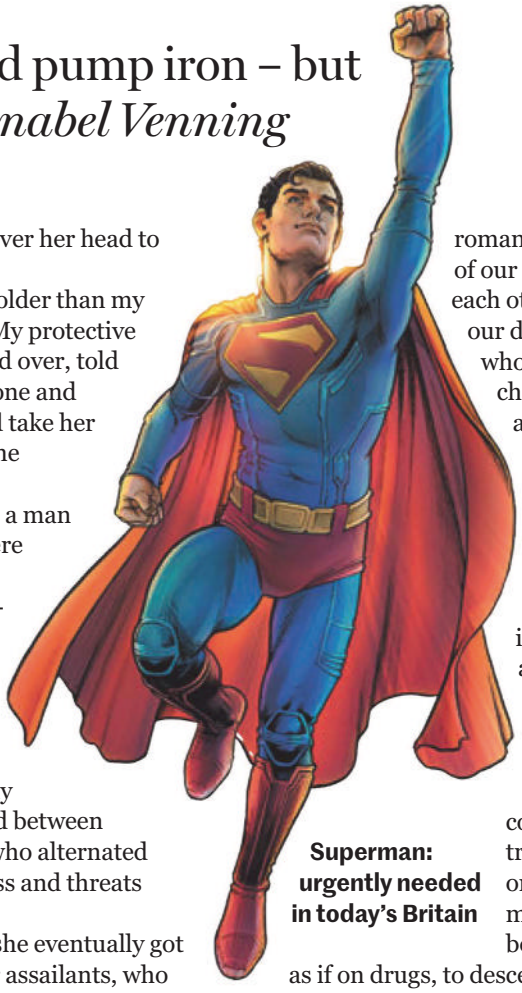
I've always assumed that women are less likely to face retaliation if they do intervene – but there is no concrete evidence for this, either.

There are many instances of both women and men stepping in only to become victims themselves. Take Sandy Seagrave, 76, who was walking past a house in Sussex in December 2019, when she saw Daniel Appleton, 38, attacking his wife, Amy, 32, on the driveway.

With extraordinary bravery, Mrs Seagrove went to Amy's aid, only for Appleton to break off from beating his wife and bludgeon Mrs Seagrove to death with her own walking stick. He then used it to beat Amy to death.

So we shouldn't judge those who don't step in. Yet I confess I have done so.

Many years ago, I was on holiday in Mexico with a boyfriend. After a romantic fortnight of our gazing into each other's eyes, our driver, José, who had chauffeured us around for two weeks and whose family we had met, got into a road-rage incident on a dual carriageway.



Superman: urgently needed in today's Britain

José got out of the car to confront the truck driver, only for two more men, both wild-eyed as if on drugs, to descend from the cab and surround him. We watched, appalled, as one man punched José – who staggered but stayed upright.

'We must help!' I squeaked at my beau.

'Don't be silly,' he replied. 'It's too dangerous.'

But I couldn't bear it. I jumped out, stood between José and the truck-drivers, and put my hand up like a referee. 'Stop this!' I demanded bossily.

They were so taken aback by this crazy Englishwoman that they did stop, got back into the truck and drove off. All was well.

But I had seen my boyfriend in a new and unflattering light. The relationship didn't last.

Perhaps I shouldn't have been so harsh. While I've sometimes been brave (or foolhardy), like Trelawney I shrink from confrontations on trains. There's no escape if a confrontation escalates.

We all have our limits.

Annabel Venning is author of Following the Drum: The Lives of Army Wives and Daughters, Past and Present

Confessions of a bad farmer

Interviewing Prime Ministers is a doddle – try milking a cow. By *John Humphrys*, who has owned two Welsh farms

It's all very well listening to Jeremy Clarkson banging on about the trials and tribulations of being a farmer, but I have a question for him: 'When was the last time you lay on the floor of a milking parlour, literally covered in dung and screaming in agony, because, not for the first time, one of your cows had kicked you clean across the parlour, quite possibly breaking your arm in the process?'

I know the answer. He has only beef cattle, and the milk he sells comes from a neighbouring dairy farm. So I can safely say he has never had to milk a cow in his life – let alone a cow with murderous intent like Number Nine, one of my herd.

This is not a criticism of Clarkson. Quite the reverse. It's an admission of my own breathtaking foolishness.

Back in 1980, I decided I'd had enough of being a foreign correspondent for the BBC and came back to London to present the *BBC Nine O'Clock News*.

Not the most challenging task on the planet, I grant you. I had time on my hands and money in the bank. Quite a lot of it. Those were the days when the bosses regarded us 'foreign corrs' as journalism's elite. A generous salary, no income tax and almost all living costs covered.

But there was a price to be paid. Endless travelling. My 'patch' stretched from north Alaska to the southern tip of Chile. Thirty-five countries. I was sometimes away from home for months at a time – and now I wanted to be settled with my family. How sensible, you say.

So I decided to buy a farm in Carmarthenshire, near Newcastle Emlyn. Not sensible. I knew nothing – and to opt for a dairy farm as I did was bordering on insanity.

I was vaguely aware that cows must be milked twice a day every day. It's relatively easy if the cows are placid and you have a modern milking parlour.

And if you learned how to do it at your father's knee, then if they're a bit jumpy and like to kick sideways, you'll know how to press hard with your shoulder and trap the nerve. My farm manager Eddie knew all that, but he had small children and needed time off; that was when I had to take over.

I lacked every one of the required qualifications and Number Nine knew it.

She did not appreciate an amateur's trying to force hard rubber cups onto her wart-covered teats. Hence the hours I spent lying whimpering on the floor – while the remaining 50-odd irritable cows grew even more irritable – dreaming that I could have used the small fortune I'd spent inflicting this misery on

John Humphrys on his west Wales farm

myself by instead buying a pleasant villa somewhere warm with not a cow in sight.

And then deliverance. Sort of. Two strangers arrived at the bottom of my drive with the promise of a new life: Peter Segger and Patrick Holden. They had heard that this weird bloke off the telly had bought a farm and had a question for me: 'Why aren't you organic?'

I said something like 'Dunno', largely because I had no idea what they were talking about. Back then, it was easier to buy the deeds to Buckingham Palace than to buy an organic carrot in a supermarket. Not any longer, of course – and we have them to thank for it.

On one level, our histories were similar. They'd left the big city and, knowing nothing about farming, bought a few acres in west Wales. They'd even chosen the same valley as me – surely a coincidence that it happened to be home to some of the best magic mushrooms on the planet.

That apart, they had a great ambition: to prove that the world could learn to feed itself without in the process destroying its precious soil with chemicals.

Together, they hijacked the moribund Soil Association. When Patrick took it over, it had five staff. A few years later, it had 150. His own farm was producing the best organic Cheddar cheese on the planet. Still is.

Peter wasn't interested in cows, and anyway he had enough cash to buy 45 acres of only stony ground, on which grew some scruffy grass, a few trees and a derelict cottage. God knows how many tons of stones they threw into the backs of trailers before they could even operate a plough.

Or how he learned to make compost. Purists used to say it took a year to produce the best compost. It takes Peter six weeks. That's how he achieved what some say is the holy grail of farming ambition: sustainable production with nary a spoonful of chemical fertiliser or weedkiller. So, for decades, Blaencamel Farm, Cilcennin, near Lampeter, has been producing the best organic fruit and veg in the land.

Oh … and he also travelled the world, persuading dirt-poor farmers to ditch the chemicals they couldn't afford, with the promise that he would buy their organic bananas or whatever. And he did, by the shipload, and succeeded in building the nation's first hugely successful organic-food company

And me? The two of them talked me into growing organic carrots. So I tried. I sowed my biggest, flattest field with them. But as they sprouted, so did the weeds. Unsurprising, really. That's what weeds do.

No problem. Bring out the chemical sprayer and they'd soon die off. Except organic growers can't do that. So, one fine morning, I set out with a fork and buckets and boundless optimism.

By midday, I had filled several buckets, which might sound a lot in your garden. But not if your garden is the size of a dozen football pitches. I wept out of both frustration and agony. Number Nine would have enjoyed the spectacle.

That was probably the moment my organic ambitions died. I sold the farm, lock, stock and barrel.

I tried to defend my miserable failure by arguing that it's all very well having organic food in every supermarket in the land, but not if it's so expensive that only the well-heeled middle classes can afford it; they're the ones who need it least.

You don't see too many single mothers living off benefits perusing the organic mangos in Waitrose.

And, anyway, the magic word these days is 'regenerative' rather than 'organic'. Patrick acknowledges that the word organic had become (unfairly) associated with expensive, niche food bought by the well-heeled.

He accepts that people like him behaved in a holier-than-thou way for decades. That doesn't mean he no longer regards organic farmers as morally superior. He does – and he's right.

The National Trust points out that the UK is one of the most 'nature-depleted' countries in the world. In the past 50 years, almost 40 million birds have vanished from our skies and the population of wild bees has been decimated. 'Without nature,' it warns darkly, 'there is no farming, no tourism and no rural economy.' Organic farming produces less greenhouse gas, more biodiversity and richer, living soil.

John's toughest interview, 1980

As for me, I bought another farm – in Ceredigion, near Aberaeron – and it's producing some excellent organic food. That could have something to do with the fact that it adjoins Peter's land and it is he who farms it.

I just eat the food he grows. I do get it right sometimes.

John Humphrys presented the Today *programme, 1987-2019*

SHUTTERSTOCK; CHRIS JONES

From blackboard to tablet

Alyson Elliott has chalked up 53 years of teaching – and seen classrooms transformed into mind-boggling technological studios

When I began teaching in Keble Prep School, Enfield, in 1972, Ted Heath was Prime Minister and 'educational technology' meant a board that was black, a piece of chalk that was white and a felted rubber generally kept in an old Peek Frean biscuit tin.

My pupils were required to supply: an HB pencil, a six-inch ruler, an eraser, an actual fountain pen and some cartridges or a bottle of Quink. Biros were frowned on.

By the mid-'70s, blackboards had been replaced by green roller boards which could be written on on both sides and could be moved around the classroom for convenience.

In this newly colourful age, pupils would sit enthralled as I illustrated the stages of a river's journey from source to sea via the thrillingly novel medium of green, blue and brown chalks.

If I needed to share a piece of visual material – a map, or something sciency – with the class I might send for the overhead projector, which had to be trundled in from the stock cupboard.

Obviously this was possible only if the classroom had the blessing of a pull-down screen and there was an accessible electrical socket. Pupils had to remain in their seats at all times to avoid the power lead's snaking across the waxed parquet floor. And this was before Health and Safety.

In the '80s, I was teaching at North Bridge House School, Regent's Park, where the call for bespoke worksheets ushered in the chemical era.

Our school had just one hand-cranked Banda machine, which could produce duplicate copies of multiplication tables or cloze tests.

Members of staff would race into school early to be the first to use it, spending the next few hours under the influence of its distinctive fumes. The children found themselves mysteriously drawn to inhaling each new sheet as it was placed on their desk.

Class act: Maggie Smith in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1969)

We teaching staff looked longingly at the Gestetner duplicating machine, powered by electricity, kept purely for the use of the office staff, who would employ it for important documents such as the end-of-term exam papers.

Only trained staff were allowed access to the Gestetner, a brand name that swiftly became a verb.

Personal stationery had not moved on a great deal by then, but I had already heard talk of felt-tip pens. By the '90s, the old fixed boards were being replaced by white ones, with which we used felt-tip markers.

At this point, we said goodbye to the unpleasant sound of chalk on blackboard and finally banished the cloud of dust through which lessons had been conducted, ushering in a new age of relative ease and cleanliness.

Children seized on the new branded stationery that became available in the 1990s like the rampant consumers they would become.

By the 21st century, when I returned from child-rearing, teaching had been made dramatically different by digital technology.

In the new theatre of the classroom, rather than looking directly at my pupils, I now had my attention divided between my keyboard, a monitor and a giant TV screen, known as an IWB (interactive whiteboard), on which the class's work would be displayed.

You might think this changed the nature of teaching. You'd be right.

Mind you, I'm a convert. As a digital immigrant, who has had to adapt from the old ways to the new, I was helped by the children, who are all digital natives, having known nothing but the new technology.

At the same time, I had no choice because boards were gone and working walls (with interactive displays) were uncommon. In the classroom of today, the screen is king. The children are magnetically drawn to it because the only equipment they need is the finger it takes to drag and drop.

The wise teacher sees all this, stands to one side of the screen and makes sure the fun doesn't take over entirely.

In the midst of all this, the pandemic introduced us to remote teaching in the most dramatic way possible. It's a miracle it happened at all, but only a fool would say it was any substitute for the real thing – which generally involves looking into an individual child's eyes to see whether some new concept has sunk in.

Remote teaching, in which the classroom is reduced to a Zoom call, offers the appearance of education rather than the real thing. Now the year is 2025, the Prime Minister is Keir Starmer and the classroom is as dependent on technology as your local supermarket or doctor's surgery.

An unseen presence in IT has to make sure the children are using their tablets for the proper purposes at all times.

Should there be an interruption to power or should the server go down, there is a wailing and a gnashing of teeth.

At that point, I go looking for the Peek Frean tin.

Alyson Elliott has taught at seven prep schools over the last 53 years. She now teaches at Garden House School, Chelsea

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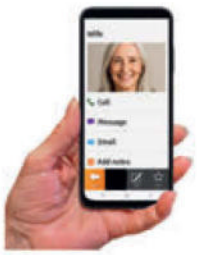

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I lived too long

At 87, *Gillian Tindall* had had enough of old age. She died of cancer on 1st October, days after writing this piece

***The Meditation* by Antonio Carneo (1676)**

I'm now 87 – and I've lived too long.

What is it really like for someone who has felt more or less fit, active and in control of their life ever since student days, to find themselves really old at last? Well, in short: it is horrible.

How I envy all those people just a bit younger than I am – or the ones who've had a bit more luck in not getting some nasty illness that wouldn't have mattered a couple of years before, but now seems to have had a lethally degrading effect.

And how I envy in particular those people, whose obits I frequently read, who have had the good fortune to die 'just a bit too young' or 'suddenly'.

Often an obit will recount that So-and-So was giving an important talk admirably on such-and-such a date 'and then died suddenly three days later'. Rare is the obit that actually mentions that So-and-So 'died of Alzheimer's'. Or even 'with Alzheimer's'.

No, actually, I haven't got Alzheimer's. Or not yet. But, since a sudden illness in the spring, I can no longer remember proper names in the way I could, and

> Those really close to me realise how incapable I am of running my life

should. Nor can I any longer take in properly the content of a long and interesting newspaper article, nor, alas, a book with a complex plot and many characters.

People who kindly come to see me – neighbours and such old friends as survive – do not usually realise that there is anything the matter with me, as I eagerly question them about their own lives. They tell me I am doing fine and must be imagining otherwise.

Only those really close to me realise how incapable I would now be of running my life on my own. Naturally I dread 'something' happening to one of them.

I recall, with pity and commiseration, how badly the late distinguished journalist Katharine Whitehorn (1928-2021) managed on her own. When she got flu and was taken to hospital, the extent to which she had in fact been failing to cope was all too apparent.

Kath went straight from hospital into a home, where she lived prisoner-like for the next three or four years.

Please God (in whom I unfortunately do not believe), not I.

My memory of distant events is excellent. I find I can often recall things from years ago that others have more or less forgotten.

The times when our now-60-year-old son was small are vivid to me, as are all those years when I helped to look after grandsons. So too are the days when I did massive research on the city of Bombay, now Mumbai – and equally massive, if rather different, research on an area of rural France. Back then I could write in French as easily as I could in English.

I can still write in French. But not with any ease. And for how long, I ask myself.

Three years ago, I wrote a whole further novel – which actually is being published, largely at my own expense, later this autumn.

But I know, even if no one else seems quite to realise this, that, though I have recently enjoyed the strange process of re-reading it, I never could write it now.

When, oh when, will the assisted-dying bill finally make it through our Parliament? Not soon enough for me, that's for sure. Canada has it, Switzerland has it and Oregon has a particularly good and responsible version of it.

Belgium has, I suspect, rather a bad version, as it seems to have developed into a row between Catholics and Protestants, French-speakers and Flemish-speakers. Assisted dying is coming fast, even in some parts of Spain.

I am, at least, in touch with someone who may be able to help me to Switzerland.

Gillian Tindall was an author for over 60 years. Her novel Journal of a Man Unknown *is out on 15th November*

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What a swell party!

When great writers want a dramatic scene, they throw a party. By *Ella Carr*

Parties are useful literary devices. They contain their own internal plots – a beginning, a middle and an end – which make them ideal vehicles for short stories or set pieces in novels. They're often the defining scene of the narrative.

What is *Rebecca* without Mrs de Winter's humiliating entrance to the fancy-dress ball? Or *Pride and Prejudice* without Lizzie and Darcy's first meeting at Meryton?

Parties provide scaffolding to stories just as in life. The writer Jhumpa Lahiri describes them as 'parentheses', akin to holidays or other journeys that punctuate the humdrum of ordinary existence.

Looking back at parties past, most people can identify one or two seminal moments on which their life has hinged and found stuffing, whether it's meeting a future spouse or simply the seeding of social anxiety.

Either way, and contrary to appearances, parties are serious stuff. That is why they make such great literary fodder.

But a good time does not necessarily a good literary party make. To borrow from Lahiri borrowing from Tolstoy, 'each party is happy and unhappy in its own way'. If I thought I was in for a swell of voyeuristic merriment when I began trawling through literature's great parties, I was swiftly disabused.

Beneath their veneer of frivolity, parties are rarely just scenes for merrymaking. Guests and hosts alike are consumed by far more serious objectives – whom to impress, seduce or disdain – that cut to the heart of what it means to be an individual navigating society. If life is a stage, then parties are the ultimate performance.

The stakes are particularly high for young people. Parties are where we take our first steps into adulthood – an arena for 'firsts': first acts of rebellion, first kisses, first heartaches and humiliations.

Youthful debuts are a common feature in literature, where parties become repositories for a protagonist's hopes and fears. Sometimes these dreams are realised, as in *War and Peace*, where a tremulous Natasha Rostov attends her first ball 'prepared for the height of joy or misery', only to dazzle the guests with her guileless charm and dance with Prince Andrei, who will become her first love.

Debuts often mark seminal moments of disillusionment, when the scales fall from a young person's eyes. Parties are inductions to life, its pleasures and also, more poignantly, its cruelties – the short stories of Katherine Mansfield, Kate Chopin and Edna O'Brien are all testament to this.

GETTY

Wendy Vanderbilt, Truman Capote, Lauren Bacall and Jerome Robbins at the Black & White Ball, New York, 1966

Parties can become stages for power play: of navigating, accruing and sidling up to power, where the fact of being invited is often far more significant than any pleasure to be had.

In Don DeLillo's short story 'The Black-and-White Ball', J Edgar Hoover, the odious FBI chief, basks in his ascension, having wrangled an invite to Truman Capote's legendary ball of 1966 – 'the party that everybody'd been talking about for months, famous long before it happened, the uninvited lapsing into states of acute confusion, insomniac, unable to function – yes, Edgar was feeling pretty good tonight'.

Bond salesman Sherman McCoy, in Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*, is initially buoyed by his warm welcome from society hostess Inez Bavardage at her Fifth Avenue dinner party, only to find himself devastatingly siloed among 'bouquets' of New York's upper crust, 'alone in this noisy hive with no place to roost … an abject, incompetent social failure'.

At the same dinner party, the guest of honour – a Nobel Prize-winning poet, secretly dying of AIDS – makes a speech referring to 'The Masque of the Red Death' by Edgar Allan Poe.

In the story, as plague ravages his city, Prince Prospero invites 1,000 revellers to his castle for a ceaseless marathon of partying, only for Death himself to turn up uninvited.

Reflecting obliquely upon the shallowness of his fellow guests, and the iniquity of 1980s New York, the poet in Wolfe's novel continues:

'Now, the exquisite part of the story is that somehow the guests have known all along what awaits them in this room, and yet they are drawn irresistibly toward it, because the excitement is so intense and the pleasure is so unbridled and the gowns and the food and the drink and the flesh are so sumptuous – and that is all they have.

'Families, homes, children, the great chain of being, the eternal tide of chromosomes mean nothing to them any longer. They are bound together, and they whirl about one another, endlessly, particles in a doomed atom – and what else could the Red Death be but some sort of final stimulation…'

Death often makes an appearance at literary parties. Parties can be portals to experience – and vehicles for escape; a desperate suspension of time to ward off the inevitability of death. Getting trashed to forget is an impulse as old as humanity.

For modernist writers of the 'lost generation', traumatised by the First World War, parties weren't so much punctuations in their lives as they were a cursed carousel, a means of constantly spinning without ever meaningfully moving forward.

As the biblical adage goes, 'Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.'

Party Stories *(Everyman), edited by Ella Carr, is out on 9th October*

John O'Sullivan on the real Margaret Thatcher. Cartoons by *Nicholas Garland*

Maggie at 100

What was Margaret Thatcher *like*?

Margaret – who would have been 100 on October 13 – was a combination of towering world-historical figure like Bismarck and ordinary middle-class English housewife like Carrie Pooter.

On the other hand, as the great Italian dramatist of identity Luigi Pirandello would have said, Margaret (1925-2013) was a different person to everyone she met because different people, when we meet them, arouse different emotions in us and we respond differently.

My impression both from Charles Moore's superb biography and from my conversations with her during memoir-writing is that the young Margaret at Oxford was socially and perhaps intellectually nervous, but impressively self-confident when the topic turned to her passion – politics – and in time to anything else she buckled down to master.

Some of her female Oxford dons didn't think that she was quite first-rate; but those Tory males who smoothed her way into Parliament in the supposedly sexist 1950s disagreed. They were dazzled by her as a kind of Tory blonde bombshell who could speak brilliantly and win Labour seats (almost). You can see how that might influence a girl.

Margaret Thatcher at the height of her power was a whirlwind inhabiting a dress. She bustled everywhere. She drove fierce arguments through committee debates. *She won wars*. When did that last happen?

But she also gave her feminine side full rein. She was a great plumper of cushions, opener and closer of windows, and rearranger of furniture to make quite sure her guests were comfortable.

One would say she was hyperactive except that she had exceptional powers of concentration. On one occasion, the MoD turned out in force, complete with senior military officers in full fig, to defend an especially costly weapons system.

Glancing through her papers, she pointed out a flaw in the MoD case that had escaped the scrutiny of all her advisers (including me). It was a critical flaw, too – and a knockout blow.

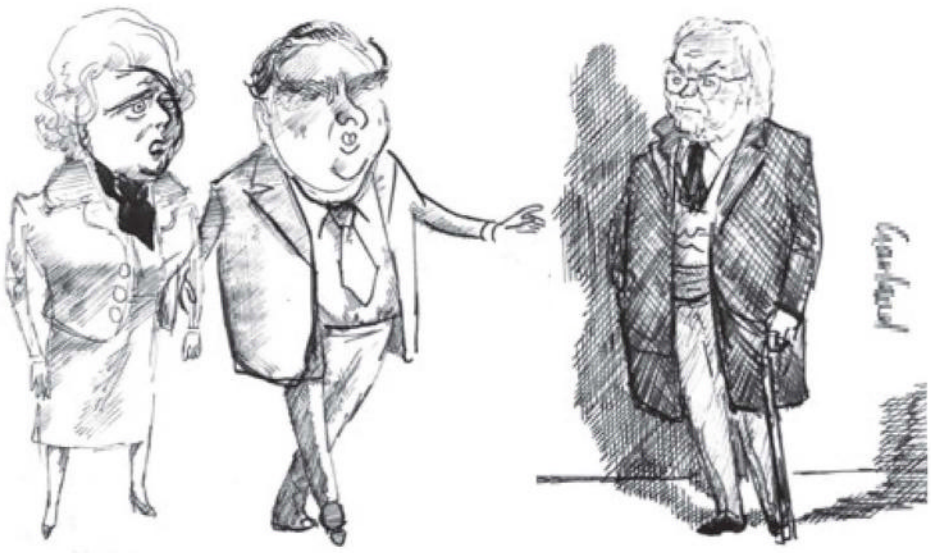
All the Defence Secretary could say was, 'Well, we shall have to go back and reconsider, Prime Minister.' In Whitehall terms, that acknowledged a defeat comparable to the First Afghan War. And she won an astonishingly large number of such battles.

My first meeting with Margaret Thatcher took place in 1973 at a luncheon club of parliamentary sketch-writers in the House of Commons. She was then Education Secretary in Edward Heath's government and I was a sketch-writer for the *Daily Telegraph*. As a Tory, I was almost the only person round the table with the slightest sympathy for 'the milk-snatcher'.

But I made the mistake of asking her a question about educational vouchers – a right-wing policy for parental choice that the nervously moderate Heath government (and so its less nervous Education Secretary) firmly opposed.

She was later, as Prime Minister, converted to vouchers, but in 1973 she dismissed them with a wave of the hand. So I defended vouchers strongly against her assault. Half the lunch was taken up with our debate, and I think I won. When our guest left, the other sketch-writers collapsed in fits of schadenfreude – 'You're the only one here who can stand her and she tore into you.'

Mrs Thatcher leaves office, 1990



With Denis Healey, Deputy Labour Leader, and Michael Foot, Labour Leader, 1980

What none of us realised was that Margaret Thatcher liked people to argue with her. She loved debate – the rougher the better. Anyone who stood up to her rose in her estimation. Quite uncharacteristically, I had stood up to her. Not only that, but I had done so from the right. Even before the phrase had been invented, therefore, I was 'one of us'. That led in time to my working for her in office as inter alia a speech-writer.

Downing Street is a very friendly place, but it is an office. Mrs Thatcher was a kind and considerate boss – worrying about her colleagues' health, telling people to take the holidays she avoided taking herself etc – but a firm one. From those working for her she expected high standards, hard work and value for the taxpayer.

But her distribution of kicks and kisses was a reverse of usual hierarchical practice in Whitehall: she kicked up and she kissed down. When a Wren waitress at Chequers accidentally poured soup into the lap of a minister, she famously leapt up – and comforted the Wren.

Maybe she sometimes made too little allowance for the nervousness that even senior officials felt on being cross-examined by her. When the limp remains of one new adviser were being carried out after a tough cross-examination by *her* on *his* speciality, she lamented *sotto voce*, 'Why do people take everything I say so seriously?'

When it all came to an end and she was expelled from the world of 'telegrams and anger', Thatcher had to learn to enjoy herself. But she did manage to do that. One Sunday in New York, she invited me to lunch at the Carlyle Hotel, where we were introduced to its celebrated cabaret singer Bobby Short, who twice nightly sang Kern, Gershwin, Porter and all the great American standards in a deep, rich, husky voice. Short invited her to a show. She accepted. A few days later, she went along.

Short gave a tremendous performance in his unique, hoarse, throaty style – a style, he said, that he'd developed in vaudeville to be heard at the last row of the stalls. Lady T loved every minute.

Afterwards, when Short stopped by her table, she thanked him profusely: 'It was really wonderful. I loved all the songs. And I thought your performing

It was the reverse of the usual hierarchical practice: she kicked up and she kissed down

tonight was a wonderful example of the showbiz tradition that, whatever the difficulties, the show must go on. For it's obvious tonight that you have rather a sore throat.'

We all froze. Short did not even blink. He nodded, smiled, and said, 'As a matter of fact, Lady Thatcher, I do have a bad cold. I hoped I had managed to disguise the fact but plainly not well enough to deceive you.'

That was gentlemanly and kind of Short, but I think he saw in her something he liked: despite her remarkable achievements, she remained the eager scholarship girl who never stopped learning – or enjoying life when the world would let her.

John O'Sullivan was Margaret Thatcher's special adviser (1986-8) and speech-writer and helped her write her memoirs

With biographer Charles Moore, 2019

Nicholas Garland on how he drew Margaret Thatcher

I found her very, very difficult to draw. Women change more than men – hair, outfits, make-up. They are elusive.

She turned out to be rather attractive, with considerable presence. I tried to draw in her face the power and the activism, which gave her a slightly bad-tempered look – and the underlying possibility of panic in her flashing eyes.

During the Falklands War, I drew her strong, frowning and vigorous. When she became a fixture on the national scene, I made her Britannia or Queen Victoria. From 1988, she became omnipotent; a bit mad.

I noticed her slightly sloping eyes – most people's eyes slope upwards from the nose; hers slipped downwards – her sharp little nose, the rosebud mouth and quite strong cheekbones.

You just began to see the way other people drew her. I always felt I was indebted to other cartoonists surely more gifted than I was, who could see the likeness which I could then develop.

Nicholas Garland was the Telegraph *cartoonist, 1966-2011. This is adapted from Charles Moore's single-volume centenary edition,* The Authorised Biography of Margaret Thatcher

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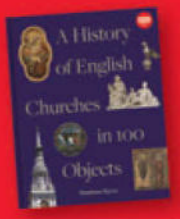

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Blue belles

Bluestockings – once mocked – are back, hosting salons and writing. By *Olivia Hurton*

The term 'bluestocking', referring to a scholarly woman, has a colourful, intriguing history.

The meaning has evolved over time, reflecting the capricious social attitudes towards women with a passion for learning. Occasionally, it is still used as an insult, deriding women deemed to hold an unhealthy appetite for knowledge.

But the term has been reclaimed for others, including second-wave feminists and, more recently, a group of literary ladies at my college, Christ Church, University of Oxford.

We are reviving bluestocking practices, including hosting intellectual salons and publishing new writing. The history of the word bluestocking now makes it a joyously facetious – even punk – epithet.

The original bluestockings of the mid-18th century were an eclectic group of accomplished women and men. Among them were writers, actors, artists, historians and social reformers.

They gathered at evening salons where they shared knowledge, practised rational enlightenment and promoted moral virtue. Since women were excluded from formal education, as well as the drawing-room discussions men had about politics and books after supper, bluestocking gatherings facilitated women's intellectual participation and sharpened their wits through interactions with distinguished attendees.

The enviable bluestocking guest list included myriad great men: Samuel Johnson, the lexicographer and wit; David Garrick, the actor-manager of Theatre Royal, Drury Lane; and portrait-painter Joshua Reynolds.

In fact, the term was originally applied to a man. Botanist Benjamin Stillingfleet (1702-71) turned up to one of the group's intellectual soirées in his work outfit of blue worsted stockings. It was a sartorial faux pas – more formal white silk ones were expected on these occasions. So 'bluestocking' became a teasing nickname, with connotations of contrariness.

Equally impressive in intellect and achievement, if less well-known today, were the group's female members.

These women became exclusively synonymous with the bluestocking label from the 1770s onwards. At the centre of the meetings was the first female drama critic, Elizabeth Montagu (1718-1800), hailed by Johnson as the Queen of the Blues.

A wealthy hostess, she held court at 22 Portman Square, London, known as 'the palace of chaste elegance'. She described herself as 'A Critick, a Coal Owner, a Land Steward, a Sociable Creature'. Her 1769 *Essay on Shakespeare* was a bold defence against Voltaire's attack on the great English playwright's alleged 'want of politeness'.

Thomas Rowlandson's *Breaking Up of the Blue Stocking Club* (1815)

Also in the group was autodidactic classicist Elizabeth Carter (1717-1806), a formidable translator of Epictetus, the Greek Stoic philosopher.

Virginia Woolf wrote admiringly about Carter's heroic – and rather eccentric – working habits, describing her as 'the valiant old woman who tied a bell to her bedstead in order that she might wake early and learn Greek'.

There was also historian Catharine Macaulay (1731-91), author of an eight-volume *History of England*. She chronicled British history with striking scholarly rigour and verve, and managed to wangle her way into the British Library's reading room, the first woman to do so.

The author, social reformer, poet and playwright Hannah More (1745-1833) was a member of the group's second generation. She was nicknamed Saint Hannah by Horace Walpole because of her staunch evangelical principles and conservative primness, though her behaviour betrayed more rebellious impulses.

More stood alongside Wilberforce in the campaign against slavery, founded the Sunday school movement, which extended the provision of education to both genders and all classes, and was the most financially successful writer of the early-19th century.

Artist Richard Samuel captured these female intellectual pin-ups in his celebratory group portrait of 1778, *The Nine Living Muses of Great Britain*. Drawn from personal fantasy, it depicted the bluestockings as a pantheon of modern goddesses in Apollo's temple. The work was swiftly exhibited at the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition in 1779.

By 1815, bluestockings were more likely to be found in satirical prints. In Thomas Rowlandson's *Breaking Up of the Blue Stocking Club*, they were pictured as grotesque barbarians in a catfight, hair-pulling and weaponising furniture.

Romantic-era male writers spewed spite against them. For Keats, bluestockings were a vexing 'set of devils' and he dreamed of being their 'Torturer'. Byron decreed that the poet Felicia Hemans should 'knit blue stockings instead of wearing them'.

The backlash came in the wake of the French Revolution, which gave rise to anxieties about disruptive social upheaval and reinforced traditional gender roles. Bluestockings were regarded as a threat: their scholarly interests imperilled domestic duties and they were fast displacing men in the literary marketplace.

Following the 20th-century feminist movements, the tide turned again. Since women's educational rights were hard-won – women were admitted to Christ Church, my Oxford college, as late as 1980 – being a bluestocking became a badge of intellectual emancipation.

Mary Beard even cheekily donned blue tights for her first academic job interview. Fashionable? Maybe. Iconic? Undoubtedly. *Vive la bas bleu*!

Olivia Hurton is Editor-in-Chief of Bluestocking Oxford, an online journal about women's intellectual and artistic achievements. At Christ Church, Oxford, she is working on her doctorate, Theatres of Education: Women Playwrights and the Romantic Stage

My Mary Whitehouse experience

The moral crusader was much mocked but she was brave, tough – and prescient. By *Mary Kenny*

Nearly a quarter of a century after Mary Whitehouse's death, it's striking what a national figure she remains.

There's always another documentary, study or drama about the late moral crusader and alleged prude. Most recently, Maxine Peake has dazzled in Sarah Frankcom's play *The Last Stand of Mrs Mary Whitehouse*.

I interviewed La Whitehouse (1910-2001) a few times, and she was far from being a prude. Indeed, she could flick through magazines showing quite alarming porn, with down-to-earth pragmatism.

TOBY MORISON

The first time I met her, I wrote a confidently youthful piece challenging her censorious view of sexual freedom and 'smutty' TV comedy.

'You've missed the point,' my editor Charles Wintour reprimanded. 'Here's a provincial housewife who has beaten the system! She has the BBC on the defensive!'

Oh yes – there was a class element to the Whitehouse wars. She was a lower-middle-class provincial against the metropolitan clever clogs.

Subsequently, in the 1980s, I met her at the Cambridge Union, debating curbing porn versus publishing freedom. She spoke with brio, cheered on by boiler-suited lesbian feminists berating men for exploiting women's bodies.

In her latter years, I again interviewed her, at her home in Colchester. A conflict had arisen with male gay activists, after her vehement denunciation of a sodomy scene at the National Theatre, and James Kirkup's poem describing a Roman centurion lusting after the dead Christ.

A young gay man had appeared in the bushes of her suburban garden, apparently stalking her.

She seemed sorry for him. 'His T-shirt is so thin,' she said.

Mary was a robust crusader and an ardent Christian, who dispatched any worries 'upstairs', to the Almighty.

Some of her campaigns were silly and overstated (our revered founder, Richard Ingrams, had a poor opinion of her). She failed to halt the tide of change, but she was prescient about the way things were going. She would be unsurprised by the stuff kids see on their phones today.

And if the BBC had paid more heed to her warnings about paedophilia, they might have been more alert to the crimes of Jimmy Savile.

Demographers are constantly saying that we're facing a shortage of babies, as families are getting smaller. Fewer than two sprogs per couple is now the norm.

A side effect is a decline of the cousin relationship. An influential article by Faith Hill in the *Atlantic* this summer – 'The Great Cousin Decline' – reported on population studies charting the disappearing cousin. In the 1970s, an average of seven cousins was usual. Now it's five, and falling.

Sha Jiang, a demographer at Berkeley, explains that we now have more 'vertical' family relationships – people relate to their parents, spouses, offspring and grandchildren – but fewer 'lateral' kinship contacts, across the network of aunts, uncles and cousins.

Yet the cousin relationship is valuable because it is 'lighter'. We share family links and often childhood memories, but there isn't the same duty of responsibility. Cousins understand the 'nuances' of the family history, but don't share the rivalries of siblings, and the more intense psychological complexities of the core family.

I love my cousins. As the demography boffins observe, they become more valued with age. A family funeral often rallies the clan with a supportive platoon of cousins. I like to explain the exact degree of cousin kinship: a first cousin once removed is *not* the same as a second cousin.

One group known to cherish the interconnected constellation of cousins is the aristocracy. I'm told that during the penal times, when Catholic gentry could not hold landed estates, some aristocratic recusants handed over their holdings to Anglican cousins, on the understanding these would be restored at emancipation.

I wonder whether that cousinly trust was honoured? Did the Protestant cousins return the land with the words 'Blood is thicker than water, my kinsman' or did some shrug, 'Sorry, old chap, possession is nine tenths of the law'?

We are familiar with the *Bildungsroman* – the autobiographical first novel, based on youth's awakening.

Now comes what might be called the alt-roman – the first novel based on the reflections of old age. Woody Allen has just written such an oeuvre, *What's with Baum?*, published just before his 90th birthday on 30th November.

I've stored up a few possible titles for a first novel based on oldie awakening. *Decline and Fall*: a darkly comic tale about an oldie who has a flashback to youth every time she trips and falls. *A Slow Maturing*: an oldie who remains wildly carefree until aged 60, and then realises the pains of growing old gracefully.

Or *When We Dead Remember*: an oldie who dreams she is dead, sees her life flicker by like a movie, and then awakes to the glories of being alive.

Now all I have to do is write one of these alt-romans!

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All photos from Boom Radio listeners

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My war with Richard Burton

Derren Nesbitt, 90, played the ultimate Nazi baddie. By *Christopher Sandford*

As the old saying goes, you should never work with children or animals. But what about the ultimate thespian taboo of playing a jackbooted Nazi?

Remember the late Anthony Valentine's sadistically ruthless turn as Major Horst Mohn in *Colditz* (1972-4)?

Although Valentine bounced back as the more congenial title villain in ITV's *Raffles*, he ruefully acknowledged that the Mohn character had clung to him.

Even towards the end of his life, he admitted, he was greeted with incongruous cries of '*Heil Hitler!*' when going out for a quiet drink around his home in Guildford.

'People must see something a bit dodgy in me,' the mild-mannered, cricket-playing Valentine remarked. 'It's odd, because quite truthfully I feel just as warm and cuddly as the next guy.'

Then there's that versatile character actor Derren Nesbitt, still very much with us today – he's just turned 90.

Nesbitt memorably played the peroxide-haired Gestapo fanatic Major von Hapen in *Where Eagles Dare* (1968), and all but stole the film from Richard Burton and Clint Eastwood.

It was an ironic piece of casting, because Nesbitt had actually experienced the horrors of the Blitz while growing up in north London, and also happened to be Jewish. He was born in London, as Derren Horwitz, and studied at RADA.

'A lot of the film was shot on location in Bavaria,' Nesbitt told me at his home in West Sussex.

'What I chiefly remember is that Richard Burton [who would have been 100 on November 10] was then knocking back four bottles of vodka a day, and there were times when he couldn't stand upright, let alone act.

'In the big scene at the end of the movie, he couldn't remember a line. So we all went back to our hotel for another night.

'MGM were worried that they'd never earn their money back, but I was quite happy because I was on a daily rate and making a fortune.

'I felt like saying, "Richard, why not have another drink?"'

In one scene, on the MGM lot in Elstree, the Clint Eastwood character was called on to shoot von Hapen in the head. The incendiary charges strapped under Nesbitt's costume failed to go off, until, at the fifth attempt, they did so with bazooka-like force, leaving him temporarily blinded by the explosion of fake blood.

'The next thing I knew,' says Nesbitt, 'I was being wheeled into the small Denham Hospital A&E.

'Things were a bit hazy, but I seem to recall that a deathly silence fell over the place, as this black-uniformed SS officer was brought in with a perfect bullet hole in his forehead, eyes covered with a bandage, his shirt a mass of blood, and various film people announcing, perhaps unnecessarily, "He's had an accident."

'After a bit, I heard the voice of a nurse kindly offering me an aspirin. "I was thinking more of morphine," I told her. I later got a huge Fortnum & Mason gift basket from Clint Eastwood, with a large bottle of Optrex stuck in the middle.'

Happily, Nesbitt both recovered his eyesight and resumed his career.

'The only time I can remember being confused for an actual German,' he told me, 'was when a couple of other actors

Left: **Major Horst Mohn (Anthony Valentine) in *Colditz* (1972)**

***Left:* Von Hapen (Derren Nesbitt) and Major John Smith (Richard Burton) in *Where Eagles Dare* (1968)**

and I found ourselves standing in our best Hussar livery next to our biplanes in a misty field somewhere in County Wicklow, waiting for the director's call of "Action!" in a scene we were doing in the wartime flying film *The Blue Max*.

'All of a sudden, this Irish priest in full-collared shirt with a flowing black cassock came walking towards us. As he went by, he looked at us steadily.

'"You should have won," he muttered out of the corner of his mouth. Then he disappeared again into the fog.

'It was one of the stranger episodes in a career not untouched by incident.'

More recently, Nesbitt won rave reviews for his role as an ageing drag queen in the film *Tucked* (2018), which suggests he's successfully avoided the lure of the Nazi pigeonhole.

'I'm pleased to say I don't get hissed at in the streets of Bognor Regis,' he assured me.

Over the years, actors as distinguished as Ian McKellen, Anthony Hopkins and Alec Guinness have variously risen to the challenge of playing the Führer himself.

All three theatrical knights survived the experience, although there were some who thought that Guinness, in particular, had overdone his immersion into the role of the paranoid German dictator trapped underground during the climactic weeks of the war.

Julian Glover, a fellow cast member in *Hitler: The Last Ten Days* (1973), said that 'Alec was untypically nasty' during filming, and at times 'quite indistinguishable from the actual character'.

Guinness himself thought the result 'by far the most captivating piece of work I ever did' – a judgement with which few of the film's reviewers concurred.

It was an 'undeniably skilful impersonation,' one critic wrote, 'but there [was] no way to avoid being both appalled and a little bored by the [Hitler] figure, just as his senior staff officers were in real life'.

And who can forget Peter Sellers as the titular character in 1963's *Dr Strangelove*, the maddest of wheelchair-bound mad scientists, who finally loses it and snaps out a Nazi salute at the film's climax?

Not Sellers himself, who liked to re-enact the role for the benefit of friends and neighbours around his home in the normally sedate Surrey countryside, or to play variants of it elsewhere.

The actor Peter Bull told me, 'Peter once enlivened a wedding reception we went to at the Dorchester Hotel in London by appearing as one of Strangelove's military compatriots in full SS regalia,

Herr Flick (Richard Gibson) and Helga, (Kim Hartman) in *'Allo 'Allo!* (1982)

Alec Guinness as Adolf Hitler in *Hitler: The Last Ten Days* (1973)

with an Iron Cross dangling round his neck, and black jackboots.

'It rather sucked the festive spirit out of the place, I can tell you.'

Then there was Richard Gibson in his iconic role as the leather-coated Gestapo officer Herr Otto Flick, in the long-running BBC sitcom *'Allo 'Allo!*

'I suppose there's always what you could call the Andrew Sachs syndrome,' Gibson recently told me. 'You can get identified with playing one particular character, as he did with Manuel in *Fawlty Towers*, and it's hard to shake off in later life.

'It didn't particularly affect me, but I can see how promoting a show about Nazis would be a tough sell in certain markets. *'Allo 'Allo!* never quite followed the Benny Hill route by making it big in the States, for instance.

'Somehow I can't imagine a major US network bringing out a line of fun-filled accessories such as Gestapo figures embossed on kids' nightclothes, or black-clad Herr Flick collectable resin dolls. Personally I loved the whole series, but I'm not sure Middle America was quite ready for it.'

The German-born classical actor and conservatory-trained musician Werner Klemperer played the bumbling POW camp commandant Colonel Wilhelm Clink in the wildly popular early 1970s sitcom *Hogan's Heroes*.

In his later years, the supremely refined Klemperer often appeared as a featured vocalist or narrator in orchestral productions around the world.

'At least once every performance of a Strauss or a Prokofiev, a cry of "*Sieg Heil!*" would soar up from the stalls,' he said.

'Do I mind being for ever associated with a lowbrow farce about Nazis and POW camps?' Klemperer once rhetorically asked me, as we sat over lunch at a Jewish delicatessen in New York. 'Not at all. In fact, quite the contrary,' he insisted. 'With the possible exception of the time someone daubed a swastika on my front door, I loved everything about my time on *Hogan's Heroes*.

'Plus, I always cashed the cheques.'

Christopher Sandford is author of Keith Richards: Satisfaction

Thirty years ago, *Peter York* lost £35,000 backing the *Modern Review* – and loved it

Lowbrow highbrows

Julie Burchill added a charming message to her invitation to me to 'The Launch of the *Modern Review* on Friday 13th September 1991, at the Soho Rooms, the Groucho Club, 45 Dean Street, W1'.

Written in Julie's neat hand at the bottom, it read, 'We have a special treat for YOU!'

I still have no idea what it was. Nor does she. But she says she's sure that it was something 'HIGHLY WHOLESOME'.

I do remember a lot else about the conception and short life of the 1990s' most influential little culture magazine, which closed 30 years ago, in 1995.

Dreamt up by Burchill and her passionately platonic friend Toby Young (now Lord Young of Acton, a Badenoch peerage, who's become a serious right-wing propagandist), it was inspired by a visit to a funfair and supported by her then husband Cosmo Landesman.

The *Modern Review*'s big idea was 'low culture for highbrows'. Clever, young, well-educated and overwhelmingly London writers such as Nicholas Blincoe, Nick Hornby, Will Self and David Runciman – all new then – wrote about low-culture subjects from Gazza (footballer Paul Gascoigne) to Arnold Schwarzenegger to Take That, with all the seriousness an earlier line-up of clever critics would have devoted to the canon of classical music and opera, literary fiction and 'serious' theatre and film.

Not sarky or consciously slumming, but written from direct experience and with real enthusiasm.

The *Modern Review* wasn't the first to take this posh/pop stance but it was the first magazine to deliver it as a *mission* between smart covers.

Julie Burchill was an inspiring writer who'd become famous in a small world, soon after she'd joined the music magazine *NME* (*New Musical Express*) in 1976, during its biggest-selling period as the leading broadsheet of punk.

She was just 17 then. She looked the part, constantly photographed and quite ridiculously seductive with her red lips and dark hair. And she wrote the part too, with a kind of directness which blew her new colleagues – mostly middle-class, mostly graduate 'boys' in their twenties – off the page.

By the mid-eighties, Burchill was properly famous, recruited to national newspapers such as the *Sunday Times*, seriously well-paid and described as 'the Queen of the Groucho Club' (est 1985).

She and her second husband, Cosmo Landesman, the handsome son of American literary bohemians, who lived in a Georgian terrace in the new intelligentsia quarter of Islington, were a power couple.

Julie came from working-class Bristol, destined for the checkout at Tesco, but with a lifeline via her father's trade-union politics and her own obsessional reading.

It meant that when the *NME* advertised, rather absurdly, for 'hip young gunslingers' as writers, she found her escape. It took her into a London middle-class world and she coped brilliantly.

She had a squeaky little West Country voice, perfect to deliver her take-downs of sacred monsters from Iggy Pop in the *NME* to the self-important American culture critic Camille Paglia in the *Modern Review*: 'Dear Professor Paglia, F**k off, you crazy old dyke. Always, Julie Burchill'.

In about 1990, Julie wrote to me – we'd met back in the *NME* seventies – to say that she and Cosmo, by now established in Bloomsbury with a salon, had a new best friend, Toby Young.

It turned out he was Cosmo's old friend, whose parents lived next-door-but-one to his, in Duncan Terrace, N1.

He wasn't to everyone's taste, she said, but she wanted me to like him because they did. It all implied that

Above: **Issue 1 of the *Modern Review*, 1991**
Right: **Peter York**

Founders of the *Modern Review*: Cosmo Landesman, Toby Young and Julie Burchill, 1991. *Right:* Charlotte Raven, 1997

SHUTTERSTOCK; GETTY

something was coming. Then they told me about the *Modern Review* idea and how they'd written to a clutch of those despised culture figures, asking for sponsorship money – and hadn't got any.

Clearly my job – apart from loving them all and talking them up – was to put some money on the table and help get things started. By the end of the run in 1995, I reckoned I was about £35,000 down, though I couldn't prove it now.

Toby, the Oxford graduate, was the editor – on £3,000 a year – putting the magazine together on the floor of his small Shepherd's Bush flat. Julie was the figurehead 'proprietor' and Cosmo was there to write keynote pieces – such as the attack on the fashionably clichéd tedium of drag and RuPaul.

Although the *Modern Review* was run on a shoestring, people didn't seem to know and were very impressed.

The *Sunday Times* called it 'the intellectually hip magazine'. The Washington-based *New Republic* said it was 'the most talked-about English journal of the moment'.

The fashionable New York Brat Pack novelist Jay McInerney said, 'Nothing has happened in America for a long time that is comparable to the *Modern Review*. I used to be awake at night waiting for these things.'

But Martin Amis, a *Modern Review* target, said, 'As far as I am concerned they are just a bunch of Turks.'

So far, so very good. It meant those clever young writers were prepared to write for practically nothing, and the readership went from an initial 5,000 to 30,000 at its peak (that issue, June-July 1993, had Julie's spectacular fax battle with Camille Paglia).

'The 21 issues would come to be seen as the gold standard'

But clever and hugely better-funded editors in bigger places had identified the *Modern Review* format and those rising star writers in the first couple of years. They stole them both.

One in particular, Susan Douglas, was then Deputy Editor at the *Sunday Times* and a friend of Julie's. In 1992, Douglas founded the paper's supplement, Culture, modelled on the *Modern Review*.

By 1994, the *Modern Review* was running out of money, advertising, readers and writers. But it actually ended with a bang: a sex scandal played out in the tabloids for months afterwards.

In 1994, the *Modern Review* had recruited an eager 25-year-old, a beautiful rich girl called Charlotte Raven, chock-full of PC feminist ideas.

According to Julie, Toby Young had told her cynically he would sleep with Raven before giving her a junior job.

Raven took all this in her stride but Burchill, to her surprise, found it disturbing. She later defied 'men and women, dogs and children' not to be attracted to Raven. They soon became best friends, then lovers.

Julie left Cosmo live to live in Charlotte Raven's Earl's Court flat, saying, 'We are not lesbians; we are in love.'

Over this period, she'd taken on Charlotte's feminist world-view, and became more critical of Toby, and his boy band. Toby described the Burchill-Raven pairing as 'firebrand feminist fundamentalists'.

The Burchill/Raven liaison broke up after Julie fled Earl's Court. Charlotte Raven died from Huntington's disease earlier this year.

Julie, now married to Charlotte's brother Daniel, has a back condition which confines her to a wheelchair. She wrote her own typically sparky obituary in the *Spectator*.

She's still alive as I write. She tells me, 'Life is very odd in a wheelchair, but I'm soldiering on!'

The end of the magazine came in the July 1995 issue, with a Disney-style cover saying, 'That's All, Folks'.

In his editorial 'The End of the Affair', Toby Young explained that 'Julie Burchill and I have fallen out and were bringing our empire down with us ... and this will be the last issue of the *Modern Review*.'

He'd decided to torch the place rather than have it 'fall into enemy hands', and so he'd prepared the final 21st issue in some secrecy.

He wrote – meaning it, I think – that those early conversations he'd had with Julie and Cosmo were the best times of his life and that the 21 issues of the *Modern Review* would, in time, 'come to be seen as the gold standard'.

Although I lost a small 1990s kind of fortune on it, I couldn't agree more.

Youth? The eyes have it

Want to turn back the years? Stop squinting

MARY KILLEN

Wrinkles around the eyes are a major gripe – even in one's early thirties.

And yet you can do so much, first to prevent them from taking root, and then to delay their embedding. All the measures below are completely cost-free.

Avoid sunbeds

Morale is raised following a sunbed session. We are transformed, like a wall given a lick of paint. But we should avoid the salons like the plague.

Sunbeds accelerate skin-ageing and the development of fine lines particularly around the eyes. California tan peepers – commonly used – absurdly only protect the eyeball.

Yet the charity Melanoma Focus found in 2024 that 28 per cent of Britons are still beating a path to the salon doors. Belfast, of all places, is the sunbed capital of the UK. Think of the damage to that thin northern skin which has not evolved to cope with sun rays.

Avoid squinting

Don't get into the habit of pulling a grimace when walking alone outside. Sit in your parked car in any high street and quietly observe the pedestrians coming along. You will see exactly what I mean.

We do pull hideous faces as a default. It is partly a self-conscious thing – you feel you should be wearing some sort of expression and so you pull a squinting face as though scanning the horizon.

But your face gets use to being pulled and, like Mr Bean's, eventually begins to default into that squinty look – even when you are inside. It helps to wear sunglasses in the street, even in winter.

Avoid moisturiser swamping

Less is more. Don't apply more moisturiser to the around-the-eye wrinkle area than you do to the rest of the face. It means that part of the skin can't breathe and it makes things worse.

Just use ordinary SPF50 moisturiser as you use on the rest of your face. Have a laugh when you consider that the most expensive eye cream in Harrods is La Prairie Platinum Rare Haute-Rejuvenation Eye Cream – 20ml (4 teaspoons) for £920.

Avoid pestle-and-mortar-style eye-rubbing

Don't ball your hands into fists and rub roughly if your eyes are itchy.

You will damage the surrounding skin to a W H Auden-like extent. The poet compared his facial condition to 'a wedding cake left out in the rain'.

When itching occurs, lie back, having applied circular cotton wool pads soaked in ice water. That will do the trick.

Wrinkle-free: Joan Collins, 92

Do wear glasses and contact lenses if you need them

Although some short-sighted vintage beauties use mini-torches to illuminate documents in public, it is impractical.

We must bite the bullet and train ourselves to wear contact lenses, or just put the ageing glasses on. If we don't, we encourage squinting wrinkles.

Do wear sunglasses when it's sunny

These are squinting-preventative. It's worth having your normal prescription adjusted to be photochromic, so you don't have to carry two pairs.

Eye masks

Personal recommendation – ask for this for a Christmas present: a Drowsy silk sleep mask. This is a padded silk cocoon for luxury sleep in total darkness.

Less bulky when you're travelling is the Eagle Creek Sandman Eyemask (£17.99), in ultra-soft fleece. The comfortable elastic strap is adjustable for a perfect fit.

Bedtime

Don't bury your face in a pile of bunched-up pillows. This will produce the condition known as quilting on your whole face. The eiderdown-like lines will subside when you get up, but eventually they will stay in place.

Why not copy Joan Collins's sleep technique – it has worked for her, at 92: lie on your back with just a small pillow under your neck.

And here are some things that aren't cost-free:

Frownies

Frownies were created in 1889 and take the form of long strips of perforated paper, which you wet. You build muscle memory by wearing them while asleep every night for 30 days. They can be used for 'crow's feet'.

As well as helping with frowning, they smooth static lines (those that the face shows in repose; not dynamic lines produced by, say, smiling). They cost £28.95 for around two months' supply.

Once the muscles have built their memory, you can use them less often. The company has been operated by women in the same family for over a century.

Eye make-up remover

Use one that does not leave an oily residue. Lancôme is ideal.

Dry eyes

TheraTears lubricant eye drops (£15) are perfectly safe eye drops for older dry eyes.

Laser treatment

Another squinting preventative is the top-of-the-range laser treatment at Moorfields for both eyes (£5,000).

Cataract and lens-replacement surgery is about £3,000 per eye.

Actors' tips for growing old gracefully

I recently had a letter from a woman – let's call her Joan.

She lives in an 'assisted living' block of flats. She has no friends (all dead) or family (all living abroad). No one in the building talks to her and the staff are young, foreign and don't speak English.

When her husband was alive, he was gregarious and friendly, and they'd push their Zimmers to the local coffee shop and chat to strangers. But he's dead now.

Her flat is expensive, and Joan pays the top whack plus charges for building maintenance and cleaning.

She cannot afford help in her flat and does her own cooking, cleaning and laundry. She worries a lot about money.

Joan has recently had a bad fall, banging her head against the wall. She couldn't get up. So she pressed the alarm she wears as a necklace. One of the staff responded and lifted her onto a chair, filled in a form for the manager downstairs and then left.

Scared and shaky, Joan couldn't get dressed. She had a black eye and a bruised face and had hurt her right wrist and left hand. The fall also smashed her one working hearing aid, without which she cannot hear.

When the manager finally arrived, Joan thought she'd come to see if she was OK. But, no, she'd come to take a picture of the damage to the plaster that Joan's forehead had caused, hitting the wall. The manager warned that a bill for the repair would follow.

Richard Attenborough, Denville Hall alumnus, in *Jurassic Park* (1993)

Compare that with the best residential home I've ever heard of. I once visited an ageing actress in Denville Hall, the care home for retired actors in Northwood, London. I found myself wishing I was in the theatre and could move right in.

All the staff were friendly. No forced professional smiles, but instead genuine cheerfulness. It was obvious they enjoyed the job.

The activities on offer are terrific: there's a theatre/cinema with daily screenings of films and occasional theatrical or musical performances, debates or live entertainment, and residents can shape their own lives, requesting trips to see plays, gardens or galleries. The grounds and gardens are extensive and beautiful.

Visitors are welcome and can join the residents for an excellent lunch, for £15. We had a chicken pie Paul Hollywood would have been proud of.

And, joy of joy, there's a bar. My actress friend said you needed to be careful at opening time if you didn't want to be crushed by the charge of wheelchairs heading for a drink.

Obviously, if would be good to have more homes like Denville Hall and fewer like Joan's. But the remit of the Casey Commission on Adult Social Care, due to report in full by 2028, is more focused on supporting old people to stay in their own homes – so as not to clog up NHS beds – than on improving care homes.

Surely, unless all geriatric care becomes part of the NHS, social care will always be the Cinderella, living off the Chancellor's crumbs, while the ever-ravenous NHS gobbles up all the money.

Prue Leith presents
The Great British Bake Off

Low blows at High Table

C S Lewis taught John Betjeman at Oxford – and loathed him

A N WILSON

It is 100 years since John Betjeman went up to Magdalen College, Oxford, supposedly to read English.

In 1925, he had the supreme misfortune to find that his tutor was a newly appointed young don, an Ulsterman called C S Lewis, who soon took a dislike to him.

Betjeman opted to study medieval Welsh – so Lewis went to the trouble of hiring a don from Aberystwyth to trundle down to Oxford once a week by train.

Needless to say, Betj either forgot to attend the tutorials, or turned up, his cheeks pale green after a night of debauch, having failed to read a single line of the *Mabinogion*. He got the only delta, the lowest grade, at Oxford in 1928.

But, though idle, Betjeman was well-informed – about architecture, and he had a poet's feel for history and place.

The don who saw the point of him, immediately, was Maurice Bowra, who had a salon at Wadham, and who savoured Betj's originality and realised that, behind all the affectations, there was an extraordinary 'take' on life.

When, yet again, Betj had failed to write an essay for his Magdalen tutor, Lewis – his nickname at the time was Heavy Lewis – asked for an explanation.

'Oh, sir! I have had such a difficult time! I simply *can't* make up my mind.'

'What about, Betjeman? What about?'

'I can't decide whether to become a High Church clergyman with a lacy surplice, or a Low Church clergyman with a long moustache.'

Lewis at the time was an avowed atheist, and also an unsuccessful poet. He loathed T S Eliot, once had a punch-up in a bar with Roy Campbell, and envied anyone who could be what he so much wanted to become – a poet.

'The trouble with you, Betjeman,' he once bullyingly sneered, 'is you have no *style*.'

Could any judgement of a human being have ever been wider of the mark? Lewis refused to let Betjeman do an honours degree, leaving him to read for a pass degree, which he failed to do.

The job of an Oxford tutor is to stand by his pupils, and this act of spite was something that Betj never quite forgave.

Betjeman was obviously the greater man – someone whose multi-layered vision of things was that of a poet. When Lewis became a Christian, you might expect the two men to have become reconciled, but they were chalk and cheese.

Lewis was not entirely devoid of humour, but (he had been a soldier in the Great War) his version of fun was getting blind drunk at Bump suppers and indulging in what he called Bawdy. The fragile comedy of Anglican life – the delicacy of doubt and lust, which runs through Betjeman's honest depictions of faith – would always be lost on Lewis.

I admire Lewis, but I blow hot and cold about him. His coarseness in much of his imaginative output is repellent.

Although for the years of his young manhood, Lewis risked scandal by sharing his domestic life with a much older woman, Mrs Moore – mother of a comrade killed in the First World War – his world was essentially male.

His cronies in the circle known as the Inklings – J R R Tolkien, Hugo Dyson, Nevill Coghill and others – met in colleges or pubs, drank and smoked a lot, and regarded women as semi-jokes.

'Cursed fate that gave thee to the Moor[e],' Dyson would joke, misapplying a line in *Othello*.

In his book *The Four Loves,* Lewis writes that friendship between the sexes is impossible, because 'men's talk' and 'women's talk' are immiscibles. 'What were the women doing meanwhile? How should I know? I am a man and never spied on the mysteries of the Bona Dea.'

Netflix is to release a film of *The Magician's Nephew*, the sixth in the Narnia series. It will be a reminder of how unsatisfactory the Narnia books are.

Yes, there is a compulsive readability in Lewis – he is the kind of writer who, with beery breath, grabs you by the lapels. You can see why his friendship with Tolkien faded. Tolkien could not stand the mishmash of E Nesbit, Malory and Spenser in the Narnia stories, and he was embarrassed by Lewis's religious books. 'The Ulsterior motive' came too strongly to the fore.

With true Ulster love of rigging an election, Lewis delighted in bussing in the country clergy to vote for 'his' candidate in the election for the Chair of Poetry, 1938 – an obscure clergyman, Adam Fox, who defeated two decent literary scholars, E K Chambers and David Cecil.

And yet, and yet… When I consider Lewis's pathetically short marriage to a foul-mouthed, chain-smoking American divorcee, Joy Davidman, and read *A Grief Observed*, his pain-choked account of bereavement, tears flow. When I read his wartime lectures, *The Abolition of Man,* I find true wisdom; and some of his literary scholarship – especially *The Discarded Image* – is magnificent.

But he remained Heavy Lewis, a bully and a misogynist. At the end of the stories, when the other children go to live in Narnia/Heaven for ever, Susan, who has passed puberty and started to wear make-up, is excluded. She is damned for being a woman. I hate this.

It's hard to forgive Heavy's bullying of the poet who brought us 'The Subaltern's Love Song', 'The Arrest of Oscar Wilde at the Cadogan Hotel' and 'St Saviour's Aberdeen Park'.

A N Wilson is author of Betjeman and C S Lewis: A Biography

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"I'd got used to poor hearing but what technology can do is incredible"

Deaf in one ear since birth, the dad-of-two had spent all his life turning to one side during conversations after he was told nothing could be done to improve his hearing. That was before he went to Amplifon, where his audiologist used Bluetooth technology to solve his problem.

With no hearing in his right ear, Ian 59, had learnt to live with the problem, but that's not to say he found it easy to cope with. He'd had hearing aids before but there was no device that would have restored the hearing he'd never had.

After some time, Ian decided to have a free trial of some Amplifon hearing aids. As his ears were narrow, the audiologist arranged for the hearing aids to be shaped so they were a perfect fit. "It's like I've been transported into another world where I can hear everything so much more clearly," he says. "I don't think people can quite understand what a difference it can make to your life when you can hear so much better and pick up things you couldn't before."

Ian can also link the hearing aids to his iPhone, so the sound comes straight into his ears when he's talking on the phone. "Some people haven't even noticed I'm wearing hearing aids which is good because it shows that they are quite small and don't stand out." Ian says he'd recommend Amplifon to anyone. "I'd just got used to dealing with poor hearing for 59 years but what technology can do today is incredible. I'd say definitely try Amplifon because you don't lose anything by seeing what they can do for you." ▪

Going private paid off for me

Music fan Steve struggled with screeching hearing aids before deciding to go to Amplifon.

Like many people who suffer from hearing loss, Steve faced a unique combination of issues that required an equally unique hearing system to solve them. Eight years ago he was given hearing aids that proved ineffective particularly in his weaker left ear.

He eventually got in touch with Amplifon and booked a free hearing test. The process includes a comprehensive health history, thorough examination of the ears and a series of tests that not only map the sounds and frequencies you can hear, but also mimic real-life scenarios to identify the impact hearing loss is having on everyday life.

Following his test, Steve was able to trial his hearing aids before he bought them.

As well as performing much more effectively, Steve found that the hearing aids were neater and less conspicuous than his previous hearing aids. "There was a huge difference straight away, it was superb," he says. "I can pick up the sounds a lot more now which I couldn't before."

Since choosing to go private, he has never looked back. he says. "I would say to people, 'don't be afraid to go', because it has changed my life." ▪

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Sonja, the Fantasy Goddess of the Cleethorpes charity shop

She gazed at my old paperbacks – it was love at first sight

JEM CLARKE

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

Friends have just sent me pictures of their holidays in Greenland, starring impressively close-to-camera whales.

What can I send them, in my never-ending days, looking after Mother? Endless shots of greasy spoons and Mother's smalls?

Mother beckons me over with a curled finger. A little chesty, like a village wise woman of old she croaks, 'Charity might begin at home, but charity shops don't. Get all that tat in your rooms cleared out.'

It's true. I have a real problem, letting go. Still, I made for the nearest charity shop.

The volunteer behind the counter was reluctant to take my well-read, brilliant bag of cultural treasures.

He said, 'Not sure we've got space for stuff in this condition, pal.'

I was no junkie flogging a twin-cassette ghetto-blaster. This was my hard-fought-for collection of late-20th-century fiction.

I was determined not to have to go home with a heavy rucksack. I placed my hands, palms down, on the counter surface, and calmly said, 'They're free and they're here. If you don't warm to them, just put them in the bin.'

'You could just put them in the bin,' he said.

The volunteer had a fancy beard and an advert for a rock band on his T-shirt. Surely he must be as lady-starved as me. So I added, in a more confidential tone, tapping the top book, 'That one has got Red Sonja in it. She calls herself "the she-devil with a sword".'

He cupped the base of the book pile and pulled them gently towards his belly.

Result! But then my spirits plunged. Had he played me? Would he dump Red Sonja in the high-street recycling bins?

Within minutes, I was back in the shop. Being a tiny man, I found it easy to gain access to the shop unnoticed – by cleverly waiting for a fat shopper to enter and walking in directly behind.

STEVE WAY

A sense of wonder in her eyes as she was drawn into a dreary world of trashy myth

From there, I was able to creep along the dreadful-smelling dress section, before transferring to my final resting point – directly behind a large *The Music of Richard Clayderman* display, offering me full view of the counter, comfortably safe behind five feet's worth of the most unsellable CDs.

For what seemed like hours – but later turned out to be 39 minutes – my books remained uninspected, sprawled on the glass counter. They were of no interest to El Beardo.

He went on serving people with everything from Beatrix Potter porcelain to a silk scarf I wanted to scream really wouldn't work for the shopper's face shape.

Then a hooded figure approached the volunteer, went round his side of the counter and began poring over the books with a level of excitement I recognised.

Surely it was a book-dealer he'd texted!

I was all ready to pounce, when the shaggy volunteer yelled, 'Oy, mate! What's your name?'

Looking round and finding no one else, I realised I'd been rumbled. 'Richard,' I lied.

As I approached the counter, the visitor pulled down her hood to reveal a smiley female with electric-red hair.

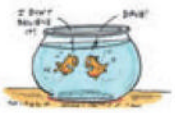
El Beardo said, 'This is my girlfriend, Sonia. How funny is that?'

El Beardo gently stroked his girlfriend's cheek as she started to read – properly read – my hallowed book.

There was a sense of wonder in her eyes as she was drawn into a dreary world of trashy myth.

Worth two photographs of someone stroking a whale.

Town Mouse



Take me down to Chinatown!

TOM HODGKINSON

When Dr Johnson started his Literary Club in 1764, the members met at the Turk's Head at 9 Gerrard Street, just next to today's Leicester Square.

It was a literary sort of area. Dryden had moved there in 1687 and there were loads of coffee houses where the wits of the day would gather.

Johnson and his highly talented mates – David Garrick, Joshua Reynolds, Oliver Goldsmith, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Edward Gibbon, Edmund Burke, Adam Smith and Boswell, of course – would gather in a private room on the first floor on Friday evenings for a few hours of Georgian wit and conversation.

I find myself visiting Gerrard Street a lot these days and when I do, I gaze up at the plaque on the wall of number 9.

Things have changed. The pub is no longer there. The Turk's Head is now the New Loon Moon Chinese supermarket, and Gerrard Street is the central artery of London's Chinatown. It's fantastically car-free, festooned with Chinese decorations and an archway and home to dozens of Chinese restaurants.

According to the website Chinatownology, there are 35 Chinatowns around the world. London's own Chinatown started life in Limehouse in the 1880s, when entrepreneurs set up restaurants (and opium dens) to serve Chinese sailors. In *The Man with the Twisted Lip* (1891), Sherlock Holmes disguises himself as an addict in a Chinese opium den near the London docks while on a case.

In 1920, the *Illustrated London News* ran a drawing of a bustling Chinese restaurant with the caption 'Where the fare includes fried noodle, sharks' fins, sea slugs, and savouries of bamboo shoots: a typical eating house in the Chinese quarter in the East End.'

In the 1970s, the first Chinese restaurant opened in Gerrard Street, and Chinatown slowly developed from there.

Now there are over 60 and they're excellent. Over the last year, I've had lunch in Chinatown with a Johnsonian group of illustrious actors and writers. I've had family lunches there and dinners with old mates. I've had pre-theatre suppers and post-theatre suppers. It never disappoints and the prices, this frugal mouse is happy to report, are reasonable. My favourite is Leong's Legend, for its dumplings, but I'm also a fan of the Golden Dragon and the Four Seasons.

The efficiency of the eateries of Chinatown is a thing to behold. On sitting, you're presented with a gigantic laminated menu, offering an endless array of choices, often accompanied by pictures. The waiting staff – always Chinese – take your order

There are no concessions here to what we might call American smarm. No 'How are we all today?' or 'Have a nice day' or broad, fake smiles. In fact, the service is often delivered without any sort of smile at all. And it's such a relief.

The staff are amazingly quick as well. They've clearly been properly trained. They're not your charming-but-clueless Bedales alumni on a gap year.

A meal in Chinatown has a medieval feast-like quality. Dozens of dainty dishes are brought to the table and then whisked away. Staff everywhere. You feel like a medieval king.

The restaurants of Chinatown also avoid the awkward digital machinery embraced by modern restaurants. If they have a website at all, it's very basic and just offers a phone number. So you phone and a table is booked with fantastic speed.

When you get there, there are none of those annoying QR codes to scan as they steal a small portion of my mousy soul. You're not put on a mailing list and bombarded with requests to review the place on Tripadvisor. Chinatown remains delightfully free of the clutches of the Californian tech bros.

For all the festoons and golden dragons, Chinatown is not pristine. It's not highly scrubbed and polished. You might see a plastic mop bucket in the foyer. The loos are not exactly odourless and feel as if they haven't had any money spent on them since 1986. There might be a towering pile of chairs next to your table.

This decided lack of perfectionism is something to do with the Chinese character. The writer Lin Yutang, a mate of Evelyn Waugh's, lived in New York in the 1930s. He wrote essays and books that compared the Chinese way of doing things – which he said was admirably 'slack' – with the American.

American editors, he said, worry themselves sick over removing every typo in their books and magazines. The Chinese editor doesn't worry so much, because he knows how much his readers enjoy spotting them.

In the same way, the Chinese restaurateur knows his customer cares less for presentation than for a convivial, delicious lunch, served lightning quick.

Country Mouse

Mary's trigger warning? Life is toxic

GILES WOOD

Some of the most exhilarating experiences of my recent country life have taken place to a background of dramatically purging music.

The shed on the edge of my field allows sufficient distance from neighbours to grant me the privilege of listening to deafening music without 'disturbing' any of them.

So emotionally rousing have I found the sophisticated symphonies of Havergal Brian (1876-1972) that I have taken some criticism of him rather personally.

Writing in the *Critic* magazine, Norman Lebrecht declares Brian a 'sticky case… Some composers are rightly obscure. There is a place for marginal composers – it's on the margins,' he sneers.

Yet Brian fans are campaigning for 2026, his sesquicentenary, to be the year when the Proms season 2026 should forget about 'grooving' and instead promote England's first self-taught, working-class symphonist, whose oeuvre was admired by Richard Strauss.

And for those readers who think that by the age of 80 one could have reasonably shut up shop, productivity-wise: consider the fact that Brian, a father of ten children, composed 21 symphonies after the age of 80. Many of these I have been listening to at full volume in my man cave.

I had a surge of adrenalin, followed by increased heart rate, and then outrage at reading Lebrecht's words. Why would anyone want to *contain* the reputation of an unjustly neglected composer? Havergal Brian Society members unite – under the banner 'Let it grow!'

But I also had a sense of déjà vu. Didn't I have this same sense of outrage when I read the choleric words of the literary critic Geoffrey Grigson in a pamphlet celebrating the centenary of another underrated personal hero, writer Richard Jefferies: 'Jefferies has always captured the second rate.'

How those words stung at the time of reading, even though I rest assured that posterity has favoured my man. It is Jefferies's bust that surveys the Gothic interior of Salisbury Cathedral and not one of his rival Wiltshireman Grigson.

My wife, Mary, maintains that these reactive perturbations are a form of self-harm and that I need a filtration system to avoid toxic content.

She claims that culture no longer equates with civility. I should expect to see 'abuse', even in forums where classical music is being discussed by serious critics, as it is a form of clickbait to drive readers onto the online sites.

I cannot deny that some of Brian's music is unnerving, turbulent and not without some awkward gear changes. It's one of the reasons I need to listen to it in a remote shed. The music is an acquired taste and it takes some time to acquire it.

If your idea of the purpose of classical music is to help you relax with a cup of Mellow Bird's coffee (what would Classic FM have done without those adverts – they are its very business model), then Brian's music is not for you. His is foreground music, not background. If, like me, you enjoy exploring 'unknown regions', plump for the enigmatic No 3, the No 8 and the macabre No 28.

Were you to start with Brian's Symphony No 6, it would give you a flavour of this composer's unique sound world. I suggest you would be entranced to find that his most notable characteristic, once you get into it, is, paradoxically, his restraint.

My enthusiasm for the symphonies of Havergal Brian have incidentally saved me hundreds of pounds in grief therapy.

Mary, wanting to help me get over Mater's inevitable 'passing' – dread word – had urged a talking cure. The only session went badly.

By the time I had listed the infidelities of both my parents and remembered the names of all the folk they had met on various winter sporting holidays at Kitzbühel or Klosters, the session was all but over and the therapist had been unable to get a word in edgeways.

My parting shot was that I wouldn't be needing any further sessions as I already had my coping strategy sorted – to get to know thoroughly all Havergal Brian's symphonies, as I firmly believed that they contain every cathartic necessity for the healing of body, mind and spirit.

The therapist's erstwhile 'Poor you' rictus grin turned to irritation when I said this. But I was right.

Who remembers the 5th of November?

Guy Fawkes is increasingly forgotten in the story of Bonfire Night

DAVID HORSPOOL

In the beginning, Guy Fawkes Night was official.

An 'Act for a publick thanksgiving to Almighty God every year on the fifth day of November' was passed in January 1606 – months after the failure of the 'many malignant and devilish papists, Jesuits and seminary priests' described in the Act. They had 'conspired horribly' to blow up James I, his queen and MPs on 5th November 1605, at the opening of Parliament.

Officially, the thanksgiving was to take the sober Protestant form of church attendance, prayers and, by extension, the preaching of sermons. But, pretty quickly, the lighting of bonfires, a longstanding celebratory ritual and more spectacular pyrotechnics were added on.

In 1607 in Canterbury, thanksgiving took the form of lighting 106lb of gunpowder. Guy Fawkes had been planning to set off a quantity as much as 50 times as big.

When you think about it, setting off a big explosion to celebrate avoiding an even bigger one is a bit odd.

Remembering the 5th remained a useful practice to successive regimes. Supporters of Charles II, after the return of the monarchy, and opponents of James's son Charles, who suspected him of covert 'popery', all embraced anti-Catholic rhetoric, and lit fires to prove it.

Samuel Pepys described that sight, still familiar in Restoration London, of 'boys in the street [who] fling their crackers'. Only the Great Fire could temporarily suspend the ritual.

What enshrined the 5th as an *un*official celebration was the prospect, and then the succession, of a Catholic king, Charles II's brother James II.

In the years before his succession, popes were burnt in effigy and ever more virulent anti-Catholic sermons were preached. Charles moved to suppress the bonfires. When James succeeded, so did he, though the sermons continued.

It was no accident that the man who was invited to replace James on the throne in 1688, the Protestant William III, arrived in England on 5th November. For a time, the 'double deliverance' of the Protestant monarchy would be celebrated, though today even fewer people connect William to the date than they do Guy Fawkes.

If Guy is increasingly absent from 5th November celebrations, it isn't the first time he has disappeared from popular memory.

Until the 19th century, when the Gunpowder Plot was discussed, or preached upon, other conspirators tended to be named, such as the actual ringleader, Thomas Catesby, or the man who probably betrayed it, Francis Tresham.

It is difficult to say why Guy Fawkes himself emerged as the representative conspirator when he did.

Still, the fact that he was the man discovered in the parliamentary storeroom, surrounded by barrels of gunpowder, with fuses about his person, does make his story stick in the mind.

It may be that, as Catholicism became more widely accepted through the 19th century, shifting the focus away from 'popery' and onto a single terrorist was less controversial.

In recent years, dreaded health-and-safety concerns have reduced the number of Bonfire Night celebrations.

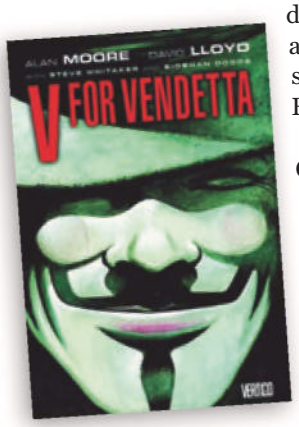
With each passing year, Guy Fawkes and the Gunpowder Plot, as the reason for them, have receded steadily into the background. A typical list of London's fireworks displays for this year, itemising bonfire nights from Blackheath to Alexandra Palace, doesn't mention Guy at all.

Guy does live on in one form, thanks to his reinvention in the modern equivalent of the 17th-century broadside ballad, a graphic novel.

In *V for Vendetta* (1982) by Alan Moore, the anarchist rebel who is trying to overthrow a fascist dictatorship wears a Guido Fawkes mask.

The success of the novel and a subsequent film have led to the mask's being adopted by all sorts of protesters, as well as the name's being taken by a right-wing blog.

There is one exception to the general disappearance of anti-Catholic sentiment on Guy Fawkes Night.



Guy Fawkes lives on: *V for Vendetta* (1982)

The Cliffe Bonfire Society of Lewes, Sussex, one of six in the town, still displays its 'No Popery' banner, and refuses to join the procession of the other societies, which have dispensed with them.

This seems to be tolerated as bloody-minded tradition rather than active bigotry, though some disagree.

Outside the Sussex epicentre of bonfiring, there are perennial worries that 5th November might be overtaken entirely by Hallowe'en celebrations, imported from America and increasingly popular (though it's hard to find anyone over 20 with a good word to say about it).

If that is happening, it might be seen as a return to earlier celebrations of All Saints Day, the Catholic red-letter day on 1st November, which was replaced by its Protestant alternative, 5th November.

Thomas Hardy wrote about the connection of 'festival fires' with pagan Britain and 'Druidical rites', which might appeal to some present-day inclinations.

In fact, from the beginning, 5th November has been more about current obsessions.

So, yes, there will be drones as well as fireworks at this year's events.

But you can bet they'll burn the Prime Minister, too.

A teacher's lot is mostly not a happy one

SOPHIA WAUGH

What are we actually being paid to do? That is the question we were tossing to and fro in the English office the other lunchtime.

We began with the vexed question of the Tube drivers. London grinding to a halt did not affect us at all in Somerset. I – and the majority of my colleagues – are all for the right to strike, and many of us have done just that in the recent past.

We couldn't help but wonder, though, whether the Tube drivers were justified in their demands. Everyone would like to earn more than they do, and everyone is prone to casting sideways looks at others' earnings.

But a qualified tube driver's starting salary is £71,000, while a newly qualified teacher's London salary (teachers in the capital have an enhanced salary scale, for obvious reasons) is £32,916. It puts paid to the theory that having a degree increases your earning power – something we endlessly tell the children.

'We're not actually paid for teaching, though, are we?' my head of department said. He did not mean we were underpaid; he meant the teaching part did not need huge financial reward.

'We're paid for all the sh*t that goes with it. When we are standing in front of a class, teaching a subject we love, with receptive children, whether they are good at English or bad at it, that's not what we're paid for.

'We're paid for the abusive parents, the paperwork, the bad behaviour, the endless and often repetitive training. We're paid for the children who swear at us and front up to us and trash our rooms. It's *that* stuff that drives teachers out of schools – not the actual teaching.'

He has a point. This term, we've had a comparatively easy ride. With our head of department now in his third year, all our schemes of work are well-planned and in place. We've had no new teachers this year – so everyone knows what they are doing. The children have on the whole come back to school with good intentions and shining smiling faces.

But, on the other hand, the number of special-educational-needs children, and the level of their needs, is becoming ever greater.

We have children in our classes who should really be in nurture (with a tailored curriculum to match their needs), but there is no room. I have year sevens (11-year-old new arrivals) who have the reading/writing age of four-year-olds.

I have a child who has monumental, and quite frightening, meltdowns at least three times a lesson, set off by the tiniest of noises. He tears up books, hits himself on the head and throws things around the room. It is mostly through frustration – he cannot really communicate – as well as misophonia, but understanding the reasons does not make him any easier to handle.

When I have him in my class, my job increases from teaching the young about similes, stories, reading and writing to something completely different.

I have to calm him down, reassure the other children (of which at least two others also have quite serious special needs) that all will be well, keep the lesson on track and keep the children safe, all the while keeping my own calm.

No Tube driver has to deal with that. I've looked it up – Tube drivers have to hold on to a handle to keep the train moving and decide when to brake.

The training includes 'communication skills', physical fitness and keen vision (so there's no chance of my retraining – perhaps I'm just envious). But I don't believe they ever have communication issues as challenging as those we have on an hourly basis.

Our more feral students have no excuse other than bad parenting. There's the 13-year-old girl who, on day one, told my colleague, 'I don't know who the f*ck you think you are to tell me where to sit.'

There are signs all over the Tube warning passengers that if they abuse staff they will be arrested. We don't have that protection, or that pay.

Still, I don't believe the Tube drivers have the real joy I had this week: introducing my new top set to their first text, and seeing them lap it up.

'We've maximised the franchise...'

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God

SISTER TERESA

In search of silent beauty? Get thee to a nunnery

As Carmelite nuns, whether we live in town or country, we are very conscious of being counter-cultural.

Some aspects of modern technology are a huge help and are in constant use; others are not. I can't think of any Carmelite nun who is inseparable from her smartphone. They have other things to do.

Recently, I spent the night in a Carmelite monastery in west London. Its architecture is counter-cultural in the best possible way. The Victorian building has, from the outside, a forbidding quality. It is made of weathered and darkened yellowish brick, its extensive walls are windowless and it clearly means business.

Its austerity came as a great relief after the appallingly bling architecture that has overtaken London in the last decades, obliterating the city I used to know and love. The monastery wall gives a strong indication of what the enclosed religious life is for: withdrawal from the world and all its pomps.

'Do you renounce Satan and all his pomps?' is a question asked during baptism. So in theory the idea should not come as much of a surprise to anyone.

It is an echo of Jesus's temptation in the desert, which appears in all three synoptic Gospels. We are asked to share in the son of God's renunciation of outward show, splendour and empty vanities.

A different world emerges once one is inside the monastery. The house has been designed with calm in mind – to promote silence. It is very bare, but the wide corridors, the light and the sense of space foster a profound impression of peace.

The silence endorses the existence of an inner life, something that is not only vital but also unconsciously longed for by so many, and not just by enclosed nuns.

Inner silence forces us to wake up to the necessity of acknowledging the existence of God. From there comes prayer, which takes us, as Christians, into the life, teaching and ultimate sacrifice of Jesus.

No one living in a monastery should ever be deprived of beauty. All beauty is God-given. This is not some kind of grudging compensation for a life that can seem to be one of extreme deprivation.

Few people would resent the London nuns' surprisingly big garden, home to numerous, happy and safe hedgehogs. It boasts a splendid native elm tree, a rare survivor from Dutch elm disease.

It also boasts a field of white lilies, a few rogue pink blooms only adding to the charm. Dare one say it: this is pomp where it is least to be expected and much appreciated.

Requiem Mass

HRH The Duchess of Kent (1933-2025)

The Requiem Mass for the Duchess of Kent took place at her beloved Westminster Cathedral. The King was there – the first time he had attended a requiem mass in England.

The Apostolic Nuncio read a message of sympathy addressed to him and to the family, from Pope Leo XIV.

The Duchess's coffin had been piped to the Advance Gates of Kensington Palace the day before by Pipe Major Andrew Rayment from the Royal Dragoon Guards, of which she was Deputy Colonel-in-Chief. This nice tradition was observed for Princess Margaret and Princess Alice, Duchess of Gloucester, both of whom lived at the palace.

The coffin was received at the cathedral and rested overnight in the Chapel of the Blessed Virgin Mary, with pre-funeral rites attended by the immediate members of her family.

The Requiem Mass was attended by the King, the Duke of Kent and a large contingent of the British Royal Family. Massive wreaths were laid by the altar rail, and the Duchess's GCVO, EIIR Royal Family Order and Jubilee medals were carried by those who had faithfully cared for her. Prince Michael and Princess Alexandra both arrived in wheelchairs.

The Mass was conducted by Vincent Nichols, the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, who stressed 'Lady Katharine's' graciousness, generosity and dedication. The homily was given by James Curry, Auxiliary Bishop of Winchester. He told the congregation that tears and smiles are never far apart.

Lord St Andrews and Lady Helen Taylor read the two lessons. The prayers of the faithful were delivered by three grandchildren – Lady Marina-Charlotte Windsor, Miss Eloise Taylor and Mr Albert Windsor. They all spoke beautifully and the acoustics and sound system were so good that every word could be appreciated (not always the case in other churches). The hymns were 'O Praise ye the Lord' and 'Love divine, all loves excelling'.

The coffin was covered with the bordered Royal Standard, white roses for Yorkshire and sprigs of yew from the Duchess's family home, Hovingham Hall, Yorkshire. The piper played the lament 'Sleep, Dearie, Sleep', played during the Queen's funeral. The choral music included Mozart's 'Ave verum corpus', which the Duchess chose as her favourite piece on *Desert Island Discs* in 1990.

After the Mass, members of the Royal Family attended the burial of the Duchess in the Royal Burial Ground at Frogmore, by Queen Victoria's Royal Mausoleum.

Each family lies in separate groups. Prince George and Princess Marina (the Duchess's parents-in-law) are near the Mausoleum. In front of Princess Marina's grave is that of Sir Angus Ogilvy, husband of Princess Alexandra.

Queen Elizabeth II often walked through that graveyard when at Windsor. She loved the tranquillity and she knew many of those who lie under the gravestones.

Hugo Vickers

To screen or not to screen

Too much screening for cancer can lead to a false diagnosis

DR THEODORE DALRYMPLE

Cancer is the cause of just over a quarter of deaths in England, and survival is longer where cancer is detected early.

It might seem at first sight, therefore, that a single blood test to screen for several or many cancers at the same time would be a great advance.

Trials are under way to find out whether or not the reality corresponds to what appears to stand to reason.

But the whole question is fraught with difficulties, and I suspect that there won't soon – if ever – be a definitive answer. There will always be room for more research.

Cancers vary greatly in their prevalence and natural history. Even the same cancer varies between individuals in the way it behaves. Prognosis is not yet an exact science, and people who are expected to live long sometimes die quickly, while those who are expected to die soon sometimes defy expectations.

There is something called the mean sojourn time (MST), which is the average difference in time between when a cancer can be first detected by screening and when it can be first detected clinically.

In general, the shorter the MST, the greater the benefit of screening, at least for a cancer that is treatable – as most are nowadays, at least to some extent.

But it must be remembered that the MST is a statistical mean, not a prediction in any individual case.

The longer the MST, the greater the potential for one of the principal harms screening gives rise to – overdiagnosis.

In this case, it means the diagnosis of a cancer that is not actually present, will disappear spontaneously or is so indolent (as we doctors describe it, as if cancers were recalcitrant schoolboys) that the patient will die of something else before the cancer kills the patient. Unnecessary surgery often follows overdiagnosis.

Prostate cancer has a long MST of ten years, compared with lung cancer's of about three. Overdiagnosis on screening increases with the age of those screened. False positives for prostate cancer discovered by screening rise to over a third at the age of 70, and more than a half by the age of 80. For lung cancer, however, with its low MST, false positive diagnoses are only about five per cent at age 70, and ten per cent at age 80.

Which cancers should be screened for? Another complicated question to be answered about screening for multiple cancers with a single test is about what is the optimal interval between the repetition of such tests.

The shorter the MST, the shorter should be the interval for screening for that cancer, but the relative prevalence of the cancers screened for is also important. There are more deaths among men from lung cancer than from prostate cancer, which suggests that the interval between screening tests should be relatively short – but this would result in more false positives for prostate cancer, with all the disadvantages therefrom. A fifth of those who undergo prostatectomy are incontinent of urine afterwards.

Then there is a problem similar to that with electric cars: is there enough supporting infrastructure to perform screening tests and to treat all the cases tests turn up?

There follows the disagreeable question of whether the light is worth the candle: could more human life be saved if the effort and expenditure on screening tests and subsequent treatment were directed elsewhere?

This question is unpleasant, since life is not a commodity with a simple measure of worth and is infinitely precious to those who have it, but it is inevitable that the question should be asked where resources are limited.

There is enough uncertainty about screening for many cancers with a single test to keep an army of researchers busy for decades. One might almost wish there were no such possibility.

Where questions are undecidable, ignorance is bliss.

'I meditated, I did yoga and I went to the gym before I came to the office. I'm too tired to do any work'

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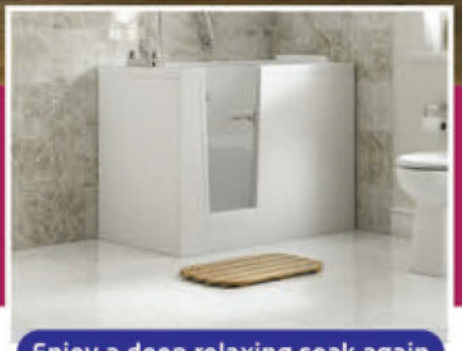
Dr Hilary Jones GP and Health Advisor



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The Oldie

Christmas Gift Guide 2025

Spirit of Christmas Past – Mary Killen on looking young

Midnight masses – Rev Steve Morris on the church revival

Gadgets * Books * Music * Quiz * Gardening * Food

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DEMENTIA has become an illness that we seem to be talking about on a daily basis, if it isn't a loved one suffering from it, it is someone we know and it isn't just the elderly, this dreadful disease affects the younger generation too. It has been identified that dementia clients remaining in their own homes have gained positive results as the client is familiar with everything and will give them much more stability.

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If you have ever considered Live-In Care for yourself or someone you know and you would like some advice or just to chat to someone, please call or email me on:

01380 870270/07921 299286
Email: info@mulberryliveincare.co.uk
Website: www.mulberryliveincare.co.uk

The Oldie Christmas Gift Guide 2025

Welcome to our *Christmas Gift Guide*. There are some great ideas for giving in these pages, but don't forget that a subscription to *The Oldie* is the best present of all (see below).

Published by The Oldie magazine, Moray House, 23/31 Great Titchfield Street, London W1W 7PA

Editor: Charlotte Metcalf
Design: Jo Goodby
Advertising: Paul Pryde, Jasper Gibbons, Honor Brown
Publisher: James Pembroke

Cover illustration by Bob Wilson

Gifts for everyone

AMELIA MILNE tracks down imaginative Christmas present for all ages

For her

Jewel or Soap?

These gently fragranced, hand-crafted soaps use a unique varnishing technique, which guarantees the image lasts as long as the soap. Reminiscent of a precious jewelled box, they are painted with images inspired by nature, from animals and birds to flowers and butterflies. Utterly beautiful, they make a highly original gift, adding a wow factor to any basin. £25. Stocked at Claire Naa, Notting Hill.

www. claire-naa.com/en/47-soaps

Pom Poms Galore

Pom Pom London's cross body bags are a staple for discerning women, with their two different adjustable straps and fun accessories. Dress them up or down depending on the strap. Numerous styles available. £94.95

www.pompomlondon.com

Silken Swathes

Royal florist Kitty Arden's extravagant designs are painted onto her silk dressing gowns (£390) and headscarves. At £195, they an eye-catching alternative to a Hermès scarf.

Hand-painted ceramics and spectacular headdresses also available.

@ kittyardendesigns or stocked at www.feltlondon.com

Sweet Dreams

Ethical beekeepers in Cambridgeshire since 2009, award-winning Maters & Co sell 100% organic honeys from set, raw, and honeycomb to premium pollen. Honey boosts energy and alertness or try lavender honey to promote a calming sleep.

www.matersandco.com

High Visibility Glasses Case

These beaded cases are available from the Jacksons in Notting Hill and designed and made by rural, artisan women in Bangladesh, along with their sought after, quirky jute bags and other beaded items, like clutch bags and keyrings. Lunette Elton beaded glasses case £45

www.thejacksons.co.uk

Balm for the Skin and the Soul

Cath Kidston loved the fragrance of Pelargonium geraniums so much that she bottled it for her C. Atherley bath collection. Pelargoniums also have antiseptic, antibacterial, antifungal and antioxidant properties, providing soothing relief for skin conditions as well as reducing anxiety and stress. There are three gorgeous hand-blended scents. £39 for 140ml

www.c-atherley.com

Winter Dreamland

These 'intelliheat' Dreamland blankets and throws have six settings and a timer. They also heat up instantly, doing away with the need to turn the central heating on. Accurately named the 'snuggle up', these throws are a winter must-have. From John Lewis at £69.99.

www.dreamlanduk.co.uk

Bug-a-Salt Gun for Flies

A reader alerted us to this satisfying salt gun that doesn't just season steak but is also a non-toxic and effective way of blasting away – or 'a-salting' – flies. No batteries are needed. £49.

www.bugasalt.co.uk

A Nut Jar for Dad

These cost £49 but are good-looking and stackable, made from tough, tempered glass and can be personalised to raise a smile.

They are made in Kent by the Oak and Rope Company, which guarantees to deliver high quality customised, oak products.

holly.co/storefront/the-oak-and-rope-company

For him

Aesop Poo-Poo Drops

Throw away your vile-smelling, toxic air fresheners and replace with this elegant bottle. Anti 'l'odeur de merde', this is a highly effective botanical bahtroom deodoriser that smells divine. £27

www.aesop.com

Midlife crisis? Go bold

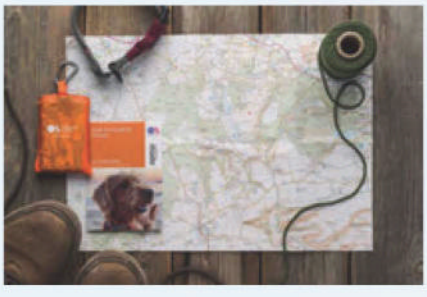
Bold, jazzy shirts have long been a fashion staple in *The Oldie*'s publisher's wardrobe. On a recent Oldie trip, a similarly attired traveller recommended Henry Arlington, which make flamboyant shirts from the finest Egyptian cotton, and if you are buying for a more conservative dresser, it also makes plain, check and striped shirts, plus socks and bow ties. Most shirts cost £149.

www.henryarlington.com

Bacon Membership – Smoke & Cure

An *Oldie* reader told us this was the best present he'd ever received. If you appreciate bacon that sizzles and crisps rather than wilts then burns, spend £6.95 and a pack of prime home smoked and cured bacon will arrive every month on your doorstep UK-wide.The company specialises in Gloucester Old Spot, sourced from a North Yorkshire farm.

londonsmokeandcure.co.uk



Get Lost! Personalised Maps

An Oldie colleague was impressed when her friend took her on a Norfolk ramble using his personalised Ordnance Survey Map, the perfect gift for anyone who enjoys exploring the countryside.

Prices start at £7.99 for a small map, large ones cost £21.99. You can add a photograph to the message, guaranteeing the map itself will never lose its way back to its owner.

shop.ordnancesurvey.co.uk

The longest shoehorn

A tall, and somewhat inflexible, criminal barrister told us that he yearned for a longer shoehorn to avoid stooping. So, we found this beautiful extra-long one. Designed by Nico, it also comes with a horse or golf ball top and costs £35.99 from Shoe In Soles.

www.shoeinsoles.co.uk

For them

Having a ball

Beyond showing off, juggling is a way of improving hand-to-eye coordination. Rex London's set of Spirit of Adventure soft juggling balls is a steal at £4.95.

Originating in Ancient Egypt, juggling has numerous benefits and the National Centre for Circus Arts offers courses in it.

www.rexlondon.com
www.nationalcircus.org.uk

Get off the phone!

Keep your teenager's hands busy but away from her phone with this Beginner's Knit Kit.

Founder Nicky Stewart is a self-confessed 'bird nerd' and self-taught knitter, based in Caithness, Scotland. Her designs are simple, relaxing and somewhat therapeutic.

For just £19 you can knit some of Nicky's native birds like Bill the Pigeon or Barry the Puffin and there's even a festive, seasonal Albert the Robin.

knittedbirds.com

Sock it to them

A pair of Chatty Feet socks will make even the most sullen teenager smile – an absolute bargain at £9.50 a pair.

The socks are made from 75% cotton and have names like David Toewie, Dinah Sockington, Eltoe John and Beethwoven.

www.chattyfeet.com

Back to the Future

It's official – young people are embracing vinyl and LPs. This Crosley Cruiser with portable shell has built-in speakers, headphone jack and three speeds so your teenagers can root out your old singles.And there's also a Bluetooth receiver so should they tire of your Beatles records they can revert to their playlist.

Crosley Cruiser Deluxe Turquoise Bluetooth Record Player, £79.99

www.crosleyradio.com

Get Stacked!

The jewellery stacking trend continues to boom amongst teenagers. Queen of Stacking, Bella Christie, started selling sea shell earrings at a market on the Isle of Wight aged just 14. Like teenage go-to jewellery designer, Bijoux Di Mimi, Bella Christie's pieces are affordable, from £30. Layer, cluster and stack for a Boho look.

bellachristiejewellery.com

Sustainable lounging

Teenagers love these unisex 'lounge pants', with three practical pockets.

The contrast stripe was inspired by Kenyan kikoys (cotton wraps). Committed to championing sustainability, Tom Holmes uses only natural hemp, linen and cotton, while selling pre-loved items, repaired by Alice Holmes. £40

tomstrunks.com

Beyond a towel

This big Fouta towel is not cheap at £111 but with its distinctive graphic designs, it can also be a luxurious and spectacular picnic rug or colourful drape to cheer up the drabbest university digs. It's made in India by Inoui Editions, which also makes bags and scarves.

https://inoui-editions.com

What's your vision for the future?

At Turn2us, we believe everyone should have financial security so they can thrive.

We support people facing financial shocks by offering high-quality information and services, co-produced with those who have lived experience, to help individuals navigate periods of hardship with dignity and resilience. We also work to strengthen communities through locally rooted programmes and drive systems-level change to build a fairer, more inclusive economy for all.

What does "a future without worry" really look like?

It's a future where people know exactly where to turn when they're worried about money. Where help is genuinely available to people who need it. Where fewer people wake up worrying. It's a future where if someone falls down, your gift will make sure they can stand up again - and keep standing. It's a future where people see a way forwards. We believe everyone should have financial security so they can thrive. A gift in your will can help make that happen.

Why leave a gift?

A gift in your will can help ensure future generations have access to the tools, resources and support to overcome hardship. Whatever your vision – a warm home, enough to eat, or a fairer society – a gift in your will can help make it a reality.

Mandy has already pledged a gift in her will to Turn2us.

" I see Turn2us as people's first port of call, before they get to such a desperate situation. I want the gift I leave to help Turn2us do more of what they're doing already, to help more people not have to worry in the future. I genuinely trust that they will do the best with my support."

"I've seen first-hand the difference Turn2us makes. Leaving a gift in my will is my way of making sure others can get the support they need – now and for years to come."

turn 2US Tackling financial insecurity together.

Write your will for free

We've partnered with **Make A Will Online** and **The National Free Wills Network** to help take the stress out of making your will. When you use these services, your will is fully checked by a Solicitors Regulation Authority registered solicitor, giving you peace of mind and reducing worry later down the line.

There's no obligation to leave a gift to Turn2us – but if you choose to, you'll help create a future without worry for generations to come.

Request your **FREE** information pack about making your will for free today!

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We will process your information and communicate with you by post to fulfil your request and to keep you updated about our work under our legitimate interest and in line with our privacy policy **www.turn2us.org.uk/privacy-policy** You can opt out at any time by **contacting fundraising@turn2us.org.uk**

Keep in touch

We would love to also keep you up to date on our work, appeals and campaigns by email. Please let us know if you are happy to be contacted in this way. ☐ Yes, please ☐ No, sorry!

For little ones

Their very own Winnie-the-Pooh

Baby Blooms is celebrating the much loved bear's 100th anniversary by creating its very own Winnie-the-Pooh with a 'Hundred Acre Wood' badge on its paw.

At just £30, this bear is made from ultra textured plush in warm honey tones and can be handwashed. He comes with a brown satin bow around his neck in an illustrated gift box with a card for a personal message.

Begging to be cuddled, he is highly likely to become a treasured keepsake.

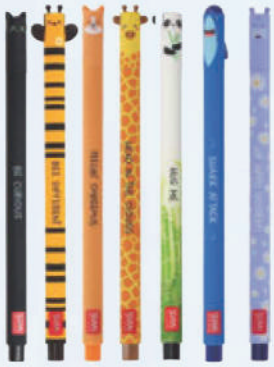
www.babyblooms.co.uk

Animal Magic

Schools welcome these fun erasable gel pens from Milan as they encourage children to experiment and be creative. Children love collecting and swapping them, and they've become a cult hit as the thermosensitive ink disappears as if by magic with the pen's eraser tip. Legami make fun animal pencil cases too.

Etsy sells all sorts of selections at different prices or go direct to the Legami website.

www.legami.com or www.etsy.com

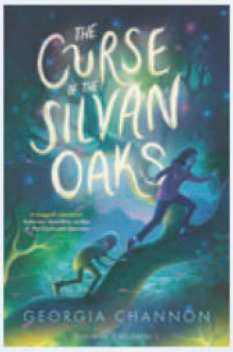


Gripping Fun

Jungle Speed is a new take on Snap. You have to grab and grip the wooden totem when you spot the matching pairs. It's fast-paced, fun and takes no prisoners.

Made by Zatu Games and constantly rated as excellent, there are various versions of the game, including one specially for kids.

www.board-game.co.uk



A magical adventure

Chips Channon's granddaughter, Georgia, has garnered numerous rave reviews for her epic, magical adventure *The Curse of the Silvan Oaks*, aimed at children aged eight to twelve and guaranteed to inspire and delight.

Richard E Grant said, 'it makes you long to be a child again to discover this wonderful story for the first time.' £8.99

from Waterstones

Nature lesson

Teach your grandchildren the names of trees and how to tell an ash from a sassafras by playing this Match a Leaf arboreal memory game with them.

The game is written by the Head of the Arboretum at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, so contains fascinating facts about American and British trees for nature lovers of all ages. £14.99

www.nationaltrust.org.uk

Happy Feet

The White Company already has a reputation for making beautiful pyjamas and sleepwear for little ones. We especially love these London Solider Slippers at £24 with their appliqué soldiers, sumptuous faux-fur lining, faux-suede soles and star 'puff' grips. Children will love wearing them during a Christmas bedtime reading of AA Milne's poem *Buckingham Palace*.

www.thewhitecompany.com

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Please note rates will increase to £45 and £110 from 1.11.25.

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It's the peace of mind you deserve, and the independence they cherish. This Christmas, consider live-in care: because the best gift of all is knowing your loved one is safe, cared for, and right where they belong - at home.

Keep your loved one safe, happy, and independent with professional live-in care. Around-the-clock support in the comfort of their own home - because nothing says "I care" more than helping them stay where they belong.

Imagine your loved one enjoying Christmas by the tree, in the comfort of their own home. Live-in care makes that possible, with 24/7 support and companionship. This Christmas, give them more than a present - give them the gift of independence, dignity, and peace of mind.

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ELISABETH LUARD on negotiating different family traditions

Whose feast is it anyway?

When the Christmas feast happens, and whether it's in the middle of the day or the evening, depends on family traditions and who has the upper hand in the household.

Ours were dictated by my mother-in-law, a middle-of-the-day woman, who sent everyone out for a brisk walk after luncheon before the Queen's speech.

With my parents, we sat down to turkey and all the trimmings in the evening. But since we were usually geographically far from England – my stepfather was a diplomat on the Latin American circuit – everything necessary to celebrate an English Christmas was ordered from Harrods and delivered ready-prepared in the diplomatic bag.

Married at just 21, with four children born in quick succession, I moved my family, lock, stock and barrel, to a remote valley in Andalucia. I wanted my children to grow up, as I had, spoiled rotten among the Latins. From my own childhood, I understood that Christmas is outclassed by Easter in the Roman Catholic year. The birth of Christ, second on the list of Church Festivals, is celebrated on Christmas Eve, *Noche Buena*, with present-giving saved for January 6th, the day the Three Kings arrived with their gifts for the new-born baby.

In the remote valley where we lived through the 1970s, our neighbours, subsistence farmers and fishermen, celebrated Noche Buena with home-cured – but never cooked – pata negra ham, carved thin from the bone and eaten with thick slices of wood-oven bread. Everyone kept a stye-pig and sent the hams to the mountains to be cured with salt in the cold dry air. There were also the new season's green olives pickled in brine with fennel stalks, and the local sherry-like wine, slightly fizzy, of the year's vintage.

The festive treat, bought with hard-earned cash from the pastry shop in the local port of Algeciras, comprised *polvorones*, toasted almond and cinnamon cookies so soft and powdery they're sold wrapped in tissue paper, and *turron*, a fudgy honey-and-almond nougat of Moorish descent.

Elisabeth with her Christmas ham. Brindisa mail-orders everything you'll ever need for an Andaluz *Noche Buena*

The pigs were killed by each household in turn at the annual *matanza*, a communal event that took place when the moon was full in October.

As the person responsible for the household porker, I could not be excused from attendance. My attempt to avoid the ordeal by reason of incompetence was dismissed out of hand by my neighbours who informed me that the *matanza* was mandatory for all who benefitted from the meat.

Luckily the men did the slaughtering and butchering but our obligations came later in the kitchen, when my neighbours expressed surprise that a mother rearing a young family had never learned to stuff a chorizo (push the casing up the funnel before you begin), salt-down belly-pork (store in a wooden drawer so the air can get at it) or understand that black puddings are only ready when the casings start whistling in the simmering water.

When it came to our family Andaluz Christmases, my diplomat parents were elsewhere, so it was Nicholas's mother who dictated.

This meant celebrating English-style on *Navidad*, the 25th. In the absence of ready-made Christmas pudding from the diplomatic bag, all ingredients – grated suet, de-pipped raisins, skinned almonds, candied orange peel –had to be prepared from scratch.

The festive goose once arrived on Christmas Eve, on foot at the end of a string with the baker's son, who explained that his mother had too much else to do to slaughter and pluck. The goose was far too big for me to kill, Nicholas refused and so the goose went home, and we made do with an elderly boiling fowl from the freezer. Brussels sprouts were unobtainable, and *Pelayo* (Andalucian flatbread) bread-sauce was a mistake.

Nevertheless, stockings and presents were opened, home-made crackers pulled and the spirit of Christmas prevailed. Until, that is, the Three Kings arrived on January 6th, which is when Spanish children receive their presents, and dropped goodies into everyone else's shoes but ours (by now our children had lost the important plastic bits from their Christmas Day presents).

By way of consolation, we joined our neighbours for the traditional Three Kings outing into the hills, a national holiday, to cook paella with foraged rabbit, snails and crayfish from the stream. Life is a learning curve. Each to his own.

WHERE TO FIND:

CHRISTMAS PUDDING

Meg Rivers does a particularly fine ready-to-heat, shiny and glossy one, the next best thing – possibly even better – to preparing your own.

The mix is lighter than the English suet-enriched plum pudding (fresh fruit, brandy rather than stout, vegetarian suet) and delivers all the necessary Christmassy goodies – dried fruits (raisins, sultanas, currants), crystallised ginger, cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, walnuts.

A proper bowlful comes in at 800g, enough for six or so happy revelers, delivered to your door for £21 plus £5.50 delivery.

www.megrivers.co.uk

MANCHEGO

There's good reason why manchego is the best loved Spanish cheese. A smooth-textured, non-cheddared, un-pasteurised sheep's milk cheese that's fresh and grassy when young, manchego ripens to a satisfying complexity – spiciness, sweetness – in maturity.

Prepared with the milk of La Mancha's hardy little black-fleeced sheep, it is supplied by Scots-based **The Cheese Lady**.

Svetlana Kukharchuk earned her name as owner of The Guid Cheese Shop in St Andrews, and author *The Cheese Connoisseur's Handbook*, a guide to appreciating cheese rather than just adding it on to a Plough-man's lunch (not that you ever would).

A 1.25k half-wheel at £59.35 from Gomez Moreno will see you happily through till Reyes on Jan 6th.

www.thecheeselady.co.uk

PATA NEGRA

Get it from Brindisa, the go-to for all things Spanish in the UK since – well – forever.

Iberico pigs,which produce pata negra, are forest pigs (ebony-trottered, lean and muscular), last of the semi-wild herds that once foraged the forests of the Mediterranean.

Their meat is distinguished from stye pigs' meat by deep red flesh trimmed with a frill of golden fat developed through the lengthy process it takes to produce the best, with a price to match.

As with serrano (mountain-cured) hams, these are cured rather than cooked, salted, wind-dried and cellared for up to seven years.

Most of the Iberico crop, released in autumn after cellaring, stays in Spain, where even the poorest hope to afford a few slices of the best as a Christmas treat.

A whole acorn-fed Iberico ham will set you back £607 for no less than 7k. Anyone can dream.

For a taste of what it's all about, £29 will bring you 100g of hand-carved Brindisa Iberico ham of the same quality and Brindisa offers you everything you'll ever need for an Andaluz Noche Buena.

www.brindisa.com

TURRON

Brindisa also supplies, at a rather modest £9.25 for 125g, this classic Spanish Christmas sweetmeat, from producer Alemany, winner of a 2025 Great Taste Award.

> Made with Marcona almonds and rosemary honey, turron comes in various guises

Made with Marcona almonds and rosemary honey, turron comes in various guises – soft, hard, marzipan – but go for the classic soft halva-like version, *turron de Jijona*.

It takes its name from its place of origin, a little town surrounded by almond-groves and bee-hives high in the hills above Alicante.

For the traditional homemade version, *turron al anciano*, you'll need 300g blanched almonds, 150g caster sugar, 150g runny honey, the grated rind of 1 lemon, 1-2 tablespoons almond oil and a teaspoon of ground cinnamon.

Pick over the almonds, spread them on a baking sheet and toast in a gentle oven until pale brown and squeaky when you take a nibble. Tip into the processor and crush thoroughly.

Meanwhile, bring the honey and sugar gently to the boil in a heavy saucepan, stirring constantly. Stir in the crushed almonds, return to the boil and cook for 10 minutes, still stirring. Pour out onto an oiled marble slab or pastry board and allow to cool. Process again until the mixture sticks and forms lumps.

Press the powdery mix into an oiled cake tin (wooden honeycomb frames are traditional) and sprinkle with powdered cinnamon.

Leave to cool and firm, then cut into squares. Delicious as a flavouring for ice cream or to sprinkle on any creamy dessert.

mnda
motor neurone disease association


Alex, his wife Laura and their children.

"It's too late for you to save my life..."

Motor neurone disease takes people's potential, dreams – and then their lives.

Alex lost his life to MND. He wrote this message just before he died.

In 2018, my wife Laura and I stood at the start line of a 255km run. It was the biggest challenge we'd face together. But we had no idea that soon after, we'd be told I was dying from MND.

Now, I can't walk, and I need help to eat. I can't get out of bed, wash or dress myself. MND has almost taken everything from me.

By the time you read this, it will have taken my life too.

An MND diagnosis is a death sentence. There is no cure. But the MND Association is funding research that could help find one.

I wanted to be there for my young children as they grew up. I wanted to travel with my wife. Our family had stored up hundreds of dreams about our future. Now, MND has forced us to give up everything we hoped and strived for.

It's too late to save my life. But in these final months I can still ask you to help spare other families from being torn apart.

Will you be one of the people who makes that cure possible?

"From the start line of the Transalpine Run to being confined to a wheelchair, MND has taken away so much from us in just three years." Alex

We have to find a way to beat MND. Will you help?

Registered with FUNDRAISING REGULATOR
Registered Charity No. 294354

Yes, I want to help beat MND today.

Here is my donation of:

- ☐ **£20** could pay for the annual storage of 35 DNA samples for research.
- ☐ **£50** could help keep our vital MND Connect helpline open.
- ☐ **£100** could fund laboratory equipment for three days of research.

OR my chosen amount of: £

☐ I enclose a cheque payable to **Motor Neurone Disease Association**

Name

Address

Postcode

Please let us know your telephone number and/or email address if you are happy to receive communications from us in this way.

Phone

Email

We promise to treat your information in a secure, sensitive and confidential way. Your personal details will not be shared with any other organisation and you can stop any or all communication at any time. For further information on how we use your data please read our privacy policy at **www.mndassociation.org/privacy-policy**

Can we contact you? We greatly appreciate your support and would like to keep in contact with you about our news, fundraising activities and appeals. Please tick if you do not want to receive this information from the MND Association via post. ☐

Your donation will help to provide essential care and support services for people living with MND, as well as funding essential research projects into the causes of MND, wherever the need is greatest.

To make a gift by phone, please call now on **0345 375 1850** quoting **25NQIC/TOP**
Or to donate online go to **mndassociation.org/alex**

Please fill in the whole form and send it to:
Motor Neurone Disease Association,
6 Summerhouse Road, Northampton, NN3 6BJ.

Give Generously

We asked Oldie contributors and other famous names to choose which charities to give to this Christmas

Jilly Cooper
Greyhounds in Need

Greyhounds are heavenly dogs, but when their racing days are over, trainers just throw them out.

My greyhound, Feather, was chucked out on the motorway with a muzzle on and was a tottering skeleton when I got him.

Greyhounds are sofaholics and Feather would spin round the field in the morning, then take my hand in his mouth, lead me home and sleep all day. They're so loving and they give so much back.

greyhoundsinneed.co.uk

Amanda Barrie
Operation Smile

Most of us greet each other with a smile at Christmas. But one in 700 children worldwide are born with a cleft palate and many can't afford the simple surgery available. Please help to put smiles on their faces by supporting my favourite charity.

Amanda Barrie, 90, was in* Coronation Street *and* Carry on Cleo *(1964)

operationsmile.org.uk

Robert Bathurst
The Injured Jockeys Fund

It's said that a jump jockey will, on average, reckon to fall every 13 races. The IJF helps riders to rehabilitate and supports those whose injuries are catastrophic.

Yes, it's their choice to ride but they do it for our entertainment.

***Robert Bathurst was in* Cold Feet**

injuredjockeys.co.uk

Graydon Carter
Natural Resources Defence Council

My wife was on the board for over 15 years. With more than 700 environmental specialists, lawyers and scientists, the NRDC is essentially a legal firm with one client: the earth.

John Adams, a lawyer, founded it over 50 years ago. Today it has over three million members worldwide.

***Graydon Carter edits* Air Mail**

nrdc.org

Nicole Farhi
UNICEF Gaza Appeal

Gaza's children urgently need food, clean water and medical care. UNICEFF is delivering essentials but demand far outweighs supply.

I support UNICEFF and I can only hope many, many others do to ensure children stop suffering and have a chance for a future.

Fashion designer Nicole Farhi is now a sculptor

unicef.org.uk/donate/children-in-gaza-crisis-appeal

Jonathan Dimbleby
The MNDA

Last year my brother, Nicholas, a renowned sculptor, died from Motor Neurone Disease. It is a terrible way to leave this world.

The MNDA supports its victims and plays a crucial role in funding research into the causes of a fatal disease which as yet has no cure.

***Jonathan Dimbleby's latest book is* Endgame: 1944**

mndassociation.org

Jeremy Hunt
Sarcoma UK

This tiny charity champions researh into one of the most aggressive cancers and one very close to my heart as I lost my brother Charlie to it in 2023.

Huge amounts go to better known cancers but this brilliant charity is sarcoma sufferers' only hope.

Jeremy Hunt MP was Chancellor of the Exchequer

sarcoma.org.uk

William Boyd
The Artists General Benevolent Institution

The AGBI was founded in 1814 – JMW Turner was a founder – to provide 'financial support to professional visual artists and their families when health and hardship interrupt their practice'. A very worthy cause.

The Predicament *is out now*

agbi.org.uks

Simon Williams
SeeSaw Grief Support

This small local charity provides support for children, young people and their families in Oxfordshire when a parent or carer is seriously ill, or has died. It helps reduce grief's emotional, psychological and mental health consequence, helping children face the future with hope.

***Simon Williams was in* Upstairs Downstairs *and is in* The Archers**

seesaw.org.uk

Edward Stourton
TraPCaf

There are an estimated ten million Parkinson's sufferers in sub-Saharan Africa. Yet Nigeria, a country of 230 million people, has just 100 neurologists. Levedopa, the necessary treatment drug, is difficult to access and, for most, prohibitively expensive.

My old friend, himself a 'Parkie', is campaigning to bring treatment to Africa, via his own charity and TraPCaf (Transforming Parkinsons Care in Africa)

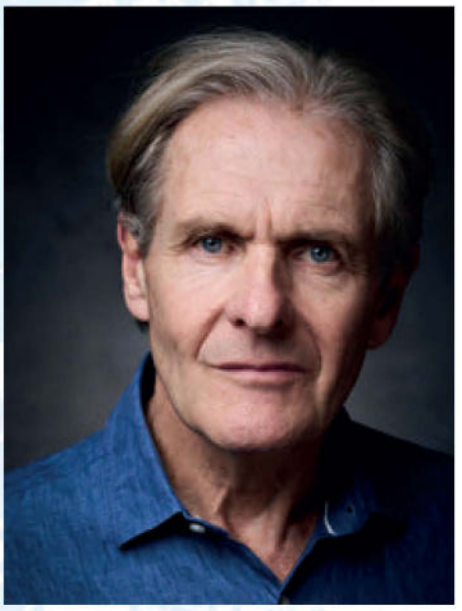
Edward Stourton presents* Sunday *on BBC Radio 4

Uhurufilm.com or https://www.parkinsonsafrica.org

A N Wilson
The Friends of St Mary's Church, Somers Town

Recently threatened with closure by the Diocese of London, this fine Inwood church, just north of Euston Station, has been committed to the poor and disadvantaged for over two centuries. Since the 1920s, when an inspirational curate, Father Basil Jellicoe, began the St Pancras

Jilly Cooper gives to Greyhounds in Need: 'Greyhounds are sofaholics'



Robert Bathurst supports injured jockeys

Graydon Carter, former *Vanity Fair* editor

Amanda Barrie in *Carry On Cleo* (1964)

Nicole Farhi pleads for Gaza's children

Friends reunited: John Standing (*right*) gives in memory of David Niven

Housing Trust, it has helped the poor find decent housing. While Historic England has raised money to save the building, much more is needed for necessary building work.

***AN Wilson wrote* The King and the Christmas Tree**

friendsofstmaryssomerstown.org

John Standing
Motor Neurone Disease Association

My dear friend David Niven died of this terrible disease. People knew so little about it that they thought he was drunk. Some 42 years later it remains incurable.

***John Standing won the 2024* Oldie In-Law of the Year Award**

www.mndassociation.org

Nicholas Coleridge
The British Asian Trust and Elephant Family

Started by the late Mark Shand, and still championed by Mark's sister, the Queen and the King, these charities are forever thinking of initiatives to help endangered South Asian elephants. Nimble, unbloated and inspiring.

Nicholas Coleridge is Provost of Eton

britishasiantrust.org and elephant-family.org

Theo Fennell
The Leopards

Five jewellers started The Leopards to donate toolkits, time and awards to young people, giving them a chance of a career in a world that desperately needs new craftspeople to keep our great traditions alive.

***Jeweller Theo Fennell's latest book is* The Glory Years**

www.theleopards.co.uk

James Holland
Chalke History Trust

History is vital as it's the compass that guides the present and helps us prepare for the future, and this charity helps further that noble sentiment, not just with the festival but also with a huge schools project.

Historian James Holland is Chair of the Chalke Valley History Festival

www.chalkefestival.com

John Lloyd
Concern Worldwide

Instead of you giving someone a present, this charity sends one on your behalf – from a blanket (£5), six chickens (£17), bicycle (£22), cow (£44), solar water pump (£50), canoe or camel (£60), to a classroom (£850) or a village well (£1,180).

***John Lloyd produced* Blackadder *and* QI**

www.concern.org.uk

Alexander McCall Smith
The Maclean Foundation

This marvellous charity was started by three Scottish brothers who have just rowed across the Pacific to raise money for drinking water projects in Madagascar.

The foundation digs wells and boreholes for those who otherwise don't have access to clean water.

***Alexander McCall Smith's latest book is* The Private Side of Friendship**

Matthew Parris
Wild Camel Protection Foundation

I've contributed to this charity for decades. In Mongolia's Gobi desert and China we're rescuing from near-extinction a genetically distinct two-humped camelid species that has survived two nuclear tests, learned to eat snow, and can drink salty water. Before I die, I'm determined to visit our massive, furry, shy protegés.

Matthew Parris is a journalist and broadcaster

www.wildcamels.com

Hugo Vickers
Future Talent

When the late Duchess of Kent gave up royal duties, she taught piano to children in Hull.

In 2004, she and Nick Robinson founded this charity to create musical opportunities for young musicians from low income backgrounds. I love their concerts.

Hugo Vickers is a royal biographer

www.futuretalent.org

Peter York
People's Dispensary for Sick Animals (PDSA)

Since 1917, this charity has enabled hard-up people to own an animal, knowing that they could go to the PDSA if their beloved dog, cat, rabbit or budgie became ill. It's marvellous reassurance for animal lovers, particularly those living alone.

***Peter York wrote* The Official Sloane Ranger Handbook**

www.pdsa.org.uk

Roger Lewis

Believing charity begins at home, I never give a penny to any bugger.

Roger Lewis's latest book is Erotic Vagrancy

GETTY

ACTIONS OF THE PAST STILL IMPACT VETERANS TODAY

Leaving a legacy will help the veterans of tomorrow.

We have over 100 years experience caring for veterans from every service. Our role today is to help those with some of the most complex mental health challenges including PTSD. Please support our work.

SCAN HERE

As a charity, gifts in Wills fund one in five of the veterans we treat.

To find out more, including our free Will offer, contact Sarah on **01372 587 144** or email **sarah.seddon@combatstress.org.uk**
Visit **combatstress.org.uk/leavealegacy**
Tyrwhitt House, Oaklawn Road, Leatherhead, KT22 0BX

Here to help 24/7, free Helpline: 0800 138 1619

COMBAT STRESS

Midnight Masses

REV STEVE MORRIS has seen people flock back to church – so long as it's traditional

At one point, C S Lewis wasn't a fan of church or God. He said, 'Though I liked clergyman as I liked bears, I had little wish to be in a zoo.'

Even after his conversion, he was something of a reluctant churchgoer but came to see the traditional straightforward service at his local church as a centre point of his life, it gave him hope and got him out of himself.

It's something we seem to be rediscovering today – particularly at Christmas.

The Rev Alison Joyce is Rector of St Bride's, Fleet Street, the journalists' church – and a Wren church, too.

She has noticed the trend: 'We've had more confirmations in the last 12 months than in any year since I've been here.' Most of those are young adults, with very busy lives, attracted to the most trad of churches.

Why did we fall out of love with church before, and why?

I was once the vicar at a lovely church on a large, well-off estate in north London. The people there remained largely untouched by church, however loud the band played. I asked those I met on the streets why.

Many said they came to the church when it was 'proper' church but gave up when it got all weird and loud. And when they gave up going to their local church, life took over and they stopped going to church altogether.

That's why the traditional church is making a comeback. Surveys show church attendance is beginning to rise. Some churches that once struggled are attracting hundreds of people on a Sunday.

These are traditional churches with services that include a combination of liturgy, candles, hymns, communion or mass and priests with robes and vestments. It is a combination of good liturgy, music and tradition. Choral evensong is pulling people in, many of whom had never attended any church.

People have an appetite for an authentic, old-fashioned service – church that seems like church, different from everyday life and culture. There is a sense that we need to return to an older truth when today's truth has failed us so badly.

There is a certain theatre to the traditional church: the robes, incense and choreography – as a friend of mine called it, 'frilly church'.

Choral evensong is pulling people in, many of whom had never attended any church

Then there are the words of the liturgy, in particular the 16th-century Book of Common Prayer. The BCP is a wonder – pithy and direct; formal but full of feeling; rhythmic but not rhyming. They may be words of a former age, but they demand our attention and worm their way into us.

Put simply, they are beautiful – and where else do you find beauty on a Sunday morning? As Alison puts it, 'They are words honed over the centuries – ancient wisdom.'

A Catholic bishop tells me, 'Young Catholics are finding respite in the Latin texts of the Mass. Words can point to the mystery of God, as can the heady atmosphere of burning candles and rising incense.'

After the late Pope Francis restricted the Latin Mass, the new pope has recently given permission for a US cardinal to celebrate the traditional Latin Mass in St Peter's Basilica.

That great Lutheran pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, had been imprisoned by the Nazis, but refused to give up ministering to others. On Sunday April 8th 1945, he was taken while leading a service and hanged.

In his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, published in 1937, he offered an insight into what makes church church.

He coined the phrase 'cheap grace' – or convenience religion. He argued that real church always demands something of us; that it is the opposite of convenience religion.

Many modern churches are vibrant, inspiring places. But the traditional church reaches back and asks us to go through life's seasonality, from Advent, Christmas to Easter – ancient structure in a chaotic world. Roman Catholic, Anglican and Orthodox churches have these regular rhythms; a form of structure to life that helps us to feel part of something enduring.

And so, the quiet revival gathers pace, whether it's the well-attended evensong service at the 12th-century St Bartholomew-the-Great in Smithfield, or the same service at a packed church on a west London estate.

I was an atheist. I went to church in my 40s at a full-on arm-waving modern church. I still love that place. Now, I've gone all bells and smells.

The traditional church is far from dead. It's making a comeback. Who would have thought it?

Wren's St Bride's, Fleet Street – inspired wedding cake

ALAMY

Rev Steve Morris is Associate Priest at St Bride's, Fleet Street

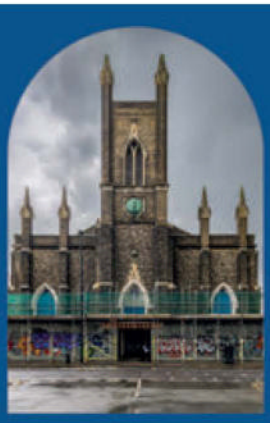
Wild Camel Protection Foundation

The Wild Camel Protection Foundation was established in 1996 by John Hare FRGS OBE and Kathryn Rae an environmental lawyer to protect the critically endangered Wild Camel in Mongolia and China.

There are less than 1000 left in the world. The WCPF manages and fully funds two successful Wild Camel breeding centres in the Buffer Zone of the Great Gobi Area of Special Protection 'A' in Mongolia. All donations go to fund these two breeding centres.

We urgently require funds now to purchase the Winter Hay for the Wild Camels as they will be inside the Enclosure during the Winter breeding season months.

www.wildcamels.com



St Mary's has been at the heart of Somers Town for 200 years,

providing a safe space for worship and creating connections for the community.

Urgent Works Overview

St Mary's on Eversholt Street in the London Borough of Camden is a Grade II listed church which requires urgent repairs so it can continue to serve the local community. It has faced threats of closure and even demolition; however, with a recently awarded Historic England grant, the future is bright and the parish church is now looking to fundraise the remaining costs for major improvements to the West End!

Scan to learn more and donate:
https://tinyurl.com/stmarysurgentworks

End of Year Target: £75,000
(25% of Phase 1 Campaign)

info@friendsofstmaryssomerstown.org
www.friendsofstmaryssomerstown.org/fundraising

FRIENDS OF ST MARY'S CHURCH SOMERS TOWN

Help us help Greyhounds and Galgos in Need

Each year approximately 60,000 Spanish galgos (hunting dogs) are abandoned or tortured to death in Spain. We work with the shelters in Spain who carry out the primary rescue work and the homing groups and individuals in Europe who promote adoption in their own countries.

In the UK, ex-racing greyhounds are taken on by rescue centres, injuries can be common and require veterinary work.

The work is successful but expensive.

We help in their rehabilitation and finding them loving, forever homes.

Please visit our website
www.greyhoundsinneed.co.uk

Registered charity in England and Wales No. 1174351
Greyhounds in Need CIO

Greyhounds in Need
Helping galgos and greyhounds since 1998

Greyhoundsinneed.co.uk/donate

Pop Treats

MARK ELLEN on the best pop and concert films

Stop Making Sense by Talking Heads is the best concert film ever. Fact! The best moment is when the band launches into 'Life During Wartime' and starts running on the spot. David Byrne's snake-hipped dance moves and musicians in mid-air around him add a whole new level of exotic choreography, shot in Hollywood in 1983.

But competition for the greatest live music DVD is stiff. In **Nirvana: Unplugged In New York,** the grunge-rock titans prove how fundamentally tuneful their crunching anthems were by playing them stripped down on acoustic instruments, unforgettably including 'The Man Who Sold The World' by David Bowie and Lead Belly's chilling murder mystery 'In The Pines'.

Another you can re-play repeatedly is **Simon & Garfunkel: The Concert In Central Park**, their highly emotional 1981 reunion, singing immaculately for half a million fans on a cloudless Manhattan night, after 11 fractious years apart.

If you're after part-concert, part-documentary, aim for the greatest music movie ever made, Peter Jackson's **Get Back**, his mammoth three-disc edit from 80 hours of footage shot for the Beatles **Let It Be** in 1969. It is wondrous to behold their spontaneous creative engine in overdrive, the warming spark of friendship – and their clothes! (George's corduroy shoes are a highlight). The other great Beatles film is **Eight Days a Week: The Touring Years**, the dizzying thrill of their evolving stage act and its impact on human happiness.

A close second of course is Martin Scorsese's **The Last Waltz,** the Band's farewell in 1976 (with Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Muddy Waters etc), an epic record of the end of a rock 'n roll era briefly overshadowed on release by the arrival of punk rock.

Buena Vista Social Club by Wim Wenders also builds towards a climactic concert as Ry Cooder tracks down and reunites a troupe of '50s Cuban legends to perform at Carnegie Hall. And **Gaga: Five Foot Two** is a hoot, the crackling build-up to Lady Gaga's monumental Superbowl show of 2017. And it's impossible not to be seduced by **Don't Look Back,** the fly-on-the-wall account of Bob Dylan's 1965 UK tour as he dazzles folk purists and bamboozles the gullible media – 'Keep a good head and always carry a lightbulb!'

This Is Spinal Tap (1984). ***The long-awaited follow-up*** **Spinal Tap II: The End Continues** ***is out now***

Also don't miss **Summer Of Soul**, released four years ago, edited from lost footage from Harlem in 1969. It features the pioneering funk and soul acts of the age – Nina Simone, Mahalia Jackson, Sly Stone, Stevie Wonder – its vast cultural value flagged by the fact it's now known as 'the black Woodstock' (which took place the same month).

Two massively overlooked and enthralling films focus on people outside the limelight. **The Wrecking Crew!** interviews the weather-beaten session players on hits by the Beach Boys, Mamas & Papas, the Byrds and many others.

The fascinating **20 Feet From Stardom** turns the torch on backing singers – who's not imagined this is the dream job? – and how they magically embroidered the work of the Stones, Joe Cocker and Ike & Tina Turner.

If you want insight into what success requires, watch **Amy**, the 2015 doc about Amy Winehouse, built around film and messages from her mobile, a moving, delicate balance between the self-destructive rigours of promotion and the evidence of her extravagant talent.

And **Dig!** follows the fortunes of two charismatic art-rock acts, the Dandy Warhols and the Brian Jonestown Massacre. One ends up playing stadiums, the other goes down in a hail of rotten fruit.

The two best music biopics without doubt are **Control**, a gorgeous (black and white), warm and witty retelling of the tragically brief story of Joy Division, the music played live by the actors; and **Elvis**, Baz Luhrmann's lavish version of Presley's life and the manipulations of his manager 'Colonel' Tom Parker, (in the delightful guise of Tom Hanks).

And we can't end without the funniest music movie ever, the gift that keeps on giving, 1984's **This Is Spinal Tap**. This forensically insightful lampoon of a fictional glam-rock act speaks more truth about band dynamics than any real documentary ever did. Slap it on and Christmas spirits will be instantly lifted. Goes with port and Stilton.

Austin Butler as Elvis Presley in Baz Luhrmann's **Elvis**

ALAMY; WARNER BROS. PICTURES

Christmas Classics

RICHARD OSBORNE on the best classical CDs, DVDs and books

Whether by chance or design, this year's 80th anniversary D-Day celebrations coincided with the release of recordings of two musicians, Eric Coates and Myra Hess. In their differing ways, they take us back to those war years like few others.

No one has conducted Eric Coates's music better than Eric Coates himself, nor has his recorded legacy been better preserved and documented than on Lyrita's recent 7-CD **The Definitive Eric Coates** (REAM 2145). The set, which provides a complete run of all the commercial recordings made by the uncrowned king of British light music between 1923 and 1957, can be had from Presto Music for around £25.

An even more affordable 2-CD distillation **The Best of the Definitive Eric Coates** is also available (REAM 2146).

Jessica Duchen's **Myra Hess: National Treasure** would be my music book of the year. It's a meticulously researched and superbly narrated biography of a woman whose life is rich in interest, both before and after those famous wartime National Gallery concerts.

A pair of recordings of **Piano Trios** by Schubert and Brahms, made in the inter-war years, remind us of the quality of Hess's music-making and some of the wonderful musicians with whom she collaborated (Biddulph 85061-2.).

Another possible marriage of book and CD is provided by pianist Sir Stephen Hough. His finely crafted divertimento for piano and orchestra **The World of Yesterday** is part of a pleasing new collection of pieces by him (Hyperion CDA 68455). Couple that with the paperback of his enchanting 2023 memoir **Enough: Scenes from Childhood** and you'll have a gift that can't fail to give pleasure.

Herbert Blomstedt conducts Bruckner's ninth and last symphony on his 97th birthday , 2024

Hough is a skilled humorist as, in his more anarchic way, was that supremely gifted musician, cartoonist, and raconteur Gerard Hoffnung (1925-59) whose centenary this is.

The 1950s was a golden age for classical music and opera with a large and well-informed audience readily to hand. What it needed to stop it becoming too serious and self-important was someone to blow a giant raspberry at it all. Which is what Hoffnung and friends did in two sell-out concerts at the Royal Festival Hall in 1956 and 1958. Such is the genius of the writing, they remain laugh-aloud events even now.

Happily, the two concerts and such gems as Hoffnung's famous address to the Oxford Union (the bricklayer saga), have now been gathered onto a 3-CD set **The Comic Genius of Gerard Hoffnung: Classic Albums 1956-61** (Acrobat Music, ACTRCD 9142).

The Queen's Choir

Remaining in Oxford, I shouldn't overlook a pair of rarely heard but quietly memorable pieces that were premiered at the annual summer concert of The Queen's College in the early 1950s. Intriguingly, it was the 21-year-old Kenneth Leighton's celebration of spring, *Veris gratia*, drawn from the medieval *Carmina Burana*, that persuaded the 79-year-old Ralph Vaughan Williams to publish his recently completed **An Oxford Elegy**, a distillation for speaker, chorus and orchestra of Matthew Arnold's 'Thyrsis' and its more famous companion piece 'The Scholar-Gipsy'.

The performances by the present-day Queen's choir are exemplary, with the added attraction that the speaker in **An Oxford Elegy** is a distinguished alumnus of the college, Rowan Atkinson, MSc.

His delivery of Arnold's text is more intimate and so more spellbinding than that of any of its predecessors on record (Signum Classics SIGCD917).

The bicentenary of Johann Strauss's birth has been too little noticed on this side of the channel, an agreeable *Die Fledermaus* at the Grange Festival notwithstanding. That said, it's encouraged Decca to reissue on CD and vinyl its echt-Viennese 1960 recording of **Die Fledermaus** with the famous party scene in which some of the most sought-after recording artists of the day turn up at Prince Orlofsky's salon.

They include Jussi Björling singing 'Dein ist mein ganzes Herz', Birgit Nilsson claiming 'I could have danced all night', and two of Italy's best-loved singers, Giulietta Simionato and Ettore Bastianini, giving us a classic rendering of 'Anything you can do' from *Annie Get Your Gun* (Decca 2-CD 487 1546, 3-LP 487 1549).

My oldie DVD of the year must be a live performance of Bruckner's ninth and last symphony, filmed in July 2024 in Bruckner's own church of St Florian in Upper Austria, with Herbert Blomstedt conducting the Bamburg Symphony Orchestra.

Blomstedt was celebrating his 97th birthday that very day and proving, like some finely engineered antique clock, that he still keeps perfect time.

There have been many memorable Bruckner performances in this famous setting, but I can recall none more moving than this, **Bruckner: Symphony No.9** (Accentus DVD ACC20661).

Passage to India

HUGH THOMSON visits his favourite town in Rajasthan for some winter sun

The holy lakeside town of Pushkar: teetotal and vegetarian

An Indian winter is always appealing – certainly compared to our own But where to go?

You could stay in a luxurious Heritage or Ananta hotel in the isolated countryside and drink nimbu sodas by the pool as the peacocks call. But it's hardly immersive – even a bit *White Lotus*.

How much better to plunge into the heart of India, to a hotel right in the middle of town by Pushkar Lake where devotees come in their hundreds to bathe at the sacred waters. Ropes are attached to the shore so that, with some laughter (for Hinduism is not a solemn religion), men can haul themselves out deep into the water for a ritual dip; the women do so fully clothed in their saris, then stand on the shore with limbs extended, like cormorants, so the clothes dry on their backs.

The Pushkar Palace Hotel is a venerable institution, once belonging to the Maharaja of Kishangarh. It's gone gently to seed and is all the better for it, not least in the pricing.

There are faded sepia prints of his family on the walls and carved wooden furniture from the 1930s. There are generous bathrooms from a time when these actually came with a rolltop bath, not just a shower.

The upper rooms all lead off from a long balcony corridor that faces the lake with stupendous views at sunset. The hotel terrace looks over the ghats beside it, and there is no more charming walk than to wander around them in the softening light as the devotees chant, lake birds call and the distant sound of temple drums begins.

Less intense than Varanasi – which, let's face it, is all about death and the burning ghats, however beautiful – the town is centred around one of the very few temples to Brahma in India and the 52 bathing ghats that line the lake, including one named after Queen Mary for her imperial visit at the close of Empire.

Pushkar is one of those places that survives its own fame. Of course, the hippies come – one nose-pierced American girl sitting cross-legged in a café proclaims, 'I'm not sure I'm ready yet for Rishikesh.' The sounds of Bob Marley mix with the deep voice of Krishna Das.

> The hotel's gone gently to seed and is all the better for it, not least in the pricing

But the strength of Hindu devotion to this lake, where some of Gandhi's ashes were scattered and Brahma dropped his lotus flower, is so strong that it subsumes all transient visitors.

Being holy, this is both a vegetarian and teetotal town, so don't, like the Americans who arrived at the same time as us, declare that all the sunset view needs is a cold beer – you won't get one. And the mutton *burra* and chicken sizzlers will have to wait. Feast instead on okra and aubergines and creamy *dal makhani* of rare quality.

Or go shopping. The tailors around the lake will knock up a shirt or pair of trousers for a fiver if you give them one you want copied. Or perhaps Sir fancies a morning coat *sherwani*? Perfect, if you are invited to one of Pushkar's many weddings.

The one we went to had 4,000 guests and a medieval fair of attendant cooks grilling chapatis on hot coals and deep-frying batches of koftas and poppadoms in pans that could have held a whole sheep if Pushkar was not strictly vegetarian.

As a place to paint, read and relax after the hurly burly of the bigger cities like Agra and Jodhpur it lies between, Pushkar is hard to beat.

We came after the Jaipur Literary Festival so had plenty of books to read on our balcony as we watched the storks swimming the lake or patrolling the shoreside ghats with their elegant, long pink legs; it was so agreeable we extended our stay to a full ten days.

Our last night happened to see a full moon and a planetary alignment that stretched from Mars through Jupiter to Venus on the horizon, so was celebrated as an auspicious event with a Mahaarti, involving three young priests stripped to the waist and juggling flaming candelabra which reflected in the water.

Braziers were lit around the Sunset Café and conversations went on deep into the night as a solitary musician played his flute by the water.

You can jump on an Uber from Delhi – yes, your Uber account will work perfectly well between cities – unless you want to engage with the booking complexities of the Indian train system (you don't, and Pushkar has no station).

And if you do want a pool and a few peacocks, the Pushkar Palace Hotel's guests have visiting rights to its larger sister establishment, the Jawat Singh, conveniently just a few minutes inland by tuk-tuk, where you can decamp for the day.

And rooms cost £60 a night not upwards of £250, as they are for the Heritage ones. I rest my case.

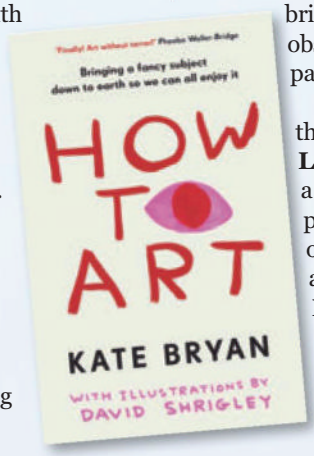
Hugh Thomson's new novel,* Viva Byron!, *imagines what would have happened if the poet hadn't died young

ALAMY

Fireside Reading

LUCY LETHBRIDGE picks Christmas books to delight

Yet again, *Gruffalo*-creator Julia Donaldson heroically steps up to the plate with the perfect Christmas present for the under-fives. **Gozzle** (Macmillan, £12.99) with enchanting illustrations by Sara Ogilvie, is the story of a bear who finds an egg which (spoiler alert) hatches a gosling.



There's another novel out by master storyteller William Boyd. **Predicament** (Viking, £20) is his second Cold War espionage novel starring accidental spy Gabriel Dax. In this one he uncovers a plot to assassinate the charismatic young John F Kennedy.

Revenge of Odessa (Bantam, £22) by Frederick Forsyth is the (very) long-awaited sequel to *The Odessa File,* published in 1972. Forsyth died this summer aged 86 so there is an added poignancy to the appearance of this novel, set in 2025, in a world vastly different than that of 50 years ago. It is co-written (or completed?) by fellow spy novelist Tony Kent.

Look Closer: How to Get More Out of Reading (Fern Press, £20) by English professor Robert Douglas-Fairhurst might be the book finally to get someone young (or old) off their smartphone. It digs away at literary classics of all sorts to find out why and how they work. Paying close attention is the key to reading well and the reward is … well, life-changing.

The Shrapnel Boys (Usborne, £7.99) by Jenny Pearson is about a group of boys in war-time London who race each other to collect fallen shrapnel. It's full of freedom, fear and adventure, perfect for a nine to twelve-year-old with a historical bent.

That wonderful poet John Burnside died last year at the age of 69. Now Jonathan Cape has published his last volume of poems, **The Empire of Forgetting** (£13), in which there are meditations on nature, faith (in old gods as well as more conventional ones) and death to give deep pleasure to poetry readers.

How to Art: Bringing a Fancy Subject down to Earth so We Can All Enjoy It by art historian Kate Bryan (Hutchinson, £16.99) looks intriguing. She is determined to take the high-falutin' out of art and bring back the pleasure in observing, making, painting.

Talking of observation, the sumptuous **Utterly Lazy and Inattentive** is a new collection by photographer Martin Parr of ordinary British life in all its strangeness. Loosely, it's a kind of autobiography, starting with Parr's suburban childhood when he was an obsessive collector of oddities and noticer of his surroundings. 'Utterly lazy and inattentive' is a school report once said of him; how wrong that was. (Particular Books, £30).

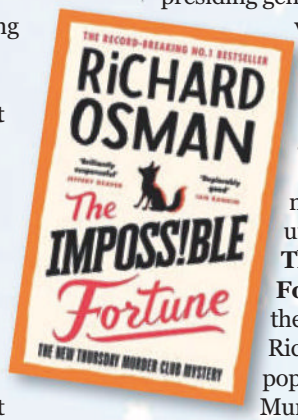
On the subject of making things, I love the look of **Craftland: a Journey Through Britain's Lost Arts and Vanishing Trades** by academic and broadcaster James Fox (Bodley Head, £25). Fox travels round the country talking to the last surviving artisans of ancient trades and skills. Readers will be fascinated to find out what remains and what has gone forever.

Dame Mary Berry, born in 1935, has seen some cooking skills come and go. In **Mary, 90** (BBC Books, £28), out just in time for Christmas browsing and a new TV series, she revisits some 'timeless' recipes for her legions of fans. And there is a picture of her on the cover looking extraordinarily sprightly and holding a layered chocolate cake. A safe bet for home bakers.

Thirty-a-week is the new five-a-day and it refers to plants and how we should eat a lot more of them.

Testament to the popularity of notching up every different plant we consume over seven days is Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall's **How to Eat 30 Plants a Week: 100 Recipes to Boost your Health and Energy** (Bloomsbury, £25), which was a number one *Sunday Times* bestseller. This is just the book for a new year re-setting of our beleaguered microbiomes. And chocolate is a plant!

The Killer Question (Viper, £18.99) is another fiendish murder mystery from Janice Hallett, best-selling author of *The Appeal* and presiding genius of twisty crime. A village pub lies boarded up and empty, its landlords apparently missing. Whodunnit and what did they do?



And there's another not-all-that-cosy village under the spotlight in **The Impossible Fortune** (Viking, £22), the latest adventure for Richard Osman's insanely popular The Thursday Murder Club. The unlikely retirement village sleuths are at it again, outwitting murderers and policemen with minds honed razor sharp on crosswords over breakfast.

Persephone Books have unearthed another neglected and surprisingly modern mid-twentieth-century novel. **Hop, Step and Jump** by Winifred Watson (£12) is a story of love and upward mobility in the 1930s.

Rowan Pelling, who introduces the new edition, admires the 'candidness about sex and the exploration of female self-determination.' In the catalogue, it is covered by the entries 'adultery, love story, north of England, sex, working women' – which gives a pretty good idea of what to expect and enjoy.

GETTY

Crafty: apprentices at a carriage works, 1903

What Not To Wear

HUGH ST CLAIR on the curse of the Christmas jumper

Whilst most of us men wear tasteful blue, grey and fawn jumpers in the autumn and winter the approach of Christmas seems to be an excuse to go crazy in the woollen department. And why not? 'Tis the season to be jolly after all.

Some of us take this as an excuse to wear ones adorned with teddy bears, antlers and Christmas trees. Indeed, The Christmas Jumper Shop, an online retailer, has sprung up to fulfil the desire of fun-loving revellers. They sell jumpers decorated with a tree that lights up and flashes and his and hers matching gaudy garments – not so flattering for her.

Apparently, some asset managers and lawyers give their new employees an initiation ceremony by making 'fun' jerseys obligatory at the office Christmas party to loosen inhibitions.

Gathering popularity is the phenomenon of 'The Ugly Jumper Party'. Paperless Post, the online greetings card company, has a template invitation which reads Who's the Ugliest of Them All? – you are invited to 'break out your very worst'.

It may not be a good idea for a young single guy or girl to go on a first date in a novelty jersey.

What might happen is brought into sharp relief in the film *Bridget Jones's Diary*.

Her mother has invited Mark (Colin Firth) to her Christmas party in the country. Talking to camera, Bridget looks at Mark's back affectionately and remarks, 'Ding Dong, maybe this time Mum has got it right. Maybe this is the mysterious Mr Right I have been waiting to meet my whole life.' But when he turns up wearing a green pullover decorated with a pair of antlers, her reaction is, 'maybe not'.

Don't despair. Thanks to the sheer amount of choice it's possible today to wear something that gives a nod to the festive season and winter cheer, but is stylish not ugly and would appeal to discerning men and women young and old.

Norwegian fishermen have always worn sweaters in tasteful dark blue, dark red and black, edged in subtle modernist snowflake motifs below the neckline or on the sleeves. Fair Isle sweaters are very fashionable again. They come with a neutral-coloured base with a yoke or overall pattern in green and red and other colours too.

Renée Zellweger and Colin Firth in *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001)

On Christmas Day, parents with teenage children are best advised not to wear something that draws attention to themselves. They could be subject to mockery and seen as 'ridic and sad' in the language of their offspring.

Conversely, it's completely acceptable for Grandpa and Grandma to wear a snowman, a reindeer or a Christmas tree on their chest, indeed it could be seen as rather charming and cosy and likeably eccentric. After all their role is to deflect and smooth the tensions at this often-fraught occasion.

> It's completely acceptable for grandparents to wear a snowman, reindeer or Christmas tree on their chest

At our family Christmas, a peace-maker, usually a grandparent, has to come up with a form of comic relief following a fight over who will perform what tasks for the preparations of the feast. The grandparent can order everyone to dress up in their all-wearable presents – not just scarves, socks and hats, but a wet suit and bikini if gifted.

Polymath Gyles Brandreth, not known for his modesty and subtlety, says he wore more than a 1,000 novelty woollen garments during his TV days in 1970s and 1980s.

He reckons what you wear gets more attention than what you say. Designed by former sculptor George Hosier, Gyles and George has become a knitwear brand.

'I am proud that my jumpers (some call them sweaters) have been favourites with popstars and royalty since the 1980s, counting Princess Diana and Elton John among the fans. More recently Kim Kardashian, Pete Davidson, and the cast of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* have been spotted wearing them,' he boasts.

In a trend started by the Victoria and Albert Museum for fashion exhibitions in London the Petersfield Museum and Art Gallery in Hampshire held a two-part exhibition in 2023 called 'Gyles Brandreth: Fun and Fabulous Jumpers'.

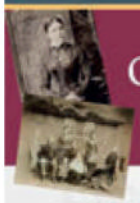
Who knows? Today's novelty sweater might be exhibited as a historical garment of cultural interest a hundred years from now.

They certainly won't have been eaten by moths, given they are made from 100 per cent acrylic and other man-made fibres.

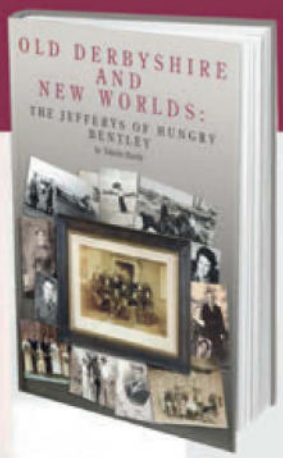
VOICES FROM THE EXPLOSION Valerie Hardy

The largest ever explosion in Britain was colossal - and it was accidental and until the Hiroshima bomb was the biggest unnatural explosion on earth. At 11.11am on 27th November, 1944 the Second World War came with a terrifying suddenness to a small village in the heart of England when nearly 4,000 tons of bombs exploded - a tonnage three times greater than fell on London during the worst night of the Blitz - transforming the peaceful rural surroundings into one of horror comparable to the battlefields of the Western Front in the First World War. Yet have you heard of it or do you know anyone who has? The catastrophe was hushed up as an official secret and although spy and saboteur stories abounded locally the largest crater in Europe remains unknown: a war grave like none other.

Told for the first time through first-hand eye-witness accounts and personal testimonies by the people who lived through the event and its aftermath this is an important and unique chronicle of a disaster the nation forgot: a catastrophic event which has become a mere footnote in the history books. Available from www.ypdbooks.com T: 01904 431 213



OLD DERBYSHIRE AND NEW WORLDS:
THE JEFFERYS OF HUNGRY BENTLEY *by* Valerie Hardy



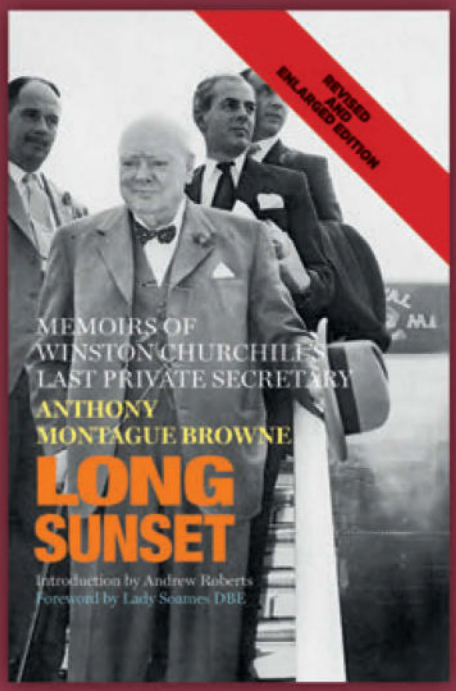
This is the story of 'Jefferyland': the story of the Jeffery family of Derbyshire who have farmed in the Dove Valley area between Ashbourne, Derby and Uttoxeter for around 400 years. The medieval 'lost village' of Hungry Bentley and the Riddings Farm were home to six generations.

The Jeffery story tells of a vanishing world: a story of a family through thirteen generations with its roots in the land and whose members are now spread around the globe. Through a treasure trove of family letters, diaries, memoirs and photographs from the 1800s to the present day it reveals not only who the family's ancestors were but also glimpses of how they lived, what they wore and even what they ate.

This meticulously researched family history brings to life an era of social change not only in the farming world of Derbyshire and the prairie lands of North America, but also for those Jefferys who sought their fortunes outside a life of farming.

SPECIAL OFFER VOICES NOW £10 (WAS £15) OLD DERBYSHIRE NOW £15 (WAS £25)
Both books are available from YPS, Amazon and all good book shops

ypsyork publishing services amazon



"Utterly Engaging. It is full of wit, mischief, affection."

– Alistair Horne, The Times.

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The Spirit of Christmas

A disastrous present for Harold Pinter taught SIMON BERRY a lesson about giving spirits

I've got it wrong before, I admit.

I once had to present Harold Pinter with a bottle from 25 of his 'best friends', at a dinner to celebrate his 75th birthday in the cellars of Berry Bros in St James's Street. My task was to find something from his birth year, 1930, a vintage Michael Broadbent described as 'execrable'. As any wine from that year was undrinkable, I turned to spirits.

Single 'vintage', 75-year-old whisky or Cognac was ruinously expensive 20 years ago (now it's prohibitive). So, I found some delicious 1930 Armagnac from Nismes-Delclou and presented it to Pinter after dinner.

He took it from me and paused (of course). 'I don't drink Armagnac,' he snarled, putting the bottle back in its carrier bag. I wilted. His friends wilted, retreating into embarrassed small talk, eyes averted from the birthday boy. Not one of them thought to say the obvious: 'There are 25 people here who do like Armagnac – so bring the brandy glasses!'

Oh well. There are several simple lessons to be learnt from this sorry tale, as you puzzle over Christrmas gifts for your hard-to-please friends.

But one of the main lessons is don't avoid spirits. Quite the reverse. Spirits, especially barrel-aged ones like whisky, Cognac and Armagnac, make splendid presents. Designed to be sipped thoughtfully over a winter's evening, they can appeal to traditionalist and iconoclast alike.

A Speyside single malt is the safe choice, but whisky (or whiskey, in certain guises) now comes from practically every country on earth, with wonderful examples from Japan, Taiwan, Australia and, increasingly, England.

English whisky is beginning to be quite the thing, having lurked beyond the horizon for years. While the much more visible English Artisan gin scene has been booming, only now is the *raison d'être* for all those new distilleries becoming evident. While you can turn a tap and sell gin almost instantly, it takes years for whisky to reach maturity in wooden casks.

Harold Pinter in Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* (Royal Court Theatre, London, 2006)

And now mature whiskies are emerging, the gins, having provided the cash flow to keep the distilleries going, will begin to thin out a little.

This Christmas may also represent the last chance to buy American whiskey, before Rachel from Accounts spots the trade imbalance and slaps a reciprocal tariff on them.

Thanks to the craft boom, every US state now has at least one distillery – including Hawaii and, perhaps less surprisingly, Alaska. My favourites recently have all come from Texas – both Bourbon and Rye, as drunk by 'them good ol' boys' (clearly *Oldie* subscribers) in Don McLean's immortal line.

And don't forget rum – rapidly shrugging off its 'n Coke image and being discovered as a serious spirit which really benefits from cask ageing. Rum is now made on every inhabited continent, with over 60 countries producing at least one.

Traditionally made from molasses in sugar-growing regions, it's not just from Caribbean islands, but also the South American mainland including Guyana, Belize, Venezuela and Colombia.

Far flung islands produce memorable rums too. Mauritius has raised its game, while Fijian rums often carry hints of tropical fruits or banana.

Avoid the spiced varieties – the spice usually masks inferior spirit – and look for single vintage bottles, or those with an 'age statement'. The older the better. Time in wood adds layers of complexity and finesse, though it inevitably raises the price.

As for Cognac and Armagnac: yes, despite the Pinter debacle, I still recommend them. The best come from small producers, sometimes offering remarkable value. A 20-year-old Armagnac can be a revelation for somebody who's never strayed beyond supermarket brandy.

The beauty of spirits is that they last. Your recipient doesn't have to drink them immediately (unless they invite 25 friends round that evening). The bottle can sit in the drinks cupboard for months – even years – until the right occasion. Or be tackled one delicious glass at a time.

And the chief lesson from my encounter with a curmudgeonly, graceless Nobel Prize-winning playwright? Not 'don't give spirits' but 'know your audience'. If you suspect your recipient's tastes are inflexible or hostile to generosity itself, don't even bother. Possibly offer a bottle of Wincarnis, if there's one lurking at the back of the cocktail cabinet. Just to annoy them.

But for everyone else? Something aged in oak, designed to be poured in small, civilised measures, and enjoyed slowly as a gale batters the windows and the Christmas lights glow. That's the Christmas spirit.

Armagnac: not for Harold

This was Sylvia's promise to you...

A generation ago, a woman named Sylvia made a promise. As a doctor's secretary, she'd watched stroke destroy the lives of so many people. She was determined to make sure we could all live in a world where we're far less likely to lose our lives to stroke.

She kept her promise, and a gift to the Stroke Association was included in her Will. Sylvia's gift helped fund the work that made sure many more of us survive stroke now than did in her lifetime.

Sylvia changed the story for us all. Now it's our turn to change the story for those who'll come after us.

Stroke still shatters lives and tears families apart. And surviving a stroke is just the start of a long and gruelling recovery journey. If you or someone you love has been affected by stroke – you'll know just what that means.

You can change the story, just like Sylvia did, with a gift in your Will. All it takes is a promise.

You can promise future generations a world where researchers discover new treatments and surgeries, and stroke survivors and their families have the support to find the strength and determination they need to find their way back to life.

Your promise today gives strength for tomorrow. Please, leave a gift in your Will to the Stroke Association.

Find out how by calling 020 7566 1505
or email legacy@stroke.org.uk
or visit stroke.org.uk/legacy

Finding **strength** through **support**

Stroke Association

Christmas tweaks

Our beauty editor MARY KILLEN recommends anti-ageing treats for non-offence-taking oldie friends

Veil cover cream

The famous plastic surgeon Sir Archibald McIndoe identified the need for a skin camouflage product when treating RAF burns victims during World War II.

The Guinea Pig Club volunteered to test the products knocked up by the chemist Thomas Blake.

Veil Cover Cream is the modern day result, and proper victims have been able to get it on prescription from the NHS since 1975.

However, for vanity purposes, it provides all-day coverage for acne, birthmarks, scars and tattoos.

You can only buy it from John Bell & Croydon. So send off for a £7.49 matching kit and ten trial shades, with £5 off your eventual purchase of £22.49

veilcovercream.co.uk

Neck lift tapes

My old friend Anne used a Bulldog Clip to pull back her neck when being photographed for her London Freedom pass – 'The pain was worth it so I don't have to look at a photo of my hideous crepey neck every day'.

Now she could have used one of these affordable neck tapes, as used in Hollywood. Around four inches long and super sticky, they look like a 'sanitary towel for a midget' but don't worry: your hair will cover them.

Easier if a friend helps you. Place the adhesive section on the back of your neck then stretch it across until you see the smoothing effect down your neck's front. Then secure the other end. If if it's not tight enough, you won't achieve the desired effect. Too tight – it'll be uncomfy.

byseraya.com

Vita Liberata body blur

Instant High-Definition Skin finish will work miracles for those who whose still shapely and cellulite-free legs are spoiled by navy blue spider veins.

This high-definition skin finish really does seem to blur out scars and veins. £33.

vitaliberata.com

Dr Harris's eau de toilette

St James's 1684 is inspired by the ornamental reredos in Christopher Wren's St James's, Piccadilly.

The majestic reredos, carved by Grinling Gibbons, features plants, botanicals, shells and birds, partly captured on the bottle's label.

Notes of rose, cabbage rose, freesia, pear and lime feture in this unisex fragrance, as in the wood carvings. 50% of sales go to St James's Church, Piccadilly's Wren Project.

From £22.

drharris.co.uk

> The pain was worth it so I don't have to look at a photo of my hideous crepey neck every day

Luna London handbag mirror

A handbag mirror is de rigueur for oldies. Well-wishers don't tell you when you have a stiff black hair marching out of a mole or lipstick on your teeth.

Luna London's elegant five-inch, rechargable mirror fits in your palm and has seven times magnification and a LED light, so you can choose morning, midday or evening lighting conditions. £39.99.

lunalondon.com

Suri electric travel toothbrush

This is expensive at £105 but perhaps a main present for a loved one.

Millions of electric toothbrushes are discarded annually. Neither batteries nor plastic biodegrade, causing huge landfill problems.

The Suri has recyclable plant-based heads and you need never throw away the aluminium body as it is rechargeable with a one-month battery life.

The motor is quiet and there's a magnetic mirror mount, so you don't have that messy charging area. Available in five colours. 'Accidentally' leave the price on, so your recipient will appreciate your wonderful generosity.

trysuri.com

Aesop herbal deodorant

Anti-perspirants are bad – stop sweat from leaving your body and you might as well put a cork in your bottom. Terribly bad to trap it inside. But deodorants are a different matter, especially this one with ingredients like sage leaf and wasabi extract – sounds more like a canapé. £27.

shop.aesop.com

JONATHAN MARGOLIS finds some simple, life-enhancing gadgets

The technophile's dream

A large proportion of the new technology I get sent to write about could be described as solutions in search of a problem.

It's also the case that about 80 per cent of these are far too complicated, bloated with confusing, intrusive options nobody needs or wants.

So I've chosen these life-enhancing gadgety gift ideas to be, above all, more fun than faff.

For patriotic music -overs

British HiFi, even when made in China, is rightly sought after the world over.

Ruark, a family hifi firm in Southend-on-Sea, Essex, has been making top-quality, elegant and reasonably-priced kit for 40 years. Their new bookshelf wireless stereo system, the MR1 Mk3 is quite superb at a £399.

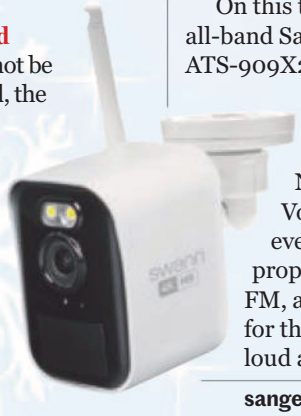
I've been using the Mk1 version for

years with my computer, and it's still remarkable. This new version has even better sound quality.

ruarkaudio.com

For the security-minded

A security camera may not be the most festive gift. Still, the peerless Aussie home security blokes Swann are the kings of easy to install and work.



Most of these wireless cameras are solar-powered, and many don't need WiFi. Even hundreds of yards from your house, you'll get quality video night and day.

You can spend nearly £1,000 on the MaxRanger 4K, but the new, more basic Evo Wireles Solar is £99.99, cause for celebration in my book.

uk.swann.com

For health enthusiasts

Ice baths and plunge pools are a trend in the, ahem, 'wellness' world.

I tried the new British Monk Smart Ice Bath so you don't have to. I felt surprisingly OK for three minutes at the beginners' recommended 8c and a definite warm glow lasted all day.

The health benefits of regular icy plunges are well documented. The price may make you feel less well though - £5,995

discovermonk.com

For Tony Hancock impersonators

It's amazing and gratifying that ham radio is not only still a thing, but it's also booming.

On this terrific all-band Sangean ATS-909X2 radio, airline pilots, shortwave-broadcast propaganda stations, such as entertaining North Korea's Voice of Korea and even Radio 4, in proper old-school FM, are all yours for the listening, loud and clear.

sangean.com

For the, um, forgetful

If I see an intersting ad on the Tube or think of something important while out and about, I go through a rather tedious process of emailing it to myself.

There's now Braintoss, a wonderful, almost excessively simple app (just £2.99) for that.

You can make a note, take a photo or make a short recording with barely more than a button press, and it will then send you an email to remind you of the reminder.

And, no, I have no idea how you give someone a phone app as a gift.

braintoss.com

For World War II re-enactors

Flying radio-controlled aircraft is hard and can lead to disasters and piles of splintered balsa wood. This crashproof model is a great discovery.

Perfected (inevitably) by a Chinese company, these models are easy to fly and great fun.

I paid £100 for its VolantexRC Spitfire, but it can now be found for £67.

I like to think of flying model aircraft as a modern update on kite-flying for spiritual renewal. Indeed many RC pilots write online about the emotional and meditative aspect of flying and the sensation of 'becoming the plane', as if you were soaring around yourself.

volantexrc.eu

Jonathan Margolis is Air Mail's *technology correspondent*

Gifts for gardeners

NIGEL SUMMERLEY picks tools for keen but infirm gardeners

As we get older, we may be able to enjoy spending more time in the garden, but too much stooping, crouching, kneeling and hard labour can take their toll. Here are some presents to help prolong an active gardening life

Double deal

The **Clever Garden Tool Stool** (*below right*)really is a toolbag and a stool all in one. It has a sturdy metal frame but is foldable and light to carry around. Its compartments can handle all your essential bits and pieces – and the seat will support you when you need to take the weight off. £33.99
gardeninggifts.co.uk

Take a stand

Even the fittest of us can sometimes do with a hand up after a stint of kneeling and planting or weeding. The **Wubushan Standing Aid** could be a welcome accessory for almost all of us.

The central handle helps spread the weight across the base, and the base gives reliable support on uneven ground. £20.99
amazon.co.uk

Gripping idea

Peta's Easi-Grip ergonomic garden tools, with their vertical rather than horizontal handles, are designed specifically for gardeners with arthritis, but may well suit anyone who finds conventionally designed tools awkward to use. Involving less pushing and twisting of the wrist and arm, they may even prevent stress and strain.

There are four tools: weeder, fork, cultivator and trowel. £16.95 each or £59.95 for the set of four
peta-uk.com

Top hat

Gardeners know the value of a good hat – to protect from sun as well as rain. It's hard to find one hat that will suffice in all circumstances, but the **Rydale's wide-brimmed wax cotton hat** is stylish and 'weather-resistant, allowing it to be worn in all seasons'. It's available in navy blue, brown and olive green. £22.99
rydale.com

The Good Life (1975)

Weed killer

The versatile **CobraHead weeder** was invented by Wisconsin organic gardener Noel Valdes, when one of the tines on an antique tool he was using broke off.

Mounted in a short handle, the blade is brilliant for weeding and digging holes for planting.

Some liken it to a mini pickaxe with multiple uses, but it's especially good for rooting out tangles of weeds. £39.99
amazon.co.uk

Glove in a cold climate

Warm 'n' Waterproof produces what it calls the **Ultimate Winter Glove** in – perhaps rather old-fashionedly – female and male styles (that means pink and dark green respectively). Either way, their latex coating is waterproof, they have good grip and a warm lining and are said to be usable in minus 20C (if you are likely to still be wanting to garden at that point). £12.99
treadstoneproducts.com

Kind cuts

Pruning is essential and can be highly satisfying but also physically wearing – especially if you already have trouble with your hands.

Bahco secateurs have a rolling handle that rotates over the palm of your hand as you snip and so spreads the workload. £70.52
amazon.co.uk

Give knees a chance

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Christmas Prize Quiz

Three fine bottles of Taylor's Vintage Port go to the winner of our quiz – set by MARCUS BERKMANN

1. Who, in 2016, fatally called the people who didn't vote for her 'a basket of deplorables'?

2. Who was the only character in the original *Dad's Army* series who was played by the same actor in the recent *Dad's Army* film?

3. Which phrase, now commonly used to refer to a weakness or character flaw, is derived from the interpretation of a dream by Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, by the prophet Daniel?

4. Which building, whose present structure dates from 1245, has the postal address 20 Dean's Yard, London SW1P 3PA?

5. When international dialling codes started to come into the telephone system in the 1960s, only three countries were given the honour of having single-digit codes.

The US, with Canada coming along for the ride, have number 1. Which country has number 7?

6. What have been set in New York (frequently), 19th-century Russia, the year 2173, Barcelona, Paris and four times in London?

Sir Isaac Newton

7. Sir Isaac Newton was Master of the Mint between 1700 and 1727. But it ceased to be an independent position in 1870. Who, by default, is Master of the Mint now?

8. Penguin Classics have black spines. Penguin Modern Classics, having had silver and white spines, are turquoise again. What colour are Vintage Classics? Graham Greene, Virginia Woolf and Italo Calvino are among their authors.

9. Which 1987 American novel, filmed in 1990, took its title from a series of conflagrations in the late 15th century? The most infamous took place in Florence in 1497, when supporters of the Dominican priest Girolamo Savonarola set fire to a number of objects they deemed to be 'occasions of sin'.

10. The actors Stacy Keach and Joaquin Phoenix, the singer-songwriter Richard Hawley, politician the Rev Jesse Jackson, the gunfighter Doc Holliday and, by all accounts, Tutankhamun shared what visible and relatively unusual physical characteristic?

11. Which came first: Yogi Bear, the well-known cartoon ursine, or 'Yogi' Berra, the well-known baseball player? Or, to be precise, which one was 'Yogi' first?

Yogi Bear

12. Which US President died on August 2nd, 1923, aged 57, after just two years in office, reportedly from a cerebral haemorrhage?

13. *Jack's Return Home*, by Ted Lewis, was the original novel on which was based which seminal 1971 British crime movie, starring Michael Caine?

14. Paul McLean, a 24-year-old reporter on the *Financial Times*, was killed in 2017 while on holiday in Sri Lanka, in what unusual manner?

15. In 2013, who became the oldest person ever to receive as ASBO when, at the age of 89, he threatened a fellow resident at the Peckham care home where he had ended up? He died the following year.

16. Louise Brown is now 47. In 1978 she became the first person to be born by what method?

17. Mount McKinley in Alaska is famously the highest mountain in the USA. Native Alaskans, however, have long been furious that their enormous hill is named after a deadbeat president who never even went there. They prefer to call it by its original name. Which is what?

18. What was the smallest British banknote, by value, until 1970?

19. Who was the drummer in the band Dr Teeth and the Electric Mayhem?

20. A naturalist, originally studying marine mammals in Cardiff but then switching to conifers in Nicosia, travels to work in Santiago but finds it too cold. He moves to hotter climes in Doha, only to suffer from mucous inflammation. He tries a spell selling lubricants in Athens, and finally settles in Seoul to spend the rest of his working life. Given his track record, where might he choose to eat Christmas dinner?

(This question was shamelessly stolen from *Round Britain Quiz*.)

THE PRIZE

Three single quinta vintage ports from Taylor's Port are the prize for the first set of correct answers drawn out of a hat. See p12 for more details to buy at the exclusive *Oldie* price of £113.95. Email your entry to: *comps@theoldie.co.uk*, subject heading Xmas Gift Quiz Prize Draw. Closing date: 28th November 2024. Result: on oldie.co.uk, 2nd December.

WIKIMEDIACOMMONS

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- ☐ **£150** can help provide **life-changing cleft surgery** for a child.
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I Once Met

Tina Turner

As I didn't know more than three people in Los Angeles, it was John Edwards, the LA showbiz correspondent for the *Daily Express* who set up the encounter in 1985.

I had just been contracted by Paramount Pictures to join the writing team for a new comedy series, and that meant moving from my quiet existence in north London to the razzle-dazzle of Beverly Hills.

John was determined to introduce me to some people he thought would smooth my way into the social whirl of the town. He started by having me invited to dinner with Jeff Bridges.

Then John told me how much he would like me to meet film director Russell Mulcahy, who was about to shoot an MTV video for Tina Turner's new single, 'We Don't Need Another Hero'. John had spoken to Russell, who invited me to join Tina and him for dinner at the Palm restaurant that evening.

The previous day, a woman had knocked on the front door of my large Beverly Hills mansion and asked me, 'Are you the Limey who works at Paramount?'

I told her probably, and she invited me over to her to play tennis with her husband, who was always looking for new partners. I accepted her kind invitation and an hour later I was hitting balls with none other than Charlton Heston.

When I went into work on Monday morning and was asked if I'd had a good weekend, I told them about Charlton Heston being so kind to this lonely stray. One wit on our team commented, 'He's only been here a few days and already he's playing tennis with God!'

I turned up at the Palm waiting for a man I had never before met and I didn't know what he looked like. I asked the manager to tell me when Mr Mulcahy turned up and point me in his direction. He was due at 8pm, but by half past, no film director.

At around quarter to nine, in walked Tina Turner. I recognised her. Who couldn't? She sat quietly at the bar. When, at ten past nine, there was still no sign of Mr Mulcahy, I tentatively approached the rock goddess.

'Excuse me – you are Tina Turner?' I said stupidly.

'I am,' she replied.

'Well, I'm Laurence Marks and I am supposed to be meeting Russell Mulcahy at eight o'clock to have dinner with you and him. He doesn't seem to be here.'

'No, he doesn't,' said Tina provocatively.

Tina invited me to join her for a drink and ordered two cocktails that had far too much bourbon in them. And when we'd finished those, she ordered two more. Still no sign of the elusive Mr Mulcahy.

Tina and I talked all about my job at Paramount Pictures and she told me all about how life had been for her since she had her huge hit the year before with 'What's Love Got to Do with It'. We got on extraordinarily well and I made her laugh.

'I need some cheering up, Laurence,' she told me. 'You cheer me up,' she added as she ordered another two too many cocktails.

Simply the best: Tina Turner

When we both realised we had drunk too much – although she could hold her drink far better than I could – and we had lost our appetites, she turned to me, smiled, took my hand, and said, 'Laurence, let's party!'

I had nothing else to do, so I said, 'You got it, Tina.'

And boy, did we party!

Laurence Marks, who wrote, with Maurice Gran, *The New Statesman* and *Birds of a Feather*

MEMORY LANE

My lost world of Eastbourne vests

In 1955, I left school at 15 and went to work as a 'junior' in a high-class gentlemen's outfitters in Eastbourne.

Very little was on show for a customer to touch. Most things were tucked away in boxes or glass-fronted drawers. Trousers were folded in three, in piles according to size; all in shades of grey, with just one pile of lovat green and fawn.

The customer sat at the counter and the requested items were brought out.

The bane of my life were the dreaded hosiery packets. They contained underwear neatly folded between two pieces of glossy white cardboard, secured by two crossbands of white string. No plastic anywhere.

Stored on a shelf, they had to have the label showing, with the white string lined up exactly in the centre – or else you got ticked off.

You had to check a customer's simple request for a 'vest for my husband' (the women did most of the shopping) pretty carefully to avoid taking down and opening too many packets.

Men's vests came in round neck, button front, long sleeve, short sleeve, singlets, cotton or wool, all in five different sizes. Twenty-five packets – just for vests! Underpants came as long, trunks, briefs, button front or elastic waist.

With a ditherer, or worse – an argumentative husband and wife – the poor assistant could end up with a counter full of cream outer papers, cardboard and string. All to be done up again and reshelved.

The shop was the official stockist for six boarding schools. Parents would arrive with a school's list, covering everything from school cap to house shoes and tuck box.

A 'school order' could take the assistant up to two hours to complete.

Parents would try to beat the system. Where the list called for 'six day shirts', they would buy four. Once term started, we would get a message from the school matron: 'Smithers Minor has come with only four shirts; please send two more.' The parents would be charged by the school accordingly.

There were ten independent men's outfitters in Eastbourne then. Today there is none.

By James Tomsett, Polegate, East Sussex

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

READERS' LETTERS

The Oldie, 23–31 Great Titchfield Street, London, W1W 7PA *letters@theoldie.co.uk*
To sign up for our e-newsletter, go to www.theoldie.co.uk

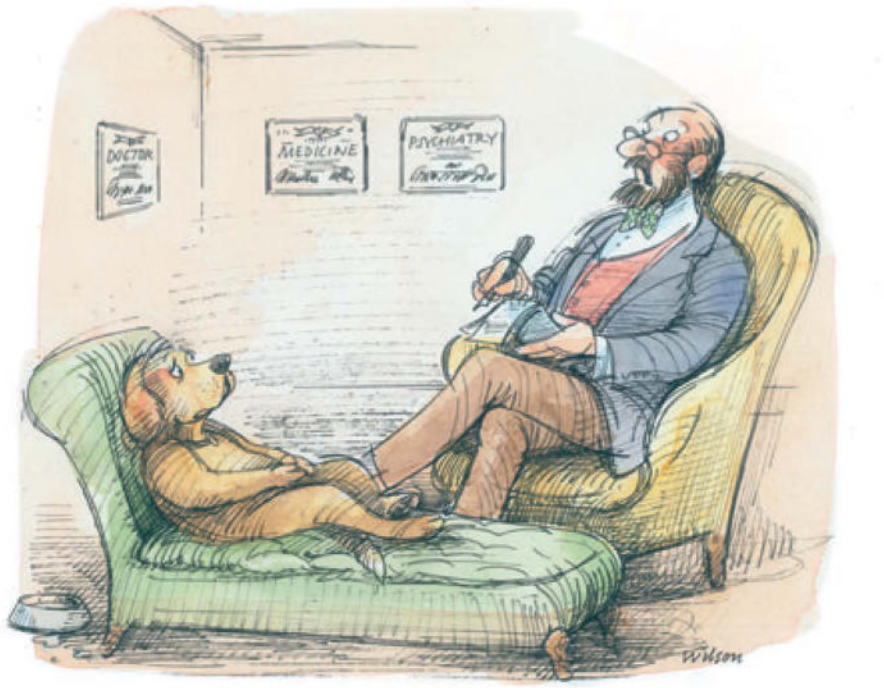
Boycott's tough delivery

SIR: The letter from John Gilbertson (September issue), which referred to Sir Geoffrey Boycott telling his friend to 'bugger off' when he asked him for an autograph, reminded me of my own more successful but transactional meeting with Sir Geoffrey.

As a 14-year-old, I attended the Nottinghamshire v Yorkshire County Championship game at Worksop in the summer of 1972. At the end of the day's play, in which he'd scored a magnificent century – so was presumably in a good mood – I was hanging around outside the pavilion when the great man appeared and was about to make his way to his car.

I sheepishly asked, 'May I have your autograph, please, Mr Boycott?' to which he replied, 'Aye, lad, if you can carry my bag to the car for me.' I subsequently struggled with his large, bulky cricket bag, but duly completed the task and was then delighted when he thanked me and signed my autograph book, before happily going on his way.

Yours faithfully,
David Francis, Tokyo, Japan



'Would you like to tell me who's been calling you a bitch?'

Salute Sergeant Snudge

SIR: I was delighted to find a reference to my childhood crush, Bill Fraser (in 'The Army game' by Piers Pottinger, October issue). A strange choice for a little girl, to be sure, but I wrote a fan letter to 'Sergeant Snudge', saying how sorry I was that the other soldiers always made fun of him. I was delighted to receive this signed photo [*right*] in exchange.

Best regards,
Maggie Cobbett, Ripon, North Yorkshire

Sergeant Snudge in *The Army Game*, c 1959

Winnie-the-Pooh shock

SIR: Mr Brandreth's celebration of Pooh's centenary (October issue) revived a very uneasy memory.

I was sitting in my bath at about the age of, I suppose, three and I asked my mother, 'What's this called?'

My mother – who missed being born a Victorian by just a few months – replied, 'That's your tiddley pom – but we don't talk about it.'

Imagine my perplexity when, about a year later, I first had *The House at Pooh Corner* read to me, including the poem 'The more it snows' with the forbidden word repeatedly pronounced.

I do now know the correct anatomical name.
Patrick Bennett, Pyrford, Surrey

John Nott's one-liner

SIR: John Humphrys is wrong about John Nott ('Broadcast news', October issue). When Robin Day asked Nott why Robin Day should believe a 'Here-today-and-gone-tomorrow politician', Nott should have replied, 'Then what's the point of your interviewing me?'
Stephen Halliday, Cambridge

Firefly's chilly welcome

SIR: As always, an interesting article by Mary Killen (October issue), but I am sorry to point out that Noël Coward's home Firefly is no longer open to the public. On a visit to Jamaica at the end of 2023, I was keen to visit, but was told it had closed its doors during the Covid pandemic and not reopened them – and the place was deteriorating.

I was also frustrated in my hope to visit Ian Fleming's Goldeneye – but that was because it had been turned into an upscale resort by Chris Blackwell, who did not welcome hoi polloi such as me.
Penny White, Chester, UK

Wurzels eulogy

SIR: I am an Anglican priest and, like Rev Michael Coren ('Funerals to die for', October issue), have lots of memories of funerals for a wide range of people. Sometimes, as in his example, there could be humorous elements.

After becoming pensioners, my wife and I moved to a town in mid-Somerset known for, among other things, its cider-making. One funeral was for a man, separated from his wife, who had a reputation as an alcoholic.

When I met some of his family before the service, they said he wanted a Wurzels track, 'Drink Up Thy Zider', played after the formal part of the service.

A golden rule from funeral directors was that a CD played at a funeral service should be in their hands by at the latest the previous day, so the church or crematorium staff could be briefed on which track to play.

The funeral director and I arrived for this funeral, at Bath crematorium. No CD had reached them; the one to be played was handed over when the family arrived. As the formal part of the service ended, I nodded to the crematorium staff to play the track. Over the system came 'I've got a brand-new combine harvester, I'll give you the key…' After a quick check with the nearest mourners, it was stopped.

On the way out, a man said to me, 'He was obviously getting his own back – he gave up booze a while back.' Happy days!

Rev Tony Birbeck, Wells, Somerset

Malevolent Pleasence

SIR: The roll-call of voice-over artists made interesting reading in the October issue ('In good voice' by Andrew Roberts), and the mention of Patrick Troughton being one of a select band being able to terrify an audience is worthy – but the master in that sphere was surely Donald Pleasence.

Although I could never replicate the gentle malevolence in his voice, to creep up on a girl and say, 'I am the spirit of dark and lonely water,' was the audio equivalent of handing her a spider.

Even now, grown-ups shudder at that public-information film.

Regards,

Vivian James Wigley, Mackworth, Derby

In praise of handwriting

SIR: I enjoyed reading Quentin Letts's article 'RIP handwriting' (October issue). It is obvious he enjoys handwriting in its many forms, as do I.

Has Quentin heard of the Handwritten Letter Appreciation Society? It is a society of people with the same aim – to keep alive the art of handwritten letters. If he, or any other readers, would like to find out more, founder Dinah Johnson would love to hear from you. Contact her at thlas@outlook.com.

Yours,

Chris Platt, Orkney

No appeasement

SIR: I am writing to endorse A N Wilson's tribute (October issue) to Louis MacNeice's *Autumn Journal*. The opening of Canto V on the run-up to Munich in 1938 fits today extremely well if 'Trump' is substituted for 'Hitler' and 'War'. These lines especially:

'And we think "This must be wrong, it has happened before,
Just like this before, we must be dreaming;
It was long ago these flies
Buzzed like this, so why are they still bombarding
The ears if not the eyes?"'

A N Wilson assumes that the Oxford election of 1938 won by the pro-appeasement candidate Quintin Hogg was for the University. In fact it was for the City.

The previous Conservative majority was halved by the Master of Balliol College, Sandie Lindsay, after both the Labour and Liberal candidates withdrew to allow him to campaign against Munich as an Independent Progressive.

The 'decent' anti-Munich side then won two by-elections, in Dartford and Bridgwater. In 1940, Hogg, a discontented army officer as well as an MP, recanted his support for appeasement and helped to overthrow Neville Chamberlain.

Yours sincerely,

Richard Heller, London SE1

And so it begins…

Don't just sit there…

SIR: One suspects that Matthew Fort's advancement of Dynamic Inertia (October issue) should be taken with a pinch of salt. Did his adventures on a Vespa in Sicily contribute to the development of this philosophy?

One can only speculate how we would have ended up had we all decided to adopt his viewpoint all the time. It may, perhaps, have its occasional merits – although I would argue that ignoring letters from the Inland Revenue is unwise.

On a more serious note, when one considers the work done by relief agencies, for example, it is heartening to think that most of us do not put Matthew's ideas into practice as a matter of course.

Nick Birbeck, Exeter

Blueberry thrill

SIR: I will take issue with Simon Courtauld (Kitchen Garden, September issue) on the question of blueberries.

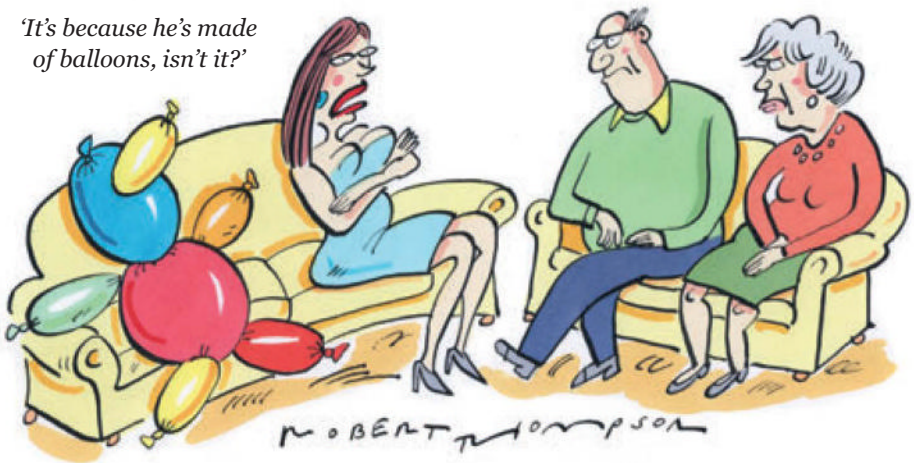
I have two bushes in pots on my patio. They have been there for two years, growing well, and this year burst into production. I picked well over a kilo of fruit and they were delicious, tastier than those from the supermarket. My neighbour has five bushes which produce enough fruit for her to freeze for future use.

While allowing for the climate benefits of living on the south coast, I still say growing your own blueberries is well worth it.

Sincerely,

Mrs Janet Riley, Bournemouth, Dorset

'It's because he's made of balloons, isn't it?'



Books

GARY WING

Katherine Mansfield with Virginia Woolf, D H Lawrence and Ottoline Morrell

Kiwi polish

A N WILSON

Katherine Mansfield: A Hidden Life

By Gerri Kimber

Reaktion Books £20

What makes us gobble down the biographies of writers, who, for the most part, do little but write, and work as journalists, and have quarrels and love affairs?

Surely it would be more interesting to read the life of a great military leader, or a scientist changing the destiny of humankind.

Yet the lives of scribblers continue to sell, and in the case of Katherine Mansfield (1888-1923), New Zealand's answer to Chekhov and Guy de Maupassant, there have been umpteen prurient books.

Part of the explanation must be that many writers have defied the teachings enshrined in Larkin's 'Toads' poems and given up the sensible, mind-numbing concept of 'work'. In the case of Mansfield – real name Kathleen Beauchamp – this was because her quite well-heeled Kiwi dad, Sir Harold, gave her a modest allowance, and educated her in London (Queen's College, Harley Street). Thereafter, there was no stopping her plunge into *la vie Boho*.

The present biographer, Gerri Kimber, has been pursuing 'Mansfield studies' for years, and is well-equipped to rehash the tale. The promiscuous schoolgirl with the pageboy bob; the bisexuality (but far more men than women); the frequent pregnancies, always sorted out by some doctor or backstreet practitioner; the gonorrhoea and possible syphilis, wiping out her immunity to tuberculosis; and her death at the age of 34.

No wonder she did not have time to complete a novel and specialised in the short story. Copulation on this scale – with all the tear-stained dramas that surround it – takes time.

Kimber passes over the notorious fact

that one of these stories, 'The Child Who Was Tired', is a direct crib of Chekhov, a fact that caused a scandal when it was pointed out; and which embarrassed the editor of *New Age,* the little mag that got Mansfield's career off the ground.

But Kimber has unearthed, with the help of a colleague, John Wood, much more than was ever known about Mansfield's affair with the editor, A R Orage, who was what used to be called a Man of Letters – in his day highly esteemed.

His interest in not only sex but the Wisdom of the East led, when Mansfield became ill, to her going for a quack cure in an establishment at Fontainebleau, where the guru was G I Gurdjieff – the sort of charlatan our present King would fall for hook line and sinker.

Had she stayed in some reputable TB clinic in Switzerland, might she have survived? Her second husband, John Middleton Murry, certainly thought so.

Kimber takes us through the familiar horrors of Mansfield and Murry's relationship, both with each other and with the Bloomsbury Group, with Ottoline Morrell, and with Frieda and D H Lawrence.

When Mansfield became really ill, Lawrence wrote, 'You revolt me, stewing in your consumption.' Kindly Virginia Woolf wrote, when she first met Mansfield, 'She stinks like a – well – civet cat that had [sic] taken to street walking.'

Such malice – and the pregnancies and illnesses – take up more space in this book than consideration of the short stories – which are, plagiarism apart, haunting, varied and re-readable.

The most famous, 'The Garden Party', is a marvellous depiction of middle-class affluent indifference to the suffering of the poor on their own doorstep. 'The Life of Ma Parker' and 'The Lady's Maid' are undoubtedly masterpieces. But it is hard not to feel that the fascination for the biographers is in the sex life.

Kimber has unearthed the written testimony of Mansfield's first husband – a music teacher called George Bowden – so we now know that this union was not, as he claimed during the divorce proceedings, a *mariage blanc*.

She married him because, already pregnant by a Kiwi boyfriend, she was insatiably demanding in bed – even during her affairs with Orage, Murry, her old schoolfriend Ida and many others.

This book is clumsily written and repetitive. Virginia Woolf's stinking-civet-cat remark is repeated. We are told three times about her 'first' meeting with Murry.

And an editor should have saved the author from sloppy prose. 'The never-ending saga of Mansfield's life' is a sadly inappropriate way of describing the flickering of this brief candle.

I ended the book by returning to the stories, and feeling sorry for poor Mansfield, who was – even Leonard Woolf recorded – hilarious company, and a basically good egg.

There is 'too much information' about the STD. I thought of Tennyson's description of having your biography written. He said he did not want to be ripped open like a pig.

A N Wilson is author of The Victorians

Biden's mouthpiece

CHRISTOPHER SANDFORD

Independent: A Look Inside a Broken White House, Outside the Party Lines

By Karine Jean-Pierre

Grand Central Publishing £25

When I was a fresh-faced trainee at America's CBS network 45 years ago, journalists were still by and large like old-fashioned messenger boys.

Here was a piece of news, there was the public, and your job was to ensure that the one was delivered to the other in as efficient and courteous a way as possible.

The idea of personally imposing yourself on the transaction was unthinkable. To employ diffidence and self-restraint was as mandatory then as, it seems, some form of cloaca-tongued exhibitionism is today.

Of course, our fall from the ideal of Reithian gravitas can't be laid entirely at the door of Karine Jean-Pierre, 51, President Biden's voluble White House press secretary from May 2022 to January 2025, but I fear her instant memoir on the experience is another step down that road.

It's a shame, because Jean-Pierre has a timely and, in its way, salutary story to tell. She was born in Martinique, probably in 1974 (reports vary), the daughter of Haitian immigrants. She moved to the USA when she was five. She did well at school, read prodigiously and went on to graduate with top honours from New York's Columbia University.

A long spell in the trenches of the Democratic Party organisation eventually led to her appointment as President Joe Biden's primary interface with the world.

As Jean-Pierre frequently reminds us, she's an openly gay woman of colour who's struggled with mental-health issues, and thus might be said to come equipped with a full set of the credentials needed to succeed in the modern-day left-of-centre political establishment.

To her many admirers in the American media, she was both a brave truth-teller and a courageous defender of the Biden regime. Of course, it could be argued that only one of these things could have been true at one time.

Judiciously edited, all this might have been the compelling backstory to a case study of the American Dream in action: from impoverished ghetto upbringing to riding in the presidential limousine.

Instead, we're rather browbeaten with the idea that the author sees herself not as one of life's commendable high achievers, but as a victim of prejudice, misogyny, homophobia, sexism and the like, with the pantomime villain of Donald Trump and his myrmidons in what she calls the 'right-wing axis' as the chief latter-day culprits.

To hear Jean-Pierre speak of it, the current Washington regime is a mixture of authoritarianism and buffoonery – the Third Reich as interpreted by the Marx Brothers – and a singularly dark vision of the American soul.

When not relating her list of personal grievances and setbacks, Jean-Pierre has an illuminating story to tell. She was there to witness the tumultuous events of June and July 2024, when the wheels spectacularly came off the Biden re-election campaign.

It says something for our celebrity-obsessed culture that, according to

'It's much more cost-effective than building an ark'

the author, the lethal blow to the President was struck not by his own senior party colleagues, but by the widely popular if – let's be frank – possibly somewhat passé film actor George Clooney, writing in the opinion pages of the *New York Times*.

'It was a gut punch,' Jean-Pierre observes. 'The fallout left me reeling,' she adds.

Again, it tells you how far we've all gone in our veneration of Hollywood stars, even ones of Clooney's magnitude, that his editorial could prove to be the tipping point that single-handedly persuaded the Democratic Party establishment to turn on its own with such ferocity. Biden fell on his sword just 11 days later.

'I still never thought it would happen,' Jean-Pierre writes, rather curiously adding, 'The president was the descendant of Irish immigrants who held firm to his convictions. He'd never let his enemies win, I thought. He'd never quit, even though the attacks on him were beyond ugly and cruel.'

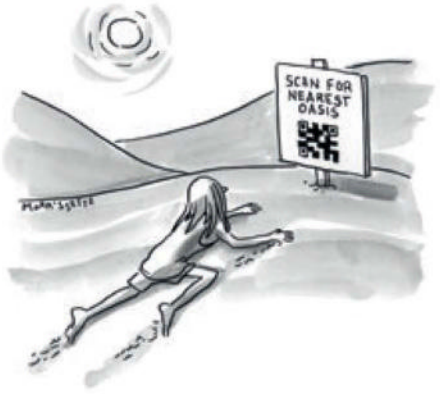
Nonetheless, Biden did quit, with the ultimate result we all continue to live with today. The author of this book was sufficiently moved by her former boss's treatment at the hands of the Democratic elite to tear up her party-membership card – hence the title of this memoir.

Still, Jean-Pierre appears to be in no hurry to join the Republicans. 'Trump is the tip of the spear, but his party have been stoking racial and other resentments for sixty years,' she writes, before treating the reader to a potted history of the pervasive American bigotry and oppression that only a few hardy individuals like her have been lucky enough to surmount.

All this is rather rushed through in a few pages, although the point could not be more starkly made. According to Jean-Pierre, the Western world's lone acknowledged superpower is currently in the grip of a trigger-happy madman, America's main opposition party is too corrupt or effete to be worthy of the name, and we're all likely to be blown to hell as a result.

It's a chilling thesis, which the author advances with some force. Just one final cavil. The words 'Black' and 'white' are so rendered throughout the text, even as the author continues to insist that we should all be as perfectly colour-blind and immune to any form of discrimination between the races as she is. Really?

Christopher Sandford is author of 1976: The Year that Scorched



Soft power

MARK BOSTRIDGE

Soft: A Brief History of Sentimentality

By Ferdinand Mount

Bloomsbury Continuum £20

The first thing to say about Ferdinand Mount's *Soft* is that it's great fun.

There was always the possibility that a book subtitled *A Brief History of Sentimentality* might entrap its reader in a quagmire of sticky treacliness.

However, Mount breezes through a thousand years with wit and ingenuity. In this, his 30th book, he demonstrates intellectual agility worthy of an erudite mountain goat, taking massive leaps and bounds. He is utterly fearless in the connections he makes between great political turning points and corresponding developments in the manner in which we express our feelings on what he calls our bumpy road to love.

Of course, we've long been accustomed to thinking of 'sentimentality' in a derogatory sense. If you accuse someone of being sentimental, you're basically telling them that they're a fake. You're saying that their display of feeling is exaggerated, excessive and self-indulgent. Oscar Wilde offered a useful definition of a sentimentalist as 'one who desires to have the luxury of an emotion without paying for it' (pretty rich coming from the man who wrote *The Happy Prince*).

In our own time, the use of 'sentimental' as an insult has become a synonym for the 21st-century vice of 'virtue-signalling'. Allied to the idea of sentimental do-gooding is the issue of how appropriate it is to weep for the misfortunes of strangers.

The classic example of this in modern Britain was the hysterical reaction, in 1997, to the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. Who can forget the anguished wailing that accompanied her cortège, asks Mount, who goes on to quote Boris Johnson pouring scorn on 'this Latin American carnival of grief'.

For Mount, though, the culture wars between feeling and unfeeling have been constant throughout history. He confidently breaks them down into three periods, three revolutions of feeling in which sentimentality has had the upper hand.

The first sentimental revolution began with the emergence of courtly love and the songs of the troubadours at the end of the 11th century in Languedoc. To be in love was seen as the very summit of experience.

This passionate ideal passed over into religious observance: the cult of the Virgin Mary was surrounded by sentimental adoration, and Christian pilgrims wept at the slightest provocation (Margery Kempe, the English mystic, infuriated her companions on a visit to the Holy Land because she wept so much that she nearly fell off her donkey when re-enacting Christ's entry into Jerusalem).

The second sentimental revolution similarly ignited with a literary innovation, the publication in 1740 of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, the progenitor of the modern European novel, where 'feeling is everything'.

The third and final sentimental revolution, which Mount suggests we're still living through, began with the summer of love in 1967.

In each instance, the overflowing of feeling, where passion and sympathy dominate, or are at least allowed equal standing with reason, has been accompanied by an outpouring of practical benevolence.

In the Middle Ages, it encouraged the building of churches and hospitals, In the 18th century, it saw the evolution of a new attitude towards man's inhumanity to man, not least in the active enlistment of sympathy in the campaign to abolish slavery.

The 1960s in Britain witnessed a host of social reforms – reforming the outdated laws governing homosexuality, divorce, abortion and so on – loosening the restrictions imposed by the state on ordinary people, making their lives easier and happier.

But sentimentality is always on the defensive. A sentimental revolution tends to be followed by a stony-hearted reaction to the very idea of allowing sloppy compassion to swamp common sense.

Mount gives plenty of examples of this revulsion against 'tears and sloppiness'. Carlyle was not alone in attributing the ideology of the French Revolution to the 'putrescent rubbish of sentimentalism'. Dickens was criticised by John

MOMENTUM TRADING WORKS

Although it has its critics, it is generally accepted that momentum trading works. Today, it is widely used by professional investors, and it has been championed by legendary historic figures.

In the summer of 1891, a 14-year-old farmer's son ran away from home with $5 in his pocket. Thirty-eight years later, having spent his entire adult life as an investor and trader, he was worth over $100million – equivalent to $1.3billion in today's money. His name was Jesse Livermore, and his immense success was largely due to one investment strategy – momentum trading. This remains just as effective today as it was 100 year ago.

The theory of momentum trading, like all the best ideas, is simple – the greater the amount of money that is being invested into a fund, or asset class, the quicker its value will rise. This, in turn, will attract further investment, pushing the price even higher. Obviously, the opposite also applies. As a fund or asset class loses investors, the upward momentum ceases and it will reverse, gaining impetus in the opposite direction. Time to move your money and exit stage left!

Another very successful momentum investor was a man called Richard Dennis. He was born in Chicago in 1949 and in the early 1970s started to trade commodities with a small loan from his family. By 1973 this had risen to $100,000 and by 1975 he was a millionaire. By the early eighties he was said to be worth more than $100million.

It was at this time that he and his long-term friend, the financial genius Bill Eckhardt, made a bet – that any sensible person with training and a supply of relevant financial information could become a successful momentum trader. It goes without saying that Dennis won his bet. He selected 20 or so novices ('turtles'), gave them $1million each, and let them loose. Three years later their combined value was $175million.

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Douglas Chadwick, founder of Saltydog Investor

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saltydog investor

Ruskin for displaying 'logic of feeling' in his novels, but no thought. A century on and the Forces' Sweetheart, Vera Lynn, was removed from the airwaves, after the fall of Singapore, for fear that her 'sentimental' songs would undermine the 'virile' nature of British troops.

A powerful image, not mentioned by Mount, but which illustrates widespread suspicion of vulgar sentiment, is that of Lewis Carroll's Alice swimming in a pool of tears. Wonderland has distracted Alice from reason, and the pool of tears is her punishment for her giving in to her emotions.

By the end of the book, Mount has outed himself as a major flag-waver for sentimentality. Deride it as futile mawkishness if you will, but it may lead to practical benefits. Sentimentality, he concludes, is indispensable to human flourishing.

For, after all, as William Blake wrote, 'a tear is an intellectual thing'.

Mark Bostridge is author of In Pursuit of Love

Like father, like son: Henry VIII's son, Edward VI, aged one, holding his rattle like a sceptre, by Holbein (1538). From Christina Faraday's The Story of Tudor Art

Anyone for Tennyson?

THOMAS W HODGKINSON

The Boundless Deep: Young Tennyson, Science and the Crisis of Belief

By Richard Holmes

William Collins £25

The premise of Richard Holmes's new book is that there are two versions of Tennyson (1809-92) and one of them is far more interesting than the other.

The later one is Queen Victoria's beloved, bearded bard, the patriotic patriarch, who in later life liked nothing better than to read aloud the entirety of his long poem *Maud* to a large audience, only occasionally breaking off to murmur to himself, 'Yes, that *is* good!'

Then there's the earlier version, the younger one, to whom I would refer as Real Tennyson. Before he grew the beard, the poet cut a dash. True, he was a bit of an odd fish, reeking of tobacco, awkward socially, and never the smoothest of suitors.

His first words to his future wife, Emily, when he caught sight of her, were 'Are you a dryad or an oread, wandering here?'

He was tall, physically strong and strikingly handsome, with a leonine wave of hair, to judge from the superb portrait of him by Samuel Laurence, done when he was in his early 30s. And, of course, he had a phenomenal facility, unmatched in any age, for the musicality of the English language.

Real Tennyson is the subject of Holmes's excellent biographical study, which begins with his childhood in rural Lincolnshire under the shadow of an abusive alcoholic father, and his precocious years at Cambridge.

Holmes puckishly likens the unexpected rising of the behemoth in his undergraduate poem 'The Kraken' to the moment in *Jaws* when we see the shark up close for the first time. This poet, it was clear, was going to need a bigger readership.

The way he finally found it forms the climax of this book. When he was in his twenties, his best friend Arthur Hallam, also in his twenties, died of a stroke. Tennyson poured his grief into a cycle of 133 sombre, searingly honest poems, which he worked on in secret for 17 years.

Some of his friends thought he was being lazy, until these poems broke to the surface in 1850, when he was 41. In spite of the determinedly uncatchy title – *In Memoriam A H H Obiit MDCCCXXXIII* – the volume proved a publishing sensation.

The Boundless Deep works best in its account of the charisma and quiddity of Real Tennyson, and in Holmes's sure literary criticism, which excels in its adjectives. He calls that hefty *In Memoriam* title 'marmoreal'. One ringing phrase he calls 'heraldic'.

He praises the 'conversational' stanzas of Philip Larkin – this in an intriguing passage, where he notes the loss of metrical skill in modern poetry, to the point where he wonders if, today, we can even really hear Tennyson.

The book is less convincing in its organising theme, which is Tennyson's engagement with science. In a sense, this is an inversion of the theme of Holmes's earlier book *The Age of Wonder*,

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which presented figures such as William Herschel and Humphry Davy as the scientific counterparts of the Romantic poets, many of whom were their friends.

The Boundless Deep presents Tennyson (the last of the great Romantics) as, if not a scientist, someone who was interested in science, thought and wrote about it and had a couple of friends who were scientists. But was this uncommon?

The best exhibit is a few stanzas of *In Memoriam* – central ones in his greatest work, it's true – where the author's grief takes on a planetary scope, as he bleakly considers how nature cares more for species than for individuals, and whether our species will itself ultimately end, as others have before.

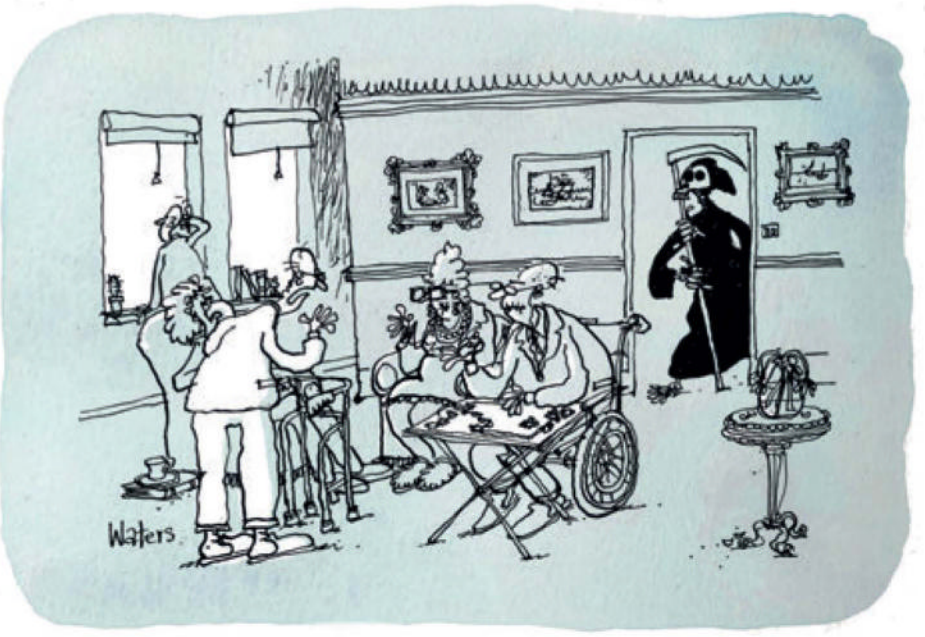
Nevertheless, I was left wanting to know more. Tennyson was friends with John Tyndall, the Royal Institution professor, who worked out why the sky is blue. Ditto William Whewell, his tutor at Cambridge, who coined the word 'scientist'.

What did he learn from Whewell? What did he talk about with Tyndall? And how is science a better prism through which to understand the poet than the theme of love, say, or empire?

In Memoriam is rife with scepticism and existential doubt. That's what makes it great. Yet as publication day approached, Tennyson lost his nerve and penned a prologue that affirmed his faith in God and rejected all the question marks to come.

A month after it appeared, he married. By the end of the year, he was Poet Laureate. It was his transition from the aesthetic stage of his life to the ethical one. He went from being a private poet to a public poet.

Thomas W Hodgkinson is author of How to Sound Cultured



'We're gonna rush him. Who's with me?'

Marlowe murder mystery

ALAN JUDD

Dark Renaissance: The Dangerous Times and Fatal Genius of Shakespeare's Greatest Rival, Christopher Marlowe

By Stephen Greenblatt

Bodley Head £25

Poet and playwright Christopher Marlowe was born in 1564, the same year as his sometime collaborator William Shakespeare.

Of humble origin, he gained a scholarship to Cambridge, where he fell in love with classical authors – Ovid especially. He also undertook confidential government work as a courier or spy for Francis Walsingham's secret service before dying, aged 29, in a fight he provoked.

By then, he was both famous and notorious for seven plays and five significant poems and translations.

This account by Stephen Greenblatt, a distinguished American scholar of Renaissance literature, adds nothing to the known facts of Marlowe's short, vivid life. Understandably – since, unless new evidence emerges, there is nothing new to be said.

But Greenblatt's knowledge of the times, and of that remarkable phenomenon the Elizabethan theatre, makes this essential reading for anyone interested in Marlowe and his period.

If we can't know what Marlowe was thinking, feeling or doing at a given time, Greenblatt argues, we can make reasonable assumptions if we know what others around him were writing, reading and reporting.

Greenblatt is also wise enough not to trip too far down the primrose paths of speculation and conspiracy. Ever since Marlowe was killed – by a knife thrust two inches into his head above his right eye – speculation has swirled about him.

This is partly because there appeared to be no coroner's report into his death, despite the fact that violent deaths in Elizabethan England are surprisingly well-catalogued. The result was a slew of conspiracy theories – he had been killed by a bawdy serving man in an argument over a wench; the Queen wanted him dead because of his atheism (free-thinking, as it was then called); he was the victim of court intrigues between the Earl of Essex and Sir Walter Raleigh; he knew too much from his secret service; he was homosexual.

In 1925, another distinguished American scholar, Leslie Hotson, found the coroner's report in the National Archives, but this seems to have done nothing to lessen our insatiable appetite for conspiracy.

Nearly everyone who writes about Marlowe, in non-fiction or fiction (I confess myself among the latter), indulges it. Greenblatt, to his credit, doesn't – or not very much.

He wants to believe it was Marlowe's atheism that got him killed, but is too good a historian to push that very far. He's right that Marlowe was on bail at the time of his death – but it was as a witness, not a suspect.

He also acknowledges yet another American Marlowe scholar, Constance Brown Kuriyama, who argues that 'the simplest and most probable hypothesis is that Marlowe was not assassinated…'

This is true. Although it is possible that the coroner's report was drafted to conceal an elaborate assassination, there is simply no evidence for it. Nor is there need for any.

Greenblatt's portrait of Marlowe paradoxically argues against his own conclusion by evoking a man with a history of violence in thought, opinion and the flesh – 'There really was something unanticipated, unforeseen and sudden about Marlowe.'

The coroner ruled that Marlowe's killer acted in self-defence. Of the four men who 'ate and drank and were

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in good parts' that fateful day, only one – Christopher Marlowe – had court appearances for violence. Think of him as England's Caravaggio or as a character from Dostoyevsky 300 years before his time.

Greenblatt's description of the cultural and legal contexts of Marlowe's dramatic evocations of atheism and homosexuality sheds more light on the man himself than might any amount of more personal speculation.

His spying, scepticism and what Greenblatt calls his 'transgressive imagination' were essential ingredients of a mind that reimagined Hell – 'I'll willingly be damned,' says Marlowe's Faust. Had anyone said that before?

For Greenblatt, Marlowe is the 'supremely eloquent expression' of the English Renaissance. His iambic pentameters were comparable to the introduction of talkies into cinema, changing English verse.

He wrote, or at least began, *Tamburlaine* while still at Cambridge; it's a play that renders 'everything in Elizabethan theatre as pre- and post-*Tamburlaine*'.

In *Doctor Faustus,* his greatest work, he turned an ancient legend into 'the single greatest tragedy ever written about an alienated intellectual', initiating the dramatic representation of the inner life that led, through the quill of an even greater writer, to *Hamlet*.

Anyone interested in Marlowe and his world should read this account. It is incomplete, of course, but that's part of the fascination of its subject.

Alan Judd, The Oldie*'s motoring correspondent, is a former soldier and diplomat*

Mind games

NICHOLAS LEZARD

When Everyone Knows That Everyone Knows ... Common Knowledge and the Science of Harmony, Hypocrisy and Outrage

By Stephen Pinker

Allen Lane £25

Stephen Pinker, Johnstone Professor of Psychology at Harvard University, has a knack for the catchy title.

He has got better at this over the years. He started with *Language Learnability and Language Development*, which to be honest does not exactly grab one by the lapels. But he's got it down to a fine art now, with

'We have a very fine pre-ban Yorkshire hosepipe'

How the Mind Works, *The Better Angels of Our Nature* and *Enlightenment Now* being particularly good; and *When Everyone Knows...* might be the best of all.

It is itself recursive, as is his whole project, which can be summed up as 'thinking about thinking'. (This title has, alas, already been used, and more than once.)

This talent extends to the chapter titles. It has to, really, to draw us in. 'The Emperor, the Elephant and the Matzo Ball' is what kicks off this book.

'The Emperor' refers to the story 'The Emperor's New Clothes'. How the elephant and the matzo ball come into it I am not so sure.

My attention had been hijacked by Pinker's assertion that ' "It's common knowledge that the police around here can be bribed" ... is almost the opposite of the meaning of the technical term from game theory and philosophy that we will explore in this book.' Oh.

This is very much the Pinkerian shtick: to provide one with something that seems almost pointlessly obvious, and then bend it around until we feel like Winnie-the-Pooh – bears of very little brain. There is also a lot of explication here, and I am afraid that, for me at least, some of it was redundant because of what I've just said.

Still, there is a lot here to take note of and to like. There is a lot about the prisoner's dilemma here: that game-theory chestnut about two accomplices in separate cells weighing up the personal advantages of ratting out the other or not.

And there are cute cartoons such as one of three logicians in a bar being asked if everyone wants a beer. The first two say, 'I don't know.' The third says, 'Yes!'

If you can't work out why the third says, 'Yes!', then either this book is not for you, or you need it more than most.

Be warned: 'But the Prisoners' Dilemma is just one out of seventy-eight ways in which the outcomes of two players facing two choices can be ordered.' I will take his word for it; a reference is cited in the footnotes.

Sometimes you get the feeling that half the book is the bleeding obvious, and half of it very much not. There is good stuff in here – lots of it – but when he starts talking about prior reasoning and posterior reasoning, you may be distracted, as I unfortunately was, by his choice of the words 'priors' and 'posteriors', and wish that he'd stuck to the Latin terms instead.

But my puerility on encountering all these posteriors was really only a sign that I was failing fully to grasp what he was saying.

It's where the applications of Pinker's reasonings bleed into the world of realpolitik that you feel a little uneasy.

A paragraph in the chapter titled 'The Department of Social Relations: Social relationships as coordination games, played with symbols, reputation and face' boils almost three centuries of the history of outraged reactions by states – from the War of Jenkins' Ear to the current situation in Gaza – down into something that sounds a little glib: the idea that history is a matter of applying one or more of the 78 versions of the prisoner's dilemma.

That is perhaps an unfair reduction of Pinker's method; but there is one really glaring real-world problem that this book doesn't address, simply because it wasn't written in time.

And that is Donald Trump's second term of office – even the little of it we have seen so far. With his presidency, all the nice cosy chats with graduate students that, as Pinker acknowledges, inform much of this book are now out of the window.

He alludes to Trump a few times here – once, tellingly, in conjunction with something called the madman theory. But, as we all know now, Trump 2.0 is very different from Trump 1.0.

And there is an all too real chance that this book will be as wrong-footed by events as was Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* (the last four words of that title now largely forgotten).

I do hope I'm wrong. Pinker is ever the optimist.

Nicholas Lezard's From the Castle to the Hove-l: Volume 3 of The Down and Out Chronicles *is out on 13th October*

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It's good to know who hates you and it is good to be hated by the right people.
Johnny Cash

I do not want money. I do not want wealth. All I ask is that people humbly and honestly sink to their knees and worship me.
Tim Brooke-Taylor

I did not regret it at the time and I don't regret it now. I have never felt a moment's regret.
Reggie Kray on a life of crime

My idea is that there is music in the air; music all around us. The world is full of it, and you simply take as much as you require.
Edward Elgar

My father said, 'You must never try to make all the money that's in a deal. Let the other fellow make some money too, because if you have a reputation for always making all the money, you won't have many deals.'
J Paul Getty

Elvis was the perfect gentleman. My father was visibly impressed ... Elvis always addressed him as Captain Beaulieu or Sir.

Elvis rarely used first names, even in dealing with people he'd known for years. As he once explained to me, 'It's simple. They've worked hard to get where they are. Someone should respect them.'
Priscilla Presley

You perform for a different audience each night. People who don't understand just think that you go out there every night and do the same thing, but you don't – you have to find out who they are and give it to them.
Rik Mayall

An artist painting a picture should have at his side a man with a club to hit him over the head when the picture is finished.
John Singer Sargent

Just as, in travel, one may miss seeing the sunset because one cannot find the ticket

Johnny Cash (1932-2003), 1958

office or is afraid of missing the train, so, in even the closest human relationships, a vast amount of time and of affection is drained away in minor misunderstandings, missed opportunities and failures in consideration or understanding.
Iris Origo

A marriage is no amusement but a solemn act, and generally a sad one.
Queen Victoria

A man at work, making something which he feels will exist because he is working at it and wills it, is exercising the energies of his mind and soul as well as of his body. Memory and imagination help him as he works.
William Morris

I'm kind of long in the tooth to fly in a cape now, so I'd have to be, like, the voice of reason or somebody. 'Don't do that, super-fellow!'
Eddie Murphy

TOM PLANT

Internet overload

For the first 50 years of my life, I managed perfectly well without a mobile phone, the internet, Facebook, Google, Instagram, X, TikTok, emails, websites or online publications.

Now I can't survive for a minute without them. When my broadband connection went down recently, taking everything with it, I discovered I could no longer operate. I could not send or receive emails, do research or order or read anything online.

All my expensive high-tech up-to-the-minute devices suddenly became useless, and I was stranded. I had articles to write, deadlines to meet, bills to pay, friends to contact. I couldn't even book a concert, or a session at the gym.

What had gone wrong? My broadband-provider said my existing router had died, and I needed a new one. This arrived and I connected the wires according to the instructions.

But would the light on the router turn from orange to blue, meaning I was online again? It would not, however much I swore and cursed at it. In the end, I had to wait ten days for an engineer to come and solve the problem, which was finally traced to a fault out in the street.

While offline and pretty much incommunicado, I began to long for an old-fashioned typewriter. Those machines never let you down and didn't depend on an electronic connection somewhere in the ether for them to work.

I understand that Jilly Cooper still writes her bonkbusters on Monica, her ancient manual typewriter.

Good for her for resisting the seductive but often unrealised promises of the online suppliers.

This episode made me realise just how fragile and flaky electronic connections and devices can be. They are massively talked up by the manufacturers, who want you to believe they are some kind of magic. But they are liable to go down without warning, and leave you marooned on a tech desert island, cut off from any effective means of communication.

LIZ HODGKINSON

SMALL DELIGHTS

When you leave a walking stick against a wall and it doesn't fall over.
MALCOLM MCCOIG, EDZELL, ANGUS

Email small delights to editorial@theoldie.co.uk

Arts

FILM

HARRY MOUNT

ONE BATTLE AFTER ANOTHER (15)

Leonardo DiCaprio got his usual $25m fee for *One Battle After Another*.

And you can see why. He is absolutely terrific as Bob – a revolutionary dopehead fighting an evil right-wing administration, brutally cracking down on immigrants in a dystopian America. Ring any bells?

The slightest furrow of Leo's $25m eyebrows communicates a mighty range of emotions. His delivery of lines is utterly believable – so understated that he has to emphasise them only the tiniest bit to produce comedy or poignancy at will.

Leo's support act is almost as brilliant. Benicio del Toro, as martial-arts sensei and fellow revolutionary Sergio St Carlos, has similar gifts as an acting natural.

And Sean Penn nimbly hams up Colonel Steven J Lockjaw, a loony soldier backing the government's extreme racist policies – except in one regard. He has had an affair with Perfidia Beverly Hills (a fine Teyana Taylor), also Bob's lover and the mother of a mixed-race girl, Willa (a rather bland Chase Infiniti).

When Willa grows to become a 16-year-old revolutionary, she is kidnapped by the fascist regime. Both Bob and Colonel Lockjaw fight to get back the girl they think is their daughter; Bob out of paternal love, Lockjaw out of a fear his secret might be discovered.

So far, so beautifully acted. But…

At two hours and 41 minutes, with this dazzling cast and sprawling shots against the wildest back shots in Texas and California, this should be an epic film. Instead, it falls squarely into the Epically Boring Film category.

The Epically Boring Film (EBF) must tick quite a few boxes to qualify. *One Battle After Another* ticks them all.

First, an EBF must be too long. Tick. It must have huge names in it. Tick. It must have a big-name director. Tick – in the shape of Paul Thomas Anderson.

The combination of big actors and superstar director means the producer is too scared to say, 'Um, this film is a little too long and boring.'

As Bruce Beresford – director of Oscar-winning *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989) – wrote in *The Oldie*, mega-directors are over-indulged and given free rein. Thus Christopher Nolan's three-hour *Oppenheimer* (2023) and Martin Scorsese's *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023) – a whopping three hours and 26 minutes.

That indulgence means not just that the EBF is too long in total; most shots are also too long. The EBF is so self-regarding that it rises above that trashy need for good films to engage the audience with quick shots and gripping plots.

The EBF is *never* funny. The self-important writer – Paul Thomas Anderson, in this case – is above the sort of beautifully delivered, perfectly structured, funny lines in, say, *Friends* or *Peep Show*. It helps, too, if the EBF writer can depend on the hefty reputation of the book on which the film is based: in this case, Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland* (1990).

Instead, the 'funny' bits in an EBF are based on a much-loved actor's being a tiny bit tongue-in-cheek, swearing too much or being a little controversial.

Cue Leo DiCaprio's bemused silly-old-dad character not knowing what to call his daughter's non-binary friend – They or Them? It isn't funny and wouldn't have been approved by the writers' room in *The Simpsons* for a second.

The EBF masquerades as being sophisticated by avoiding the supposed clichés of 'entertaining' films. So don't have enchanting music; have plinkety-plonk discordant music instead. Tick.

The modern political undertone makes *One Battle After Another* lazy about the family saga laid on top of it – which is equally boring. If you're going to make a dysfunctional, fictional parallel with the horrors of Trump's America, you've got to make the jump from reality intriguing in itself – see

Diamond in the rough: Bob (Leonardo DiCaprio) in *One Battle After Another*

George Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Animal Farm*.

If the leaps you make into fantasy aren't imaginative enough, you're better off with a documentary.

It's quite an achievement to tick all the EBF boxes. Leo is almost bound to win the Best Actor Oscar. If there were an Oscar for Most Dazzling Performance in a Terrible Film, he'd be a racing certainty.

THEATRE

WILLIAM COOK

THE PRODUCERS

Garrick Theatre, London, until 21st February

Mel Brooks (99 not out) has spent over 75 years in show business, and he'll be best remembered for two hilarious movies he made in his forties – his scandalous spoof Western, *Blazing Saddles* (1974), and his wicked showbiz satire, *The Producers* (1967).

The Producers barely broke even at the box office, but during subsequent decades its reputation grew and grew.

Finally, in 2001, Brooks did what now seems blindingly obvious – he transformed this cult film about a Broadway musical into a Broadway musical in its own right.

Unlike the feature film, the musical was an instant hit – first on Broadway, then in London's West End. In 2005, it even spawned a (sorely underrated) second movie, starring Nathan Lane and Matthew Broderick, who'd played the lead roles in the stage show.

Twenty years later, *The Producers* is back in the West End, directed by gifted polymath Patrick Marber. Has this old warhorse stood the test of time? Yes indeed. Far from becoming stale and dated, like a lot of the best films and plays it's actually improved with age.

Like *Blazing Saddles*, *The Producers* is a jubilant celebration of bad taste. It actively sets out to cause offence. Last time it was in the West End, we were in the midst of Cool Britannia, a much more easy-going, hedonistic time.

Today we live in a more censorious age, an era of judgemental cancel culture. So Brooks's outrageous jokes now pack a much bigger punch.

The plot concerns an ingenious financial hustle: rather than selling 100 per cent of their play to theatrical investors, in the normal fashion, bent producer Max Bialystock and his crooked accountant Leopold Bloom sell off 1,000 per cent of the show – and then set out to mount an outright flop. The idea is that when the show closes on the first night, none of the investors will expect any money back, and these two shysters can pocket the fraudulently inflated budget.

GARY SMITH

Springtime for Hitler: Max (Andy Nyman) and Leo (Mark Antolin)

Bialystock beds a succession of wealthy, randy old women to raise the cash, and then selects the worst script he can find – a demented eulogy to the Third Reich called *Springtime for Hitler* by a fanatical neo-Nazi nobody (a suitably deranged portrayal by Harry Morrison).

He then hires the worst director on Broadway to stage it (a wonderfully effete turn by Trevor Ashley).

Unfortunately, the resultant monstrosity, a limp-wristed paean to the Führer, is so awful that it tips over into farce. The show is a triumph, the investors demand their profits and Bialystock and Bloom are ruined.

I'd always assumed this fiendish scam was the product of Brooks's fertile imagination, but in fact it was based on real life. Brooks once worked for a producer who made love to little old ladies to fund his plays.

He also met 'a couple of guys who were doing flop after flop and living like kings'. 'God forbid they should ever get a hit,' a press agent told Brooks. 'They'd never be able to pay off the backers.'

As Brooks told the *Guardian*, 'I coupled the producer with these two crooks, and bang! There was my story.'

Andy Nyman and Marc Antolin have big shoes to fill as the eponymous producers – not just Lane and Broderick in the musical, but Zero Mostel and Gene Wilder in the original movie. Thankfully, their performances aren't pale imitations. They make these iconic roles their own.

Nyman is scrumptiously seedy as the corrupt, back-stabbing Bialystock – his good looks obscured by a greasy comb-over and a five-o'clock shadow.

Antolin is a tormented tangle of virginal neuroses, transformed into a suave Lothario after he weds Ulla, the gorgeous Swedish starlet (a sensual *tour de force* by Joanna Woodward).

The unseen stars of this timeless show are Marber, who directs with a light touch and a keen eye for detail,

costume designer Paul Farnsworth, who has an absolute ball with the camp Teutonic outfits, and above all Brooks, who was well into his seventies when he (re)wrote this joyful, irreverent romp.

Is it offensive? Only if you have no sense of humour. Esteemed film critic Roger Ebert recalled ending up in an elevator with Brooks when he was accosted by an irate woman.

'I have to tell you, Mr Brooks, that your movie is vulgar,' she said.

'Lady,' he replied graciously, 'it rose below vulgarity.'

RADIO

VALERIE GROVE

The Reunion, on the removal of hereditary peers from the House of Lords in 1999, was pulsing with drama.

The Blair government had pledged in 1997 to boot out this medieval relic. The Welsh call it a crachach, as Ann Beynon told us: an elitist, entitled Establishment gang with an inbuilt Tory majority.

Among the guests were two old hereditaries: Tom (Earl of) Strathclyde, and the Earl of Burford, heir to the Duke of St Albans, descendant of Nell Gwyn and Charles II.

Charlie Falconer, Blair's first peer and former flatmate, said he found himself charmed by the noble lords and the 'languid arrogance' of their manner. (One, hearing Charlie was a lawyer, pulled a crumpled parking ticket from his pocket and asked for Charlie's help.)

Baroness Jay, known in the Upper House as Posh or Scary Spice, said huh, the hereditaries may have been languidly charming and polite to you, Charlie, 'but they were extremely hostile to me. And the atmosphere was one of bullying misogyny.' (All present agreed – she had been horribly targeted.)

The oddest scene came on the historic day itself, 11th November 1999, when Lord Burford, then 34, made his protest, leaping onto the Woolsack and crying treason – 'looking so wild,' said Lord Falconer, 'with your wild beard and wild hair, and not even wearing a suit'. He was frogmarched from Westminster and banished from its precincts in perpetuity ('I can't even enter the Abbey,' he said).

As he was ushered past, Norman Tebbit said, 'Well, that's one way of doing it.' Lord Strathclyde said his protest had been 'quite unnecessary'. Not so, retorted Beauclerk: the Queen is a hereditary; he was standing up for the soul of the nation. 'What was done that day had diminished the lustre of the Crown.'

To refresh her memory of the incident, Margaret Jay had checked in Hansard. 'You'll be rather sad,' she told Beauclerk, 'but all it says is "Interruption".' Kirsty Wark pointed out that the reform of the Lords, failing to reach Stage Two, was an opportunity missed. The House was still bloated, a House of cronies. But Falconer said it was transformative: the grip on power had passed.

It was good to hear the sane, ironical views of the *Guardian*'s Michael White. A thoroughly civilised programme. The producer, Leo Hornak, had chosen the guests well. They were, as lords should be, combative but scrupulously polite.

It is 50 years since the first *Quote... Unquote* was on Radio 4, with Ned Sherrin on the team, plus Tom and Miriam Stoppard. But when Nigel Rees's quarterly *QU* Newsletter arrives, packed with quotable words and intelligent comments, up pops 'Generative AI User Guidelines'.

'This appears to be a long document,' it harrumphs. 'Save time by reading a summary.' Such presumption.

I am thinking of setting up as an AI transcript editor. They say AI will soon be so sharp-witted it will issue its instant verbatim transcripts perfectly, sans errata. I don't believe it for a moment. I think its speedy but absurd transcripts will continue to spread disinformation, with dodgy spellings and laugh-a-minute mis-hearings.

On Gyles Brandreth's Rosebud podcast, Dame Judi Dench asks, 'Shall we recite The Alna Pussycat?' (including 'Piggy said to the Owl, "You Elegant Vowel".') Judi also says she once played Juliet 'for Frank of Severely at the Vic.' Hm. Franco Zeffirelli, perhaps?

Oh, and, in 1969, Gyles recalls, 'John Lennon has married Jurgen Oehner.' Sic! Human intervention required here.

Prizes for philanthropic Michael Sheen, who told Lauren Laverne his father was a Jack Nicholson lookalike. His great-great-grandmother was an elephant-trainer and lion-tamer. Mauled by a lion, she lost a breast; the family kept the lion's claw.

TELEVISION

FRANCES WILSON

It is ITV's 70th birthday – Auntie's groovy nephew is now himself an oldie.

In my 1970s childhood, ITV was seen as risqué and my parents' nervousness about the content made it all the more exciting: the BBC had her nose in the air, but ITV was down with the people.

BBC

The channel's commitment to television as an instrument of social justice can be seen in an unbroken chain of dramas about the impact of power and corruption on ordinary lives.

Aside from *Mr Bates vs The Post Office*, ITV has given us *Honour*, with Keeley Hawes investigating the murder of Banaz Mahmod, and *Stephen* (written by the children's laureate Frank Cottrell Boyce, and Joe Cottrell Boyce), covering Doreen and Neville Lawrence's' crusade to get justice for their son.

In this autumn's stand-out series, *I Fought the Law*, Sheridan Smith gives a stunning performance as bereaved mother Ann Ming, single-handedly overturning the 800-year-old double-jeopardy law to get her daughter's killer behind bars.

We now have *The Hack*, the story of *Guardian* journalist Nick Davies's investigation into the phone-tapping scandal at the *News of the World*. As a result of Davies's reporting, the Sunday tabloid was closed in 2011 and Rupert Murdoch had 'the most humble day' of his life.

Nick Davies is played by an animated David Tennant, who had his own phone tapped and was one of the more than 1,600 people who settled out of court, while Alan Rusbridger, then editor of the

Nick Davies (David Tennant) and Alan Rusbridger (Toby Jones) in *The Hack*

Guardian, is played by Toby Jones. Now that he is identified entirely with Mr Bates, Jones is doomed to represent the moral high ground and he plays Rusbridger as one of the great martyrs.

The Hack, which might have been called *Mr Davies vs News International*, begins in 2008, one year after Andy Coulson's resignation as editor of *News of the World*.

While two of his journalists, Clive Goodman and Glenn Mulcaire, received short prison sentences for eavesdropping on Prince William's staff, Coulson went on to higher things, becoming Director of Communications for David Cameron. He later served five months in Belmarsh and Hollesley Bay prisons.

The challenge for Jack Thorne, *The Hack*'s award-winning scriptwriter, is to turn dogged journalistic trepidation into a seven-episode thriller. How can he dramatise a story built on months of dead ends and unreturned phone calls?

The answer is to speed it all up into a crazy head rush. Tennant spins us through the events by breaking the fourth wall, addressing the audience in manic monologues. In between, he appears as an adult observer in his childhood home, watching his younger self being beaten by his deranged mother, going into dream sequences, chatting in the *Guardian* building to the sainted Rusbridger, or waiting to pick up his kids from school.

We see him at the computer, trying out and deleting multiple beginnings to his story. We see him meet an anonymous source (Mr Apollo) at a hotel room. There, to prove to viewers he will not reveal names, he has five possible Mr Apollos (including Jonathan Ross) open the door to him. 'It's not you,' he says to the first four.

While Tennant is basically playing Doctor Who in a multiverse where anything can happen, the super-subtle skills of Toby Jones are wasted on wince-making lines such as 'My life? This is bigger than me.'

Running alongside the Nick Davies story is the cold-case investigation by Detective Dave Cook (Robert Carlyle) into the 1987 murder of the private investigator Daniel Morgan. Cook's gradual uncovering of the police and media involvement is told without japes or winks at the camera, which makes these sections feel like an entirely separate TV programme.

Carlyle, who played Begbie in *Trainspotting*, still walks like a flick knife and spits rather than speaks. He is thrilling to watch, and his performance makes the pantomime in which Tennant is starring all the more irritating.

It is hard to believe this overly long and self-indulgent mess is the work of the writer of genius who created the flawlessly slick *Adolescence*. Why did Jack Thorne choose the uncovering of phone-hacking to reinvent television drama?

If the format of straightforward story-telling ain't broke, don't fix it.

MUSIC

RICHARD OSBORNE

GERARD HOFFNUNG: THE CENTENARY

I've been meaning to write about Gerard Hoffnung (1925-59) – master cartoonist, humorist, humanitarian, and musical jester par excellence – for longer than I care to remember.

The 50th anniversary of the 1956 Royal Festival Hall Hoffnung Music Festival came and passed. And I would have missed this year's Hoffnung centenary had it not been for a couple of timely prompts.

The first came from an old friend of this column, Dr Andrew Mayes, multitasking music-lover and chronicler of the work of pioneering recorder player – and Hoffnung confederate – Carl Dolmetsch. Browsing in his favourite second-hand bookshop in Cromer while holidaying on the Norfolk coast, he came across *Hoffnung*, Annetta Hoffnung's beautifully written and lavishly illustrated 1988 biography.

The second prompt came from an edition of that wisest and kindliest of Radio 4 programmes Matthew Parris's *Great Lives*, with Hoffnung devotee Harry Enfield as the guest proposer.

Born in Berlin in 1925, Hoffnung was steeped in music from an early age. But it was drawing that preoccupied him. Even when the family was forced to flee – first from Berlin, then from Fiesole, where they'd taken up temporary residence in 1938 – the boy's drawings (more than a thousand in all) travelled with them.

An abnormal boy? 'Perfectly healthy' was the judgement of the paediatrician and two graphologists who'd examined him at the age of 12. The act of drawing was simply the conduit for a highly unusual imagination.

In his entry on Hoffnung in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, our own most celebrated commissioner of cartoons, Richard Ingrams, suggests that the famously subversive German painter and

Master at work: Hoffnung in the 1940s

illustrator Wilhelm Busch (1832-1908) was an early influence on Hoffnung.

I doubt whether Busch ever contemplated portraying that most sainted of instrumentalists, the lady harpist, plying her trade on the spokes of a penny farthing. But he was probably moving in that direction. Not that Hoffnung confined himself to music.

I think of his sketch of three high-hatted chefs armed with a butterfly net, a shotgun and a frying pan, chasing a trio of terrified snails. The cartoon was probably inspired by Hoffnung's memories of the occasion when he informed the chef of Schmidt's, the celebrated German restaurant in Charlotte Street, that his Kassler Rippchen (smoked loin of pork, German style) was using the wrong cut of meat.

The man, who was brandishing a meat cleaver at the time, was not amused.

'Never stand idly by when a wrong is being perpetrated' was Hoffnung's abiding political belief. People remember his 1952 address to the Oxford Union for its brilliant retelling of the bricklayer's misadventures – but it was the message 'Stand up and be counted', quietly but powerfully put, that ended the address.

Happily, the bricklayer and the two Royal Festival Hall concerts are available on a three-CD set from Acrobat Music, *The Comic Genius of Gerard Hoffnung*. As for the cartoons, they're there in abundance on the excellent Hoffnung website, www.gerardhoffnung.com.

Falstaff's boast 'I am not only witty in myself, but the cause that wit is in other men' was evident in the life of Gerard Hoffnung. Hearing those Festival Hall concerts again, I'm struck by the degree to which the spirit of Hoffnung inspired them, while it's the brilliance of the contemporary composers who wrote the musical spoofs that leaves them unwearied by time. I think of Malcolm Arnold, Joseph Horovitz, Elizabeth Poston (composer of the Dolmetsch Ensemble's Tchaikovsky send-up 'Sugar Plums'), Franz Reizenstein, Humphrey Searle, Mátyás Seiber and more besides.

The best-remembered skits are probably Arnold's *Grand, Grand Overture*, a rollicking send-up of the genre, with concertante parts for three vacuum cleaners and an electric floor-polisher, and Reizenstein's *Concerto Popolare*, for which the orchestra has been booked to play the Tchaikovsky and the soloist (Yvonne Arnaud in 1956) the Grieg.

Was that the inspiration for the legendary Morecambe and Wise ('I'm playing all the right notes') sketch with André Previn? That too uses the Grieg concerto, which may not be a coincidence. Hoffnung and Previn had been childhood friends. There's even a photo of them on a beach holiday in 1936, when the routines they'd dreamed up for the children's festivities are said to have had both parents and children convulsed with laughter.

Hoffnung died of a cerebral haemorrhage in 1959 at the age of 34. There was more work to be done. But, as Matthew Parris suggests, he'd already distilled the optimistic mood of the postwar age with a unique brand of humour that was funny yet never unkind.

Peter Ustinov wrote something similar in the foreword to Annetta Hoffnung's biography. 'For such a fellow, what better name than Hoffnung, the German word for hope.'

GOLDEN OLDIES

MARK ELLEN

LOOK BACK AND HANKER

When was rock nostalgia invented? Maybe 1966?

An album called *A Collection of Beatles Oldies (But Goldies!)* appeared that Christmas, which was pretty rich as two of the tracks, repackaged as 'past classics', had first appeared on *Revolver* only four months earlier.

Maybe it was at the Concert for Bangladesh in 1971, when Bob Dylan played just five songs from the early to mid-'60s and nothing contemporary. That was understandable – charity shows need tunes people recognise.

Whatever – the concept of Greatest Hits had arrived.

At this point, a tension emerged between touring acts and the audiences paying handsomely to see them. The crowd mainly wanted familiar songs; the bands, bored of playing them, wanted to flog their new records.

And there's a limit to how many times you can see Neil Young, as I did in 2003 expecting old bangers like 'Southern Man' and 'Heart of Gold' only to get 90 minutes of his then unreleased new album – a part-spoken-word musical novel set in the fictional town of Greendale, oh yes! – and still want to stump up next time he's in town.

But the bigger the venues, the more bands were playing to marginal fans who wanted just hits. And the bands made more of a song and dance about their new albums and named their tours after them – the Rolling Stones' Steel Wheels 2006! – to try and persuade people they weren't, embarrassingly, just 'a heritage act'.

But there's no shame these days. Oasis changed all that. This month, they lumber into the Japanese and Australian legs of a world tour that will earn an estimated £420m; a band who haven't made a new record for 17 years playing the exact same 30-year-old hits every night without even the faintest pretence of being anything other than 'heritage'.

Their rapturously reviewed shows are one massive, memory-lane karaoke, where tanked-up middle-aged folk in bucket hats are teleported back to their youth and buy ruinously expensive souvenirs at the merch stand on the way out.

And why not? Audience delighted, band minted! As the bulk of the money most acts make is from touring, why not focus on the live shows? As much of that cash is now from the festival circuit, where the audience haven't paid specifically to see you and the words 'Here's a couple of new ones for ya!' tend to spark a mass exodus – to a hamburger stall, a tented shopping mall, another band on another stage – there's even less incentive to record new music.

Most of the big '90s acts still tour, but make less and less effort to be anything other than 'classic rock'. They're the new nostalgia and they've accepted it.

Pulp have a recent record but play almost entirely greatest hits. Blur have made one album in ten years – as have the Libertines and Primal Scream. Supergrass last made a record in 2008.

Just the hits: Noel and Liam Gallagher of Oasis on their 2025 reunion tour

Makes sense for their personal safety, too. I remember an angry crowd telling the Stranglers, 'Play some old!'

And the hail of missiles when they didn't.

GETTY

***Clockwise from left*: design for a chimneypiece by George Dance the Younger; the Courier Office on the Strand, London, c 1806-19, George Underwood; *Perspective of the First Court of the Temple at Edfu*, Charles Malton, 1809**

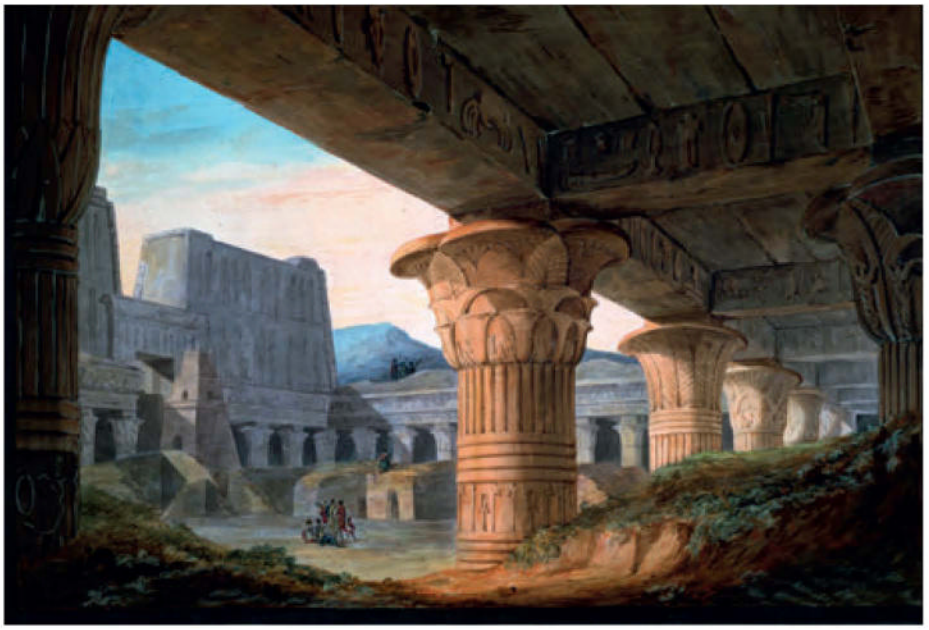
SIR JOHN SOANE'S MUSEUM

EXHIBITIONS

HUON MALLALIEU

EGYPT: INFLUENCING BRITISH DESIGN 1775-1925

Sir John Soane's Museum, to 18th January



I was once accompanied on a visit to the Soane Museum in Lincoln's Inn Fields by a white witch. In room after room, she pointed out pagan symbols.

They were more likely to be the products of the architect's attachment to freemasonry than of his interest in any occult beliefs. As a protégé of the Grand Master, the Duke of Sussex, Soane was fast-tracked to initiation in 1813. He was appointed Grand Superintendent of Works for the rebuilding of Freemasons' Hall, and he wore his regalia when he sat for his portrait.

According to the masonic historian James Campbell, although Soane 'may have an Egyptian sarcophagus and skeletons hanging in the Museum and may have held candlelit evenings to show them off', Soane was not assiduous in the craft.

And European fascination with ancient Egypt began a little earlier than the association between Egypt and Masonry, or Napoleon's Egyptian campaign. The fascination goes back at least to a fantasy biography of High Priest Sethos published by Abbé Terrasson in 1731, which was a source for *The Magic Flute*.

Soane owned the 3,000-year-old alabaster sarcophagus of Pharaoh Seti I, the weighty anchor of the museum's Sepulchral Chamber – and this exhibition. One gallery is devoted to Soane's Egyptian collections, drawings by him and his workshop inspired by them, and to his architectural and artistic near-contemporaries.

Elsewhere, the exploration of the later spread of Egyptian influence is pretty well up to date, with due attention to the glories of Art Deco cinema and factory architecture.

The current fashion for commissioning contemporary artists to react to historic exhibitions is not always convincing, but Egyptian-born artist Sara Sallam is very relevant here. She is having a moment with temporary and permanent displays in European museums, and takes a level-headed approach to issues of tomb robbery and appropriation.

She does her audio tour in the voice of the goddess Nephthys accompanying Seti into the afterlife. And she has written a handmade, limited-edition artist's book, *A Tourist Handbook for Egypt Outside of Egypt*.

I am not entirely convinced by the inclusion of a Grinling Gibbons drawing in the show, since the motifs seem more Roman. It's a pleasure to see it nonetheless.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Pursuits

GARDENING

DAVID WHEELER

EYE CANDY

Whatever its size, a garden should have at least one principal focal point.

It can be within the garden itself, or outside, in what the pros call the 'borrowed landscape'. It doesn't have to be a grand mausoleum, a towering pagoda or a solitary copse on a distant hill.

In town, it might be something as simple as a Victorian lamppost beyond the garden's curtilage, a neighbour's eye-catching tree or the attractive gable end of an adjoining property.

Or, within the garden itself, perhaps a bench at the end of a short path aligned on a window or door, or a trickle of water from a stone mask on a wall.

Our August move to a townhouse in Presteigne, Powys, gave us a clear view from the kitchen window of the church and many of its delightfully tilted gravestones in a spread of greensward which, seemingly, every dog in the district claims as its private domain. I counted those on and off the lead for an hour one morning – 27 made an appearance!

Several fine trees soften the sanctified masonry, including a venerable flowering cherry – possibly the most beautiful of all, *Prunus* 'Tai-haku', but I must wait for next spring's blossoming to be sure.

There are a few mighty ash trees, thankfully sans any sign of ash dieback, and an amelanchier whose small galvanised plaque says it was planted in December 1990 to mark the 75th anniversary of the WI.

Outstanding among the tombstones, and one that attracts visitors almost every day (bringing, regrettably, bunches of gaudy plastic flowers), marks the burial place of Mary Morgan. The doomed lass, a 17-year-old servant, was publicly hanged in 1805 for murdering her newborn illegitimate child, thought – scandalously – to have been sired by the son of her employer, an MP and High Sheriff of the county.

In fading lettering, the stone proclaims to have been 'erected not merely to perpetuate the remembrance of a departed penitent but to remind the living of the frailty of human nature when unsupported by Religion'.

Our rear garden, generous in its proportions for a town location, is graced by damson, plum, apple and medlar trees. There's a princely white-stemmed Himalayan birch of the *jacquemontii* clan, with cyclamen and autumn crocuses at its foot.

Flower borders are richly endowed with peonies, which, in June, when we first saw the property, caused much excitement. Sadly, they're unnamed; photographs of them posted on Instagram thrilled several RHS bods to whom, in September, I sent seeds.

Some 40 yards north of the house stand our gates to the river, which hereabouts defines the border between us, on the Welsh side, and England, on the other. It runs with trout and grayling (though Izaak Walton anglers we are not).

There stands in the garden a handsome small greenhouse, a very small, timber-framed medieval 'cottage' and, joy of joys, my soon-to-be potting shed, kitted out by a former owner as his man cave, resplendent with bar, fridge, jukebox, karaoke system and dartboard, all removed before our arrival.

Simon is skilfully redesigning the garden, removing tired and overgrown shrubs, finding space for as many of our hydrangeas and Japanese maples as can be comfortably accommodated. Overspill plants – hurray – are destined for friends' gardens where I can still enjoy and propagate them.

Blossoming cherry *Prunus* 'Tai-haku'

I wonder, too ... might the church elders let me plant some on their hallowed ground? After all, many churchyards are seen or used as communal gardens, there for the enjoyment of garden-deprived folk, a benefit to wildlife and – woof! – that all important *paradiso canino*.

David's Instagram account is @hortusjournal

KITCHEN GARDEN

SIMON COURTAULD

SPINACH

I sowed two rows of perpetual spinach, more correctly called leaf beet, in the spring and, unlike so many vegetables this year, they have flourished through the summer of drought and into autumn.

Because I used seed tapes, the plants did not need thinning and had the space to grow vigorously and continue to grow – with frequent cutting of the leaves. I have had leaves this year more than 12 inches in length. No bolting occurred during the hottest dry spells this summer, and I began to think it might really be perpetual.

A dormant period during the winter should precede new growth next spring until the plants finally run to seed. This spinach is so much hardier, and more rewarding to grow, than the so-called summer spinach, which bolts in dry weather, particularly in midsummer, and reduces more than the perpetual spinach when cooked.

There are varieties of spinach that are recommended for their baby leaves and fast growth, and may be resistant to the fungal disease called downy mildew; but I shall stick with the trusty perpetual spinach.

In the Chelsea Physic Garden – I visited this wonderful place recently for the first time – I came across strawberry spinach, which was new to me.

The leaves are small and pointed, and the plant produces red fruit which look like strawberries and are edible. But the flavour is bland and cannot be mistaken for the true strawberry. This is best considered as an ornamental plant, grown in a container on the terrace.

In the same plot in the Physic Garden is mountain spinach, which I know as orache, usually with red or purple leaves which go well in a salad. The plant will grow to three feet or more and is a hardy annual.

Whatever the variety of spinach, it is full of vitamins and iron. And let's not forget the famous cartoon character the pipe-smoking sailor Popeye, who attributed his great strength to a regular diet of spinach and was credited with increasing the consumption of spinach by a third in America during the 1930s.

COOKERY

ELISABETH LUARD

HOT POTATOES

Potatoes are my happiness food.

Nutritionally, the potato is all that anyone needs to keep body and soul together. At its simplest – baked in its jacket, soft and floury on the inside, blackened on the outside – it is best eaten from the hand, straight from the embers of a Guy Fawkes bonfire.

It's even better when crisp-skinned from a high oven, split in half with a slab of cold butter straight from the fridge, a fingerful of roughly crushed peppercorns and a pinch of the flaky white sea salt that melts so elegantly on the tongue.

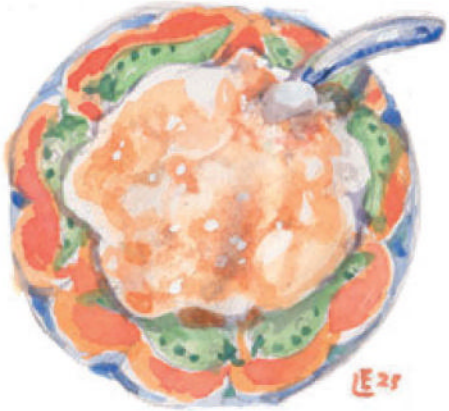
But, for what Mrs Beeton used to call 'made dishes' – cooking that actually requires a cook – the French, bless their little wooden *sabots*, have done it to perfection.

Consider the difference between mashed potato and *pommes mousseline*. Or, for that matter, *pommes de terre sarladaises* and potatoes with gravy.

I rest my case.

Mousseline potatoes

Mashed potatoes thoroughly beaten with butter, egg yolk and cream till miraculously light and fluffy. Serves 4.



About 1kg medium-size mature potatoes, scrubbed
175g unsalted butter, softened
½ tsp freshly grated nutmeg
4 egg yolks, forked to blend
200ml whipping cream, well-whipped
Salt and freshly milled white pepper
To finish (optional)
Chopped herbs (parsley, chervil, chives)
More melted butter

Cook the potatoes in plenty of boiling salted water until perfectly tender – 25-30 minutes. Drain thoroughly and shake them over the heat to dry a little. Peel as soon as they're cool enough to handle.

Mash the pulp and push it through a potato-ricer or *mouli-légumes*. Return it to the pan, reheat gently and beat in the melted butter, salt, pepper and nutmeg.

Remove from the heat, wait for a minute, then beat in the egg yolks. Fold in the whipped cream, heap in a hot serving dish and finish, if you like, with a handful of chopped herbs. Or trickle with more melted butter and blister in a high oven or under the grill, till brown and bubbling.

Duchesse potatoes

Proceed as for mousseline omitting the whipped cream, and use a star-shaped piping nozzle to pipe little pyramids onto a buttered baking sheet. Brush with melted butter and bake as above till prettily browned.

Potato croquettes

Proceed as before, allow the mousseline to cool and firm, form into little cork-shaped patties, dust lightly through flour, dip in forked-up egg-and-milk, roll in breadcrumbs, leave for 10 minutes for the coating to set, then deep-fry till brown and crisp.

Pommes de terre sarladaises

Potatoes and onions cooked in goose dripping, *pommes de terre sarladaises* – a gorgeous winter dish from Sarlat in the Périgord, land of the fattened goose. During the black-truffle season – late November to early March – add a few slivers of the real thing. Serves 4.

1kg mature potatoes, peeled
3-4 tbsps goose dripping (duck will do)
1 large onion (at least 500g), sliced into fine half-moons
2 tbsps chopped parsley (flat-leaf rather than curly)
Salt and freshly milled pepper

Chunk the potatoes into bite-size pieces. Heat the dripping in a roomy sauté pan that'll take the potatoes in a single layer. As soon as the fat begins to sizzle, add the chunked potatoes and toss over a gentle heat for 10-15 minutes, till the potato begins to soften and brown. Add the onion slices and let them feel the heat.

Pour in a wineglass of water, season generously, bubble up and cook gently for another 10-15 minutes, breaking up the potatoes a little with a fork as soon as they soften. Continue to cook gently, stirring, until the water has evaporated and everything starts to fry again.

Stir in the parsley and remove the pan from the heat. The potatoes should have absorbed all the goose fat, retain a little shape and be deliciously golden and soft.

RESTAURANTS

JAMES PEMBROKE

DARTMOUTH AHOY!

Agatha Christie was born in Torquay and chose the River Dart as her hidey hole from the press and her fans. What better choice?

Her Georgian home, Greenway, set high above the river, open to the public, is reassuringly spooky. There's something macabre about musty eiderdowns; little wonder the duvet took over.

We were happy to board the ferry and return to beautiful Dartmouth, which the posh set have leap-frogged in favour of Salcombe. More fool them. Dartmouth has far more charm and greater pedigree.

With its deep port and easily defended river mouth, it was perfect for larger sailing ships and became the embarkation point for the Crusades of the 12th century, later establishing itself as a naval base. Both Raleigh and Drake launched raids from its harbour. And it was at the Naval College that our late Queen first met Prince Philip in 1939 – much to her father's dismay.

The small, medieval old town is awash with glorious Jacobean buildings with elaborate dark wood carvings – not least the Butterwalk, which has 11 granite piers holding up its top-heavy upper storeys, the former homes of wealthy merchants.

I would have loved to try the Royal Castle Hotel, built in 1639, not least because the

ELISABETH LUARD

lintel of the front door, through which horses were led, is at an angle of about 45 degrees, but it was closed, for a complete refurbishment by St Austell Brewery.

We started a few doors down at Taylor's, a small bow-fronted restaurant overlooking the harbour and river. I didn't know I liked grey furniture in a restaurant until that evening – it's surprisingly cosy.

They are purveyors of hearty 1970s portions. Their generosity extends to multiple (often wonderfully superfluous) ingredients. So not just scallops with Nduja sausage but scallops, *king prawn* and 'nduja sausage. There are only about 30 covers, so the owner and her waitress made everyone feel as if we were all in it together, willing the next dish (*confit de canard*) to beat the last. Sadly, there was no room for the Baileys Mudslide Liquid Dessert, either in my tum or, for that matter, on the menu, given that the ingredients, which included vodka, stretched to five lines.

After the Editor interviewed Oldie Man of Letters A N Wilson at the Flavel Arts Centre (available on Radio Oldie), we four hurried to the Seahorse, not 100 yards from Christopher Robin Milne's former bookshop. You enter through a huge floor-to-ceiling curtain which sashays back to reveal the sort of dining room where you expect to find Toulouse-Lautrec with his sketch pad. The waiters, whose every second word is 'sir', are uniformed in white jackets with gold buttons. It's bliss.

What amazing fish, especially the *escabeche* of sea bass. For some reason, I chose a plate of delicious quail legs and wings.

Finally, we had a perfect Sunday lunch at the Embankment Bistro, the former ticket office for trains to London, via the ferry to Kingswear on the opposite bank. We were surrounded by huge glass windows through which we could see every type of sailing boat.

Our host? Local hero and patron of the literary festival broadcaster John Suchet, whose brother David also has some sort of connection with Mrs Christie.

My leetle grey cells fail me.

DRINK

BILL KNOTT

MY CIDER HOUSE RULES

The UK's apple harvest this year is a bumper crop, the best for many years.

It's great news for cider-makers, producers of what the 17th-century botanist and diarist John Evelyn called 'the native wine of England'.

Evelyn was not referring to the industrially produced ciders that populate supermarket shelves. Cider needs an apple content of only 35 per cent to earn its name. There is no obligation for producers to use cider apple varieties, or even any fresh apples: apple concentrate is both permissible and widely used.

Sugar is allowed as well, so that cider can be made to a high alcoholic strength – a process called chaptalisation – to prolong its storage life; it's then diluted before bottling. Colourings, flavourings and sweeteners are also permitted: it is a very cost-effective way of making huge quantities of a bland, fizzy drink.

Annoyingly, there is no legal definition of what might be called 'real' cider (or perry, the pear equivalent, a historic British drink also routinely traduced by industrial producers). The Campaign for Real Ale's website (camra.org.uk) defines real cider and perry as 'being fermented from the whole juice of fresh pressed apples or pears, without the use of concentrated or chaptalised juices.'

Filtering and carbonation are permitted, on which diehard fans of flat and murky 'rough' cider might frown.

But even the most assiduous makers of craft cider need to make some concessions to shelf life and palatability.

The CAMRA website also features a useful and enlightening map of cider- and perry- producers: many are in the cider-orchard heartlands of the West Country, and there are others all over the UK, from the Isles of Scilly to Aberdeen and Canterbury to Portadown.

CAMRA's Champion Cider & Perry Pub of 2024 is in Chester and, rather confusingly, called That Beer Place.

Dozens of ciders and perries (as well as a stupendous number of beers) are in bottle or on tap, to drink in or take away.

Out in the countryside, many cider-makers are catching on to what their grape-growing brethren have discovered: that offering tastings, tours and even a place to rest a slightly tipsy head are all good for business. The site visitherefordshire.co.uk, for instance, offers a range of options, from cottages and glamping to B&Bs and Scandinavian lodges with hot tubs.

It also features the Crown Inn at Woolhope, between Hereford and Ledbury (and my own favourite cider pub). Landlord Matt Slocombe offers an 'eight-bedroom cider sleepover' for groups of up to 16. Located directly above the pub, the venue boasts a beautiful kitchen/dining room, the perfect location in which to decide whether rabbit pie goes better with Brown Snout cider or Speckled Russet perry.

Whatever your conclusion, there will be no need to designate a driver.

SPORT

JIM WHITE

MARATHON MEN

Every year, the challenge gets more extreme.

In 2016, the comedian Eddie Izzard competed 27 marathons in 27 days. Last year, Russ Cook, the self-styled Hardest Geezer, ran the length of Africa, covering 10,900 miles in 352 days – roughly 28 miles every 24 hours.

Now, even as you read this, a 31-year-old former world champion at computer games, Sam King, is in the middle of a challenge that is even more demanding. At the end of September, he set out from Battersea Park on Project 74, planning to run 74 ultramarathons on consecutive days.

For most of the autumn, he will be pounding the streets, running a minimum of 50km (31 miles) every single day. He is doing it to memorialise his mum, who died earlier this year after suffering a life-altering brain injury. She was 74 – hence the title of his extraordinary effort.

For those of us who finish our Saturday morning 5km Park Run with our knees burning, our ligaments liquidised, the idea of taking another step – never mind running on to such extremes – seems utterly absurd.

Yet according to the man who kick-started this fashion for ever-longer consecutive running challenges, we could all do it. Even we oldies. In 2007, Sir Christopher Ball, the former head of Keble College, Oxford, established the Brathay Trust 10in10, in which runners complete ten marathons round Lake Windermere in ten days. He says it is all in the mind.

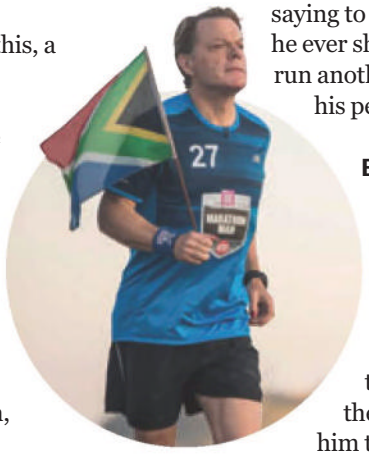
He cites himself as living proof. He was 72 when he first completed his Lakeside feat. He didn't start running until he was 67. His first step came about when, soon after retiring as an academic, he went for a routine visit to the doctor, who told him he was overweight and had alarmingly high cholesterol.

'She said you need to eat less and exercise more,' he recalls. 'On the way home from this miserable interview, I thought eating less is in the too-hard category. I'll have to exercise. I'd seen people in Lycra jogging all around the place and thought they were completely mad but also thought, "How hard can it be?"'

He bought himself a pair of trainers and, for the first time in his life, went out for a run.

'After about six months, one day I found I'd run ten miles without stopping. I was rather impressed with myself – so signed up for the London Marathon, not quite noticing it was 26 miles.'

At 68, he completed it. He is not sure of his time; how long he takes, he says, is not important. What matters is finishing. But he does remember afterwards lying on his back in St James's Park, saying to his wife, Wendy, that if he ever showed any inclination to run another marathon, she had his permission to shoot him.



Eddie Izzard: 27 marathons in 27 days

Within 18 months, he had done London again and Edinburgh twice. He realised as he did so that it was the mind – not the body – that was telling him to stop. So he decided to up the distance, coming up with the idea of the 10in10. And, in the process, kick-started a trend that grows ever more demanding.

Not that he is stopping. Back in April, he turned 90, a birthday he marked by joining the 100 competitors who annually complete the 10in10 for the last six miles of their run. The next thing we know, to celebrate his 100th birthday, he'll be running the length of Britain. Backwards.

MOTORING

ALAN JUDD

COOL HONDA JAZZ

Depreciation is the silent killer in car ownership.

We know about it but don't have to face it until we sell. So we ignore it. We're more aware of the smaller costs of ownership – fuel, tax, insurance and maintenance – because we're forever paying for them.

The AA recently surveyed depreciation rates of popular models. Unusually, their baseline was not what a car costs when new; instead they compared its estimated values at one, three and five years old.

Maybe the reason for this is that many more of us buy used cars than buy new; also, most nearly-new cars, like brand-new ones, are bought through leasing schemes. These schemes – without which the car market would collapse – further protect us from awareness of the day of reckoning, until the time comes to hand it back at the leasing company's valuation or buy it outright.

In the two years between years one and three, the AA found that 13 of the most popular models lose more than 30 per cent of their value.

Top of that undesirable list was the Range Rover Sport (model unspecified), which the AA reckons loses 46 per cent, with the Vauxhall Astra and Kia Sportage in joint second at 41 per cent.

Surprises included the well-thought-of Kia Niro at 35 per cent, the Toyota Hilux at 32 per cent and the popular Ford Focus at 31 per cent. The Hilux surprised me because it's an exceptionally reliable and rugged car, comfortable enough and much sought-after in the used market.

Perhaps it suffers a hard life with many of its commercial buyers. But I'd sooner pay the quoted £38,050 for a year-old Hilux (£26,482 aged three) than £80,891 for a less reliable Range Rover Sport (£43,455 aged three).

Among the winners were the Kia Picanto and Audi A1, both losing 16 per cent between one and three years. The VW Polo loses 17 per cent and the ever-fashionable Fiat 500 21 per cent.

Overall, it seems that the more you pay for a car, the bigger hit you take on depreciation – not only in obvious cash terms but often in percentage, too.

However, there's a stand-out exception: the Honda Jazz. Between one and three years the AA have it increasing in value by an average of 3 per cent. If you paid £15,402 for a one-year-old Jazz, you can expect £15, 815 when it's three, they say. Even after five years, it will still have lost only 16 per cent of its one-year value.

Unless it's a rogue result, why should this be? Since its launch in 2001, the Jazz has earned a well-deserved reputation for reliability, with relatively low maintenance costs. Favoured by older drivers, it's a pleasant drive, comfortable, with easy ingress and egress, roomier inside than it looks and with adaptable rear seating.

It's also relatively affordable. Motors.co.uk offers three-year-olds with fewer than 25,000 miles for £14,000-£15,000. Fundamentally, the reason must be our old friend the law of supply and demand: more people want them than have them.

I know of only three ways to beat depreciation. One is to buy something new and expensive with a long waiting list – the latest McLaren, perhaps – and sell it a year later to someone else on the list who's fed up with waiting.

Or buy a classic that's ceasing to be just an old car and is becoming collectible, and then keep it. Or buy an old banger that's been well looked-after, run it for a year, sell it for about what you paid and buy another.

Or maybe just buy a Honda Jazz.

Matthew Webster: Digital Life

Key facts about the keyboard

Surrounded, as we are, by the incessant digitalisation of our world, change seems almost compulsory.

What a relief that one thing remains stubbornly unmoved by these pressures – the keyboard I am using to generate these words.

Apart from getting smaller, typewriters didn't change much until the birth of the electric machine in the 1960s and the early computers with screens, which we called word processors.

A rather ugly name – but then I suppose we are all processing words in one way or another.

Webwatch

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These electric machines supplanted the manual typewriters in no time. They transformed the creation of documents.

Mistakes could be corrected without paper being wasted. You could print as many identical copies as you wanted without the need for that awful carbon paper which blighted office paperwork for so long.

While the keyboard that drives all these wonders has grown a bit, it has essentially remained much the same.

A typist from the 1950s transported to today would find much they would recognise: keys that have not changed since the late-19th century, stubbornly unwilling to yield more than a little to digital modernity.

They may have been enhanced a little, but in essence they have endured through the advent of electric typewriters, word processors, tablets, phones and more.

I don't just mean the QWERTY layout, although that is an obvious survivor; various other layouts have been promoted from time to time, but they never catch on.

I'm thinking more of the 'return' key, the oddly shaped key to the right of the letters. This was once the 'carriage return'. In electric typewriters, it replaced the lever you pushed when the bell rang. It shifted the roller that held the paper from the end of a line to the beginning of the next.

It is sometimes called Enter but it still signals a new line, a new command or simply 'move on'. It no longer shifts a roller with a sheet of paper but it carries the same sense of progress: something is moving forward.

The Tab key is another survivor. Even on the earliest typewriters, this key helped typists create neat columns of text; on a computer, it can do exactly the same thing. It has evolved a little, and continues to assist us to be organised.

And what about the space bar? It always was, and remains, the longest key on the keyboard. It is as vital now as it ever was; without spaces, text is gibberish. It has remained unchanged since typewriting was invented.

How about the backspace? It still does what it always did. As do the Caps Lock and Shift keys.

We have seen the rapid development of 'speech to text' software that allows you to dictate to a computer and watch your words appear on the screen. It's rather magical, and the software is getting better, but the result is never just how you want it. So how do you correct it? Back to your trusty keyboard, again.

So next time you sit at your keyboard, take a moment to notice those faithful keys. They've been with you through letters, essays, emails, CVs and many internet searches.

They've aged gracefully, and in a quiet way remain as useful as they ever were. Very much the oldie way.

But I do miss the little bell on the typewriter.

Neil Collins: Money Matters

Don't keep companies in the family

One of the perennial questions about investing is how much the executives running the show really care about the interests of the shareholders whose money they are managing.

Are their interests truly aligned with yours? Or are they just pretending, trying to get the share price high enough to make them rich in a few short years?

Where a family has a controlling stake, the question should be easy to answer – your fortunes rise and fall with theirs. They can take a long view, so you should too, and both sides will live happily ever after.

Unfortunately, life is seldom so simple. One generation may have built a brilliant business, but there is no super-manager gene to ensure the next can carry on the good work.

Two examples demonstrate the pitfalls. Schroders banking goes back to 1804 and has been public since 1959. In 1984, the family had the good sense to put an outsider, Win Bischoff, in charge. The business was then worth £30m. In 2000, with inspired timing, he sold its investment-banking business for £1.3 billion, leaving a fund-management company when this business was growing fast.

I inherited a few shares from my father, and watched their value rise – until it didn't. Fund management is much harder today, and the share-price

peak in 2021 is a distant memory. They cost the same today as they did in 2013.

The family still controls 44 per cent, but does not run the business. Recent reports that they were looking to sell were denied.

So continuity of control does not bring continuity of investment returns.

It's a similar picture at Associated British Foods (ABF), that curious combination of bread, sugar and Primark. Investment bankers dream of the fees that would follow splitting off this hugely successful clothes retailer, but the Weston family owns the votes, and consistently denies any such plans.

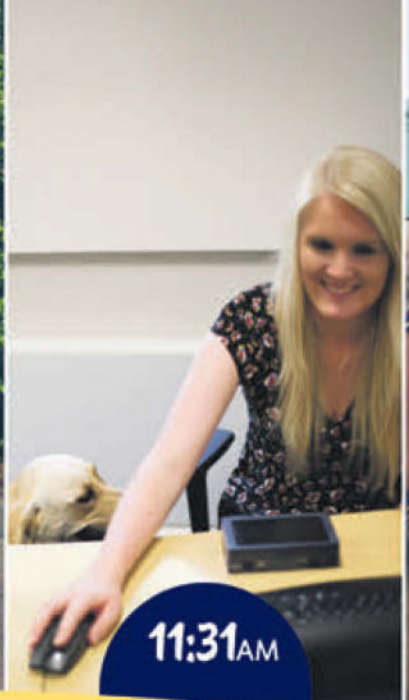
ABF is a rare example of a conglomerate that seems to work – but only up to a point. When the stock market woke up to the potential of Primark 15 years ago, the share price trebled. As the potential has been realised, the price has essentially gone nowhere, shares selling at the same price today as in 2013.

Both these families decided that professional, outside management would make a better fist of looking after the family silver than would some less competent scion, there by an accident of birth.

Today, both companies still look like solid businesses with reputations for good management. It's just that ordinary investors – even patient ones – may not share the inter-generational long view that allows such continuity.

The family may have their fortune at stake, but life is just too short for the rest of us.

Neil Collins was City Editor of the Daily Telegraph



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BIRD OF THE MONTH

Jack snipe

BY JOHN McEWEN * ILLUSTRATED BY CARRY AKROYD

The secretive and diminutive winter migrant jack snipe (*Lymnocryptes minimus*) has been reckoned the UK's most elusive and least understood bird. At its smallest, it's only between one and two and a half ounces.

The migration of 110,000 snipe, mostly from Russia, places it in the UK's green category of 'least conservation concern'.

That elusiveness is now being transformed by technology. Knowledge of the snipe's habits and movements has been transformed by the thermal camera and a tracker – so small, at one gram, that it can be carried by the little bird.

Thermal cameras have for some years revealed the daytime hideaways and nocturnal feeding of jack snipe. As a result, from 2000 to 2015, an average of 120 were ringed annually in the UK. In 2023 that figure rose to a record 738.

The minuscule tracker, which includes an aerial, a solar panel and a battery, has only recently documented the details of its journeying. Downloaded data from the tracker of a bird that flew from Staffordshire in spring 2024 showed its route. It departed overnight in mid-April to Essex, on the next day to Germany and the day after to Poland – a total of 625 miles.

It stayed where it landed in Poland for 15 days, and then flew in a day to another Polish location and spent two days in Latvia – before the battery expired. So we don't know whether its breeding destination was Scandinavia or Russia.

Such long flights are surprising. Once settled in the UK in its favourite rushes, the jack snipe does not move unless it's in danger of being trodden on – and then flies silently only to land in the same or a nearby patch.

In this behaviour, it is the opposite of the similarly camouflaged common snipe, which springs up with a grating alarm call and veers, zigzagging, into the distance at dazzling speed.

As Grey of Fallodon wrote of the jack snipe in *The Charm of Birds*, 'Even when shot at and missed, it will settle again at no great distance, as if it could not believe that the shot was intended.'

This chance of getting a second shot used to make it a favourite quarry of boy hunters.

Since 1981, it has been a protected bird in England, Scotland and Wales, despite its current green conservation status. Only in Northern Island is it fair game.

The common snipe (80,000 UK resident pairs; a million winter migrants) is listed a conservation-concern amber but remains a game bird. The same amber status, even more surprisingly, applies to the wood pigeon (5.1m UK breeding pairs – 30 per cent of the European population).

In *The Charm of Birds*, published a century ago, Grey wrote, 'There are four winter birds familiar to us that are distributed all over the country, and of which not one pair remains to breed. These are fieldfares, red-wings, bramble-finches, and jack snipe.'

Today this appears true only of the jack snipe – but technology may disprove it.

American odyssey

When *Judy Montagu* toured the USA by Greyhound bus in 1949, she met David Niven and a plastered Mary Pickford – and rode in a rodeo

Judy Montagu (1923-72), daughter of Edwin Montagu, Secretary of State for India, served in the ATS in the war with her cousin Mary, daughter of Winston Churchill.

In 1949, she toured America for 78 days by Greyhound bus and kept a diary of her travels, from Texas to Hollywood.

31st May 1949 – Fort Worth, Texas
Went out to the Carters' at 11.
Mrs Carter's sister rushed me off to a queer thing called a 'Brunch', which I'd read of but never seen. We only stayed for an eternity of 45 minutes.

Mrs C and her sisters are the kind of bores which eventually make one bore oneself with every word one says.

I have never heard three people fail so inevitably to get the point of anything said.

Expenditure for the Day
Books $8.40
Cigarettes and Drug Store $2.15

Judy's first rodeo, Fort Worth, Texas, 1949

3rd June 1949 – Rodeo at Mineral Wells, Texas
The band blared Souza, and we rode in, single file, at a walk, and slowly circled the outer edge, while the crowd roared and clapped. I don't think I've ever enjoyed anything more than those few minutes under the dazzling arc lights.

We started to circle again. Faster and faster, till we were flat out. Even wilder yells from performers and audience, and even wilder excitement in me. As we got to a gallop, we cascaded out of the arena and piled up in a mêlée in our pen.

As we left the scene for the last time, my knees turned to jelly and I began to bounce around again like the fat women one sees in Rotten Row, trying to reduce.

The last event was known as 'bulldozing' and consisted of two seemingly puny men, wrestling with a Longhorn steer and throwing it to the ground. Here the only casualty, by some miracle, was a man who had his arm ripped to the bone.

Expenditure for the Day
Paper $0.05
Cokes for all $0.70
Popcorn $0.85
'Bad Luck Cowboy Fund' $2.00

12th June 1949 – Hollywood, California
After lunch, we went on to the David Nivens. Mr N was outside the gate looking pretty in a pink shirt and bawling at a ferocious bulldog (lady) who had been trying to escape for a rendezvous with the neighbouring dachshund.

He took us to the swimming pool, where we found his wife – beautiful, Swedish and with a rather too consciously cute accent, but nice; his two sons, both packed with charm, and Mr and Mrs Raymond Massey.

D Niven very funny, especially about Shirley Temple, whom he has drawn as his next leading lady (a direct insult from Mr Goldwyn, he thinks) and who apparently maddens everyone with her drivel about Linda Susan (her daughter) and her inability to act after the age of eight.

Mrs Niven, whose name [Hjördis] is a throat-clearing sound impossible to reproduce, put the children to bed and then we played canasta.

13th June 1949 – Forest Lawn Cemetery (subject of Evelyn Waugh's 1948 novel, *The Loved One*), Glendale, California

Acres and acres of careful landscaping, dotted with lakes, grottoes, chapels and other buildings of various architectural styles.

Lots of people ambling about – mostly, I think, rubberneckers, though a few carried flowers.

Several parties were prepared for a picnic later and the mixture of a cemetery with ham on rye and Coca-Cola seemed rather strange to my, no doubt, old-fashioned, view.

There were some quotations carved on buildings or made in metal – mostly quite good, though a few slightly nauseating but, on the whole, what one sees is not really ludicrous – the great thing is that people obviously like it as they go on being buried there.

14th June 1949 – Pickfair, Beverly Hills

We drove, up a steep hill, to 'Pickfair' [home of actress Mary Pickford (1892-1979), ex-wife of Douglas Fairbanks], a rather pretty white house with octagonal centre and wings spreading out.

The garden was magnificent, with one of the lushest, smoothest, greenest lawns I've ever seen, leading down to an irregularly shaped pool.

The swimming pool at Pickfair is thought to be the first in-ground pool at a private house, large enough for Fairbanks and Pickford to be photographed on it, fully dressed and paddling a canoe.

There was only one picture – an over-life-size painting of our hostess in her heyday, complete with the ringlets. A few minutes later, Mr Buddy Rogers [Pickford's husband, and actor (1904-99)] appeared.

Suddenly from outside, a voice piped, 'My darlings, my darlings, I've kept you all waiting. I'm a naughty one and I should be punished,' and in tripped Miss Pickford.

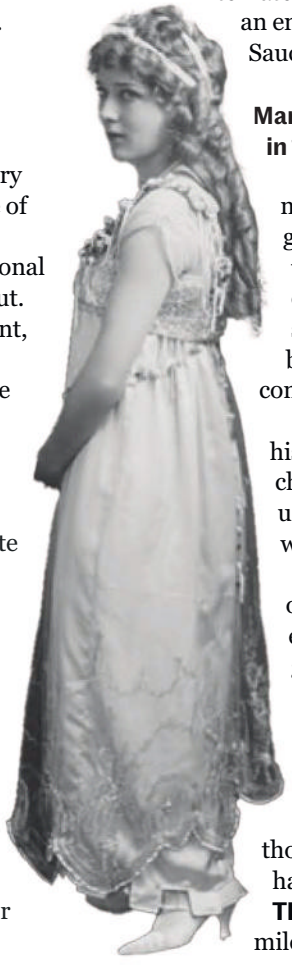
She looked wonderfully pretty and very young, but the riveting thing about her was that the gestures and expression hadn't changed an iota since she delighted the world with *Daddy Long-Legs* [1919 film].

Her voice sounded quite odd, as her whole manner was so obviously geared for no sound, except piano accompaniment. She ran over to me with little halting steps and gripping both my hands, exclaimed, 'From England, dear England – I'm English, you see.'

It was at once clearly apparent that the world's Little Sweetheart had been quietly indulging in a nip upstairs.

We all settled down to a rather bitty conversation, constantly interrupted by Miss P either putting in a completely irrelevant remark, beginning on a story and then losing the gist, or else running over, either to Mrs L or [to] myself, throwing her arms round our necks, or tweaking our clothes.

At one point, she became very silent and edged over to the drink tray with a very different gait from her earlier sallies forth, and poured herself a beaker of tomato juice which she laced with an enormous slug of Worcester Sauce. The intention was obvious but, at the last minute, she changed her mind and furtively added a good four fingers of gin, thereby defeating the original purpose and starting herself on a fresh bout of gestures and comments.



Mary Pickford in 1910

Mr Rogers kept looking at his wife and fruitlessly chipping in with 'So you told us, dear'; 'Yes, dear, but Ivan was talking about Paris.'

As we were in the process of departure, the fact emerged that Mrs J [a fellow guest] was pregnant, whereupon our hostess's parting shot was to clutch her stomach and exclaim, 'That is what I have longed, to bear a child – here' – though where else she could have borne it, heaven knows.

TRAVEL FOR THE DAY | 525 miles | 13 hours 15 minutes

Charm: Hjördis and David Niven, 1949

Expenditure for the Day

Cigarettes $2.10
Brown paper $0.20
String $0.05
Post Office $3.58
Books $9.43
Shoe polish $0.15
Drug Store $0.54
Paper (news) $0.05

8th July 1949 – Springfield, Illinois

Just as I was ready to leave, there was a knock on the door and Adlai Stevenson [(1900-65), Governor of Illinois and Democratic candidate for President in 1952 and 1956] came bustling in.

Governor Stevenson is by far the most exceptional man I've met. Not only during this trip, but in the last few years.

It is hard to say exactly why a person can make a deep impression; perhaps the qualities which stand out most in his conversation or idealism, without any nonsense, but on the contrary, overlaid with powerful sense, realism and tolerance.

He gives one the feeling also of overwhelming fairness and justice – but added to all this, there is inspiration and brilliance.

At the end of the evening, I felt had spent five hours with a great man.

Expenditure for the Day

Magazine $0.20
Cigarettes $0.43
Ticket $5.18
Lunch $1.20
Tip $0.25
Tip $0.15

TOTAL COST OF WHOLE TRIP $1,066.28

The Greyhound Diary *(Zuleika, £25), edited by Judy's daughter, Anna Mathias, is out on 23rd October*

NOBLE CALEDONIA



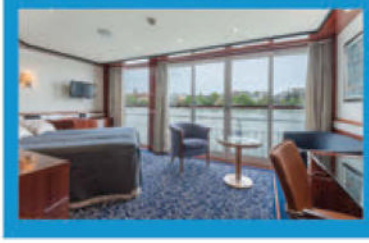
GLORIES OF THE MAIN & RHINE

A scenic journey from Bavaria to Basle aboard the MS River Crown
10th to 20th October 2026

Autumn is one of the loveliest times in Middle Europe when the forests and vineyards are in full colour. Enjoy the colourful foliage, the tranquil beauty of the countryside and the contrasts and vibrancy of the cities and towns along the Main and Rhine rivers as we cruise along them aboard the elegant, 100-passenger MS River Crown. If you have not cruised along such rivers before, nothing can prepare you for the peace and beauty of it. To relax on deck or in the beautiful lounge whilst the world floats by is a fortifying experience. Such vistas cannot be appreciated from any other means of transport, the stately pace and quietness of the vessel allows you to be at one with your surroundings.

This is a river voyage through idyllic landscapes, past centuries old villages, towns and cities which have witnessed the fascinating and turbulent history of Middle Europe. From Regensburg we cruise along the tranquil waters of the Main River visiting the enchanting towns of Bamberg and Miltenberg and continue onwards along the Rhine to explore the fascinating cities of Heidelberg and Strasbourg in addition to the splendid town of Colmar. Over the course of ten nights our river vessel will transport us along the Main and Rhine in considerable comfort and with great ease, allowing us to relax and enjoy the scenery and interesting guided excursions. When combined with some daytime cruising, informative talks from our Guest Speaker as well as the opportunity to sample some wonderful wines along the way, we have a fascinating trip.

MS RIVER CROWN is an elegant 100-passenger river vessel which we have exclusively chartered for this voyage. The vessel is spacious and well-designed and the atmosphere on board is friendly and informal. All cabins for double occupancy feature a French Balcony providing wonderful views and access to fresh air along with ample storage, a dressing table, television, individually controlled air-conditioning and en-suite bathroom. The open seating Restaurant and the Lounge and Bar are on the Upper Deck and feature floor to ceiling windows affording excellent views as you dine, relax or listen to the onboard lectures. There is also The Club, a perfect place if you are seeking somewhere to relax with a good book and a tea or coffee. The huge Sun Deck covers almost the entire length of the vessel, interrupted only by the bridge and is the ideal location to watch the changing scenery. A Guest Speaker will provide a series of interesting talks and our Cruise Director will host informative port briefings.

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GUEST SPEAKER

Michael Hindley was born in Blackburn, UK and educated at London University (BA Hons in German and French), Lancaster University (MA in Comparative Cultural Studies), and the Free University of West Berlin. Michael also has a post graduate diploma in International Law. Michael was an elected council leader in Northwest England, a Lancashire County Councillor and a Member of the European Parliament for three terms (1984-99). He was the Majority Leader on the Trade Committee (1989-99). Michael is now a freelance political consultant and has acted as an expert adviser for the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC). Michael is a frequent lecturer on European politics and has lectured at the Universities of Greifswald and Gottingen, Germany and worked with the University of Tallinn, Estonia.

THE ITINERARY IN BRIEF

Day 1 London to Munich, Germany. Fly by scheduled flight. On arrival transfer to the MS River Crown in Regensburg.

Day 2 Regensburg. On our guided morning tour we will stroll around this World Heritage listed historic city. Widely regarded as the Medieval wonder of Germany, we will see the majestic twin-spired cathedral Dom St Peter, the ancient Romanesque Porta Praetoria and the tower houses. The afternoon is free to explore this charming town at your own pace.

Day 3 Nuremberg. Nuremberg's long and sometimes troubled history has left its mark on the city and there is plenty to discover during our afternoon tour. Visit the World War II sites, including the Third Reich Party Rally Grounds, and discover the city's spectacular Medieval architecture.

Day 4 Bamberg. Arrive in Bamberg this morning, one of Germany's most beautiful historic towns. Its geographical location, some 40 miles north of Nuremberg, was a key factor in preserving its magnificent architectural heritage from the ravages of war. Every European style from the Romanesque onwards has left its mark on Bamberg, each bequeathing at least one major building. Return to the ship for lunch and sail this afternoon as the MS River Crown leaves the Main-Danube Canal and enters the River Main.

Day 5 Wurzburg. This morning we arrive in historic Wurzburg, the wine capital of Franconia. We will tour this lovely town including the old town with its collection of churches which range in style from Romanesque to Gothic, Renaissance to Baroque, as well as the magnificent Prince Bishop's Residenz Palace. Our visit will end with a wine tasting of local wines before we return to the MS River Crown for lunch and spend a relaxing afternoon on board sailing towards Miltenberg.

Day 6 Miltenberg. We arrive today in the pretty Franconian town of Miltenberg, renowned for its half-timbered Medieval houses. On a walking tour see the picturesque triangular shaped Marktplatz and the restored castle. Enjoy a relaxing afternoon sailing.

Day 7 Mainz. Arrive this morning in atmospheric Mainz where our guided walking tour will include the Hoefchen ("Little Court"), residence of the city's archbishops until the 15th century, the Kirschgarten with its romantic half-timbered houses and Marian-Fountain. Our tour will end with a visit to the Johan Gutenberg Museum. The afternoon is free to explore further independently.

Day 8 Mannheim for Heidelberg. From our berth in Mannheim, we visit nearby Heidelberg to enjoy this most picturesque and romantic of German cities which is home to Germany's oldest university, dating back to 1386. During our guided tour, which will include a visit to the city's castle and gardens, we will stroll through Heidelberg's enchanting old town and see its Renaissance building, 'Zum Ritter', which survived the fire of 1693.

Day 9 Kehl, Germany for Strasbourg, France. From the nearby town of Kehl, our guided tour this morning will introduce us to the delights of Strasbourg including the fascinating old quarter. Start with the Quai de la Petite France where the River Ill splits into a number of canals, see the Ponts Couverts, a series of wooden bridges dating back to the 13th century, the Place Gutenberg and the Cathedral of Notre Dame, the tallest Medieval building in Europe. After lunch on board you can choose to spend the afternoon at leisure or alternatively join a scenic tour along Alsace's "Route des Vins", including a tasting of the region's splendid wines.

Day 10 Breisach, Germany for Colmar, France. From our berth in Breisach, we will cross the River Rhine into France and drive to the capital of the Upper Rhine region, Colmar. We begin with a visit to the impressive Unterlinden Museum which dates back to the 13th century. Admire a fine collection of religious Medieval paintings and also paintings from the 20th and 21st centuries, including works by Picasso and Monet. We continue on for a walk through the charming Old Town, with delightful patrician houses and winding lanes and enjoy some free time before our drive back to Breisach to reboard the MS River Crown. The afternoon is free for independent exploration in Breisach.

Day 11 Basle, Switzerland to London. Disembark this morning and transfer to Basle airport for our scheduled flight to London.

PRICES & INCLUSIONS

Special offer prices per person based on double occupancy start from **£6795** for a Premium Cabin. Single cabins from **£6795**.

WHAT'S INCLUDED:

Economy class scheduled air travel • 10 nights aboard the MS River Crown on a full board basis • House wine, beer & soft drinks with lunch & dinner • Shore excursions • Noble Caledonia onboard team including Guest Speaker • Gratuities • Transfers • Port & airport taxes.

NB. Ports and itinerary are subject to change. All special offers are subject to availability. Travel insurance is not included in the price. Our current booking conditions apply to all reservations.

Radley's lost boys

The school's war memorials pay tribute to generations of doomed youth

LUCINDA LAMBTON

Of all the First and Second World War memorials in England, those at Radley College in Oxfordshire stand particularly proud.

As is usual, it's hard not to well up with tears, reading of those who fell. But here is a particularly large group, all in one place, accompanied by a wealth of details.

With 235 gallant old schoolboys from Radley killed in the First World War and 224 in the Second, it is a sad and sorry crowd. One particularly upsetting discovery is finding that two pairs of brothers are buried in Radley Church.

Most moving of all, though, are the stained-glass windows that hauntingly glow forth their sad story. Mostly created by Burlison and Grylls between 1894 and 1919, they move the heart with the supreme excellence of their execution.

In the chapel, on an especially long window (*pictured below*), there is a giant assembly of mounted soldiers stretching forth, showing a great troop of horses: some mounted, others pulling heavy guns, others with even heavier guns, all hauling forth weaponry, seemingly at a snail's pace, and most movingly marvellous they all are too.

Radley College staff are commemorated on tablets on either side of the central pillar of a great memorial arch. On one side, there is a list of the 'College Servants' who died during the First World War. Particularly touching are the memorials to 'Joe Allen, the college plumber for more than 40 years,' as well as Rose Morse, 'a college cleaner for more than 20 years'.

On the inner walls of this same arch, two much larger boards commemorate former pupils who died in the two World Wars. The stone plaque to 'Radley's masters who fell in the Great War 1914-1918' list seven names from seven different regiments.

The earliest and one of the most haunting memorials to a Radleian killed in conflict is a brass plaque in the chapel, in memory of Melville Balfour, killed in the massacre at Cawnpore during the Sepoy Rebellion in 1857. The chapel was designed in 1895 by the architect Sir Thomas Jackson – famed for his 'Anglo-Jackson' style on his Oxford buildings,

Below and below right: **Charles Henderson MC's grave, in the memorial window, Radley College Chapel**

Memorial to nine Radleians killed in the Boer War, 1900-02. St George slaying the dragon is by George Frampton RA

including the Examination Schools and the Bridge of Sighs.

In the chapel stands the bronze figure of St George slaying the dragon, sculpted by George Frampton (*pictured above*).

A memorial to all those killed on active service between 1945 and 2005 was dedicated by the Radleian Society in 2008. A memorial to the two Old Radleians who fell in Afghanistan in 2009 and 2010 was unveiled in 2019.

Then there is a commemoration to Hugo James Ross (Jimmy) Barker, a PE teacher at Radley, killed in a RAF crash in Lincolnshire. Three cheers for Radley College! It would seem that there is no larger assembly of memorials in the country. First World War stained glass can be found all over the country.

Women were prominent among Arts and Crafts stained-glass workers, many working on War memorial glass. Mary Lowndes (1856-1929), co-founder of the renowned Lowndes and Drury company, created a mass of marvels.

In Longparish Church, Hampshire, the 1960s glass shows a Western Front grass airfield.

The 1920s window at St Nicholas's, Barton-le-Clay, Bedfordshire, includes shattered stained glass gathered in war-ravaged Arras in northern France.

At St Peter-upon-Cornhill, London, Christ is risen and soaring high above five soldiers with tanks.

At St James the Great, Manorbier, Pembrokeshire, a uniformed nurse with bowed head stands alongside finely attired members of the armed forces, all of them there to glorify God. A crucifix takes centre stage in front of a smart row of representatives of the armed forces, with a mountainous landscape beyond.

At St Mary's, Attenborough, Nottinghamshire, there are battle scenes with fleeing refugees. At Ickford, Buckinghamshire, three uniformed soldiers, sheltered by a ruined church, kneel before a priest who is giving them Holy Communion.

And so it goes on and on and on. All in all, they are QUITE TREMENDOUS!

Genius crossword 458

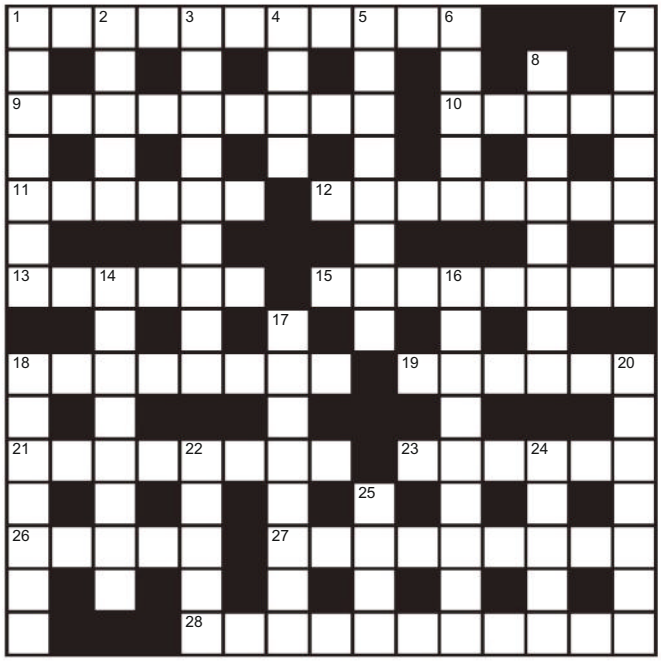
EL SERENO

Across

1 Admiring call from lothario, when crossing street (4-7)
9 One's put out about fine, being blunt (9)
10 Conservative with unidentified man of the church (5)
11 Gathers answer may be found in valleys (6)
12 Grizzly warning for Spooner's ancestor? (8)
13 Farmer once rejecting a moment swamped by desire (6)
15 Advise against the euro? (8)
18 Frank watched, fully aware (4-4)
19 Cake or meal found in 75% of Caesar's France once (6)
21 Area detective allowing no disobedience (8)
23 Part of diocese that manages city hospital? (6)
26 Thin, hungry, missing starter (5)
27 A sailor from Muscat perhaps rejected lover (9)
28 There you are! Advance, beginning to dream; brave defending eh? (2,3,6)

Down

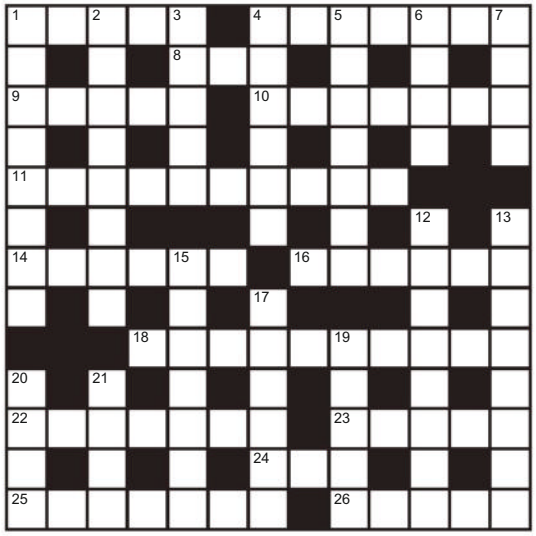
1 Word oddly just describing golf, in error (7)
2 'Bubbles' mostly must be Turner (5)
3 Writer cheers during solemn vigil, seeing old division in north (9)
4 Choosy going topless – that's disgusting! (4)
5 Do nothing in fixing train fare from India (8)
6 Host using mic regularly (5)
7 Old Division C? (7)
8 Guarantee to protect the city when exposed to danger (8)
14 Plant from essentially holy Christian festival (8)
16 Friend with a cord securing tail of fish or bird (9)
17 Exciting read about feature of Mao's territory (3,5)
18 Tidy worker in hospital (7)
20 A French leader covering the centre of Paris is not listened to (7)
22 Qatari money may see challenger having a change of heart (5)
24 Short picture – origin of only adult version (5)
25 Democrat supporting battle for part of constituency (4)



How to enter Please scan or otherwise copy this page and email it to **comps@theoldie.co.uk**. **Deadline: 14th November 2025**.
We do not sell or share your data with third parties.

First prize is *The Chambers Dictionary* and £25.
Two runners-up will receive £15.
NB: Hodder & Stoughton and Bookpoint Ltd will be sent the addresses of the winners because they process the prizes.

Moron crossword 458



Across

1 Petite, delicate (5)
4 Ghost (7)
8 Consume (3)
9 Keen (5)
10 Rootstock (7)
11 Garden centre worker (10)
14 Arctic plain (6)
16 Put into words (6)
18 Started job (anag) (6,4)
22 Cancel officially (7)
23 German sub (1-4)
24 __ and flow (3)
25 Of baked clay (7)
26 Talent (5)

Down

1 Time without end (8)
2 Statuette (8)
3 Boldness, courage (5)
4 Wanders off (6)
5 Inscription (7)
6 Stole (4)
7 Female sheep (4)
12 Pasta tubes (8)
13 Abstaining (8)
15 Codswallop (7)
17 Blush (6)
19 Cold-shoulders (5)
20 Straight, loyal (4)
21 Russian ruler (4)

Genius 456 solution

P	U	T	S	C	H	E	S		C	A	R	P	E	T
L		R		R		V			N		R		E	
A	P	O	L	O	G	I	A		B	O	G	O	T	A
N		U		S		C		G		M		C		C
E	X	P	O	S	I	T	O	R		A	R	E	N	A
T		E				E		U		L		E		D
			C	A	R	D		B	L	O	O	D	E	D
W		I		C						U		S		Y
A	D	M	I	R	A	L		S	A	S	H			
T		M		O		E		N				E		C
C	H	I	M	P		A	N	A	L	G	E	S	I	A
H		N		O		N		P		I		T		R
F	E	E	B	L	E		A	P	P	A	N	A	G	E
U		N		I				E		N		T		S
L	A	T	E	S	T		T	R	O	T	T	E	R	S

Winner: Heather Uebel, Filey, North Yorkshire

Runners-up: Sonny Waight, Bristol; John Liley, Bollington, Cheshire

Moron 456 answers: Across: 1 Carries, 5 Horse (Curry sauce), 8 Yummy, 9 Aerosol, 10 Tumble-dry, 12 Imp, 13 Abduct, 14 Humane, 17 Fur, 18 Sour cream, 20 Lattice, 21 Itchy, 23 Yarns, 24 Sincere. **Down:** 1 Crypt, 2 Rum, 3 Idyllic, 4 Scalds, 5 Harry, 6 Rusticate, 7 Eclipse, 11 Moderator, 13 Awfully, 15 Unction, 16 Duress, 18 Skits, 19 Maybe, 22 Cue.

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What are the key qualities to being the best player in the world? You have to be logical, quick-thinking – and be prepared to back your judgement – even when to do so involves some extremely courageous plays.

Enter 28-year-old Michał Klukowski of Poland (who represents Switzerland through a sponsorship deal). Plan the play in five spades doubled after West leads a club, East winning the king and trying the ace, which you, Klukowski, ruff.

Dealer North North-South Vulnerable

	North ♠ 10 5 ♥ 10 9 8 4 2 ♦ 10 9 6 5 ♣ Q 10	
West ♠ 9 ♥ K Q 6 5 ♦ J 7 4 3 ♣ J 8 7 2	South ♠ A K Q J 8 2 ♥ 7 ♦ A K Q 8 2 ♣ 3	East ♠ 7 6 4 3 ♥ A J 3 ♦ - ♣ A K 9 6 5 4

The bidding

South	West	North	East
		2♥ (1)!	3♣
4♠	5♣	Pass	Pass
5♠	Pass	Pass	Dbl
end			

(1) A weak hand with hearts and a minor – but really? The expression 'making a mockery of the game', perhaps in a Geordie accent, springs to mind.

A mere mortal (MM) draws trumps and cashes the ace of diamonds, cursing when East discards. MM has to give up a diamond and a heart. One down – not bad, given that East-West can make six clubs.

Klukowski also draws trumps – finding East with four and then ... drum roll ... leads a low diamond out of hand. Can you blame West (also an international player) for playing low? Understandably, he can't believe that declarer would lead a low diamond out of hand from ace-king-queen-low-low. Dummy's ten scores and declarer is soon chalking up his doubled 11-trick contract, having avoided a diamond lead.

Why has declarer made such a bold (and brilliant) play? It is partly because of East's double, probably made with the hope of attracting an unusual lead (or switch) à la Lightner. Further, East has advertised about six clubs (for his bid) and turned up with four spades. Not too many red cards, then.

To think of doing it is clever. To *do* it – that's why Klukowski is world number one.

ANDREW ROBSON

Competition

TESSA CASTRO

IN COMPETITION No 324 you were invited to write a poem called *Flint*. I was astonished by the close love many of you bore for the stone.

Julie Wigley wrote of the 19th-century forger of stone-age tools Edward Simpson, known as Flint Jack.

Pat Gannon-Leary wrote of Flint McCullough, legend of the West, in *Wagon Train* on television. Martin Elster celebrated Flint, Michigan, 'a town trying hard to come back from the dead'.

Clare Morris watched David sling his flint pebble. Heather Uebel wrote of a flint axe, a picture of which she kindly sent, and Margaret Jones sent another. Tom Norbury recommended the matchlock over the flintlock.

Commiserations to them and to Christopher Paul, Erika Fairhead, David Shelton, Roger Farrance, Con Connell, Peter Wood-Tovey, Diana Cutler, Frank McDonald and Noel King, and congratulations to those printed below, each of whom wins £25, with the bonus prize of *The Chambers Dictionary* going to David Silverman's evocation of Flint.

Fly, Rhys! Fly, Bryn! Fly, Flynn, fly!
Mynydd Ypynt's dry ghylls by;
Mwdwl, Pwllgwyn, Bwych, Mwynt;
Glyn Myfyr – why, Flint!

Cwrt! Thy hymns by C B Fry,
Rhym'd by Cynwyd's twyns dry:
'Cwm Pwllgwyllyn', 'Dwygyfylchi',
'Llyn Cyfynwy', 'Flint'!

Cwrt – thy lych, thy crypt, thy gryphs;
Thy myths: Wyn Sylwyn, Gypsy Lynn –
Cly thy crwth, Lynn! Rhythms ply,
Wry nymph-sylph syzygy!

Fly, Rhys! Fly, Bryn! Fly, Flynn, fly
By Rhydymwyn's Clwyd sky.
Spy Rhyl? Cry 'Dywlch Hwyl'!
Shyly tryst – in Flint!
David Silverman

The sun-bleached, arid hills of southern Spain
Are farmed no longer. Spiny thorns
Now cover ancient terraces, where grain
Was grown and harvested once with shards of stone.
How did men live six thousand years ago
Before time had a name? I find their bones
In the museum, grave goods put on show
In halogen-lit glass cases. The place is full of death.
I feel no sense of kinship, turn to escape –
But then a stone-age sickle stops me in mid-stride.
Embedded with sharp flakes of flint, its half-moon shape
Is utterly familiar. I lift it in my mind, grasp barley stalks, slash down
And feel the stems part cleanly. I'm standing on a hillside in the sun.
And working with my tribe to gather food.
I have my sickle. I know what must be done.
Veronica Colin

A pirate parrot, as I perch
On Long John Silver's shoulder
I name the object of the search.
No parrot could be bolder.

'Pieces of Eight' is what I call
The silver Spanish dollar.
The buried hoard that makes them all
Grow hot under the collar.

I take my name from Captain Flint,
Alas the dear departed,
Who ended up as good as skint,
Betrayed by the flint-hearted.

Yes, Long John Silver has, I feel,
A hide thick as a hippo,
A coin-hard soul. Give him some steel
And you could light your Zippo.
Basil Ransome-Davies

Smooth, dense stone, core stone.
Hammerstone.

Strike off the cortex
Strike in two
Strike the edge

Fracturing
Pressure flaking
Thinning
Notching

Detailed
Sharp-edged, fine-edged
Balanced
Knapped
Finished
Stephanie Wallace

COMPETITION No 326 Christmas, as ever, is coming. You are invited to write a poem called *Wrapping*, 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 326', by Thursday 13th November.

Impressionist master

Alistair McGowan turns himself into Alfred Hitchcock and Louis Theroux to entertain *Louise Flind*

Did you act as a child?
Not until I was about 11 or 12. I became aware of wanting to perform at school doing English O level, when the teacher would say, 'Who's going to read this Keats for us? You'd see people cringing, and I'd always be thinking, 'Please choose me.'

And I had a wonderful drama teacher who asked if I'd like to be in the end-of-term play and I said, 'No, I'm a footballer.' She gave me Scrooge's nephew in *A Christmas Carol*, and I loved it.

Is it because you went to Leeds University that you support Leeds United?
No – I went to Leeds University because I supported Leeds.

Did you go to acting school?
The Guildhall School of Music and Drama.

Of whom did you do your first impression?
Frank Spencer, aged about nine. Everybody was doing him in the playground and I thought my Frank Spencer was better than anybody else's.

What was your first big break?
A Radio 4 programme called *Weekending*. I used to listen to it as a child with my father going to watch Coventry City.

How do you create an impression of someone?
Some come very easily and for others you really have to listen hard. I did a film where I narrated the whole thing as Alfred Hitchcock [he imitates him].

You had to get every vowel sound right – every breath, the sound of the voice, the shape of the mouth, the face and the attitude. Ultimately, it's the attitude that really differentiates one voice from the other.

How do you know you've got a voice right?
You get used to the adjustment of the sound coming out as the way you hear it in your head.

Who did you most enjoy being on *Spitting Image*?
I both did and didn't enjoy doing Paddy Ashdown, because Paddy was somebody I thought was an absolutely fabulous orator and a wonderful man.

GETTY

And on *The Big Impression*?
Jonathan Ross and being 'weally gwegawious'. Gary Lineker, very quiet. Beckham was always tricky because there was so much make-up, wigs, bald caps, beards and things.

Louis Theroux was great fun [he imitates him] – the wig; he has such lovely hair. I met him once and he said, 'I hope you're not going to do me; I'd be so self-conscious.'

And I thought, 'Actually, Louis, we've just filmed it.'

Who was your all-time favourite?
Richard Madeley was fun to do – but Ronni Ancona always hated doing Judy Finnigan and never felt she really got her.

Is there anyone you can't do an impression of?
Oh, loads of people. Vocally you can't get your voice into certain areas. I've never wanted to listen to Trump enough to be him. I couldn't do Mikel Arteta – but basically [he imitates him] he's Spanish.

He doesn't open his mouth at all when he's talking. His teeth are clamped together – he talks all around his teeth.

John Major talked through the back of his head, and Raymond Blanc's voice goes out through the top of his head.

When did you start playing the piano?
When I was eight. Then I gave up when I was nine, and started again at 49.

Do you think musicality goes arm in arm with being an impressionist?
Whether one makes you good at the other? I don't think that's necessarily the case.

You're an actor, impressionist, pianist, stand-up, poet, writer – what do you see yourself as?
Poet and pianist.

Is there anything you can't leave home without?
Earplugs. I don't drive, I go by train and I find the amount of noise – from announcements, air-conditioning, phones ringing, conversations, FaceTimes, recordings to friends, TikToks, sweet wrappers, crisps munched and crunched – all really disconcerting. Trained musicians (which I'm not) have mentioned misophonia, an extrasensitivity to noise which makes you murderous...

Is there something you really miss?
My cat – we're in a very close relationship.

Do you travel light?
I once worked with Stephen Mangan when iPhones were quite new and Stephen would turn up with just his iPhone. I had a book, paper, food, water bottle, pens and pencils, cardigan... I try to travel as light as Stephen, but I can't.

Earliest childhood holiday memories?
We'd go to Bournemouth and Swanage or Barmouth and Aberystwyth – always the seaside.

Do you go on holiday?
Rarely, because of touring so much. I've got very insular and take great pleasure in nature and solitude in space these days.

What are your top travelling tips?
Always expect the unexpected. Don't get the last train...

Alistair McGowan narrates A Christmas Carol *with the Brighton Philharmonic, touring in December*

Norfolk Broads clean up their act

PATRICK BARKHAM

Edwardian days may have been the last time it was this fine to take a walk beside the waterways of the Norfolk Broads.

These human-made lakes and connecting channels, cuts and rivers were then acclaimed for their gin-clear water and swaying miniature forests of aquatic plants.

Those golden days were lost because of sediment-stirring from motorboats, sewage and, most of all, fertiliser and soil draining off the increasingly intensive farming close by. For as long as I've known them, Broadland waters have been brown.

Not this summer and early autumn. So I took a walk beside the Bure, the prettiest of the Broadland rivers, to enjoy its newly sparkling waters.

There are not many broads or rivers with good footpaths beside them, because most people enjoy them from floating craft. I set out south from Mayton Bridge, a pretty swim spot close to elegant Hautbois Hall. This field-edge path meandered through an almost eerily peaceful valley bottom, with only the cackle of a green woodpecker and a startled roe deer for company.

Beside ripening maize, I picked the last sun-sweetened blackberries before the path squeezed its way past some old cottages. Crossing a footbridge, I turned left to admire the riverside.

The mellow sun of September warmed the scene as alders, hazels and willows met over a wonderfully intimate stretch of river. All was green and gold, as yellow-flowering water lilies jostled with ribboning beds of water weed.

'Peeeeeep!' I heard the kingfisher before I saw it, flashing low along the river, ginger to the fore and vivid iridescent turquoise on its back, which was hunched like a speeding motorcyclist over his handlebars.

This has been a kingfisher summer. I've never seen so many before, and I'm sure they must have thrived with easier fishing provided by such clear water. This also helped osprey fledge young on the Broads for the first time in eastern England for 250 years. And the birds left plenty for us: a venerable angler told me he hadn't known such good fishing on the Bure for a quarter of a century.

GARY WING

I couldn't resist a swim. The water was joltingly cool and sweet as I joined darting shoals of juvenile bream in the water, slightly disconcerted that I could see them and my feet so clearly in a Broadland river. It had never been like this in previous years.

The undersides of the riverside trees were illuminated, as if by spotlight, from the sun bouncing off the surface of the languidly flowing water.

Tingling and refreshed, I walked on, past the old church and across the bridge into Coltishall, turning north along the path that wiggles alongside the river all the way back to Mayton Bridge.

This way round, I was saving the best stretch of path until last – but it proved unexpectedly challenging. Although well-walked, the path was swamped with late-summer growth – nettles, thistles, grasses and sallows, supercharged by their position in perpetually damp earth that's been blessed with months of unprecedented sunshine.

As red admirals feasted on flowering ivy, I fought my way through various thickets for the reward of more glimpses of limpid water.

This stretch of river is free of sewage works. The lack of rain has hugely helped clarity, and Broadland experts say we are reaping the rewards of years of effort by local farmers and conservationists to stop fertiliser run-off and halt intensive animal husbandry close to the Broads' rivers.

With luck, a virtuous circle has been established: more aquatic plants thriving in the clearer waters, filtering out even more sediment.

The final stretch of the path entered an open meadow and brought easy walking beside the glinting Bure, a river that sounds like fiction – here, at least, as clear and healthy as its Edwardian ancestor.

Free parking at Mayton Bridge (What3 Words: yacht.beginning.fairly). Cross the Bure, turn left onto footpath and follow it to Horstead. Turn left over Coltishall Bridge and immediately left again onto riverside path back to Mayton Bridge

Beat the Christmas rush by Charlotte Metcalf

Go on. Treat yourself to a touch of luxury before the Christmas shoppers swarm.

In November, you can still linger and choose your presents with care. Browse those lush high-end retailers at leisure – and choose a watch, designer handbag or coat that someone you love has been coveting.

Or stroll into one of the innovative jewellers that now specialise in colourful, versatile bracelets and earrings for younger people. Or spend time tasting claret to get a truly decent bottle for someone you want to thank.

Or choose the goodies for that hamper in person, rather than just leaving the selection to the shop.

You might even indulge in a new cashmere jumper for yourself, or in that interesting bottle of Japanese whisky you've wondered about trying.

Then go and pick your favourite treats: mince pies, Stilton, biscuits or champagne truffles, before the crowds swoop on those tempting shelves and snap them all up.

Enjoy your browsing as soon as you can – we oldies are not good at battling against the scurrying hordes.

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Editorial extra...

Grand old Duke of Kent

The Duke, who's just turned 90, saved my bacon – twice.

By *Richard Snailham*

One of the great privileges I had as a civilian lecturer at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst for 25 years was meeting influential people in the Officers' Mess. One of them was the Duke of Kent, who turned 90 on 9th October [see page 48 for the requiem mass for his wife, the late Duchess of Kent].

The Duke was a military instructor at Sandhurst for two years in the 1970s. I made an awful gaffe when another colleague, Major John Blashford-Snell, tasked me to invite the Duke to a party John was giving – and ask whether he'd like to bring his wife.

I asked the Duke, 'Would you be able to come with the Duchess of Windsor?'

'Well,' he said, 'she's getting on a bit and now lives in Paris.'

In 1981, John and I were in Sierra Leone on reconnaissance for a scientific expedition, just as the country was celebrating the 20th anniversary of its independence in 1961.

The British High Commission in Freetown gave a reception. The guests of honour were the Duke and Duchess of Kent.

Edward had been the member of the royal family to witness the lowering of the Union Flag there on Independence Day. John and I met the Kents and had a chat on the lawns of the High Commissioner's residence.

Days later, John and I were at Lungi Airport, waiting for our flight home. Wandering round the departure lounge, I found myself in a small room containing a huge, pyramidal heap of old luggage.

Thinking this unusual, I took out my camera to take some pictures – whereupon security officers marched in. They arrested me for taking illegal pictures, likely to give a poor impression of Sierra Leone.

One on each side, they lifted me off the ground and frogmarched me into the main hall. John saw this, got up and in a stentorian voice said, 'Put that man down. He is a friend of the Duke of Kent.'

And they did.

The grubby world of books

Literary life is horrible – from bitter writers to stingy publishers

ROGER LEWIS

Growing up in industrial South Wales, where the men were men and the women by some margin worse, I hankered for somewhere more refined, more seemingly civilised and openly genteel.

Would I find such a climate by cranking myself up several social classes and going to university, perhaps?

My innocent assumption was that the humanities would be humane and the arts filled with nice people saying hello to clouds and flowers. I couldn't have been more wrong.

Maybe people are better behaved in proper subjects such as medicine or quantum physics – subjects requiring rigour and application – but, in my (long) experience, those involved with English Literature, in particular, are on the whole disloyal, mendacious, grasping and thoroughly vile.

The problem is that, unless one stays hidden away in a university, receiving a pension after delivering lacklustre lectures on Keats as a teaching hack, writers have no professional structure; no promotions or recognisable ladder to success.

This creates a permanent and undignified sense of insecurity and volatility. It's all pushing and shoving and competitiveness. It's dog eats dog – and dog who doesn't answer the other dog's emails. And if the money is rubbish, the prestige and recognition are non-existent.

When I first graduated and was at large in London, boardroom lunches at *Punch* or the *Spectator* (where the cook was Jennifer Paterson) were a riot. That I found my way home in one piece was a miracle.

What I most recall were all these old authors and publishers, with rheumy eyes and black spittle at the corner of their mouth – people who simply could not contain their bitterness.

Launch parties on a Thursday evening had a similar cast – dreary literary novelists, groping literary editors, diarists desperately sweeping the room for gossip, poets propped up by the Arts Council, biographers wondering whose life with tabloid serial potential they'd next knock off – Dennis Potter, perhaps, Benjamin Britten or maybe Spike Milligan.

I was in my twenties and everyone else in their fifties and sixties. I had absolutely no intention of turning into one of these gargoyles.

Yet, lo and behold, I probably have. Not that anyone throws launch parties any longer – another way publishers manage not to spend money on authors and keep it for themselves. Nor has any editor asked me out to lunch since the last millennium.

Should I ever find myself in proximity to a fellow author, within seconds flat I am moaning about absolutely everything. And my interlocutor is moaning about absolutely everything.

Where to begin? The pathetic advances, which work out at an hourly rate of less than 2p; the way the author now must fork out for copyright permissions, picture researchers, indexers and the libel reports.

It won't be long before we have to foot the printer's bills, too, and do the chief executive of Penguin's gardening.

The horrors of sensitivity-awareness editing is a subject in itself – the way Agatha Christie, Roald Dahl and Ian Fleming have been sanitised is as nothing when publishers demand the removal of jokes and bits of wanton silliness.

I like interspersing high-flown bits of prose with plenty of swearing and the demotic, as if what you are reading is a transcription of what is going on inside my head.

Well, I might upset ethnic minorities or fat people or the trans mob, mightn't I, if I call Sophia Loren's big knockers booby-doos. A publisher's greatest fear is that a youngster in a black T-shirt, working in Waterstones, will place something disobliging on social media and everyone gets cancelled.

At least there used to be the publicity carnival – a few weeks in nice hotels in London or New York, accompanied by lovely publicity handmaidens.

Not any more. Instead of brief appearances on radio shows, up and down in the lift at Broadcasting House, today it's all podcasts which last hours, done 'remotely' from my back bedroom here in Hastings, where black mould runs up and down the curtains.

There are professional bodies meant to protect us – but when I had a heart attack and couldn't earn a living for a few months, the Royal Literary Fund refused to help me because I had a wife, who I suppose was now expected to take in washing.

As for the Royal Society of Literature, they hate me so much that not even the combined efforts of the late Jeremy Lewis, David Hare, Stephen Fry and goodness knows how many others have managed over 40 years to persuade the committee to take me seriously.

Apparently grave offence was taken when I said somewhere that Iris Murdoch's novels were resounding balls.

I am worried now about the Society of Authors, as I recently received candidates' statements for the election to the management committee.

Everyone bangs on about making 'a more inclusive space', having an 'environmental agenda'. They fret about 'under-represented groups, including neurodivergent, global majority and disabled authors'.

What can any of that gobbledegook possibly mean? It doesn't equate writing with merit, which is all I care about. They call writers 'creatives', which annoys me as much as calling actresses actors.

Well, so what? AI is on its way and capricious authors will no longer be required. This is not a world I want to be in, and the only good thing about the future is I won't be alive to see any of it.

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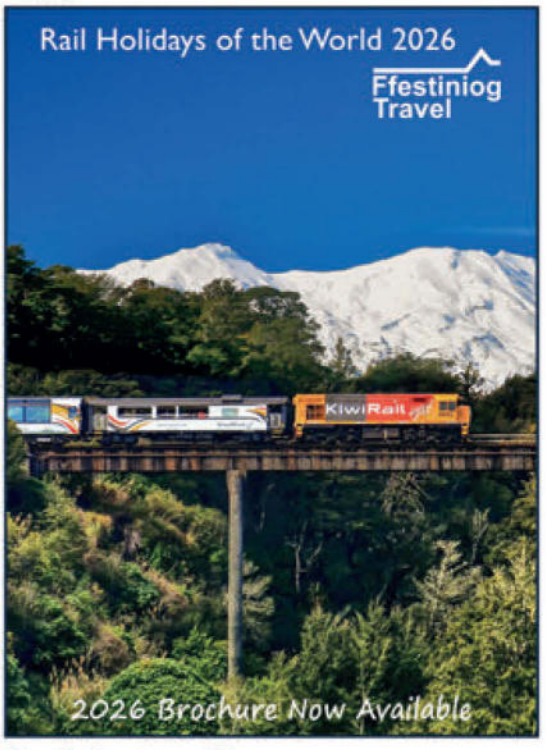

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