FREE 32-PAGE OLDIE REVIEW OF BOOKS

ANDREW ROBERTS ERNIE WISE AT 100

The Oldie

FREE CARTOON CALENDAR 2026

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

December 2025 | £6.95 £4.75 to subscribers | www.theoldie.co.uk | Issue 459



100 years of modernism

From Salvador Dali to Hockney – by John McEwen

Who wants to be a millionaire? Judith Keppel did

Do skinny jabs work? Fat chance! By Prue Leith

Princess Margaret on Mustique – Nicholas Courtney

9 770965 250987 12



Chris Beetles Gallery



THE ILLUSTRATORS

THE BRITISH ART OF ILLUSTRATION

1806-2025

22 November 2025 – 3 January 2026







Above: Edmund Dulac (1882-1953) *The Infant Moses*
Above right: Ronald Searle CBE HRWS (1920-2011) *Inefficient Cat*
Right: E H Shepard MC OBE (1879-1976) *Pay Attention Pooh*

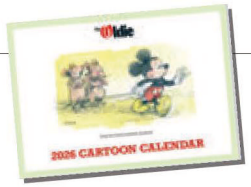
The biggest annual event worldwide for illustration and cartoon collectors, displaying over 300 original artworks spanning two centuries. This year's irresistible collection features treasures from Thomas Rowlandson to Edmund Dulac; E H Shepard and William Heath Robinson to Edward Ardizzone and Giles; and Michael Foreman to Peter Brookes and Matt.

A complimentary illustrated brochure is available to *Oldie* readers on direct contact with the gallery.

All works are available to purchase and can be viewed on our website

www.chrisbeetles.com

8 & 10 Ryder Street St James's London SW1Y 6QB • 020 7839 7551 • gallery@chrisbeetles.com • Monday-Saturday • 10am-5.30pm



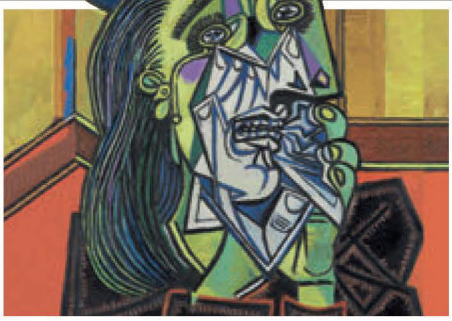
NB Don't throw away your free 2026 calendar, included with this issue!

The Oldie

Give a subscription and save up to £99
See page 25



Ernie Wise at 100 page16



Britain's oldest modern-art gallery page 20



Margaret's Mustique page 82

Features

12 My dad invented TV *Malcolm Baird*
14 How I won a million *Judith Keppel*
16 Ernie Wise at 100 *Andrew Roberts*
19 Insults are good for you *Charlie Mortimer*
20 A century of art at the Mayor Gallery *John McEwen*
24 Real SAS rogue hero Paddy Mayne *Michael McKee*
27 Widowed and downsizing *Richard Britton*
30 John Vanbrugh, 300 years on *Simon Scott Plummer*
98 Restored-art disasters *Quentin Letts*

Regulars

5 The Old Un's Notes
9 Gyles Brandreth's Diary
10 Grumpy Oldie Man *Matthew Norman*
11 Olden Life: What were polyfotos? *Gillian Jones*
11 Modern Life: What is stupidogenesis? *Richard Godwin*
29 Oldie Man of Letters *A N Wilson*
36 Mary Killen's Beauty Tips
37 Prue's News *Prue Leith*
40 Postcards from the Edge *Mary Kenny*
41 Small World *Jem Clarke*
42 Town Mouse *Tom Hodgkinson*
43 Country Mouse *Giles Wood*
44 History *David Horspool*
46 School Days *Sophia Waugh*
48 God *Sister Teresa*
48 Memorial Service: Ray Brooks *Harry Mount*
49 The Doctor's Surgery *Dr Theodore Dalrymple*
51 I Once Met ... Tom Jones *Judith Krebs*
51 Memory Lane *Steve Overbury*
52 Readers' Letters
65 Commonplace Corner
65 Rant: Trendy hamburgers *S A Johnson*
89 Crossword
91 Bridge *Andrew Robson*
91 Competition *Tessa Castro*

Books

54 El Generalismo: Franco: Power, Violence and the Quest for Greatness, by Giles Tremlett *Christopher Howse*
55 From the Castle to the Hove-l, by Nicholas Lezard *Rupert Christiansen*
57 Holbein: Renaissance Master, by Elizabeth Goldring *David Ekserdjian*
59 Greek to Us: The Fascinating Ancient Greek That Shapes Our World, by John Davie *Paul Cartledge*
61 Death of an Ordinary Man, by Sarah Perry *Patrick Barkham*
63 A Life in Letters, by John Updike *Christopher Bray*

Reader Offers

Literary lunch p37
Reader trip to the Loire Valley ... in the footsteps of the Plantagenets p79

Arts

66 Film: The Choral *Harry Mount*
67 Theatre: Death on the Nile *William Cook*
68 Radio *Valerie Grove*
68 Television *Frances Wilson*
69 Music *Richard Osborne*
70 Golden Oldies *Mark Ellen*
71 Exhibitions *Huon Mallalieu*

Pursuits

73 Gardening *David Wheeler*
73 Kitchen Garden *Simon Courtauld*
74 Cookery *Elisabeth Luard*
74 Restaurants *James Pembroke*
75 Drink *Bill Knott*
76 Sport *Jim White*
76 Motoring *Alan Judd*
78 Digital Life *Matthew Webster*
78 Money Matters *Neil Collins*
81 Bird of the Month: Brent goose *John McEwen*

Travel

82 Margaret in Mustique *Nicholas Courtney*
84 Overlooked Britain: Papplewell Pumping Station *Lucinda Lambton*
97 On the Road: Alf Dubs *Louise Flind*
92 Taking a Walk: autumnal Northamptonshire *Patrick Barkham*



OUT NOW! The Oldie Annual 2026
See page 27

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

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

NEXT ISSUE
The January issue is on sale 10th December 2025

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

***Oldie* subscriptions**
To order a print subscription, go to https://checkout.theoldie.co.uk/offers, or email theoldie@subscription.co.uk, or call 01858 438791
Print subscription rates for 12 issues: UK £51.50; Europe/Eire £58; USA/Canada £70; rest of world £69.
To buy a digital subscription for £29.99 or single issue for £2.99, go to the App Store on your tablet/mobile and search for 'The Oldie'.

Advertising
For display, contact Paul Pryde on 020 3859 7095, or Jasper Gibbons on 020 3859 7096. For classified, contact Honor Brown on 020 3859 7093
News-stand enquiries
mark.jones@newstrademarketing.co.uk
Literary lunches and reader trips
01225 427311
Front cover:
Salvador Dali (1904-89)
Gala-Salvador Dalí Foundation

TRAILFINDERS
THE TRAVEL EXPERTS



WHEREVER AND WHENEVER, TRUST TRAILFINDERS TO TAKE CARE OF YOU...

Trustpilot

No.1 TOUR OPERATOR

AWARD WINNING SERVICE
INDEPENDENT TRUSTED TRAVEL ADVICE
UNRIVALLED CARE & PROTECTION
NO SURCHARGES OR HIDDEN EXTRAS

WINNER
BEST TOUR OPERATOR
The Times & The Sunday Times
TRAVEL AWARDS 2025
for 12 consecutive years

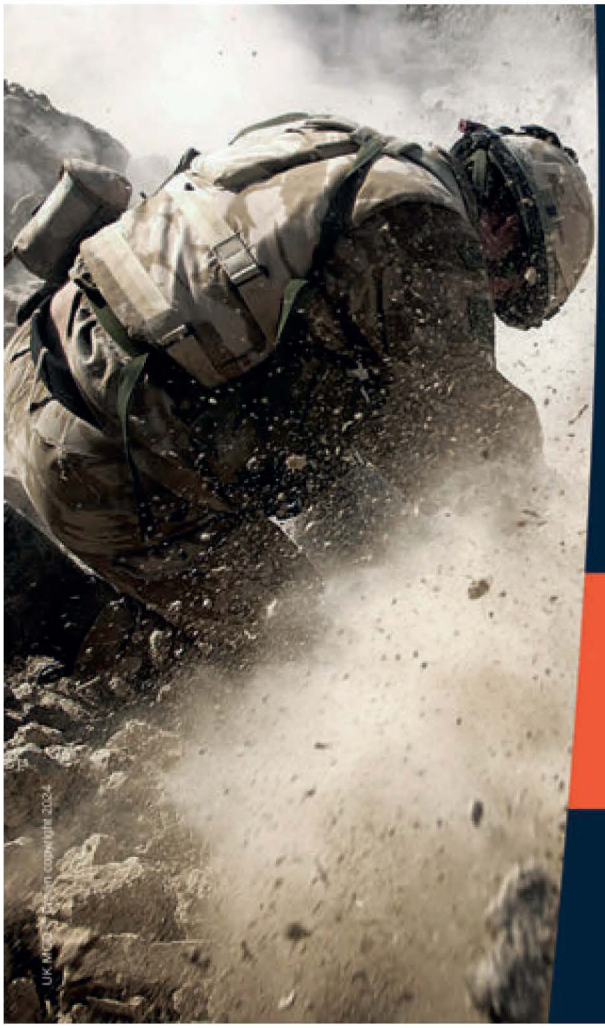
ALL YOUR TRAVEL ARRANGEMENTS TAKEN CARE OF IN ONE PLACE

ABTA IATA

Call TRAILFINDERS on 020 7368 1365,
or visit your local Trailfinders Travel Centre

Trustpilot No.1 TOUR OPERATOR

ATOL LICENCE: 1458
caa.co.uk



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 and our role today is to help those with some of the most complex mental health challenges. Please support our work.

SCAN HERE

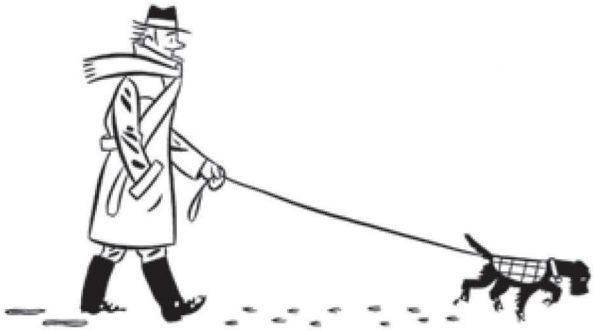
As a charity, gifts in Wills fund one in five of the veterans we treat.

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**

Here to help 24/7, free Helpline: 0800 138 1619

COMBAT STRESS

Company Registered in England & Wales No 00256353. Charity Registration No 206002 (SC038828 in Scotland). 25060



The Old Un's Notes

The McLachlan family have just celebrated the great *Oldie* cartoonist Ed McLachlan (1940-2024) at a party at the Cartoon Museum.

His daughter, Danielle Lees, recalled admiring one of his cartoons and ringing up her father to praise it.

'It's me, Dad,' she said.

'I know it's you,' he barked. 'Why are you ringing?'

'I wanted to say how much I loved the cartoon.'

'I suppose you want the original?' he said.

'That would be lovely!' said a thrilled Danielle.

'Well, you can ring up the Chris Beetles Gallery – it's for sale.'

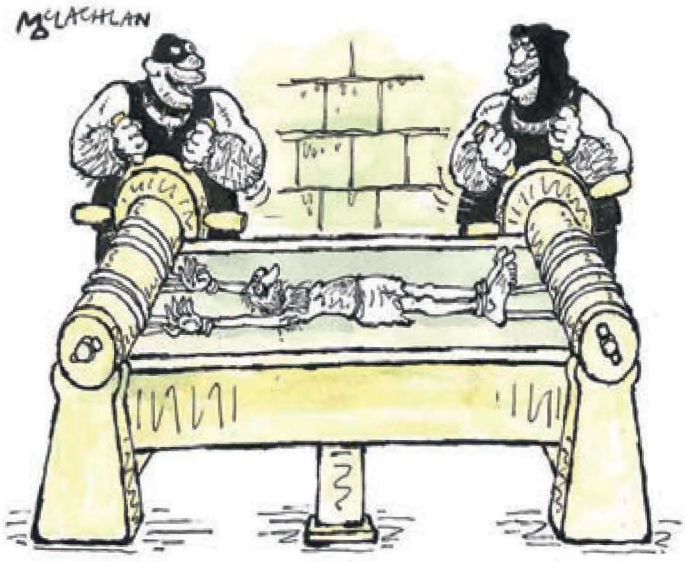
Danielle thought this was typical of her father – until she returned to her family home for a visit and found a parcel neatly wrapped on her bed. The cartoon.

Ed was a joy to work with at *The Oldie* – as well as being a supremely funny cartoonist. He was extraordinarily prolific – he would send roughs of hundreds of cartoons every year, from which we had the luxury of asking him to produce at least one an issue.

And how funny he was. His friend Nick Newman, the *Private Eye* and *Sunday Times* cartoonist, recalled Ed turning up to a cartoonists' party.

Another cartoonist said to Ed, 'Oh, you've just missed Bill Tidy [another renowned cartoonist].'

'I wouldn't if I was in my car,' said the inspired Ed.



'Race you'

Among this month's contributors



Judith Keppel (p14) was the first person to win a million pounds on *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*, in 2000. She was on quiz show *Eggheads* from 2003 until 2022.



John McEwen (p20 and p81) is *The Oldie*'s Bird of the Month correspondent. Former art critic of the *Sunday Telegraph*, he is author of *Swoop Sing Perch Paddle*, illustrated by Carry Akroyd.



David Ekserdjian (p57) is Emeritus Professor of Art and Film History at Leicester University. His books include *Correggio*, *Parmigianino* and *The Italian Renaissance Altarpiece*.



Paul Cartledge (p59) was Professor of Greek Culture and Greek History at Cambridge University. He is author of *Thebes: The Forgotten City of Ancient Greece* and *The Spartans*.

A dinner is being held to celebrate that neglected item of male headgear the fez.

The Honourable Society of the Fez has asked guests to come topped by a tasselled titfer. The fez, although often associated with Tommy Cooper, was once a mark of officialdom in the Ottoman Empire. It was later banned by Ataturk, who possibly had no sense of humour.

The Savile Club dinner, an act of heroic cultural appropriation, may be a splashy event. An earlier fez-tivity ran well past midnight, one patron becoming so 'enlightened' that he gave his fez to a taxi driver and has since had to buy a red-rabbit-fur replacement from Lock & Co (£295).

Stephen Fry has been made a member of the Senior Common Room at Magdalen College, Oxford.

It's richly deserved, after his uncanny performance as Oscar Wilde in *Wilde* (1997), much of it filmed at Magdalen, Wilde's alma mater.

In one of his first duties as a Magdalen Fellow, Fry has just presented Movie Monday, where he shared his six Desert Island Films with Magdalen alumni.

Fry also played Jeeves to his old friend Hugh Laurie's Wooster. So we're now in a strange situation where Jeeves is a Magdalen Fellow, while Bertie Wooster,

NOT MANY DEAD

Important stories you may have missed

Stolen tractors found in Stevenage and returned to owner
Comet



Large stone left at field
Worcester News

Woman hit partner with wooden giraffe
Aberdeen Press & Journal

£15 for published contributions

NEW! Tune into Radio *Oldie*

Every Tuesday, you can find the latest weekly interview by Harry Mount or Charlotte Metcalf with personalities such as A N Wilson, Alexander McCall Smith and Gyles Brandreth.

Each week we release three more podcasts on Top of the Pods, our selection of the best podcasts and comedy clips on the internet.

Just sign up for the newsletter on the home-page of the website.

Sign up to our weekly e-newsletter

Email SIGN UP

who P G Wodehouse said was a Magdalen undergraduate, isn't recognised by the college as an old boy.

The late Angus Macintyre, History Fellow at Magdalen, tried to have Bertie included in the Magdalen College Register of alumni, but he still isn't officially recorded.

Surely Bertie must be celebrated as one of Magdalen's greatest alumni, alongside Oscar Wilde, Edward VIII and Louis Theroux.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission is an utterly admirable, remarkable institution.

But few people know that it looks after the graves only of those who have died for their country since 1914. What about those who fell in previous conflicts – such as the Seven Years War, the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars?

Step forward the Remembrance Trust, founded by former *Spectator*-owner Algy Cluff in 2018. A new book by Roger Bowdler, *The Remembrance Trust: Tributes to Valour*, salutes the Trust's work so far.

It includes a foreword by the Trust's patron, the Princess Royal. She says, 'I have witnessed the dedication of those involved in this mission: volunteers who tend forgotten headstones, historians who unearth lost narratives and communities who preserve the legacy of local heroes.'

The Princess Royal is pictured at Dover Cemetery. Among the tombstones preserved there by the Trust is that of Quartermaster Charles Wooden VC (1829-76), who survived the Charge of the Light Brigade.

The German-born Wooden won his VC for helping to save a wounded officer at the 1854 Battle of Balaclava. Wooden was also celebrated for forgetting the password to get back into camp one evening after a drinking session. When the sentry challenged him, he said, '"Tish me.'

When the sentry refused him entry for not remembering the password, Wooden shouted, '"Tish me, the Devil.'



Royal restoration: Princess Anne, Dover Cemetery

The sentry, now recognising Wooden, said, 'Pass, 'Tish me, the Devil.' From then on, 'Tish me, the Devil became Wooden's nickname.

Tragically, Wooden killed himself after another drinking session in 1876, aged 47, having been in the Army for 30 years.

Ring-a-ding!

That quintessential showman Sammy Davis Jr (1925-90), who enjoyed describing himself as a 'little, one-eyed, coloured, Jewish guy', would have turned 100 on 8th December.

Davis's career was bookended by the titles of his two bestselling autobiographies. He published *Yes I Can* in 1964 and, 25 years later, its sequel *Why Me?*

At one time, Davis was earning $40,000 a week (roughly $300,000 in today's money) to perform in Las Vegas.

He was one of American television's first black stars, regularly got himself photographed in stylish nightclubs with glamorous women, and reached his 1960s apotheosis clowning around on stage and off with the likes of Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin as part of the Rat Pack.

Above all, Davis was an irrepressible performer. Even away from the stage, he lived for the public's acclaim.

Dean Martin once told the Old Un of a stormy night in New York when he was in a car with Davis and their wives en route to a restaurant:

'We pulled up, and Sam got out, and did his whole *Singin' in the Rain* routine right there on the street in front of a cheering crowd. He loved that.'

But it wasn't all roses for Davis. There were drink and drugs, and a knowledge of the occult rumoured to be far more than perfunctory. His marriage to the white actress May Britt from 1960

JEREMY LEWIS PRIZE FOR NEW WRITING 2025 How to enter



Our much-loved deputy editor and patron saint of *The Oldie*, Jeremy Lewis, died in 2017, aged 75. In his memory, we run the Jeremy Lewis Prize, worth £500. It rewards the sort of writing that emulates Jeremy's wit and lightness of touch in his books and journalism.

What to write about
In 400 words, recount a memory (similar to our Memory Lane column, on page 28 of this issue).
Please begin by saying when the events you describe took place.

How to send your entry
Simply email your entry to editorial@theoldie.co.uk by 24th November 2025.
Please mark it JEREMY LEWIS PRIZE.

to ’68 was punctuated by hostile remarks from an American press yet to reconcile itself to the idea of interracial relationships.

And for years he lived beyond his means, dying of cancer in 1990, aged 64, owing $7 million to the tax authorities.

‘This is what I want on my tombstone,’ Davis told an interviewer shortly before the end. “‘Sammy Davis Jr”, the date and, underneath, one word: “Entertainer”. That’s what I am.’



Lawyers are seeking compensation from Herefordshire chicken farmers for allegedly polluting the River Wye.

But are the lawyers themselves polluting the English language?

Outside the High Court, the Wye was described by a lawyer as ‘one of our historic rivers’.

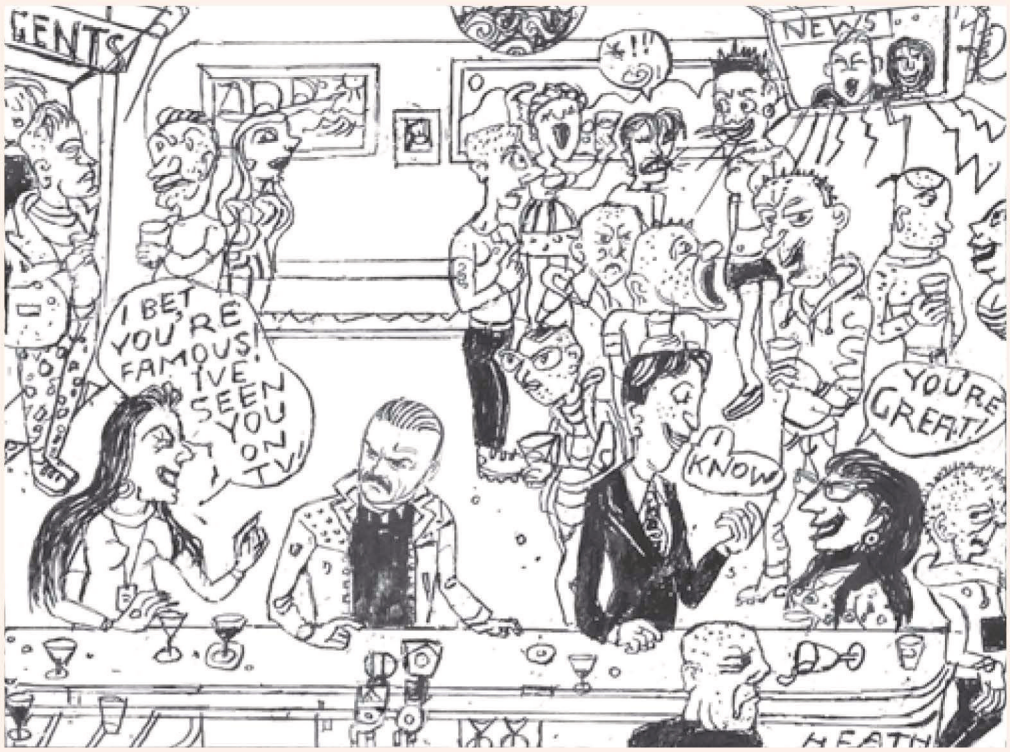
What does that mean? Are there any rivers that are ‘modern’?

A *Times* obituary of former House of Lords clerk Sir John Sainty (1934-2025) noted his rule that peers’ contributions at oral questions ‘should run to no more than four lines of *Hansard*’.

If only! Work and Pensions Minister Lady Sherlock, 64, recently answered eight oral questions on the jobs market.

Her replies covered 141 lines of *Hansard*, making an average per answer of 17½. A champion windbag!

★ GREAT BORES OF TODAY – THE GOOD OLD BRITISH PUB ★



I was here on Monday and it was dead. Dead.

You don’t get much change out of a tenner for a pint now. I remember the days when a pound note would buy you a pint AND a packet of crisps.

Of course you could smoke then. Mind you, it was like a kippering shed. Your clothes stank the next day. Know what I mean?

I blame the music. Or what they call music. It kills the art of conversation.

Can’t hear yourself think. And what’s all that with BrewDog? Nothing to it, if you ask me.

Never liked the taste. It’s horrible. Craft beer? Leave it out. I knew when they did this place up that the prices would be going up with it.

There’s a pub closing every day, and I’m not surprised. It’s like a morgue, isn’t it? Young people get cheap stuff from the supermarket and drink it at home instead.

Oh, don’t mind if I do. Just a half. I met that Jeff Bernard once, and he wasn’t funny at all. He said to me, ‘Why don’t you…?’

By Michael Heath and Christopher Howse

A monocle-popping moment for viewers of ITV’s *Good Morning Britain*. Presenter Kate Garraway, interviewing BBC naturalist Chris Packham about eco-energy policies, managed to refer to the ‘energy price crap’.

Unusually forthright for breakfast telly.

Fret not if you have difficulty mastering your mobile telephone. It happens to the brightest of us.

A terribly serious House of Lords constitution committee meeting was interrupted by loud glockenspiel chimes.

They were coming from the mobile of former Lord Chief Justice Lord Burnett.

The 67-year-old (who is not entirely unvarnished by pomposity) dived for his rucksack, squinted at the telephone’s controls and stabbed it with his fingers, to no avail.

Eventually he managed to kill it. One of our top legal brains – but plainly hopeless with gadgets.



‘They said my call is very important to them, so I’m going to stick it out’



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.

There is only one cure for grey hair. It was invented by a Frenchman. It is called the guillotine.

PG WODEHOUSE ESTATE/CAZALET FAMILY



Join a River Cruise Holiday in the Beautiful Severn Vale

- Luxury hotel boat cruises up to 22 passengers.
- New destinations daily. 3-6 nights long.
- Traditional English food, special diets welcomed.
- Includes food, drink, tours & more - no hidden extras.
- Moorings close to tours or transport provided.
- Cosy twin cabins - climate control, windows, ensuite.
- All deposits financially protected.
- Pre-cruise hotel packages available.

FREE BROCHURE: Call 01452 410411

englishholidaycruises.co.uk

ENGLISH HOLIDAY CRUISES

ABTOT Member 5609





Unveiling theatre's unsung hero

Sir Donald Wolfit brought Shakespeare to the people – and breakfast in bed to Captain Peacock

When I was a little boy, living in London in the 1950s, my enchanted place was the London Underground.

As a family, we travelled everywhere by Tube – and always in a smoking carriage. My father's two preferred brands were Olivier, named after the actor, and Craven A. The packaging for both was very classy.

From the age of six, I took the Tube to school every day on my own. It was only two stops from our mansion flat at Earl's Court to the French Lycée at South Kensington and, it turns out, in the early days I wasn't as alone as I thought.



Gyles unveils Wolfit's bust, Robin Hood Theatre, Notts

Not long before she died, aged 96, my mother confessed to me that she followed me to school at a discreet distance, travelling in the next-door carriage to mine to keep an eye on me.

When I was 12, we moved to a different mansion block, across the road from Baker Street Station. That's when I discovered the joy of the Circle Line.

It was an unbroken circle in those days, and I would spend whole days going round and round on it without getting off. I did all my O-Level and A-Level revision on the Circle Line.

The jerking as we stopped at each station kept me awake (I found revising soporifically tedious), and each time we got to Paddington, I rewarded myself by coming up from the Tube and treating myself to a cup of tea at the buffet in the main-line station.

In youth, the London Tube was my delight. In old age, I am finding that it is YouTube that keeps me going.

It is almost the only TV channel my wife and I watch. Technically, I don't think it is a TV channel. We watch it on TV, but you can find it your phone and laptop, too. It's the second-most-visited website in the world – after Google, who own it. Founded 20 years ago in 2005, it now has around three billion active users around the world and, collectively, we are watching more than a billion hours of videos on it every day.

My wife and I are hooked because it's got all the old stuff we love. We have just finished binge-watching the 13 episodes of *Edward the Seventh,* with Timothy West in the title role and Annette Crosbie as Queen Victoria. Made in 1973, it is immaculate. Beyond the intelligent script and matchless acting (OMG: John Gielgud as Disraeli!), it's the attention to detail we love.

If you watch it, look out for the buttonholes – and the dancing. The choreography is by Geraldine Stephenson and must be the best in the history of television drama.

The series was co-written and directed by John Gorrie, now 93. I saw him the other day at Timothy West's memorial service. He looked as elegant and spry as a 60-year-old. I know why. His middle name is Summer. *Nomen est omen*.

Away from the small screen, my treat of the month was being invited to visit the Robin Hood Theatre in the village of Averham, close to Newark-on-Trent in Nottinghamshire.

It's a gem of a playhouse, recently refurbished, and notable because it's where the mighty actor-manager Sir Donald Wolfit made his stage debut in 1917, aged 15.

I went to unveil a plaque in Wolfit's honour – and was thrilled to do so because Wolfit (1902-68) is the unsung hero of 20th-century theatre.

Before there was a National Theatre, he took theatre to the nation, travelling the length and breadth of the British Isles with his own company, performing Shakespeare, mainly, and Ibsen and Marlowe, too.

Bringing the Bard to the people was his mission. At Consett in County Durham, he was delighted to find a group of women sitting in the middle of the front row at every performance, each with a baby at her breast.

The stage manager explained it was the theatre's policy to reserve the front row for nursing mothers so that 'they should not be overlooked'.

Some dismissed Wolfit as a ham, not a *tour de force*, but forced to tour. Most acknowledged that his King Lear was the greatest of his time. I saw him on stage. He was magnificent.

By all accounts, as a man he was demanding and delightful. Frank Thornton (Captain Peacock in *Are You Being Served?*) and his wife, Beryl, who both served in the Wolfit company, told me that when they went to stay with the Wolfits, Sir Donald brought them breakfast in bed, and served them boiled eggs kept warm with egg cosies. Sir Donald had knitted the egg cosies himself.

Beryl, who was his wardrobe mistress, gave me a button from the costume he wore as Lear.

If you want to know about him, watch the lovely programme Ned Sherrin made in his praise in 1994.

You will find it on YouTube, of course. Videos are being uploaded onto YouTube at the rate of more than 500 hours of content per minute.

Gyles Brandreth's Somewhere, a Boy and a Bear, *a biography of A A Milne and Winnie-the-Pooh, is out now*



Let us pray for a living saint

It's time to canonise Britain's most humiliated man – or so his wife told me

MATTHEW NORMAN

It is peculiar, is it not, how long-dormant memories suddenly erupt for no discernible reason?

The workings of the subconscious tending to the impenetrably opaque, I've no clue what reignited this one.

But, whatever the reason, a long-forgotten encounter has lately been flashing vibrantly back to mind.

Several years before the pandemic, a dinner party in central London was richly enlivened by a latecomer.

The hostess had explained the empty chair by reference to a friend unable to join us until 10.30pm. Even as the clock chimed the half-hour, in bustled a woman of middling years with the gait, aura and haphazard enthusiasm of a Labrador puppy.

She seemed a jolly, engaging kind of person, if not necessarily one likely to be given a permanent berth at the All Souls high table any time soon.

Anyway, an hour or so later, I was on my way towards the front door when the hostess diverted me towards her sitting-room for a nightcap with this woman, who apparently wanted a word with me.

I was mystified. No one who shares a postcode with sanity ever wants a word with me, unless that word happens to be 'goodbye'.

But I acquiesced, needless to report, as the most basic precepts of good manners dictated.

It swiftly transpired that the specific word this person wanted to have with me was 'saint'.

'He really is a saint, you know,' she said. 'An absolute saint.'

'Well,' I said, perhaps a shade hesitantly, 'that's awfully nice to know.'

Looking back, I begin to suspect she was using the noun in other than its strictly technical sense.

It's very early doors in Leo XIV's papacy, and there's no predicting whom he might wish to elevate to the Lord's right hand.

If you ambled into William Hill to request a price, you'd get exceedingly long odds against this Holy Father's – or any's – canonising Andrew Mountbatten Windsor. But, only last month, a 200-1 shot won a Group 1 race at Ascot, so we can't get too hung up about that.

Now, one of the lovely things about writing for this journal is that one takes the readership's high intellect for granted.

So I will presume many of you will already have rumbled the mystery woman's identity.

God spare her bones, the erstwhile Duchess of York must have been confusing me with a journalist with enough influence to persuade the public of her ex-husband's innate saintliness.

Regardless of that misconception, she did an absolutely bang-up job of persuading me. In this, she was assisted by the fourth of our party, Peter Jones, the giant from *Dragon's Den*, who was involved in some scheme of Andrew's to inspire young entrepreneurs.

Never knowingly undersold in the field of royal praise, Mr Jones played a one-man Greek chorus, echoing her words at every turn.

Memorable among her words were these: 'I see him as the reincarnation of Prince Albert.'

As an atheistic Jew, I've no clearer insight into the Dalai Lama's thinking than the Holy Father's.

It may seem no less unlikely that the saffron-robed darling would endorse the theory than that the Queen-Empress's consort would welcome the reincarnation.

Given a straight choice, he might opt instead for the dung beetle of cliché. Or Ann Widdecombe.

> In bustled a woman of middling years with the gait of a Labrador puppy

Whatever the truth of it, the eulogy went on and on. And on. How many times I was roused by a booming 'Wake up, wake up – I'm talking to you' (wine had been taken, and it was late), I can't recall. Either twice, I think, or thrice.

Each time, the reclamation of wakefulness was rewarded with further declarations of Andrew's saintly nature and staggering reformist achievements.

After a brief detour into her own literary career ('I've published 28 books'), and after we had revisited the sainthood/Albertine nexus one final time, big hugs of farewell were demanded and received.

It could have been the beginning of a beautiful friendship. Alas, it wasn't.

All these years later, as I say, it's impossible to pinpoint the precise cause of the flashbacks from that night. One hears so little about the couple now, as they go about their business with quiet dignity.

But, glancing at the recent Vatican pictures of Pope Leo and King Charles, I realised that one implication of that historic rapprochement was unavoidable.

If the Pope was willing to take a giant leap by praying publicly with the leader of the Anglican church, it's a small step to imagine him overriding the convention that only Catholics can become saints.

There is already a St Andrew, and you have to fear that the Scots would take serious umbrage at the imposition of another.

While it's true that there is also a St Albert, this 13th-century Dominican friar and philosopher from Cologne seems a sufficiently recherché figure to ignore.

But, were some distinction required, a descriptive line could easily be annexed. St Albert the Too Honourable for His Own Good, perhaps.

Or, for brevity, St Albertus the Sweatless.

OLDEN LIFE

WHAT WERE polyfotos?

Polyfotos existed from the 1930s to the mid-1960s.

At their height, there were an impressive number of polyfoto studios around the country. There were ten in London, including one at Selfridges and one at the Army & Navy Stores.

Across the country, there were too many to count, from Bangor (Kinistil Photos) to York (Timothy Whites), from Edinburgh (Binns in Princes Street) to Belfast (Robinson & Cleaver).

The sitter was placed against a plain, neutral background. The camera, with its single glass plate measuring 5 by 7 inches, was operated by the photographer using a hand crank.

On the walls, but out of view of the camera, would be various props, such as a pen or plastic flowers, and images, which the photographer used to direct the sitter's gaze and elicit a variety of responses and facial expressions.

After 48 takes, the 'reel' ended and the sitting was done.

You would receive your sheet of proofs in the post. Colour was introduced in the '60s.



Anne Frank, ten, in her 1939 polyfotos

In wartime, polyphotos were especially valued by servicemen as parting gifts. The photos also provide a record of how the sitters saw themselves.

Learned essays have been written about polyfotos, quoting luminaries such as Roland Barthes on 'the construction of the self' and 'the projection of identity'.

Gillian Jones

MODERN LIFE

WHAT IS stupidogenesis?

A stupidogenic society is a society that tends to make the people in it stupider.

Just as obesogenic environments promote excessive weight gain, stupidogenic environments promote dumbness, laziness, foolishness, banality, triviality, mental torpor and idiocy.

The point is, if you're a fathead it's not entirely your fault – just as obesity experts agree that socioeconomics is the critical factor in obesity. Healthy food is more expensive: if you're in the bottom ten per cent of earners, following the government's healthy eating advice would cost 74 per cent of your income.

Also you probably have less time to cook, you're tired, you're surrounded by unhealthy options, you're bombarded by junk-food advertising and so on.

The thing about stupidogenesis, though, is it seems to affect all of us – at least those of us who write emails with ChatGPT, navigate by Google Maps, consume 15-second TikToks instead of 350-page novels and outsource taste, discernment and political identity to profit-seeking algorithms.

It doesn't seem so surprising that the old neural pathways might begin to atrophy in the age of the smartphone.

There's evidence of this decline everywhere. One third of British adults have given up reading books in the last ten years, according to the National Literacy Trust; the *Economist* recently discovered that the sentences in bestselling books are getting shorter too; perhaps most alarmingly, IQ rates are declining.

These rose through the 20th century, only to begin to drop in the 1980s.

Researchers (clever ones, from MIT) have looked into the effects of 'cognitive offloading' – outsourcing our own mental functions to machines, specifically AI. The conclusion? AI is reducing our ability to internalise and process data: 'Frequently offloading cognitive work to devices may cause certain "mental muscles" to atrophy,' they say.

Of course, people have worried about this as long as there has been technology. 'The radio and the phonograph, and now television, instruct people in their own impotence,' warned Theodor Adorno in 1941. Gustave Flaubert worried that the invention of railways would just allow stupid people to go and be stupid in other places.

Before the advent of recorded music, you could walk round Paris and hear governesses belting out Chopin's Études as if that was just a normal thing.

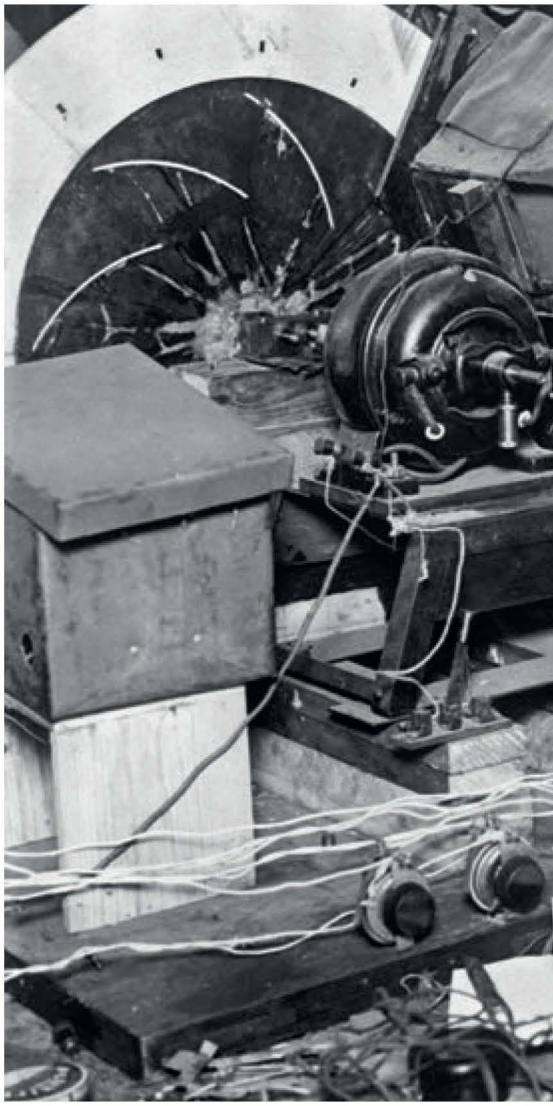
Likewise, Plato worried that the invention of writing would mean people would rely too much on other people's thoughts instead of their own.

It's easy to scoff. But what if they were all just a little bit right? What kind of democracy would we become? What kind of leaders would we elect? Oh.

Richard Godwin

A century after John Logie Baird invented telly, *Malcolm Baird* salutes his dad

Father of the TV age



When I was born, in 1935, my father, John Logie Baird (1888-1946), was enjoying a rare spell of affluence.

Since its formation in 1926, Baird Television Ltd had only a handful of employees, struggling to promote the idea of television.

Then, in early 1932, the company was bought and greatly expanded by an eccentric millionaire, Isidore Ostrer, who owned Gaumont British Pictures Ltd. Ostrer was interested in showing large-screen television in cinemas. The company moved to premises at the Crystal Palace in south London.

My father's title in the enlarged company was Managing Director. This was a misnomer because most of his work was technical, while the administrative duties were divided among the board of directors.

However, he attended the board meetings and often made statements to the press. Last but not least, he received an annual salary of £4,000.

A few months before the takeover, JLB (as I shall call him) had rather abruptly got married to a young concert pianist from South Africa, Margaret Albu. They had met during one of the experimental television transmissions at the BBC. She was 24 to his 43.

The match was also unconventional in that she had no scientific or technical background, while JLB was tone deaf and could barely recognise a tune.

Nevertheless, the marriage was a success; my parents rarely had rows.

In 1932, the Bairds moved to a Victorian six-bedroom house with a large garden, at 3 Crescent Wood Road in Sydenham, not far from the company's premises at the Crystal Palace.

My sister, Diana, was born in 1932 and I followed three years later. The household included a cook, a housemaid, a gardener and a nurse who looked after Diana and me. She was called Miss Yarker, but I called her Misharka. My mother had a magnificent Steinway grand piano, a wedding present from JLB: I vividly remember her practising and it gave me a lifelong taste for classical music.

JLB's day-to-day work involved mainly his television research at the Crystal Palace, and he also had a private lab in the former coach house at 3 Crescent Wood Road. Diana and I saw quite a lot of him at mealtimes, when we were often joined by his young assistant, Paul Reveley, who lived on until 2017. We were seldom admitted to the lab and only ever under supervision, for obvious safety reasons.

I remember JLB as kind and soft-spoken, and also dreamy and preoccupied – hardly surprising in view of the pressures of his research and the equally demanding business side of television.

The original (1925) spinning-disc system of television, celebrating its centenary now, had provided only 30 lines of definition.

At the Crystal Palace, the skilled technicians were able to upgrade the definition to 240 lines, but this required a camera so large and heavy that it made the studio conditions very difficult.

Eventually, in early 1937, the BBC adopted the electronic system offered by the Marconi Company and EMI. This



Baird with Stocky Bill, the dummy in the first TV picture of 2nd October 1925



John Logie Baird and the first TV, 1925

GETTY

system (405 lines) was heavily based on the work of the American company RCA.

To make matters worse for Baird Television, in November 1936 the Crystal Palace was destroyed by fire. The fire was a mile away from our house. Legend has it I was held up to watch the glow in the night sky, but I have no recollection.

It says much for JLB and his colleagues that Baird Television did not collapse there and then. A few of its working buildings, including the Rotunda, survived, and the fire damage in the main building was covered by insurance.

A few years earlier, the company had astutely set up research groups on electronic television (cathode-ray tubes), working in parallel with the groups developing the mechanical system. After a period of frantic reorganisation, Baird Television continued as a manufacturer of 405-line receivers under licence, using the Baird brand name. JLB's salary was slightly reduced, but was still generous.

Despite the setback with mechanical television, JLB remained in the public eye. In 1938, he was invited to Australia as the guest of honour of the Australian radio industry. My mother accompanied him and the trip lasted two months, including the round trip by ocean liner with a stop in India. She remembered this as the only holiday she ever had with JLB, apart from the occasional weekend in the South of France.

While my parents were out of the country, Diana and I were looked after at Sydenham by my father's older sister Annie from the old family home in Helensburgh, with her faithful housekeeper Margaret Scott. These two fine people were to play a major part in my teenage years.

In his quiet way, JLB had developed a plan for the family in the event of war – which came in 1939. Sydenham was not safe from aerial bombing; it was only a few miles from the London docks, a prime target. Evacuation of the family was essential.

JLB decided on the small town of Bude on the north coast of Cornwall. Within a day or so of the declaration of war, my mother, Diana and I were on a train to Bude, where a hotel room had been booked. JLB had saved £15,000, but his salary had ceased in November 1939, when Baird Television Ltd went into receivership.

Throughout the war he continued to spend most of his time at the private lab in Sydenham, where he resumed his research with one or two assistants, working mainly on cathode-ray tubes for colour and stereoscopic pictures.

Eventually we settled in a small terrace house on Flexbury Park Road, near the golf course. Every month or so, JLB would come down to Bude for a few days' badly needed rest. Often he would take Diana and me for long, slow walks along the beach.

He got me interested in science, especially optics. He showed me how a small glass prism would produce a vivid spectrum of colours when sunlight shone through it. More excitingly, when it was focused through a magnifying glass, enough heat was produced to set fire to a piece of paper.

The war dragged on and JLB worked on, with his savings gradually being eroded. By the end of the war, the house in Sydenham was dilapidated and JLB's health was declining.

We moved to Bexhill-on-Sea, just along the coast from Hastings, where JLB had done most of his early experiments in 1923-25. A high spot came in the autumn of 1945 when Diana and I were shown his high-definition colour tube (the Telechrome). We were



Malcolm Baird with sister, Diana (*left*), and his father, 1936

then taken to see a variety show in the West End. The star was JLB's old school friend actor Jack Buchanan (1890-1957). We met him backstage.

The end came quietly: JLB died in his sleep at Bexhill on 14th June 1946, aged only 57. His funeral and burial took place at his birthplace in Helensburgh.

Later, my mother, Diana and I went to his memorial service at St Saviour's, Chelsea, attended by many notables. It was only then that I realised that he was a famous figure.

I wanted to be a millionaire

Judith Keppel won a million 25 years ago – and it changed her life for ever



Right royal brainteaser: Judith's million-pound question

Now that I look back, 25 years on, 20th November 2000 really was the most astonishing day of my life.

It also completely changed my life in every single way for the better, and I still feel I was blessed with the most extraordinary luck. From the first moment in 1998 when *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* first aired, it attracted vast audiences of up to 19 million viewers.

Very soon I joined the throng and watched agog as people walked away with thousands of pounds for answering what I quite quickly realised were not very difficult questions. At the time I was feeling skint, having recently made some very stupid mistakes and began to think, 'Why shouldn't I have a go? £32,000 or £64,000 would solve a lot of problems.'

I read that thousands of people were applying for each show. So one day I settled down at my desk and dialled and redialled the number, resolving to stick at it till I was called back.

My first piece of luck came on the second day, when a robot did call me back and asked me a question, which I got right, and then a real person rang and I was off to the races – or rather Elstree Studios. The nerves began to jangle.

The set and the music are deliberately designed to enhance the tension and the drama – and boy did they work on me. I had never been on telly, had no idea of how programmes were made, and was scared stiff of making a complete fool of myself.

So when I finally found myself in the chair having got through the Fastest Finger First with another piece of luck (I was the only person to get the question right), my heart started to thump so loudly that I thought it would be picked up by the mike.

Luckily for me, fear makes me focus – although when I watched my run again to jog my memory before writing this, I noticed I was somewhat incoherent whenever I had to say anything.

My biggest piece of luck came with the £1,000,000 question and even now it makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. It was 'Which king was Eleanor of Aquitaine married to?'

Just three months before, I had been driving home through France after staying with some friends and stopped in a little town called Fontevraud L'Abbaye in the Loire Valley. There was a medieval garden in the grounds of the abbey I wanted to see.

Afterwards, I went into the abbey church. The nuns and the monks it had served had been dispersed in the Revolution and the church turned into a prison, which it remained until after the Second World War.

In the sixties, it had been restored and the interior was now an enormous, almost empty space, except for four beautiful tombs at the far end of the nave. Eleanor of Aquitaine lay beside her husband, Henry II … or could it possibly have been Henry I?

I was fairly sure it was Henry II – but not absolutely entirely 100-per-cent sure, despite having studied Henry II for history A level a million years ago.

There was just enough uncertainty in my mind to make it a stunning relief when Chris Tarrant shouted, 'You have just won a million pounds!'

I did so many interesting things in the aftermath of the win. One of the nicest was to make a radio documentary for the BBC on Eleanor. I learned all about her life and went back to Fontevraud and saw the tombs again.

She was a remarkable, strong-minded, powerful woman, rather like Queen Victoria, a grandmother of Europe, with two sons as Kings of England and her daughters all making dynastic marriages.

Another was to go to India looking at tigers. My daughter Rosie, who was my plus one in the audience at Elstree, is a wildlife artist specialising in big cats. On the way there, for the second recording, she had asked me to donate something to her tiger-conservation charity if I won a lot of money.

So I gave them a Jeep and we went out to India together to hand over the keys, and spent a fascinating time with a scientist who was studying tigers and their prey on a reservation with no tourists.

And then I got a job. I was asked to become an Egghead on the quiz game *Eggheads* and I spent the next 19 years trying to keep up with the other Egghead quizzers, who seemed to spend their entire lives doing nothing but quizzes.

That had never been my bag. I had occasionally played Trivial Pursuit but that was all.

There is no question in my mind that I was anything but phenomenally lucky and, to top it all, I have never had to worry about money again.

This Christmas, Get The Easy-To-Use Samsung Smartphone.

“It’s everything I need in a phone – simple, smart and reassuringly easy to use – Sandra, 76, N. Yorks”

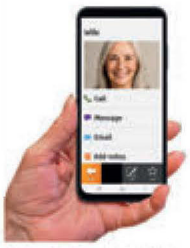
Whether you're new to smartphones or just want something more intuitive, make Christmas simpler with the Samsung Galaxy A16 Easology – a smartphone thoughtfully reimagined to make life easier.

Your essentials sit front and centre on a personalised home screen, with quick calling to four favourite contacts. Large readable text, bold icons and generous touch areas keep every interaction calm and stress-free. If you ever feel lost, a dedicated ‘Home’ button takes you back instantly. Powered by Samsung, the Galaxy A16 Easology delivers a vivid screen, long-lasting battery and ample storage – with clear audio and a sleek design that feels just right. **Simple. Powerful. Made for you.**




Intuitive Navigation


Large Displays


Clear Layouts

Colour: Black

Do more in a few taps:

- Call, video or text family & friends
- Browse the web, check news & weather
- Watch YouTube videos
- Listen to music or audiobooks
- Read and reply to emails
- Use Maps for directions or nearby places
- Take crisp photos & videos
- Download all your favourite apps
- Built-in magnifier for reading small print

Specifications:

- 6.7" super AMOLED touchscreen
- Size: h 16.4 cm, w 7.8 cm, d 0.8 cm
- 4G (compatible with all networks)
- Wi-Fi, Bluetooth, NFC, GPS
- 128GB storage
- Add storage with a microSD card
- All-day battery and fast charging
- Front (13MP) and rear (50MP) cameras
- Android 15
- 2-year Samsung warranty
- **Ready to use – no installation required**



BLACK FRIDAY PRICE PROMISE

We guarantee the price won't drop – PLUS extended returns until 31/01/26.*

CHRISTMAS BUNDLE – £259.00

Everything in one box – the Samsung Easology phone with FREE: 146-page user guide, charger, protective cover, stylus, SIM card (or use your own), unlimited UK call-centre support & FREE delivery.

*Price Promise valid until 31/12/2025. Extended returns to 31/01/2026 under our standard returns policy.

Order by FREEPHONE 0800 888 6044 | **Order Online at www.easology.net/eshop**

SAMSUNG Galaxy A16 | easology

Importance of being Ernie

Ernie Wise was a brilliant straight man – and a shrewd businessman. By *Andrew Roberts*

The historian Graham McCann wrote, 'A great comedy straight-man, or straight-woman, is a discreet magician. They do not just misdirect the audience away from their tricks but also from themselves.'

That was the art of Ernie Wise, born Ernest Wiseman, 100 years ago, on 27th November 1925. He died, aged 73, in 1999.

He believed that 'As far as the show goes, I think you could say that Eric's definitely the end product, and I sort of project him.'

Every major comedy straight man has a personality as distinctive as his comic partner. Bud Abbott was the exploiter of Lou Costello's naïf, and Chesney Allen was the amiable gentleman associate of Bud Flanagan.

Of the notable British unofficial double acts, Jerry Desmonde was the self-assured narcissist confounded by Norman Wisdom, and Sidney James became the Sancho Panza to Tony Hancock's suburban Don Quixote.

Kenneth Tynan referred to Wise as 'the classic stooge – dapper and aggressive'. But to Ernie, that was 'someone who just stands there and doesn't say anything'. Bob Todd and Jackie Wright were Benny Hill's stooges, human props for the star's use.

Ernie was a straight man on a par with Oliver Hardy. Between the 1950s and the 1970s, he gradually transformed from a dapper authority figure to a haplessly innocent would-be playwright ridiculed by Morecambe.

Dick Hills and Sid Green, who wrote the majority of M&W scripts in the 1960s, created a long-suffering straight man, fond of issuing orders to his partner. A 1963 drink-drive-warning film features Morecambe and Wise, still as a standard crosstalk act, with overtones of the US duo Wheeler and Woolsey.

However, after Eddie Braben became their principal writer in 1969, Braben noted, 'Eric is now sharper, slightly sophisticated, while Ernie has become gullible and prudish, which more accurately reflects elements of their real personalities.'

He said of their earlier work, 'What was missing was the genuine and honest affection that they had for one another.'

But this element in their onscreen relationship can be discerned in the Hills and Green era. The comic interrupting his partner's attempt to sing a ballad is a familiar trope, but when Ernie croons 'Can't Get Used to Losing



BBC

You', Eric literally dances against him throughout the number. At one point, Wise breaks character and laughs as he sings the refrain not to the audience but to Morecambe.

Such moments seem uniquely M&W; it is impossible to imagine their near-contemporaries Mike and Bernie Winters engaging in such routines. Surviving programmes with the latter pair display less mutual affection and more 'appearing owing to contractual obligation'. After the viewer had endured a Winters Brothers' *Seaside Special* performance, it is easy to believe they would hit each other before the curtain went up.

Wise was a shrewd judge of comedy, remarking that *Monty Python* could contain 'five or six minutes of utter boredom' before 'three minutes of "very funny"'. He regarded himself as primarily a song-and-dance man, never forgetting he was formerly 'the British Mickey Rooney'.

Ernie Wise and Eric Morecambe, *The Morecambe and Wise Show* (1972)



While believing Americanising their act would be futile – 'Eric and I couldn't come on and start talking about dollars and sidewalks and elevators' – Ernie was keener than Morecambe on their US *Ed Sullivan Show* appearances. Those faintly mid-Atlantic tones, almost 'Leeds-Canadian', reflected the entertainer with Hollywood dreams.

Ernie was the business half of the partnership, and on one occasion his negotiations doubled a Braben script fee, while Ernie refused to take a commission for this work. Christopher Fowler, in his indispensable memoir *Film Freak*, described interviewing M&W: 'It appeared that Ernie was essentially Eric's keeper,' tasked with controlling the 'permanently electrified' Morecambe.

After Eric's death on 28th May 1984, aged only 58, there was speculation regarding Ernie's future, ignoring his proven talents in dancing and singing.

It is regrettable that he was not offered straight acting roles. *That Riviera Touch* (1966), the best of the three 1960s M&W films made for the Rank Organisation, showed Wise's potential in light drama.

Besides, show business was almost all Wise had known from the age of six. His career began in a Leeds environment from a J B Priestley novel. Ernie and his father performed as Carson and Kid amid 'beer and sandwiches, pies, potato crisps, pickles and bottles of tomato sauce; the whole place crowded for the concert'.

In 1939, Wise, still just 14, was believed to be the youngest entertainer in the West End. The bandleader Jack Hylton informed the press, 'His actions, patter and jokes are of his own creation.'

Some critics mused how Eric would have fared had Ernie died first, and footage of Morecambe's interviews sans Wise have a hint of this alternative future.

Eric seems to joke into a void without his indispensable partner, who was always ready to respond immaculately to every line. Braben thought Ernie was a 'genius in the way that he could literally read Eric's face and anticipate every ad-lib'.

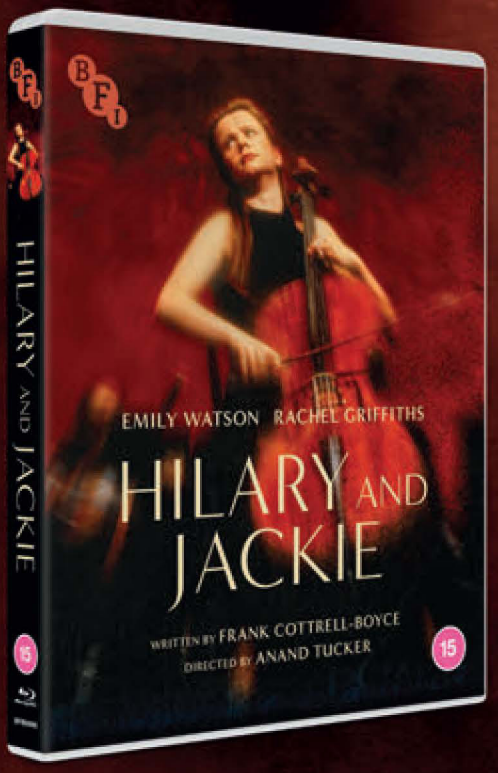
Braben best summarised Wise's importance to the act, in a line for Morecambe when his partner had to go offstage:

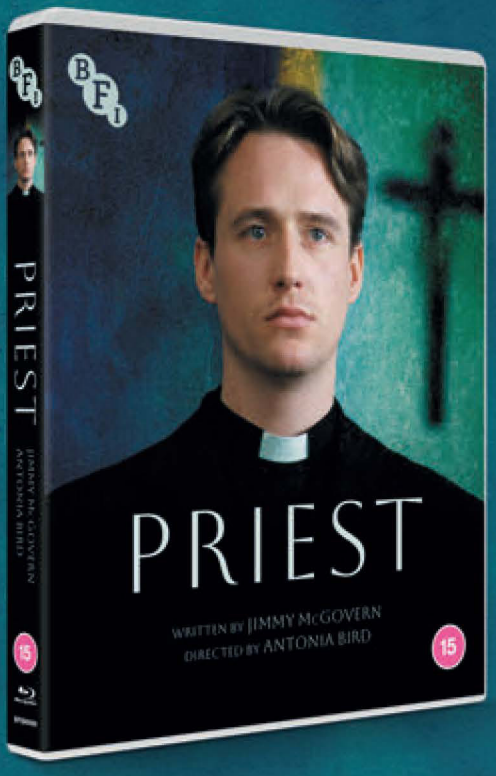
'Don't be long. When you're not here, I feel a cold draught all down one side.'

Andrew Roberts is author of Idols of the Odeons: Post-War British Film Stardom

Emily Watson and Rachel Griffiths star as the British classical musician sisters Jacqueline and Hilary du Pré in this acclaimed British drama.

Newly remastered and on Blu-ray for the very first time.





Linus Roache leads a stellar British cast in this acclaimed drama directed by Antonia Bird, and written by Jimmy McGovern.

Newly remastered and on Blu-ray for the very first time.

Available to order from all good Blu-ray retailers

Words can never hurt me

Charlie Mortimer has been insulted by everyone from his dad to the *Telegraph* editor – and loves it

I was recently surprised to receive a mildly abusive email from X, an artist friend (possibly now an ex-friend).

He said, 'You are more transparent than you imagine and more readable than you believe.'

It was bad luck for X that a lifetime of receiving highly articulate put-downs has made me almost immune to uncomplimentary observations. I take them as accolades.

I took huge pleasure in responding:

Dear X

There is a certain irony that, in my 74th year, I am still receiving letters commenting on my character, or lack of it.

So forgive me when I say that your email yesterday made me laugh out loud – in particular your attempts to question what little integrity I still possess.

I am so used to criticism and articulate put-downs that I keep note of some of the more memorable examples.

My classical tutor at Eton, when I was 14, wrote, 'Nero was content to roll in the dust in order to collect his laurels. Mortimer, however, seems merely content just to roll in the dust.'

My father, Roger Mortimer, wrote to my modern tutor the following year, 'I agree with everything you say about Charles in that he is a sort of inverted Lord Rosebery. However, your comparison of him to a chimney jackdaw I thought was unfair to the bird.'

In August 1977, following Elvis Presley's sudden demise, I paid tribute to the King with an impromptu performance of 'Blue Suede Shoes' at Sotheby's, Bond Street.

My father read about it in the paper under the headline 'Cheeky Charlie Goes for a Song'.

He wrote to me, 'In the lavatories of my preparatory school, someone had written the time-honoured couplet "How eager for fame a man must be to write up his name in a WC."

'How eager for fame (or something) a man of 25 must be to give, unasked presumably, an imitation of a defunct pop singer during an auction in London.

'Fortunately, few of our relatives read the *Daily Mirror*. I have no particular feelings about your performance beyond finding it, as I do most amateur entertainments, mildly embarrassing.'

My father wrote to my older sister on my 30th birthday, 'It's rather tragic that Charlie's life to date has been one of epic futility.'

To me, he added, 'Now you've reached middle age, why not accept the fact that in life's ranks you come into the category of "also ran and made no show".'



Direct: Roger Mortimer, Charlie's father

Charles Moore, then *Daily Telegraph* editor, reviewed *Dear Lupin*, my father's book of direct letters to me: 'Charlie Mortimer is apt with his hands and, in that enviable way of the utterly feckless, good at getting along with people. He is however spectacularly unfit for all the occupations of the upper middle classes.'

In the disparagement stakes, these are hard acts to follow and I think you will agree that your effort pales in comparison.

Yours,

Charlie

In later years, my father continued his observations about me: 'I don't expect you to be a second Lord Chesterfield, but in mode and conduct I rather wish that in appearance and conduct you were slightly less typical of a transport café on the Great North Road.'

'Writing a serious letter to you is about as effective as attempting to kick a 30-ton block of concrete in bedroom slippers, but I am a glutton for punishment, as far as you are concerned.'

'All good horses run true to form and no doubt in a few months' time you will want to be a jockey or manufacture cut-price tambourines for the Salvation Army.

'However, it is your life, and I know nothing I do or say will have the slightest effect on any course of action you propose to take.'

I once wrote to him, 'I've got a great idea for a new job.' He replied, 'For God's sake, don't tell me what it is, sonny boy, or I shall laugh so much I'll make a mess in my trousers.'

My father was a master of insults to those outside his family, too. In the 1960s, as the racing correspondent for the *Sunday Times*, he received angry letters from a Colonel Hitchcock. He replied, on a plain postcard, 'Dear Colonel Hitch, stop talking cock, yours, R M.'

I was once called by a judge 'fair and measured'. My friend Graham Boal, another judge, said of him, 'Obviously a very bad judge of character. Being a civil practitioner, he would not see through an old crook like you.'

I admire insults against others, too. I was once in a Hampshire kitchen with the lovely late Marchioness of Cholmondeley when in wandered a young urchin.

'Oh, hello – and who are you?' said Lady Cholmondeley.

'I'm Dean,' replied the boy, 'and do you know what my dad would say if he was here?'

'No, darling boy,' she replied. 'What would your father say?'

Dean said, 'He'd say you was a nice bit of c**t!'

Insults are good for you. I have been inoculated against taking umbrage. I've developed an invisible suit of armour.

Words can never hurt me.

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

John McEwen on Britain's oldest modern-art gallery – and the astonishing masterpieces it's sold



ESTATE OF PABLO PICASSO © TATE

100 years of modernism

This year marks the centenary of the Mayor Gallery, which can claim to be the oldest modern-art gallery in the UK.

It was founded in 1925 by Fred Mayor (1903-73) who opened it in Cork Street, London. Over the years, it attracted rival galleries, making Cork Street the centre of the UK's contemporary gallery scene. Today, under the ownership and dynamic direction of his son James Mayor, the gallery is at 9 Bury Street.

Fred Mayor was the son of William Frederick 'Fred' Mayor RA (1866-16), among England's foremost impressionist painters. His father trained in France and lived there for almost a decade, making his son a lifelong Francophile.

The Mayor Gallery kept Britain abreast of European developments via the artistic Mecca of Paris, surrealism to the fore.

In Anthony Powell's 1936 novel *Agents and Patients*, Fred Mayor appears as the gallery-owner Reggie Frott; the surname acknowledging his championing of surrealism – frottage a collage technique introduced by Max Ernst.

He was equally important to British artists: first to show Francis Bacon and to launch the Unit 1 group, which included Burra, Hepworth, Hitchens, Moore, Paul Nash and Ben Nicholson.

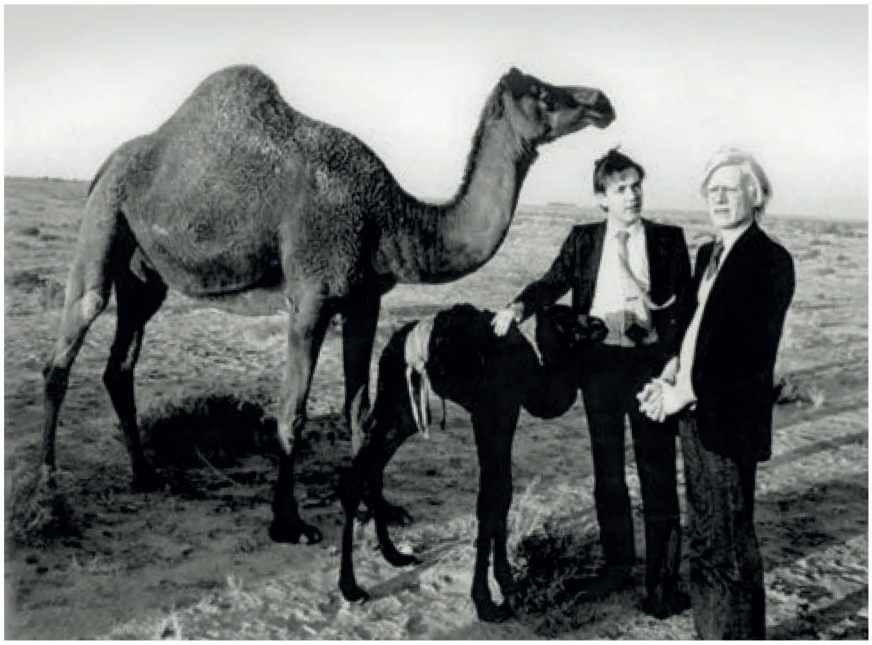
The *Times* obituary described him as a man 'with a very warm heart' and a 'reputation of absolute artistic and financial integrity'. He enjoyed all sports, especially horse-racing. An impromptu closure of the gallery was explained by a note: 'Gone to Goodwood'.

With the war he shut up shop to enlist, rising to the rank of major. Resumption met with undiminished success.



TATE © SALVADOR DALÍ, GALA-SALVADOR DALÍ FOUNDATION/DACS

***Top: Weeping Woman* (1937) – once owned by Antony Penrose, it's the 'greatest' Picasso James Mayor has sold. *Left: Lobster Telephone* (1936) by Salvador Dalí. James acquired six of the ten telephones. All are now in foreign collections**



Left: **James Mayor and Andy Warhol, Kuwait, 1977. *Below: Boy in the Shower*, (1964) by David Hockney. It's so iconic that the Tate seldom loans it**

There was no paternal pressure for James Mayor to succeed his father. His mother even suggested he choose something 'sensible'. Oliver Poole, Chairman of Lazards, advised him to do what he liked and after three years he would give him a job – 'The best advice I ever had.'

Fred Mayor was inspired by Paris; James went to New York, the new art Mecca. By 21, he had initiated postwar and contemporary sales at Sotheby's Parke-Bernet, New York.

Succeeding his father in 1973 was eased by an interest-free £100,000 loan



TATE © DAVID HOCKNEY



***False Start* (1959) by Jasper Johns was Mayor's first $1m sale (1982); in 2006, it went for $80m. *Right:* the owner of Pauline Boty's *Colour Her Gone* (1962) acquired it in lieu of rent. Below: Fred Mayor, gallery founder, 1932**



COURTESY WOLVERHAMPTON ART GALLERY © PAULINE BOTY

ICA and husband of legendary Lee Miller (star of a Tate Britain show, until 15th February 2026) – remained a key supporter, as did his son, Tony.

The Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art is a world-class museum, not least because its outstanding founding director, Douglas Hall, took advantage of the Mayor Gallery's marketing of the Penrose collection, which it acquired in 1995. Recognition of the importance of museums outside London was Murray's particular responsibility.

An annual January exhibition of the past year's sales advertised the policy's success. The gallery's underlying aim was to 'upgrade the price structure of certain artists'. This was done for the 1950s English 'kitchen sink' painters, the pop artists of the '60s and '70s and exemplifies the present programme, which focuses on unfamiliar foreign or unjustly neglected artists.

Like his father, James Mayor is a stylish example of connoisseurship and integrity, with lunch at Brooks's an excuse for conversation rather than business, his neck ties always defiantly non-conformist.

Traditional standards have been maintained, despite the sea change in the art world – international art fairs now forcing him to travel for a greater percentage of the year.

'Up to 1990, galleries used to be basically one-man bands, with everyone knowing each other. Now, like car show rooms, swarms of sales staff sell what they think people will buy.'

He avoids auctions: 'I like to place art. I think of buyers as a kind of club who fit in with the other members.'

Civilised tradition is upheld.

from Robert Adeane, long a Mayor supporter, and the presence of Andrew Murray, his father's assistant.

James Mayor exploited his American connections. Leo Castelli's New York gallery had established collaborative satellite galleries in the USA and Europe. Mayor Gallery became his English satellite.

Its opening exhibition in 1976 was by Castelli's Andy Warhol, his third by Robert Rauschenberg, unseen in London since the trail-blazing Bryan Robertson's 1964 exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery.

Among his coups, James acquired six of the ten versions of Salvador Dali's *Lobster Telephone* (1936). All are now in foreign collections.

Vital paternal contacts were in place. His father's friend since childhood, Roland Penrose – biographer of Picasso, champion of surrealism, founder of the



John McEwen was the Sunday Telegraph *art critic*

Celebrating 100 Years of

THE MAYOR GALLERY

Part 1



John Banting

Emmy Bridgwater

Edward Burra

Stanley William Hayter

F. E. McWilliam

Roland Penrose

Peter Rose Pulham

Edith Rimmington

William Roberts

Graham Sutherland

10 Nov – 18 Dec 2025

9 Bury Street, London, SW1Y 6AB

The SAS legal eagle

After a heroic Second World War, solicitor Paddy Mayne was killed in a car crash 70 years ago. By *Michael McKee*

In BBC 1's *SAS: Rogue Heroes*, our introduction to Blair 'Paddy' Mayne (1915-55) is in a brawl in an army prison, where he floors three military policemen.

Yet this war hero, given four DSOs and recommended for the Victoria Cross, was a solicitor before the war and, after it, became secretary of the Northern Irish Law Society. Solicitors tend to be regarded as the less exciting members of the legal profession.

Who was the real Paddy Mayne – killed in a car crash 70 years ago in his native Newtownards?

Born there on 11th January 1915, he went to Regent House grammar school where his rugby ability led to his playing for Ireland and the British Lions before the war. He joined the Territorial Army in 1939, and by 1940 had been transferred into 11th (Scottish) Commando.

His big break came when David Stirling persuaded him to join the fledgling SAS. He joined on 15th August 1941. The myth (perpetuated in *SAS: Rogue Heroes*) is that Stirling got him released from prison, but this is not true.

He soon showed an aptitude for operations behind enemy lines in the desert. The raids focused on enemy airstrips: the destruction of planes and personnel.

The hype began early. Britain needed heroes as the Germans advanced in the Western Desert. An early newspaper description of Blair Mayne in action said:

'A British lieutenant, a famous international sporting figure before the war, walked into the [German] mess with one man. They pushed the door open and pressed the triggers of their Tommy guns. It was all over in a minute… Then on to the next job.'

By the end of the Desert War, Stirling was captured and Mayne was leader of 1st SAS Brigade.

The myth is that Paddy Mayne was a wild man, often drunk, good at killing and leading but not at working within the system. Had that been the case, he would not have continued to be successful throughout the war.

While the desert war exploits made the fame of the SAS, Mayne successfully led 1 SAS through Italy, France and Germany to the end of the war, adding three bars to his DSO.



Tough nut: Blair 'Paddy' Mayne (1915-55)

On more than one occasion, the Army considered subsuming the relatively small SAS forces into other parts of the force. Mayne successfully persuaded the hierarchy not to do this. His leadership, even more than Stirling's, laid the foundations for the modern SAS.

There is no doubt that his legendary status is deserved, even though some of the stories are myths.

A verified example of his heroism was the VC citation. 1 SAS was behind German lines in Germany when they ran into three heavily fortified farmhouses.

His men took cover and he took a jeep, a Bren gun and one man, attacking and clearing out the farmhouses so he could recover wounded men who had been pinned down in forward positions.

Despite such heroism, he was not a 'psycho'. He at all times maintained strict discipline and gave articulate reports to his superiors, who held him in high regard.

Back in Northern Ireland, his life was ironically sedate. He focused on his job, his garden and his family. There were two exceptions: occasional drinking binges and a liking for fast cars.

On 14th December 1955, his speeding car hit a parked, unlit lorry in the dark in Newtownards and he died instantly, aged 40.



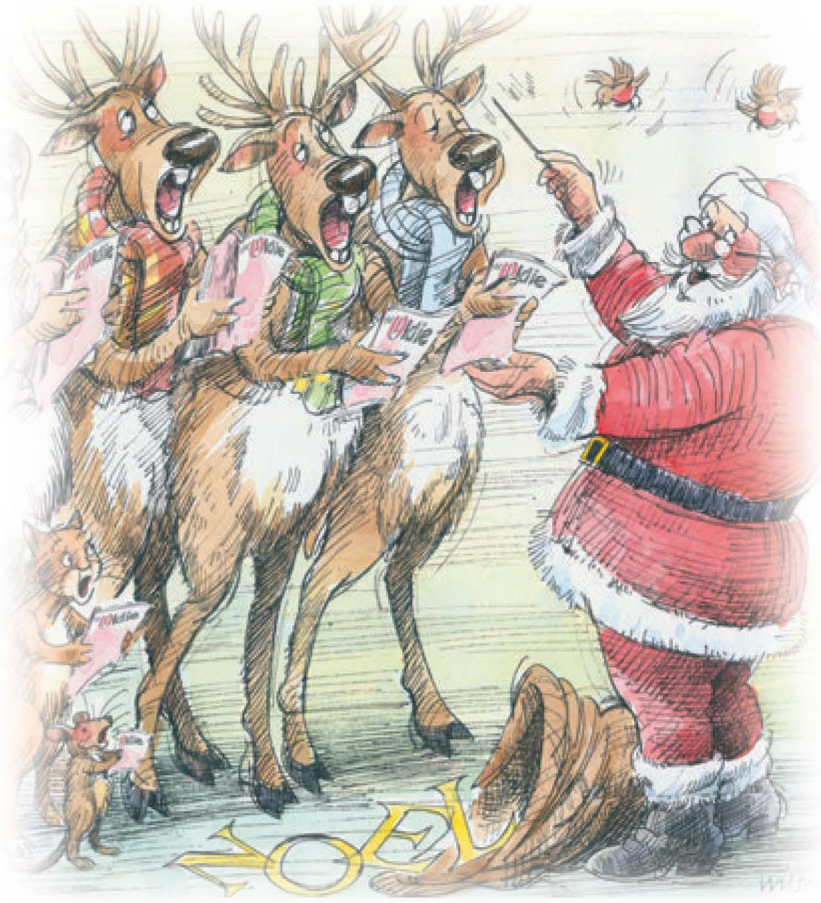
Paddy Mayne (Jack O'Connell) in *SAS: Rogue Heroes*

Michael McKee is a lawyer from Northern Ireland

Christmas solved by *The Oldie*

Entertain your friends throughout the year ahead

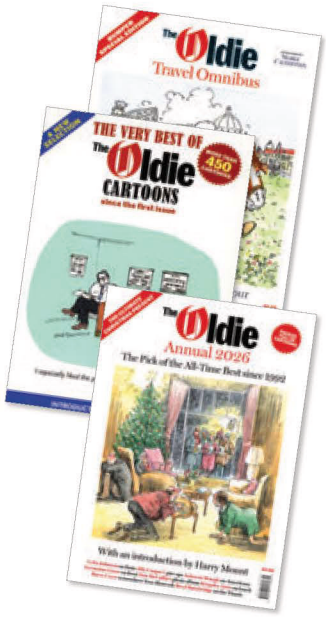
SAVE UP TO £99 AND GET THREE FREE BOOKS



GIVE ONE 12-issue subscription for £49.99, saving £21.41 on the shop price, and get one FREE copy of *The Oldie Annual 2026* worth £7.95

TWO subscriptions for only £89.99, saving £52.81, and get one FREE copy of *The Oldie Annual 2026* AND one FREE copy of *The Very Best of The Oldie Cartoons,* worth a total of £16.90

THREE subscriptions for just £115.20 – BEST DEAL, saving £99, AND get the two books plus *The Oldie Travel Omnibus*, worth a total of £22.85



ORDER NOW AT www.oldiegiftsubs.co.uk

OR complete the form below and return it with your payment to:
FREEPOST RUER-BEKE-ZAXE Oldie Publications Ltd,
Tower House, Sovereign Park,
Market Harborough, LE16 9EF

OR **CALL 01858 438 791 NOW** using offer code PXM1225

DETAILS

NAME OF DONOR

ADDRESS

POSTCODE

EMAIL

PHONE:

RECIPIENT NAME 1

ADDRESS

POSTCODE

EMAIL

PHONE

RECIPIENT NAME 2

ADDRESS

POSTCODE

EMAIL

PHONE

RECIPIENT NAME 3

ADDRESS

POSTCODE

EMAIL

PHONE

I would like to give a subscription(s)

Please send the free books to me, the donor.
(We will also send you a gift card to personalise and pass on.)

Please choose a start issue:

January ☐ (on-sale **10th Dec** – reply by **21st Nov** to guarantee delivery of this issue)

February ☐ (on sale **8th Jan** – reply by **23rd Dec**)

FOR OVERSEAS SUBSCRIPTIONS, simply add £5 per subscription to the above rates.
Example: one UK sub, one Europe sub and one Australia sub will cost you just £125.20.
This offer is applicable only to recipients who have not subscribed for six months or more.

PAYMENT DETAILS - choose one of two ways to pay

1. BY CHEQUE: I ENCLOSE MY CHEQUE FOR £_____ PAYABLE TO OLDIE PUBLICATIONS LTD OR

2. BY CREDIT OR DEBIT CARD: PLEASE CHARGE MY VISA ☐ MASTERCARD ☐ MAESTRO ☐ WITH £ ☐

CARD NO: ☐☐☐☐ ☐☐☐☐ ☐☐☐☐ ☐☐☐☐

START DATE ☐☐/☐☐ EXPIRY DATE ☐☐/☐☐ MAESTRO ISSUE NO ☐☐

SIGNATURE _____ DATE _____

PXM1225



***The Oldie* is published 13 times a year, which means a 12-issue subscription runs for 48 weeks.**

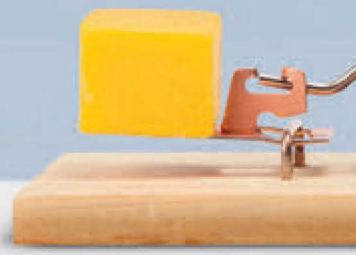
The Oldie collects your data so that we can fulfil your subscription. We may also, from time to time, send you details of *Oldie* offers, events and competitions, but you always have a choice and can opt out by emailing us at help@subscribe.theoldie.co.uk. Please tick here if you'd prefer not to receive such offers by Phone ☐ by Post ☐ by Email ☐. We do not share with (or sell) your data to third parties. Details you share with us will be managed as described in our Privacy Policy here: https://www.theoldie.co.uk/about-us/privacy

The Scottish American Investment Company (SAINTS)

Tempted by a tasty short-term yield?

You could regret it.





There are investments out there offering some mouth-watering short-term yield figures. Understandably, it's all too easy to bite. Trouble is, succumbing to short-term temptation can be fatal when it comes to long-term growth. The Scottish American Investment Company (SAINTS) focuses on capital growth as well as income. Aiming for growth plus yield. You could fall for the short-term trap. Or you could take a longer-term view – and let your investment mature.

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

Find out more at saints-it.com
A Key Information Document is available. Call 0800 917 2112.

Baillie Gifford™
Actual Investors

Your call may be recorded for training or monitoring purposes. Issued and approved by Baillie Gifford & Co Limited, whose registered address is at Calton Square, 1 Greenside Row, Edinburgh, EH1 3AN, United Kingdom. Baillie Gifford & Co Limited is the authorised Alternative Investment Fund Manager and Company Secretary of the Trust. Baillie Gifford & Co Limited is authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority. The investment trusts managed by Baillie Gifford & Co Limited are listed UK companies and are not authorised or regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority.

When two become one

After his wife died, *Richard Britton* went through the Hell of downsizing

I had no idea what a nightmare downsizing would become at the age of 83.

It took me more than a year after my wife's death to decide to move to a smaller house. It was a tough, emotional decision because of the fond memories held by the place we shared for so long. Everywhere I look, there is something to remind me of her.

Having recently retired – a miserable experience – I know it makes financial sense to move into a smaller and more energy-efficient bungalow. And I have come to the conclusion that if I'm going to move on with my life after becoming a widower, I need to escape from the 20 years of memories my wife and I built together in my current home.

'It makes so much sense for you to downsize,' family and friends reassured me casually, not knowing the trauma that would be unleashed.

Most readers of *The Oldie* are familiar with the process of moving house – the remorseless chasing of solicitors; arranging finance; co-ordinating the buying and selling transactions; deciding on décor; what to take and what to throw out; scheduling the removal; notifying people of change of address and contact details.

The to-do list involved with any move seems endless. And downsizing imposes a whole new dimension of emotion and stress. My daughter says, 'If you haven't used it or looked at in in the last year, get rid of it.' And in her next breath: 'You can't throw that away – Mum was very fond of it.'

It's so easy to say, 'Get rid of it,' but that simple phrase implies the casual disposal of a lifetime of memories: where, when and why we bought things – or who bought them for us; and 'Remember when…?'

Almost everything I pick up provokes a recollection which in turn feeds the instinct to hang on to it. The tension between wanting to retain sentimental and treasured memories and the harsh reality of moving to a much smaller space is stark. 'You've got to be ruthless,' they say. But how can I be ruthless in disposing of my past life?

The things around me represent 43 years of marriage. Some items even relate to both our previous marriages.

I want – need – a fresh start after the trauma of losing my wife, but a fresh start stripped of a past seems frightening. Things I've lived with for decades have become part of what and who I am. Parting with them is like writing off parts of me; a blunt reminder that aspects of my life are coming – have come – to an end.

Striking some sort of balance between wanting a fresh start and needing some sort of reminder of where I've come from is difficult, complex and painful.

I feel this emotional tug in parting with things that evoke memories while trying to remind myself that memories are not dependent on things.

And then there is the sheer practicality of how to dispose of most of a lifetime's goods and chattels. My collection of Victorian glasses, my watercolours and a few antiquarian books – all treasures with, I thought, some value. What a sharp let-down was in store for me when I started to try to sell them.

I quickly realised that my idea of the value of things – especially the bits of furniture that are surplus to requirements in my smaller home – is not shared by the second-hand marketplace.

Of course, second-hand dealers expect to make a profit, but I had not understood just how discriminating they would be in what they would take and how little they would pay for it.

And the ultimate in being brought down to earth with a bump? When a member of the staff of the auction room looked at one item of furniture, shook his head and said, 'You won't get a bid for that, Guv.'

OUT NOW!

The Oldie Annual 2026



Only £7.95 Inc p/p in UK

132 PAGES PERFECT BOUND

Go to www.theoldie.co.uk /readers-corner/shop or call 0207 436 8801 (10-4pm)

Top of the Pods

in partnership with Baillie Gifford

Check out TOP OF THE PODS… Listen to our pick of the best podcasts out there, from documentaries and history to comedy, arts and life!

Go to www.theoldie.co.uk/top-of-the-pods

www.theoldie.co.uk

AIREDALE

Specialists in Group Travel

Explore, laugh and make memories with like-minded people.



Madeira & The Estreito Wine Festival

31st August | 8 Days | £1805pp sharing

Join us on a journey to the beautiful island of Madeira, famed for its year-round spring climate, lush gardens and old-world charm. Over 60% of the island is protected, preserving its rich wildlife and spectacular scenery.

During this delightful eight-day tour, you'll visit Madeira's most enchanting gardens and cultural treasures, before rounding off your holiday at the celebrated Estreito Wine Festival, a joyous occasion marking the grape harvest, filled with local music, dancing and, naturally, a glass or two of the island's finest wine.

Why choose Airedale for your next holiday?

- ✓ **Friendly personalised service**
- ✓ **Discounts for groups of 10 or more**
- ✓ **40 years experience in the industry**
- ✓ **We truly care about your experience**
- ✓ **Financial protection, for peace of mind**

Discover all 15 inspiring tours in our brand-new 2026 Open Tours brochure – request your copy today

Call **01924 276135**
or **scan** the **QR code**

ABTOT Member 5420

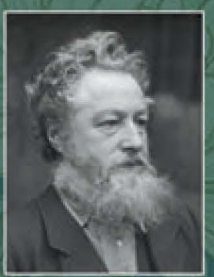
ATOL PROTECTED

AITO Specialist Tour Operator



THE WILLIAM MORRIS SOCIETY

Visit the West London home of William Morris



- Explore Morris's idyllic riverside home and garden
- View original designs, textiles, and wallpapers by William and his daughter May
- Discover the significance of Morris's family life in Hammersmith
- See the original 1835 Albion printing press

Museum | Shop | £5 entry
Open 10am-4pm
Thursday-Sunday

26 Upper Mall
London, W6 9TA
+44 (0)208 741 3735

Ravenscourt Park (10 minute walk) Hammersmith (15 minute walk)
www.williammorrissociety.org

CHARTERHOUSE MOBILITY

YOUR COMFORT IS OUR PASSION





We're rated Excellent
Trustpilot

MADE IN BRITAIN PREMIUM QUALITY

THE WINTER HALF PRICE SALE*

PLUS £375 TRADE-IN DISCOUNT
When you part exchange your existing furniture

Call today for your **FREE brochure**
Freephone **0800 080 3392**
or visit **www.charterhousemobility.com**

Open 7 days a week

*Ends 31st December 2025. T&C apply



Bitter secrets of Iris Murdoch's marriage

My tutor John Bayley was charming, with a tormented, envious streak

A N WILSON

The Iris Murdoch industry goes on.

Whereas many of her contemporaries have already passed into oblivion (does anyone under 40 now read Kingsley Amis?), Iris (1919-99) *is* still read, and studied by the young.

Miles Leeson and Ann Rowe – Professors of Murdochology – have been rummaging in the novelist's attic in Oxford , and found a cache of her poems, some of them celebrating the beauty of nature, but most of them sobbing with love for one girl, or bloke, after another.

Leeson and Rowe have done much to keep Iris's memory green and they have been kindly custodians of her flame. No one could accuse them of stirring malice or gossip. But, yet again, those of us who knew Iris have a strange feeling of the ground sinking beneath our feet.

I first had the sinking feeling when John Bayley, her husband, wrote his series of memoirs about her. Then there was *Iris* (2001), starring Kate Winslet as Iris When Young and Judi Dench as Iris in Decrepitude.

Then there was a prolix, needlessly prurient biography by her supposed friend Peter Conradi. And, in an attempt to put the record straight, I wrote my own Iris biography. Since then, there have been dozens of books about her life, work and thought.

As time goes by, I realise more and more how much I owe to John Bayley (1925-2015) and Iris Murdoch. John was my tutor at Oxford, and Iris, his wife, became a close friend who encouraged me in my early writing. I slowly became closer to Iris than I was to John.

Like most of their friends, I speculated about the nature of their relationship. They appeared to be a harmonious pair. Friends who had them to stay spoke of hearing their murmur of continual chatter, broken by laughter, coming from their bedroom.

John was an infinitely charming man and essentially, like all the best Englishmen, facetious, turning everything into a joke or an implied joke.

Iris, by contrast, was a lay abbess, who wanted to talk about the great books, the meaning of life, God and His absence.

When Iris died after a miserable spell of dementia, John began to write the memoirs, some of which were loving, but which also left a disagreeable feeling in the mind.

A journalist pal, who had not known them, said to me, 'I thought you said they were a devoted pair! That scene where she shits herself and John Bayley hoses her down with a garden hose – it was disgusting. It was written with real hatred.'

As he spoke, I thought of the only Iris love affair that I actually knew about, at that date: when John had got the Principal of St Anne's – where Iris was a fellow – to sack her for having an affair with Margaret Hubbard, the Mods don.

I thought of the occasional tantrums John had with her in my presence; or his admission that he had given up reading her books after *The Bell*, which he found strangely repellent; the assertion, which he made often, that Barbara Pym was a much better novelist.

Then I thought of the many scenes in her novels of married couples who actually hated each other. I thought of John Bayley's early attempt to be a novelist and realised how much he must have envied her. Anthony Powell said marriages more often fail not through jealousy, but through one partner envying the other.

I keep thinking of Hartley, the heroine of *The Sea, the Sea*, who is kept a prisoner by her jealous, peppery little husband – obviously not a portrait *as such* of her own marriage, but it is a fantasy version of it.

> Marriages fail not through jealousy, but through one partner envying the other

I think, when I reread that marvellous novel, of the glee with which John told her he had sold their lovely, rambling old house in Steeple Aston without consulting her, and impulse-bought a hideous, cramped little terraced house in North Oxford, where he made her live for several years.

I thought of the fact that the only time I ever saw them together in London was at Christmas, when he and his brother would give her a bacon-and-eggs luncheon followed by a walk in Kensington Gardens.

London friends tended to see her on their own, and I realised, in retrospect, that some of them – such as Brigid Brophy, with whom she exchanged hundreds of passionate letters – were her lovers. However giggly and amused John appeared to be, he must have been in torment much of the time.

Peace to their shades, both of them! Time heals everything, and the best of her novels – *The Bell*, *The Sea, the Sea*, *The Black Prince* – are immortal.

Though almost absurdly unworldly and out of touch, she chronicled the sexual and spiritual revolution that arrived in our society between the 1950s and the 1970s. The frantic, love-haunted beings who pursue their chaotic emotional lives in her books would never have come into being had she and John been Darby and Joan.

But the discovery of the poems, and the resurrection of all the stories about Iris's life and loves, make me realise marriage is a strange old business.

Not only do we never really know the truth about other people's marriages. We probably also never really know the truth about our own.

A N Wilson is author of Iris Murdoch As I Knew Her *(2003)*





NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY

***Left: Brideshead Revisited* (1981), filmed at Castle Howard**
***Above:* Vanbrugh with his dividers**

Vanbrugh Revisited

On Sir John Vanbrugh's 300th anniversary, *Simon Scott Plummer* salutes the baroque architect and master of the 'Castle Air'

Sir John Vanbrugh – who died 300 years ago, on 26th March 1726, aged 62 – was a man of protean abilities.

In the second half of his life, he became Britain's greatest architect of country houses. Before that, Vanbrugh (1664-1726) had been a soldier and spent four years in French prisons, including the Bastille, and had then volunteered for naval service and taken part in the 1694 Battle of Camaret Bay in Brittany.

His next venture was the London stage, where he became one of the leading Restoration playwrights. His best-known comedies were *The Relapse* and *The Provok'd Wife*.

While continuing to write, he burst onto the architectural world with the palatial house built for the 3rd Earl of Carlisle at Castle Howard, Yorkshire. That commission led to a request from the Duke of Marlborough to design Blenheim Palace near Oxford, and over the next 20 years a succession of great houses, from Northumberland to Dorset, followed.

As if this were not enough, Vanbrugh was also a civil servant, as Comptroller of Works and Surveyor of Waters and Gardens, became the second-most senior herald in the College of Arms, and built and ran his own theatre in London's Haymarket.

How did the Restoration playwright, with a leap and a bound, turn himself into a famous Baroque architect?

There was luck. William Talman, designer of England's first aristocratic palace, Chatsworth, fell out with Lord Carlisle over Castle Howard, who then turned to Vanbrugh, a kinsman and a fellow Whig. Then there was the assistance of Nicholas Hawksmoor (1661-1736), who had been trained by Wren and had expertise in architectural drawing and managing construction work, which Vanbrugh yet lacked. The two were to co-operate throughout most of Vanbrugh's career – a serendipitous partnership of two men of genius.

Further commissions came through the Kit-Cat Club, to which Vanbrugh belonged. The members, a Whig élite of aristocrats and intellectuals, met once a week to drink in a London inn.

Vanbrugh brought to his new profession great self-confidence, no doubt bolstered by his success as a playwright, and the ability to visualise and transfer to paper the ordering of masses of masonry to dramatic effect.

At Castle Howard, to light the Great Hall, he introduced a huge central dome, for the first time in an English country house. At Blenheim, he did the same with a clerestory. Coming new into architecture, he was ready to innovate. Both he and Hawksmoor were boldly idiosyncratic – and were criticised as such, as taste turned towards the more symmetrical strictures of Palladianism.

What are the distinguishing marks of Vanbrugh's style? In 1706, he wrote, ''Tis certainly the Figure and Proportions that make the most pleasing fabrick, and not



to enter the park and see the building for which he is most famous. But it did establish him as a proto-conservationist.

In 1707, he wrote of restoring to the much modernised Kimbolton Castle in Cambridgeshire 'Something of the Castle Air' and proceeded to crown it with battlements. The third house he built for himself, Vanbrugh Castle in Greenwich, is castellated, and medieval references abound in his use of towers and turrets – in the service court at Castle Howard; at Blenheim; on the north front of Grimsthorpe Castle, Lincolnshire; and at Seaton Delaval, Northumberland.



the delicacy of the Ornaments.' He also mentions his pride in making 'a Noble and Masculine Shew'.

His buildings are characterised by their manly vigour, seen most clearly at Blenheim, the part-private house, part-national monument given by a grateful nation to the warrior who had defeated the French in 1704.

This palace, with its beautiful honey-coloured stone tinted with orange, does not lack ornament – just look at its skyline – but its façades and fenestration are relatively plain. The overall impression is of powerful mass, a quality complemented by the bastion-like bridge over the River Glyme in the valley below.

Vanbrugh was sensitive to the romance of the past. In a fascinating letter to the Duke of Marlborough, he pleads for saving Woodstock Manor (*pictured left*), the royal hunting lodge where Henry II had dallied with his mistress, Rosamund Clifford. Just as people in the past associated Woodstock with the king's 'Affections', he writes, so they would in future come to see the palace built by Queen Anne for her hero.

The argument got him nowhere – part of the deteriorating relationship with his clients, which, after the Duke's death in 1722, led to lawsuits initiated by the Duchess, and her forbidding him



ITV; ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM; MATTIA AQUILA

***Top:* Grimsthorpe's north front**
***Above:* Seaton Delaval's south front**
***Below:* old Woodstock Manor**

At Kings Weston, an Italianate villa near Bristol, currently being restored by its American owner, John Barbey, the arcaded chimneys lend a crenellated effect.

It is in the interior of his buildings that Vanbrugh is literally theatrical. Arcading is his proscenium arch, the views through it the receding flats of a stage.

The effect is most spectacular at Castle Howard and most perfect at Grimsthorpe, whose hall was judged by Pevsner to be 'unquestionably Vanbrugh's finest room'. There you look through two-storeyed arcading towards the wrought ironwork of a double staircase from ground to first floor, on which stand doorways based on a design by Michelangelo.

Blenheim has the same



Great Hall from *Castle Howard*, a new book by Christopher Ridgway
***Below:* Eastbury Park in Dorset**

feature, as do Kimbolton, Seaton Delaval and Audley End in Essex, a Jacobean house where Vanbrugh refashioned the south end of the Great Hall. At Kings Weston, the hall, which led the eye to the cantilevered staircase in the saloon, was filled in after his death.

One of the glorious legacies of the 18th century is the landscape fashioned around great houses. We do not know in detail what part Vanbrugh played in the layout of gardens and parkland by landscape designers such as Charles Bridgeman, George London, Henry Wise and Stephen Switzer.

But there is ample evidence of what he placed in them: the bridge at Blenheim; the Rotondo (since altered) and the two lake pavilions at Stowe (Viscount Cobham's Whig Elysian Fields in Buckinghamshire); the twin-towered Belvedere at Claremont in Surrey; and the Bagnio and Temple at Eastbury Park, Dorset.

His and Hawksmoor's influence on landscaping is most clearly seen at Castle Howard. For a start, Vanbrugh switched Talman's proposed alignment of the house through 180 degrees so that it sits north-south on a ridge.

A great axis runs straight as a die for over four miles, starting from the monument to the 7th Earl of Carlisle, erected in the 19th century, continuing through the Carrmire Gate, with its flanking battlements, and the Pyramid Gate, passing the obelisk raised to Marlborough's victories, and skirting the Great Lake.

Elsewhere in the park are Hawksmoor's Pyramid and Mausoleum and Vanbrugh's exquisite Temple of the Four Winds, based on the Villa Rotonda outside Vicenza, showing that he was quite capable of mastering the Palladian style.

Vanbrugh was ever a man of the theatre, and there are two structures that, having suffered since his death, bear heightened witness to the drama of his architecture. The first is the central block of Seaton Delaval, uninhabited since a fire in 1822. The impact of this gaunt shell, the walls of its hall stained with molten lead, its mighty façades blackened by industrial pollution, is overwhelming.

The second is what little is left of Eastbury Park, once a palace on nearly the same scale as Blenheim.

A gateway of Roman grandeur, decorated with scrolls, leads into its remaining courtyard. Two Scots pines seeded themselves on it years ago. One died this year but the owner, Ronald Farquharson, has planted a new one.

This surreal marriage of arch and tree calls to mind Panini's paintings of Roman ruins. I like to think that Vanbrugh, classicist and innovator, would have approved.



SIMON SCOTT PLUMMER; MATTIA AQUILA

Charles Saumarez Smith's biography Vanbrugh: The Drama of Architecture *is out on 20th November. A show of the same name is at Sir John Soane's Museum, 4th March to 28th June 2026*

Eleanor

Live-Well

Live-In Care & Companionship At Home



BEST PLACE FOR CARE?

IN YOUR OWN HOME

The Eleanor Live-Well Difference:

- Always there, giving your family peace of mind
- Expert care in the comfort of familiar surroundings
- Tailored support that evolves with your needs
- Trained and fully-vetted carers who truly care

READY TO BEGIN A NEW CHAPTER WITH 24/7 PERSONALISED LIVE-IN CARE?

Visit our website

01732441877 live-well@eleanorcare.co.uk

The Maple Suite, Reynolds Retreat, Quarry Hill Road, Borough Green, Sevenoaks, Kent, TN15 8RQ

Regulated by Care Quality Commission

NOBLE CALEDONIA





ISLAND HOPPING IN THE AEGEAN



Discover some of the most beautiful Greek Isles aboard the 50-passenger MS Monet – **27th May to 6th June, 6th to 16th June*, 15th to 25th September & 25th September to 5th October* 2027**

Join us for a relaxing and informative voyage to some of the most idyllic islands in the Aegean. Part of the joy of a cruise aboard a small vessel is its capability to dock in small ports and cruising aboard the delightful MS Monet is a wonderful way to experience the lesser known islands of the southern Aegean and encounter their timeless quality. In addition to some daytime cruising which allows us to enjoy some magnificent views, there will also be some overnight moorings. These afford the opportunity to take a stroll after dinner in some marvellous places that are particularly atmospheric in the evening. For those who wish to swim in the intensely blue Aegean there will also be time at leisure to explore the local beaches.



We have devised our itinerary to allow ample time to wander through the whitewashed villages and picturesque harbours of some hidden Greek island gems such as Sifnos, Lipsi, Nisyros, Fourni and Symi. In addition, whilst ensuring a relaxing time will be had by all, we could not devise an itinerary in this wonderful region without including visits to at least some of the fascinating ancient sites in the area and we will discover Ephesus where St Paul preached and spend some time on Patmos where we will visit the grotto of St John.

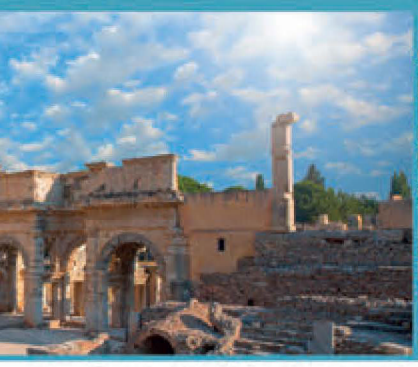
With a maximum of just 50 guests, our trips ashore will be a pleasure as we explore with local guides who will also join us on board for our cruise, adding immeasurably to our knowledge of the region. Whether you are interested in ancient history, Greek myths or simply the joy of cruising aboard a small ship and experiencing new places and islands in this beautiful region, our island hopping voyage has something for everyone.

MS MONET is a 220 foot motor yacht accommodating a maximum of 50 guests which we have exclusively chartered for these cruises. Cabins are designed for comfort and have a warm and inviting feel with light fabrics and wood trimmings. Cabins feature an en-suite bathroom with shower, television, minifridge, safety deposit box, air-conditioning and hairdryer. The public areas include a main lounge and bar with comfortable sofas and the Sun Deck which provides a delightful space with sun loungers and a Jacuzzi, ideal for relaxation and wonderful views. The indoor dining room seats all passengers in a single sitting with unassigned seating and allows for wonderful panoramic views of the stunning scenery as we sail. The Lumiere Open Deck provides a generous covered area where guests can enjoy meals al fresco, weather permitting.






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







MARCH 2025 Which? Recommended Provider OCEAN CRUISES

SPECIAL OFFER – SAVE £300 PER PERSON

THE ITINERARY IN BRIEF

Day 1 London to Athens, Greece. Fly by scheduled flight. On arrival transfer to the MS Monet and embark.

Day 2 Folegandros & Sifnos. Arrive this morning at the little known island of Folegandros. Visit the clifftop capital of Chora, a wonderfully picturesque village with alleys lined with bougainvillea and hibiscus and a dramatic seascape over an edge which drops some 700 feet directly into the Aegean. Return to the ship for lunch and a relaxing afternoon at sea as we sail to Sifnos arriving in the early evening. This corner of the Cyclades is far from the well-trodden tracks of the big ships and you will be greeted by traditional white houses, picturesque churches and narrow lanes and alleys.

Day 3 Sifnos & Syros. A morning tour of Sifnos will include Apollonia, the island's tiny capital, the Virysianni Monastery and the villages of Kastro and Artemos, both delightful places to wander and admire the traditional architecture. Sail during lunch to Syros and enjoy a leisurely afternoon with a stroll in the town of Ermoupoli, the capital of the Cyclades.

Day 4 Fourni. After a morning at sea we arrive at one of the best kept secret islands in the Aegean, Fourni. Once a haven for pirates who enjoyed the island's remote setting and little changed for centuries, it has a wonderfully peaceful atmosphere. Enjoy an afternoon at leisure to walk up from the harbour to the charming main square and enjoy a drink whilst observing island life.

Day 5 Samos. Today we explore Samos which lays claim to be the birthplace of Hera, the mathematician Pythagoras and philosopher Epicurus. From the port of Vathy we will visit the excellent archaeological museum with one of the richest collections in Greece. Continue to the Sanctuary of Hera, the second largest temple ever built in Greece dating from the 6th century BC before arriving at the charming village of Pythagorio. Return to the MS Monet for lunch and enjoy a free afternoon in Vathy where you may wish to visit a local beach or wander through the historic quarter.

Day 6 Kusadasi, Turkey. Arrive in Kusadasi over breakfast. From our berth we will drive to the nearby ancient city of Ephesus, a stunning and partially excavated site where digging has been taking place for over a century. Broad streets are lined by impressive buildings including the Library of Celsus and the temples of Serapis and Hadrian. Once the capital of Ionia, St Paul preached here on his second missionary journey and we will see the Church of the Virgin Mary, the most important Christian monument in Ephesus. Also see the spectacular Grand Theatre, originally built in the 3rd century BC by the Greeks, and later expanded by the Romans to its present capacity of 24,000. Enjoy lunch in a local restaurant before we return back to Kusadasi for the rest of the afternoon at leisure.

Day 7 Patmos, Greece. Of all the Greek islands, Patmos is the most sacred to Christians both Orthodox and Western and it was here that St John received his revelation. This morning we will make our way to the grotto of St John. This small cave, now converted into the beautiful chapel, is where the Saint lived, had his revelation and wrote 'Book of the Apocalypse'. From here continue to the village of Chora, with its simple houses and Byzantine churches and climb to the Monastery of St John the Theologian. Return to the MS Monet for lunch and this afternoon and evening is at leisure to explore the picturesque town of Skala or maybe enjoy a swim at a nearby beach.

Day 8 Lipsi & Leros. Today we can use our small ship to visit two of the less visited islands of the Dodecanese. Spend the morning on the tiny island of Lipsi, a wonderful place to spend a few hours walking amongst the whitewashed houses or take the opportunity to visit a local beach for a swim. Over lunch we sail to Leros and will drive to the capital, Platanos to see the Pandeli Castle which overlooks Agia Marina offering wonderful views. The Battle of Leros was a central event in World War II and we will also visit the War Museum and Commonwealth Cemetery.

Day 9 Nisyros & Symi. Arrive this morning at the small island of Nisyros. From the port of Mandraki we drive to the Polyvotis Volcano named after the Titan imprisoned under the rock of Nisyros during the battle with the gods. Here we will learn more of the legends and have the chance to walk into the caldera. Alternatively, maybe wander through the village, climb to the Monastery of Panagia Spiliani or visit the archaeological museum. We sail this afternoon to the island of Symi.

Day 10 Symi & Rhodes. Spend the morning on the island of Symi, a small, mountainous and much indented pretty island. The harbour is particularly attractive and we have time to stroll through the colourful cobbled streets. In the mid afternoon we sail to Rhodes arriving in the late afternoon.

Day 11 Rhodes to London. Disembark after breakfast and transfer to the airport for the return scheduled flight to London.

***Please note** that the itinerary for the 6th June & 25th September departure dates operates in the reverse order to that shown, from Rhodes to Athens. Full itinerary can be viewed online.

PRICES & INCLUSIONS

Special offer prices per person based on double occupancy start from **£4995** for a Category D cabin.

WHAT'S INCLUDED:

Economy class scheduled air travel • 10 nights aboard the MS Monet on a full board basis • House wine, beer & soft drinks with lunch and dinner • Noble Caledonia onboard team • Shore excursions • Gratuities • Transfers • Port 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.



Avoid the Denis Healey look

Don't let your eyebrows run wild – but do dye them

MARY KILLEN

First let's address the issue of growth direction. Some 12 per cent of Britons have eyebrows growing in an unhelpful trajectory.

To illustrate, think of the late Denis Healey. Imagine the abundance of Healey's eyebrows. It will help to illustrate what can go wrong when eyebrows grow straight out of the head in the same direction as the nose, rather than along the brow line towards the ears.

In Healey's case, the eyebrows went untamed throughout his 40-year political career and at one stage even became 'handlebar' eyebrows (as in Jimmy Edwards/ Norman Parkinson handlebar moustaches).

Looking back at the lack of vanity of this dedicated public servant from the perspective of today's Ozempic-taking, teeth-whitening, spineless sissies and shafting parliamentarians, war hero Healey seems a giant of a man.

But many of us in the 12 per cent do not want to make a feature of our handlebar eyebrows, so we trim them and try to coax them into line, literally, with Vaseline.

Now this is no longer necessary, as a new procedure for eyebrow-laminating has become available.

Readers old enough to remember the disfiguring permanent wave or perm need not be alarmed by the inclusion of perm 'juice' in this procedure. Perms do not suit head hair, but they do suit eyebrow hair.

The brows are trimmed, tinted and permed and so kept in place for up to six weeks. Restrained, in other words.

Readers who want more brow rather than less will be pleased to know lamination can achieve this. It will make sparse brows fluffy. You can even buy gels from Anastasia of Beverly Hills with lamination technology built in.

And now we must go to those women who foolishly over-plucked in the 1990s, when it was a fashion to have very thin eyebrows. How cruel that leg hair, armpit hair and upper-lip hair, when shaved, waxed or plucked, will burst right back with renewed vigour and the stiffness of a yard brush – and yet eyebrows won't.





The eyebrows have it: Denis Healey. *Left:* Marni model, eyebrows mown

As Lidl says of products in its middle aisle, 'When they're gone, they're gone.'

After a decade of everyone striving for full, Brooke Shields-inspired eyebrows, razor-thin brows came back into the limelight, thanks to recent Maison Margiela and Marni runways. But you suit that look only if you're very young and striving for dramatic effect.

But when the fashion has passed, you will be eyebrow-free. So don't go for it. And if it's too late, then microblading has the edge on tattooing, when replacements need to be drawn into the space where the eyebrows once were.

Uklash, which promotes eyelash growth, can be tried on the missing brow line, but it can be patchy and thickety.

Many women and men are now dyeing – ideally highlighting (it looks less crude) – their hair, right up till their eighties and beyond. But it is essential to dye the eyebrows too. Otherwise, they jar.

The product I use is Dybrow. In a mid-brown shade, it comes in a pleasant enough box. Choosing mid-brown means you won't look too Groucho Marx.

You blob out one blob from a white tube, and then another blob from a brown tube, into a plastic bowl (supplied). You mix the two together, using the mixing wand supplied.

You then go to a window, with bright light streaming through, and, with a magnifying mirror in one hand and the wand coated with eyebrow dye in the other, you blob the mixture on.

You are warned on the box to protect the adjacent areas you do not want to dye by smearing Vaseline all over them. I don't bother. You are advised to leave the mixture on for ten minutes. I leave it on for 30 and have never had a bad reaction.

The general message is that eyebrows are necessary. Nature put them there for a reason and we should do what we can to ensure they are coloured in an authentic-looking shade and dyed if they have become grey. But they should be ruly, not unruly.

Unruly brows are fun on men and can even be a turn-on because a lack of self-consciousness in a man is attractive. How strange that we don't tend to like unruly eyebrows on a woman.

GETTY

Lose weight with skinny jabs? Fat chance!

I've spent nearly all my long life longing to lose a stone.

I doubt there is a potion or a regime I haven't tried. Remember Limmits, the little biscuits, each 100 calories? You ate twelve of them a day, instead of everything else.

Then there were slimming drinks, WeightWatchers unsatisfying ready meals, and some amazing pills called Nobese which were rapidly banned.

And all sorts of diets: the drinking man's diet, the banana-and-milk diet, the grapefruit diet, the milkshake diet, and a delicious one on which I lost no weight at all – the pineapple-and-lamb-chop diet.

I've twice been to starve farms. The first time was to the now defunct Shrubland Hall, when my son was four months old and I wanted to lose the post-baby fat.

I went with my sister-in-law, and we had a little cottage in the grounds, so other clients (patients?) would not be bothered by a bawling baby. All we got by way of sustenance was lemon and hay tea, and at night it had a spoon of honey in it.

It certainly worked, but it was Hell – especially as we were feeding the baby soft-boiled eggs and toast soldiers. When he spat this out, it was all I could do not to gobble it up.

The other time was to a now equally defunct 'health farm', Tower Lease in Bristol, where I went for a week with my mama.

I thought I'd kill three birds with one stone: I'd lose a stone, dutifully spend time with my mother and get going writing a cookbook.

That was Hell too. Writing recipes for *coq au vin* and pavlova when you are starving is tough. And Tower Lease was obsessed with colonic irrigation and mud baths.

So why, when the skinny jab became all the rage, why was I not at the head of the queue? My husband signed up and lost a stone and a half in a month. He loved it. He was never hungry, ate half the quantity he used to, stopped snacking completely and pretty well gave up drinking.

He said it *increased* his enjoyment of meals. He looks great, feels fit and needs new trousers.

Fat and happy or thin and miserable?

But something puritan in me would not let me do something so effortless, painless and expensive. What's the matter with good old willpower? So I held out.

That is until I discovered that half the people I know, including my doctor, are happily stabbing themselves.

I gave in. And can you believe it? I have not *lost one single ounce* in seven weeks. Two years ago, I did finally lose a stone after a determined calorie-counting diet, but I'd like to lose another, damn it.

I certainly have no appetite, I'm certainly eating and drinking half what I was and I am totally exhausted all the time, desperate for a siesta in the afternoon and bed at 9.30. And I'm not one single imperial pound lighter. Only lighter by several hundred pounds sterling.

PS I finally quit after two more weeks on the drug. And, oh God, the relief! To have some energy back, regain my appetite and not feel below par all the time.

Frankly, I'd rather be fat and happy.



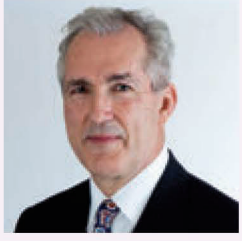
Prue Leith presents *The Great British Bake Off*

The Oldie Literary Lunch

Supported by Noble Caledonia

20th January 2026

At the National Liberal Club, 1 Whitehall Place, London SW1A 2HE



Jeremy King

on **Without Reservation: Lessons From a Life in Restaurants** Restaurateur of Arlington, The Park, Simpson's-in-the-Strand



Mary Berry

on **Mary 90: My Very Best Recipes** Recipes from Mary's brand-new BBC series celebrating her 90th birthday



John Davie

on **Greek to Us: The Fascinating Ancient Greek That Shapes Our World** Foreword by Harry Mount

TO BOOK TICKETS email reservations@theoldie.co.uk or call Katherine on 01225 427311 (Mon-Fri 9.30am-3pm). The price is £85 for a three-course lunch including wine or soft drinks ● Vegetarian options available on advance request ● Meet the speakers from 12 noon; lunch at 1pm ● Authors speak 2.30pm

Eastbourne

as you've never seen it, and would never wish to



Letter Boxes Are Red

The explosive novel by **Edward Thomas**

Available at bookshops, online and on Kindle

ISBN: 978-1-83975-693-1

perilla

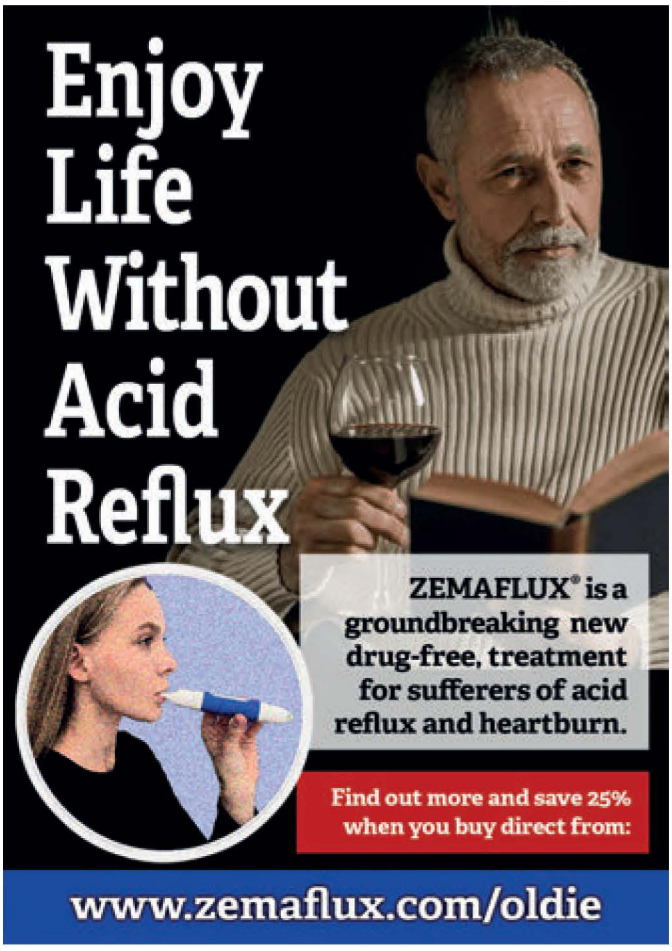
Everyone wants socks for Christmas



perilla.co.uk
sales@perilla.co.uk
01905 948834

Wrap up warm this Christmas with Perilla's luxury alpaca socks - softer, warmer, and more breathable than cashmere. Naturally temperature regulating and odour resistant, they stay fresh longer and need less washing. Made in the UK, our Bed, Everyday, and Activity Socks offer indulgent comfort with practical durability. Give the gift of cosy feet. Starting from £15.50





GOURMET SEAFOOD GIFT BOX

Surprise someone special with 13 gourmet seafood delights.

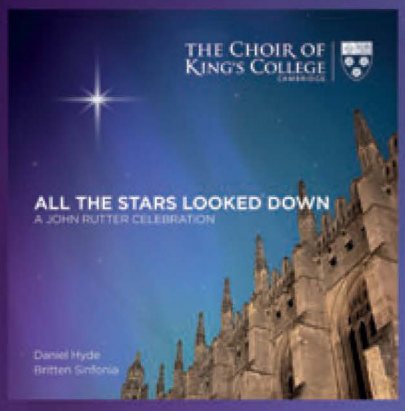
SCAN TO ORDER ↓

www.deli-fayre.com

SCAN ME



THE CHOIR OF KING'S COLLEGE CAMBRIDGE



ALL THE STARS LOOKED DOWN

A JOHN RUTTER CELEBRATION

Hear the latest Christmas album from the Choir of King's College, Cambridge

Album out 21 November
Available at **kingscollegerecordings.com**



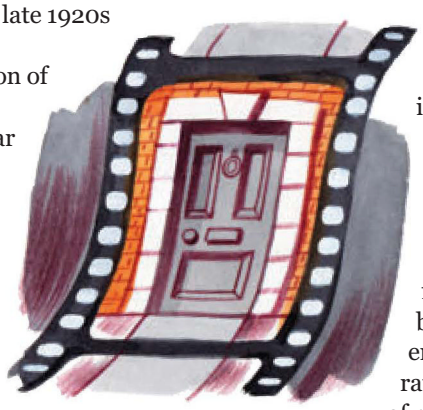
Cinema Paradiso – in Maidstone

Mary Kenny is enchanted by a 1920s cinema, frozen in time in a Kent terraced house

When Celia Cooke went to clear out her late father's bits and pieces a couple of years ago, she uncovered a beguiling vignette of cinema history.

Her dad, Alex Smith, a trained electrician who died in 2001, had run a private cinema at his parents' home in Maidstone from the late 1920s to the early 1940s.

A perfect collection of everything required for screening pre-war movies – projection equipment, lighting arrangements, sound recordings, film and hand-crafted models of cinema organs – lay in a box.



The private cinema was in the front room of his parents' home – a two-up, two-down at 52 Kingsley Road in Maidstone. Tickets were issued for the eight audience members – all that could be accommodated – and a local girl, Doris Waghorn, dressed as an usherette, made her own costume for the role.

The home cinema was named the Alexia. Entertainment included newsreels, radio amplifications of *In Town Tonight*, 'outside broadcasts' (done from the kitchen), Charlie Chaplin and Mickey Mouse film.

When war started, the audience would sing 'Land of Hope and Glory' and 'La Marseillaise', in solidarity with Occupied France, at the end of proceedings. There was usually a full house, all logged. And romance blossomed as Alex married the 'usherette' who had shown such dedication in supporting his mini-cinema.

Mrs Cooke donated the contents of the pre-war home cinema to the Museum of the Moving Image in Deal. The models of cinema organs are technically accurate reproductions of a disappeared role.

I'm a big fan of Kent's movie museum, which also has a detailed exhibition about *Lawrence of Arabia*, set in location maquettes.

TOBY MORISON

The Italians love a holy day. Giorgia Meloni has been popularly applauded for restoring St Francis of Assisi's feast day as a national holiday – anticipating the 800th anniversary of his death in 2026.

St Francis remains universally cherished – the only saint quoted by Margaret Thatcher. He is an unlikely match for the Iron Lady: he was basically a hippie, and embraced poverty rather than the pursuit of prosperity.

In his lifetime, he was nearly excommunicated for 'unorthodoxy' – church leaders thought it loopy to greet wild animals with 'Hello, Brother Wolf.'

But Francis is now the perfect fit for our nature-worshipping times.

People knew Jilly Cooper for her bonkbusters, libations of champagne – and personal kindness. My encounter was over the subject of adoption.

She had written, with characteristic honesty, about her struggles to conceive a baby. And then, finally, she was able to adopt a boy and a girl, and she wrote about how happy she was.

Adoption was once treated in a utilitarian way. If one woman had an unwanted baby, and another yearned for a child, why, just transfer the infant from one to t'other. In the postwar era, unwed birth mothers were often coerced into placing a baby for adoption.

Yet I am always touched by the attachment that can form between adoptive parents and their children.

I once wrote a column saying so, quoting a poem about an adoptive mother's words to her child: 'Not flesh of my flesh/ Nor bone of my bone/ But still, miraculous/ My own/ Never forget/ For a single minute/ You didn't grow under my heart/ But in it.' It borders on the sentimental, yet it's meaningful.

I received a heartfelt pop-up card from Jilly, adorned with images of garden flowers, thanking me with typical warmth for quoting those words.

After Jilly Cooper died, her children Felix and Emily, said, 'Mum was the shining light in all our lives.' What a sweet tribute to Jilly as a mother.

The new President of Ireland, Catherine Connolly, has been joyously hailed as a victory for left-wing democracy.

She's fiercely anti-war, doesn't see the need for a national army, was supported by the pro-Palestinian hip-hop band Kneecap, speaks in Irish and transmits the hopey-changey pro-underdog-anti-colonialism vibes that so appeal to the young. A broad political left coalition, including Sinn Féin (Ireland's richest political party) backed her.

The President of Ireland is a ceremonial position – so she has no actual power. Yet the Irish have skilfully invented a system that allows the President to do all the soft left-wing stuff, while a centre-right administration gets on with the harder task of managing the economy, which includes attracting American, European – and, er, Israeli – capitalism. It's like a marriage where Mummy is the comforter, while Daddy does the discipline.

Ms Connolly, a barrister, proved herself an attractive candidate: at 68, she could dance in a cèilidh and play a nimble game of netball with youngsters. Her face is unadorned by cosmetics – a note of unpretentious authenticity.

She grew up in a family of 14, which she says taught her equality. I imagine it also taught her competitiveness and survival!

Angel of the Church Coffee Morning

There were no punters at the white elephant stall – until I came flying to the rescue

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...



STEVE WAY

I'm not normally one for virtue-signalling or humble-bragging. But let me say it out loud – I feel very saintly today.

Roles are reversed. I am now pushing Mother around, albeit that she's in a wheelchair, not a pushchair.

I am practising *very* muscular Christianity – the High Street is full of cracked-pavement peril for the pro-am pusher.

I try to reassure Mother with a gentle 'Remember, I'm right behind you, at your shoulder. You want to stop, go right or left – just let me know. Just think of me as your St Christopher.'

She grumbles back, 'St Christopher wouldn't take those bloody kerbs the way you do.'

I'm a bit deaf. So we're halfway down the street before I realise that for yonks she's been yelling, 'I said, "Stop," you twit!'

We screech to a halt at the church-hall coffee morning. As a youth-club member till 23 (a benefit of still being as tall as a 12-year-old), I was only too familiar with this fine but timeworn building.

So, rather than take my hefty mum up the difficult front steps, I rushed her round the side and elbowed open the ramped fire exit.

I suddenly appeared, with a magician's flourish, bursting through the double doors to the ten coffee addicts, with a cheeky 'Ta-da!' Mother later reclassified this as vulgar in a tense afternoon debrief.

The server of the coffee looked disappointed at the now permanently open fire doors.

The coffee itself is more questionable than the Holy Trinity. But the prices can't be beaten by the baristas down the road.

Mother took her job as Captain of HMS *Wheelchair* more seriously as we navigated the dangerous channels of the forest of tables.

She barked at me, 'Straight down the centre aisle, to the final table on the right. Quicker! If Belize Barbara stops us to talk, the coffee'll be cold by the time she's finished telling us about the chicken.'

I rushed through, knocking Mum's big toe against organist Alan's table with such force his flapjack flipped in mid-air – back onto his plate.

As two friends decanted Mother into a plastic chair, I looked round the white-elephant stall. The stall took up four trestle tables. Next door was a coat rack with a full-length trawlerman's oilskin coat that's been there since 1979.

All the items on the stall had been brought in by the ten coffee-morning attendees. The stall-runner, Cedric, is trapped in a mythological story: of a man who must endlessly take items nobody wants from a cupboard to show yet again to the people who didn't want them when they had them – in the vague hope that this curse may one day end when someone comes through the door with a life-or-death need for the Stylistics' greatest hits on double cassette or an opened set of dinner place settings with a wolf theme.

Suddenly, the sound of a Biblical rainstorm burst out of nowhere through the open fire-exit doors.

Streams of shoppers in cardigans came pouring in, seeking literal sanctuary inside the hall. They filed through the very fire exit I had unwittingly opened, through which they had viewed the coffee morning for the first time.

An entire school class are walking past on a day out. I catch the eye of the teacher, beckoning them to join our throng.

I failed to realise it wasn't just one class but the whole of Grimsby's Year 8 cohort. There was now no floor space left as a legion of cross-legged soggy children completed my ad-hoc ark.

I also failed to realise that the coffee morning ended in 20 minutes. The main volunteer looked at me, viciously disappointed. No prophet is saluted in his own church hall.

I bought the oilskin off Cedric to place over myself, Mother and wheelchair as we ventured home, looking like an S&M panto horse. We arrived home with tales for Father, gabbling how I had given the stall its most profitable day ever, and saved the town's children from pleurisy.

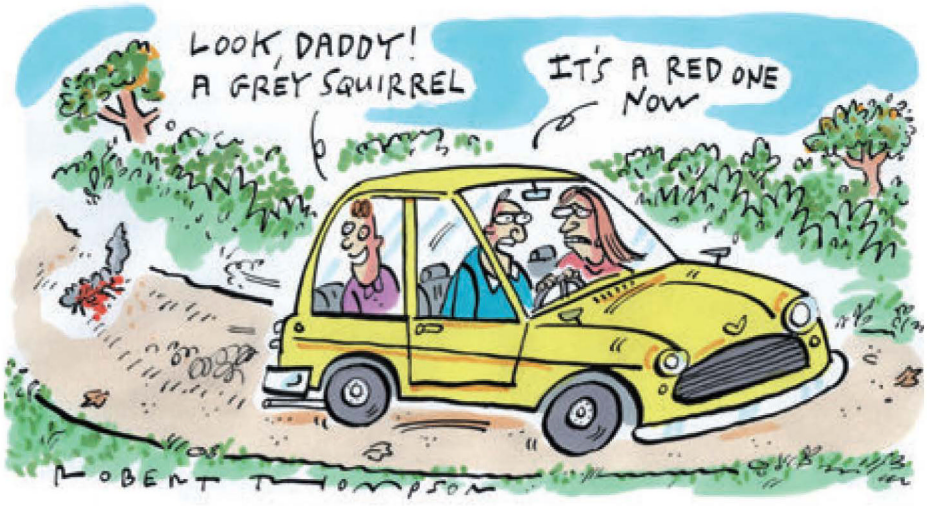
'He's the Oskar Schindler of the summer-flu season,' said Mother with typical bad taste.

When the house phone rang, Father muttered, 'That'll be Spielberg.'



Grey squirrels, watch out! John Humphrys is about

TOM HODGKINSON



ROBERT THOMPSON

You will not be surprised that, as a mouse, I fear and hate the rats of London. But there is another rodent tribe that fills me with even more loathing and extreme annoyance –the grey squirrel, *Sciurus carolinensis*.

These thugs do everything they can to wreck my life. When I play tennis, they climb along and then down the fence, tear open my bag and steal my banana. They run across the court, meaning the point has to be replayed. They have absolutely no fear.

When I cycle across Hyde Park, I see them cynically manipulating tourists into giving them small pieces of bread. The squirrels have learned to flatter the vanity of the visitors. They make them feel like David Attenborough, as if they have a special connection with the animal world. But it's all self-interest.

My heart soared one morning when I was enjoying a coffee with my *Oldie* colleague and broadcaster John Humphrys in his London kitchen.

Without warning, he leapt up from the table and ran into his garden, shouting expletives, and picked up a large piece of wood – kept for the purpose – and hurled it at a grey squirrel, which scampered away unharmed.

'I bloody hate those things,' he said. 'I've managed to get rid of quite a few, but one or two keep coming back.'

I was delighted that Humphrys had given free vent to his feelings around grey squirrels. No virtue-signalling there.

And there's a lot to loathe. On further research, I found that my instinctive fear of these creatures is well-founded.

According to my *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 1911 edition, which I use instead of Google, the eating habits of the squirrel are nothing short of barbaric:

'In addition to all sorts of vegetables and fruits, the squirrel is exceedingly fond of animal food, greedily devouring mice, small birds and eggs.'

They are vicious carnivores who would like to eat me and my family.

I blame one main culprit: Beatrix Potter. Her character Squirrel Nutkin certainly looks cute. And he's a red squirrel, which are generally preferred to the bullying grey squirrels we see in London parks.

But when you go back to the original story, you find that Nutkin is not only cheeky, he's a murderer and thief, like his distant descendants in London parks.

First, he and his mates slaughter three dead mice and gives them to the owl, Old Brown, as a peace offering in return for nut-foraging rights on the island that the owl owns.

This macabre gift is followed by more: an innocent fat mole is dispatched, followed by seven fat minnows and six fat beetles. The final gifts are some stolen honey and an egg.

Nutkin – who is, says Potter, 'excessively impertinent in his manners' – taunts the old owl with silly riddles. Finally, the owl loses it completely and tries to skin Nutkin alive. Unfortunately Nutkin escapes through the attic window (though without his tail).

So we mice hate all squirrels, although the red squirrel is better than the grey. I'm pleased to hear red squirrel numbers are up because this has been a mast year, with a glut of seeds and nuts, leading to two breeding seasons in 2025.

A website devoted to helping the red ones, britishredsquirrel.org, mounts a spirited attack on their grey relatives:

'They are listed in the international list of 100 worst invasive non-native species, which highlights the damage that grey squirrels cause to our native flora and fauna; a problem severe enough to be recognised at a level of global significance.'

The grey squirrels, we learn, were introduced in the late-19th century by daft aristocrats as ornaments for their gardens. Now they lose us money, reported *The Squirrel* magazine in 2016:

'Grey squirrel bark-stripping damage costs the UK timber industry some £14 million per annum.' Furthermore: 'Research carried out by the Game Conservancy and Wildlife Trust demonstrates that grey squirrels have an adverse impact on many native woodland birds, reducing fledging rates by an average of 15 per cent.'

I eagerly clicked on the section euphemistically called Grey Squirrel Management. I was delighted to read the following statement: 'Shooting grey squirrels is legal and can be highly effective in reducing numbers as part of a wider management scheme.' And even better, you're free to eat the ones you kill: 'They are perfectly edible by humans.'

This leads me to a modest proposal. The government simply needs to equip John Humphrys and his ilk with powerful air rifles. They will enjoy a bit of sport, produce some free meat for the table. Into the bargain, they will gradually eliminate the 2.5 million grey devils who currently terrorise the people and mice of this fair isle.



The strange death of broadcast news

GILES WOOD

An outing from the village occurred last Friday.

It offered a chance to witness a rare terrestrial alignment of our local MP Danny Kruger with his mother, *The Oldie*'s Prue Leith, plus Soil Association and resilience-farming do-gooders. All these lined up on a stage at Carvers, one of Wiltshire's climate-change-enabled vineyards.

Prue and her son famously disagree on assisted dying. Would she support his new membership of a populist right-wing party of the sort sweeping through Europe and deposing the traditional middle-ground party, I wondered.

Resilience is a buzz word: how can we make farming and food procurement resilient in a world of global systemic collapse? Think local was the conclusion to the debate – local abattoirs and farms supplying local schools with proper food.

Dame Prue said the education needs to come from the bottom up – children need to be taught how to cook and what good food is. 'The obesity problem would be solved in a generation.'

I asked some cheeky-chappie questions at the conference sponsored by our local millionaire – such as how new entrants to the industry or land-hungry peasants might ever be able to afford the inflated price of English farmland.

But the question I really wanted to ask was around the nebulous theme of unseemliness. How might we slow down the pace of arable-field operations in Wiltshire, a county that organic hero Henry Massingham (1860-1924) observed was one of the first to embrace mechanisation?

There is something deeply disturbing about the speed of the recent harvest, which was not even threatened by inclement weather. Unlike Julie Christie during the harvest in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, combine harvesters raced round the local prairies while huge trucks, as in a relay race, trundled to keep pace on uneven ground with the funnel-poured grain – England's glory.

A farmer in the real world blamed 'economies of scale'. It was doubtful whether I would be able to bring in local laws against tractors working outside the hours of daylight, which disturb even the poor owls; never mind us insomniacs.

We hung our heads in collective shame as we were lectured by a local apple-press-owner, who turns fallen fruit into delicious, glass-bottled juice and sells it back to us for a peppercorn fee.

It was a vaguely enjoyable event, but the harmony arrived at was undermined when one poor person stood up and spoilt it all by saying that, unlike the 60 per cent of Britons who are 'victims' of highly processed foods, most of the folk attending the conference could afford to pop into Waitrose on their way home.

Indeed, my wife and I were about to do just that, in search of pine nuts for a recipe for stuffed marrow and kefir. The marrow was the result of my painstaking and time-consuming husbandry or, in truth, the abandonment of a courgette plant.

Once the hand-wringing was over and the assembled locals and farming folk were leaving the hall, I realised there had been none of the talk of geopolitics I had hoped for. It was too late. I turned my head and found that I had missed my opportunity.

Never having been interested in geopolitics as a student, I have developed a late-flowering passion for it and had been hoping to engage with Danny Kruger. I was going to argue that if a NATO-vs-Russia war becomes unavoidable, any available government funds will be funnelled into the war. So what will be left for resilience farming?

'Russian aggression demands sacrifices from every one of us,' warned the *Sunday Times* that weekend.

Small wonder that young people have been turned off what they call the legacy media. They have no interest in 'mainstream' TV news.

My father would be turning in his grave. How he loved the news at six, nine and ten and *Newsnight*, all of which he claimed had different 'angles' – a concept that even back in the 1970s aroused much family scepticism.

But our own young people (under 40) have explained to me why the 'monoculture' our generation of Brits bought into – *Fawlty Towers*, the Proms and the Attenboroughs; the media that made us – does not exist for them.

Instead, the monoculture has been replaced by microcultures. This happened circa 2020, when TikTok was invented. Suddenly, the algorithms could assess which tribe TikTokers belonged to – and start 'targeting' them with especially relevant data.

Not broadsheet data of the kind my generation is used to, but highly specific data of interest to the new 'narrow-minded' young. The explosion of YouTubers and TikTokers has ended the stranglehold of Reuters.

I am informed that Britishness itself – like the BBC, with its outdated licence-fee model – would perish in a world where digital, bespoke, personal lifestyle choices reign supreme.

One young Briton, an admirer of Japanese culture, who spends his days immersed in online Japanese interchanges, knows what Japanese values are – but was baffled when asked about British ones. Not unlike our current Prime Minister.





History pictures paint a thousand words

The art of historical painting went out of fashion – and is now being revived

DAVID HORSPOOL

A small boy, dressed in a blue silk suit and breeches, stands on a cushioned footstool at a table.

He is raised level with the eyes of the man seated on the other side, who leans forward and looks straight at him, chin resting on his crossed hands, with an air of earnest kindness.

But the boy's pose – arms linked behind his back, as he stands almost to attention – and the attitudes of the other people in the room – looming or slouching armed soldiers, bloodless clerks, two anxious women and a weeping girl – tell us that this is an interrogation.

So too does the title of this painting, William Frederick Yeames's *And When Did You Last See Your Father?*, an imagined scene of hard-nosed, devious Roundheads attempting to track down the head of a Royalist household.

Yeames's name is barely remembered today, but this picture was famous enough to mean that, until recently, a recreation of it was displayed at Madame Tussauds in London.

Painted in 1878, it had a sort of double historical origin: the Civil Wars of the 17th century, of course, and also a deliberate nod, in the boy's costume, to Gainsborough's *Blue Boy*, a rather more self-possessed young man painted almost a century before Yeames picture, in 1770.

This is a history painting and, as with most history paintings, it is equal parts history and fantasy. Yeames has not based his tableau on a particular historical event, but he has imagined a plausible one.

The deliberate painterly quoting of Gainsborough, meanwhile, isn't as anachronistic as a copy of an 18th-century model for a 17th-century subject might at first appear.

The outfit of Gainsborough's *Blue Boy* was itself based on a historical precedent; in this case, the dress worn by Anthony van Dyck's subjects – which brings us neatly back to the Civil War period.

For centuries, history paintings were all the fashion, in Continental and British art, from Ingres and David to Paul Delaroche and David Wilkie. In Britain, some subjects, such as the fate of the Princes in the Tower or the execution of Lady Jane Grey or of Mary Queen of Scots, were painted again and again.

Like historical novelists, painters could use their imagination to fill in the gaps in history, which accounts for the attraction of eternal mysteries such as the Princes or – another of Yeames's subjects – Amy Robsart, whose suspicious death, apparently



***And When Did You Last See Your Father?* by Frederick Yeames, 1878**

caused by a fall down the stairs, was a cause célèbre in the Elizabethan court.

They could also simply make viewers feel as if 'they were there' as a great moment in history happened, from the death of General Wolfe to the reading of the Waterloo Dispatch. Or, with artistic licence to go much further back, viewers can insert themselves into the space between myth and history where Alfred burnt the cakes (Wilkie again), or the Sabine women intervened in war against the Romans (David).

That last masterpiece, in which the women are the only people clothed, shows various naked yet heavily armed men, jostling among quite a few equally naked babies, being held back from spearing one another to death by the outstretched hands of Hersilia, Romulus's Sabine wife.

It is referred to in a work – now on show at the Royal Academy – by the African American painter Kerry James Marshall, part of an exhibition entitled The Histories.

The new painting, *Six for One* (2024), is ostensibly a scene of celebration. Marshall, who says, 'I've always considered myself a history painter,' depicts an imagined scene in a historic West African village. The villagers are beginning to dance, to play music and, in the foreground right of the composition, to braid the mane and decorate the fetlocks of a handsome chestnut horse.

Part of Marshall's declared purpose in painting such historical scenes is to 'move the black figure from the periphery to the centre'. But the title gives away a dark origin for this merry scene. The 'One' is the horse, which has been exchanged for six souls, captured and sold into slavery and the Middle Passage.

And the David? The art historical reference is right at the centre of the picture, a dancing woman, hands outstretched in joy. But while she is revelling in a scene with a dark secret, her counterpart is trying to stop a war, an action that will play a part in the foundation of an empire.

Marshall's take on history painting breathes new life into the genre. His Middle Passage paintings, inspired by reflections on the abhorrent slave trade, are filled with moments of hope and uplift. They show that slavery's by-product was a new African culture across the Americas.

History painting can seem quaint to a modern eye, especially in the more saccharine or Gothic gory versions presented by some Victorians.

But, as Kerry James Marshall's unforgettable images remind us, it allows us to reconnect with the humanity of all our forebears, however uncomfortable that sometimes makes us.

David Horspool is author of Cromwell: England's Protector

JAMES MEADE

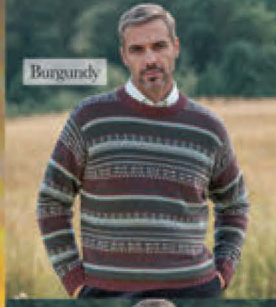
Classic clothing for town & country

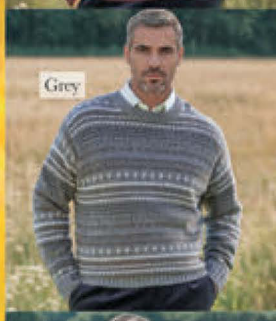
Shetland Fairisle Crew Neck

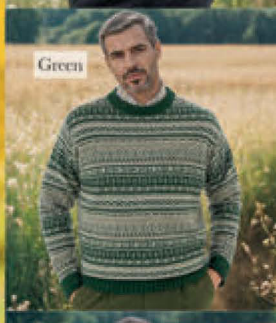
only £59 plus FREE delivery

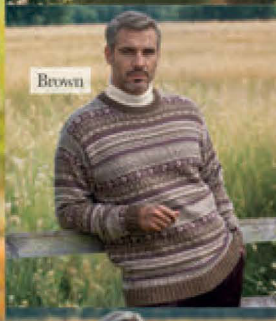


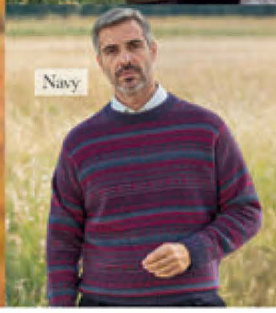
~~£75~~ £59











Knitted from pure Shetland wool. Crew neck, drop shoulder style.
Generously sized.
Hand wash.
Sizes S (38-40") M (40-42")
L (42-44") XL (46-48")
XXL (50-52")

7LA MB	Mid Blue
7LA BM	Burgundy Mix
7LA GY	Grey Mix
7LA GN	Green Mix
7LA BN	Brown Mix
7LA NV	Navy Mix

~~£75~~ £59

Delivery ~~£5.50~~ **FREE**

FREE DELIVERY • FREE RETURNS • NO TIME LIMIT GUARANTEE



Call or visit our website to order your **FREE** catalogue today!

Phone **0333 241 4451**
Monday-Friday 9am-6pm, Saturday 9am-5pm

Offer code OL46

Online **www.jamesmeade.com**

or complete & return the **Freepost** coupon.

Hurry offer ends 12th January 2026

(Current catalogue price refers to James Meade Mens Christmas Essentials 2025 catalogues.)

BLOCK CAPS PLEASE

Name (Title) _____

Address _____

Postcode _____

Tel _____ Mobile _____

Email _____

REF	COLOUR	SIZE	QTY	PRICE	TOTAL
7LA				~~£75~~ £59	
7LA				~~£75~~ £59	
7LA				~~£75~~ £59	
				Delivery	~~£5.50~~ FREE
				Grand Total	

JAMES MEADE *Classic clothing for town & country*

Offer code OL46

Phone **0333 241 4451**

We think you will enjoy hearing about our latest products and exclusive offers (your details will not be passed to any third party). Please tick if you **do not** wish to receive: Email ☐ SMS/Text Message ☐. **See our Privacy Policy at www.jamesmeade.com/privacy.** We may make customers names available to selected trusted retailers, UK charities and organisations whose products we feel might be of interest to you. If you prefer not to receive these postal mailings please tick this box ☐

I enclose a sterling cheque payable to James Meade or charge my Mastercard, Visa or American Express card no:

Expiry date ☐☐ / ☐☐ Last 3 digits on the signature strip on reverse. 4 digits on the front of the card for AMEX. ☐☐☐☐

Post to: James Meade Mens, FREEPOST CE451, Dept. OL46, Craw Hall, BRAMPTON, Cumbria CA8 1BR



My candidate for the Bad Sex Prize

SOPHIA WAUGH

Every day's a learning day, we say. (Do we actually? Ugh.)

We definitely had a learning day at the beginning of the term when we gathered in the school theatre for a Twilight Session (ie an extra-long day).

We were told our 'learning' on this occasion was around PHSE (Personal Health and Social Education, sometimes called PSHE and sometimes PSHEE – basically the stuff parents used to teach their children until we were told to tack it on to Shakespeare and the Civil War and the pluperfect). In this case, sex.

'Hi, I'm Sex Deb,' said the round, cheerful woman at the front of the theatre. And, just in case we didn't believe her, the first PowerPoint slide boasted a big smiling picture of her, with 'Meet Sex Deb' emblazoned across the top.

'I'm here to teach you about teaching sex. So we'll start with getting some big words out of the way. Clitoris. Penis. There you are.'

The audience reacted in a variety of ways. Shuffling. A few embarrassed giggles. In my case, eye-rolling. Well, we all have the 16-year-old inside us somewhere.

The science department teaches sex education, in so far as teaching how children are conceived; the rest of us teach what might be called 'relationships'. Gone are the days of the blue rubber penises I stacked high in my cupboard when I ran the PHSE content at my last school.

Now we talk about safe sex and teenage parenthood. We talk about healthy and unhealthy relationships, trying to explain the signs of coercive control. We discuss consent (there's a very funny cartoon equating sex with a cup of tea – worth a watch).

For a while, we were asked to discuss sex-enhancing drugs, but that seems to have gone out of the window. Now we are asked to teach them about sexual pleasure.

So here was Sex Deb, with her high-rising terminals and her determination to embarrass us, about to teach us some new tricks.

Most of what she brought with her was a shifting vocabulary. We are absolutely not, it turns out, ever again to use the word 'virginity'.

'Virginity is a social construct used to control women's bodies,' Sex Deb assured us, presumably forgetting that boys as well as girls use the word about their state. The very idea that it could be 'taken' was abhorrent to her. But – Deb, Deb – what about the converse of taking, which is giving?

'Foreplay' was another verboten word. We are to use 'sexual activity' as a phrase at all times. Is there no subtlety to Sex Deb and her language?

Some of her edicts were more prosaic: scrotum, not testicles; vulva, not vagina – which she reminded us was a 'hole'.

After the session, I tried to organise outrage at the use of the word 'hole'.

'It has such negative connotations!' I cried. 'A hole is something that needs filling! It's a vile and dingy place! It means emptiness; loss! Is she even thinking about the words she uses?'

My (young, male) colleague did me the honour of considering my point. 'It's very positive in golf,' he said seriously.

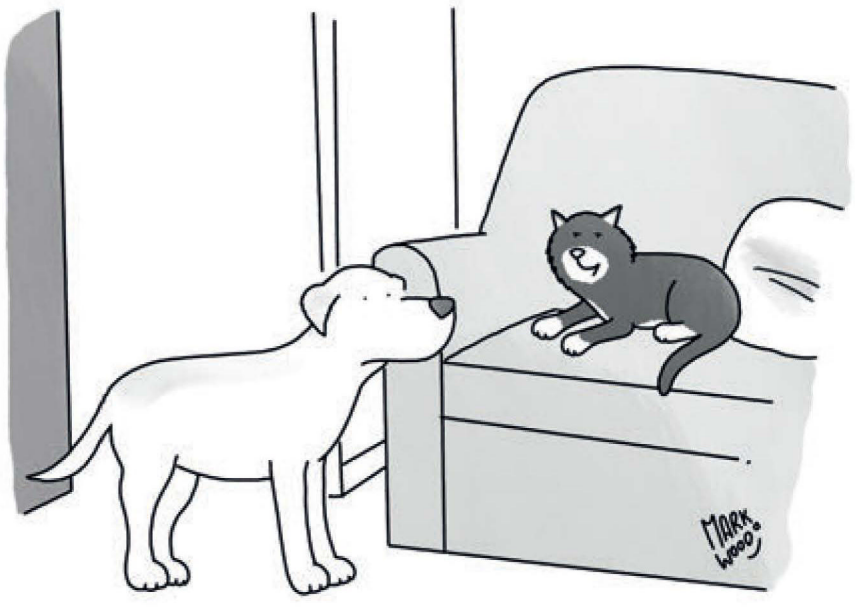
Finally, Sex Deb gave us some top tips for how to help children ask us about sex. None of them was very new, and only one was a little alarming.

'Ask the children to teach you,' she suggested. 'Get them to draw you a poster.'

I mean, seriously, Deb. We deal with cartoon penises on a daily basis as it is – in margins of exercise books, on mini-whiteboards, the main whiteboard, tables, walls and covers of textbooks (Sargent's portrait of Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth is particularly popular).

Are we really going to hand them a ream of A3 and tell them to draw posters of penises?

I think not, Deb.



'They call you bad dog. They never call me bad cat'



ADVERTISING FEATURE

Live a life of class and comfort

Experience later living at Auriens Chelsea, where residents can socialise in style

London remains a popular choice for downsizers, especially those seeking world-class culture, superb dining and everyday ease on the doorstep. Auriens Chelsea offers an elegant answer: 56 beautifully designed apartments, state-of-the-art facilities and a like-minded community just steps from the King's Road.

Here, the retirement years are viewed less as a winding down and more as a rather stylish new beginning. There's ample time for health and fitness to flourish, friendships to form and new passions to emerge, for those so inclined.

Life at Auriens is a lively affair. Think live jazz dinners, wine tastings, guest speaker afternoons and classical recitals, along with art and singing classes and wellness programmes to keep both mind and body in fine fettle.

Gin and jazz are not compulsory, but at Auriens Chelsea they serve as a reminder that the Swinging Sixties may be past, yet the good life carries on happily into one's seventies, eighties and beyond.

The surroundings are elegant but relaxed. A library, cinema and speakeasy bar offer plenty of nooks for conversation. With 24-hour security, housekeeping, in-apartment dining, a chauffeur and house car, the practicalities are handled so residents can simply get on with living well. And for added peace of mind, expert support from Draycott Nursing & Care is on hand should you ever require it.

Above all, it is the people who make Auriens truly special. "The sense of community here is extraordinary," says Henry Lumby, Chief Commercial Officer. "There's a warmth that comes from friendships between the residents and our team."

Apartments start from £2.75m and are open to those over 65. For a taste of life at Auriens, the Friends of Auriens programme offers select guests access to curated events and experiences. For more details, please contact David Simpson on 020 3947 5575.

auriens.com







God

SISTER TERESA

The Bible's message – don't be beige

There is no beige in the Bible.

This will no doubt please Prue Leith, who regularly and generously takes brightly coloured cushions to hotel bedrooms which are so often upholstered in beige. She leaves the cushions behind to brighten the next occupant's stay.

There is grey in the Bible: 'The glory of young men is their strength, and the splendour of old men is their grey hair' (Proverbs 20:29). Part of the splendour comes from strength being replaced by wisdom, experience and honour – a great relief to us all as we grow older. Unlike beige, grey is not bland.

The Old and New Testaments are not bland either. And they discourage being lukewarm – in most cases the culinary equivalent of bland. 'I know all about you: how you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were one or the other, but since you are neither, but only lukewarm, I will spit you out of my mouth' (Revelation 3:16). Faith has to be an active element in one's life; otherwise it may well be rejected as just plain boring.

Does any of us really want bland? Bland is tedious safeness, not calm and harmony. Defying it is, in my view, a necessity. St Paul confirms this. 'That is why I am reminding you now to fan into a flame the gift that God gave you when I laid my hands on you. God's gift was not a spirit of timidity, but the Spirit of power, and love, and self-control' (2 Timothy 1:6-7).

It is easy to overlook the fact that St Paul was writing to someone he knew. His approach is very direct. There is evidence elsewhere in the New Testament that Timothy was a shy man. This shyness need not and must not prevent him from taking on the difficult task of being the head of the church in Ephesus.

All too often, it is assumed that leadership involves a booming and hearty despotism. Jesus himself, throughout his life, gave the lie to this idea.

We are not asked to stand back, and we are not asked to be innocuous and anodyne. There can be moments when we long for lack of fuss, created either by ourselves or by others, and there are times when one is just too tired to expostulate.

On such occasions, it can be very helpful and rather enjoyable to think of the sheer power of the Holy Spirit: he can kindle a flame from dying embers and his force is such that the results are spectacular.

There is no suggestion here of the slog of stoical self-effort: a divinely bestowed gift is far more appealing and far stronger.

Memorial Service

Ray Brooks (1939-2025)

The Rev Canon Dr Giles Fraser, of St Anne's, Kew, officiated at the memorial service for actor Ray Brooks.



Ray Brooks starred in *The Knack* (1965), *Cathy Come Home* (1966) and *Big Deal* (1984-6). The King of the Voice-Overs, he was the voice of Mr Benn. He appeared, too, in *Coronation Street*, *EastEnders* and *Carry On Abroad* (1972).

Michael Kilgarriff, his friend and fellow actor, recalled a *New York Times* review of Brooks in *The Knack*, praising his 'disrobing voice'.

Kilgarriff read out a condolence letter from Ken Loach, director of *Cathy Come Home*. Ray was a 'generous and truthful actor', said Loach, and 'His performance was central to the success of the film.'

Tom Brooks, his son, recalled Ray's Brighton upbringing and his 1947 elocution lessons: his report said he excelled in 'timing, movement, staying power and repose' – all useful for his future in amateur dramatics, rep and the big and small screens.

Tom Brooks remembered attending a 50th-anniversary screening of *Cathy Come Home* with his father. Halfway through, Ray said, 'This is a bit depressing. Let's go for a pint.' They ventured into the cinema lobby, only to see Ken Loach standing outside, like a bouncer.

Will Brooks, Ray's other son, recalled their nights out: 'Always the best West End shows, with a customary visit to the Imperial before, for chicken Kiev – with a sauce boat of extra garlic butter – sauté potatoes and petits pois with pancetta.

'Weekends in Brighton: pitch and putt by the windmill, scampi at English's, the Palace and West Piers, greyhounds and counting eateries in Preston Street (52 the record). The KitKat always waiting on the front seat when you picked me up from school.

'And, of course, Fulham. Season tickets since the late '60s and still four today: me, Tom and two of your grandsons, Joe and Beau.'

A cartoon tribute to Ray's talents as a voice-over artist was shown in the service, starring Brooks as Mr Benn, and doing the voice-overs for Cook Electric, Currie Motors, Kellogg's Corn Flakes and Rice Krispies.

The hymns were 'Abide with Me', 'Lord of the Dance' and 'Jerusalem'. Ray's grandson, Dylan Brooks, sang 'Lend Me Some of Your Time', the title track from Ray's 1971 album.

The congregation adjourned to the neighbouring pub, the Coach & Horses, Kew, Ray's local.

HARRY MOUNT



Bad news – or fake news?

The latest Alzheimer's tests are far from accurate

DR THEODORE DALRYMPLE

Would I want to know that I was likely to develop Alzheimer's disease at some unspecified time in the future? What would I do with this information if I had it?

There are now blood tests partially diagnostic of the disease, even before there are any clinical signs of it.

The tests detect raised levels of amyloid and tau proteins in the blood that are present in the disease, even before it makes itself manifest.

Traditionally, the diagnosis has been made by means of the clinical history, often provided by close relatives, combined with examination of the patient's cognitive functioning.

This method is fallible – first because relatives and patients may be imperfect witnesses, secondly because severe depression may mimic Alzheimer's, and thirdly because other causes of dementia (which is not a disease but a syndrome), and which are occasionally reversible, may also mimic it.

More recently, measurement of amyloid and tau proteins in the cerebrospinal fluid, as well as positron emission tomography (PET) scans, have been used to help in the diagnosis of Alzheimer's. But the first requires a lumbar puncture, and the second is expensive and not available everywhere.

A blood test is cheaper and much more convenient: it can be carried out on large numbers of people. It seems the answer, if not to our dreams, exactly, at least to our needs.

But the accuracy of the tests is far from certain. Their accuracy has sometimes been measured not against clinical manifestations of the disease – such a measurement would be useful but not easy to carry out – but against so-called surrogate phenomena such as cerebrospinal fluid concentrations of the marker proteins, or PET-scan results, which do not diagnose the disease directly.

The tests give both false positives and false negatives, which is to say cases in which a person tests positive but does not have the disease, and cases in which the person tests negative but does have the disease.

A false positive is particularly alarming (a false negative will soon enough reveal itself), because of its consequences. The diagnosis is, inevitably, distressing (and not just to the patient). And the person and his or her relatives who are given a false positive result might then be put in the position of waiting for Godot – waiting for a horrible disease that fails to turn up. Waiting for Godot is very unpleasant.

Moreover, the association between a positive test and the disease weakens or declines as a person grows older.

By the time they are in their 80s, almost a third of people will test positive for the disease who do not, and never will, have it. The damage done to such people and their relatives might be considerable, at least if the tests were used as screening instruments.

There are very few studies examining the question of whether the blood tests improve the quality of anyone's life. A medical procedure, including a blood test, is excellent if it conduces to the welfare of patients.

More recently, questions of cost also arise, as they did not when I was a young doctor, for increasingly benefits have to be weighed against costs, including opportunity costs.

It is unclear, to put it no higher, how far – as yet – blood tests for Alzheimer's have resulted in clinical benefits, though this in time might change. For the moment, the disease is, *grosso modo*, untreatable, and early diagnosis does not alter outcome much.

But the manufacturers of the tests have no interest in their practical benefit to patients. They want to sell them, via doctors; that is all.

I do not blame them for this: they have, after all, a fiduciary duty to their shareholders to maximise their profits. To every person, his function.

One day, though, the tests will be useful. Within limits, faith in science to improve our lives is justified.



'I'm afraid you've only got four to six months to live. Perhaps a year. Maybe two. I'm terrible with time'

Shower & bathe
in comfort & safety again



"Safe, easy access bathing can help maintain your independence and wellbeing"

Dr Hilary Jones GP and Health Advisor



Enjoy a deep relaxing soak again

Just look at the benefits...

- **Easy in...Easy out**
  Low, wide & safe entry
- **No fuss, No mess**
  We take care of everything
- **Walk-in showers**
  Baths & Wet rooms tailored to your style, needs and budget
- **Complete makeovers**
  From design to installation
- **Comfortable seats**
  Grab rails and slip-resistant flooring
- **Easy clean wall panels**
  No tiling required
- **Best price guarantee**
  From the name you can trust
- **Fixed price quote**
  No hidden cost



FREE BROCHURE

MOBILITY*plus*

www.mobility-plus.co.uk

For your free brochure freephone

0808 115 3918

Please Quote Ref MCN615

#Subject to normal installation conditions.

The Oldie

Review of Books

Christmas Round-Up of the Best Books



Why mock popular fiction? Lulu Taylor
Middlebrow *Middlemarch* Nicholas Shakespeare
Christmas Books for Children Emily Bearn

Biography & Memoir * History * Politics & Current Affairs
Arts & Crafts * Fiction * Crime & Thrillers

Winter 2025 | www.theoldie.co.uk

Roger Hargreaves & Agatha Christie®

AGATHA CHRISTIE MYSTERIES FOR LITTLE READERS!



TIMELESS STORIES WITH A BRAND-NEW TWIST

Available in bookstores and online

© 2025 THOIP (a SANRIO company) and Agatha Christie Limited. All rights reserved.
AGATHA CHRISTIE® POIROT® MARPLE® Agatha Christie Limited

Farshore

The Oldie

Issue 74 Winter 2025

4 * A BOOKWORM'S DIARY

6 * MEMOIR & BIOG

9 * SHOWBIZ

Christopher Silvester on celebrity biographies and memoirs

11 * ANCIENT HISTORY

Tim Willis dives into the past

12 * HISTORY

14 * TECH & AI

Sam Leith on the latest techie books

15 * CURRENT AFFAIRS

17 * WH AUDEN

Peter Harper's poetic meeting

18 * WRITER'S CHOICE

Nicholas Shakespeare's favourites



19 * FICTION

21 * WOMEN'S FICTION

Stephen Cooper picks the best

22 * CHILDREN

Emily Bearn's magical stocking fillers

24 * ART & CRAFT

25 * MISCELLANEOUS

28 * CRIME & THRILLERS

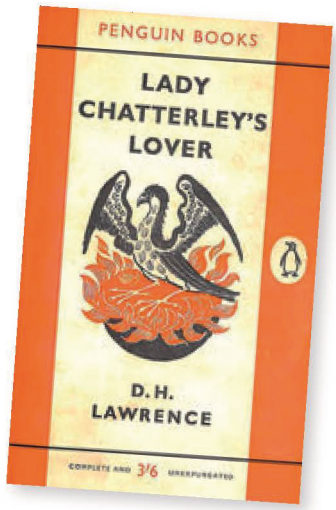
Michael Barber looks beyond *Slow Horses* to the next crime novels

24 * ENJOY!

Lulu Taylor defends popular fiction

COVER ILLUSTRATION: BOB WILSON

Review of Books: Winter Delights



Dear Editor,

Along with Jilly Cooper's Rivals, Lady Chatterley's Lover *by D H Lawrence has been named as one of the sexiest books of all time. I can remember when Penguin won its case to publish the unexpurgated edition in 1960 after a trial attracting huge publicity.*

I was at school at the time and the headmaster issued a decree that nobody below the fourth form was allowed to read the book and if caught reading it, a prefect would confiscate it. I was in the fifth form and so just escaped the ban. Of course, we all rushed to read it in the Penguin edition, costing 3/6 (42p).

I gather much the same thing happened with schoolgirls caught reading Jilly's sexy novels.

Yours faithfully,
Liz Hodgkinson, Oxford

This letter from Liz, an *Oldie* contributor, captures the thrill of naughty books.

It's also a reminder that books should be a pleasure, rather than a duty. *The Oldie Review of Books* is all about the delight of reading.

On page 9, Christopher Silvester chooses some irresistible showbiz memoirs and, on page 14, leading novelist Nicholas Shakespeare writes about his favourite books (and those turgid, old classics he can't stand). On page 28, writer Lulu Taylor celebrates popular fiction by the likes of the late lamented Jilly Cooper. And, on page 16, Stephen Cooper picks the best new fiction by women, still considered 'popular' rather than 'literary' by some. There's a reason it's popular – so why is it mocked by the highfaluting literati?

And we have a new gossip column, *The Bookworm's Diary*, celebrating high jinks and low skulduggery among the writers, hacks and publishers of Grub Street. It includes upcoming publications for Christmas and the New Year.

As always, we've rounded up reviews of the most pleasurable – and not so pleasurable – recent books. As you should do with any book you read, enjoy it!

Charlotte Metcalf

Published by The Oldie magazine, Moray House, 23/31 Great Titchfield Street, London W1W 7PA
Editor: Charlotte Metcalf Design: Jo Goodby Editorial Team: Liz Anderson, Sam Leith, Lucy Lethbridge, Tim Willis
Reviewers: Liz Anderson, Michael Barber, Stephen Cooper, Sam Leith, Lucy Lethbridge, Christopher Silvester, Tim Willis
Publisher: James Pembroke Advertising: Paul Pryde, Jasper Gibbons, Honor Brown
For advertising enquiries: Paul Pryde on 020 3859 7095 or 7093. For editorial enquiries editorial@theoldie.co.uk

The Bookworm's Diary



Literary gossip from Jilly Cooper, Mary Beard – and Queen Victoria. Cartoons by *Nick Newman*

At the Henley Literary Festival, Mary Beard, discussing her book *Emperor of Rome*, was asked if she would have liked to have lived in Ancient Rome.

'Things are much better today, particularly for a woman like me,' she said. 'In the last century, my mother was laughed at for wanting to be an engineer.

'So I'd like to go to Rome - but only with a return ticket.'

It brings back memories of Philip Larkin being asked if he'd like to go to China. He said, 'I wouldn't mind seeing China if I could come back the same day.'



Return ticket to Rome: Mary Beard

Mary Beard also discussed the new translation by Daniel Mendelsohn of *The Odyssey*.

Mendelsohn translates Odysseus's epithet - *polutropos* - as 'roundabout'. It has previously been translated as 'of many turns' and 'of many ways'.

Mary Beard liked the idea of roundabout because it gives the impression of Odysseus being tossed round and round the Mediterranean for a decade. Still, she said, 'It works better in America. Say the word "roundabout" in Britain and people start thinking of Milton Keynes.'

When former Chancellor of the Exchequer Jeremy Hunt addressed the Oldie Literary Lunch, he unearthed some surprising relations.

His great-great grandfather was a Liberal MP – suitable since Jeremy was talking about his book, *Can We Be Great Again?* in the National Liberal Club. Another relative, George Ward Hunt (1825-77), was Chancellor under Disraeli.

Hunt said, 'He delivered one budget but forgot his speech and had to dash back to Number 11 to fetch it. MPs were furious. His successor held up the red box and shook it outside Number 11 to prove he hadn't forgotten *his* speech, and that's how the tradition began.'



Budget tips: Jeremy Hunt

Rachel Reeves knows who to thank when she brandishes her red box at the upcoming budget.

AN Wilson is increasingly convinced Victoria had a child with her servant John Brown

At the Dartmouth Literary Festival, AN Wilson, Queen Victoria's biographer, said he's becoming increasingly convinced Victoria had a child with her servant John Brown.

He first suspected it on reading *Ask Sir James* (1987), by Michaela Reid, wife of the grandson of Sir

John Brown's lovechild? Richard Ingrams, grandson of Queen Victoria's doctor, in his attic



GETTY; NEIL SPENCE

The Bookworm's Diary



Heavenly: Jilly Cooper

James Reid Bt, Victoria's doctor. Another of Reid's grandsons is our founding father, Richard Ingrams.

Might Richard have a look round his attic? Are there some hallowed royal baby clothes in the Ingrams' family archive?

Aound the corner from London's Portobello Road, you can't miss the startling blue frontage of Saucy Books, the UK's first bookshop devoted to romance novels, which opened in the summer.

But the books here are nothing like the products of Mills & Boon, love stories about sheikhs pitching woo at swooning virgins.

Saucy Books deals largely in 'romantasy', a coupling of love story and fantasy, the genre that's invaded the literary world, with dragons, witches, sexually fluid lovers and smitten vampires.

The shop is the brainchild of American entrepreneur Sarah Maxwell, whose nickname at school was Saucy. There are nearly a hundred romance bookstores in the US. So Sarah spotted a gap in the market.

According to info from 7,000 publishers, romance and saga books hit records sales last year, hitting an impressive £69m.

So get stuck in. You could begin with Elizabeth Helen's *Beauty and the Beast* quartet, with its resonant, if somewhat interchangeable, titles: *Bonded by Thorns*, *Forged by Malice*, *Woven in Gold and Broken by Daylight*. Enjoy!

The late Jilly Cooper was a tremendous friend to *The Oldie*, as a contributor, speaker at our literary lunches and as an interviewee.

She was so funny – particularly about sex. When interviewed in the magazine for her last book, *Tackle!* (2023), she spent much of the time discussing what exactly 'a bonus hole' is. She concluded it must have been 'something to do with golf'.

She gave a charming speech about *Tackle!* at an Oldie literary lunch. Jilly said, '*The Oldie* has so many wonderful literary references but I have to confess I'm nervous today because I'm aware of not being a very literary author.

> 'The *Daily Mail* once said I was such a bad writer, I made Jeffrey Archer look like Dostoyevsky'
> *Jilly Cooper*

'The *Daily Mail* once said I was such a bad writer, I made Jeffrey Archer look like Dostoyevsky.'

How she will be missed at Oldie Towers.

To the British Library. 125 years after his death, Oscar Wilde was finally reissued with his British Museum Reading Card. The card was cruelly taken from him after his conviction.

Wilde's grandson, Merlin Holland, author of a new book, *After Oscar*, accepted the card on his grandfather's behalf.

Holland was asked by a member of the audience what question he would ask Oscar if he met him now.

'Why did you do it?' said Holland. 'Why bring on your downfall by suing for libel?'

On the same evening, Holland was interviewed by Rupert Everett, who played Wilde in *The Happy Prince* (2018). Magnanimous Merlin said Lord Alfred Douglas, whose affair with Wilde destroyed him, could have been a 'great poet'.

NEW RELEASES IN THE NEXT 3 MONTHS

Bread of Angels by Patti Smith

We Did OK, Kid by Anthony Hopkins

A Life in Letters by John Updike

The Great Gambon by Milly Ellis

Beyond Beauty by Devon Cox

Via Garibaldi by Jim Holden

Waiting in the Sky by Peter Ormerod

A Short History of America by Simon Jenkins

Battle of the Arctic by Hugh Sebag Montefiore

The English House by Dan Cruickshank

Shellshocked: Britain Between the Wars by Alwyn Turner

World in Peril by Al Murray and James Holland

Winter by Val McDermid

Being Jewish after the Destruction of Gaza by Peter Beinart

The Forever War by Nick Bryant

Pearl Harbor: Japan's Greatest Disaster by Mark Stille

We Are What We Eat by David Cox

CARTOONS: NICK NEWMAN

STORYTELLER
THE LIFE OF ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

Leo Damrosch

Yale University Press, 265pp, £25



Robert Louis Stevenson (1887) by John Singer Sargent

'In terms of literary reputation, Stevenson had a distinctly mixed 20th century but is doing better in the 21st,' wrote Andrew Motion in the *New Statesman*.

'He was a desperately uneven writer, whose best books were a product of their time (extolling banal ideas of male valour), and whose reputation as a serious artist was glamourised, but also compromised by the colourfully tragic drama of his life.

'Although there is still a tendency to pigeonhole Stevenson as a children's writer, his reputation within academies is now closer than it has been for many generations to his standing in the world of general readers. Which means that Leo Damrosch's new biography, which draws generously on the work of predecessors but adds its own sensible, sympathetic and thorough commentary, is very well timed.'

'Damrosch makes a convincing case for Stevenson as a skilled stylist and innovative narrator', praised Francine Prose in the *New York Times Book Review*.

In the *Washington Post* Tobias Grey agreed: 'Damrosch restores Stevenson to the literary prominence he richly deserves – not only as a creator of heart-stopping tales but as a deeply introspective, stylistically daring writer whose life was just as adventurous as his fiction.'

For the *Economist*, 'Damrosch… avoids both idolatry and iconoclasm. Well-paced and thoroughly researched, this new biography never assumes that the reader has a prior acquaintance with Stevenson. Damrosch tells the reader not just what happens in Stevenson's books, but why they should care.

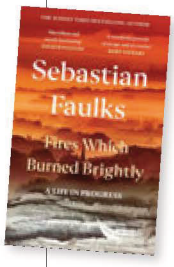
'This biography is crisp, brisk but warm - all Stevensonian virtues - and lets readers see why this "beautiful, bountiful being" (in Henry James's words) cast such a spell.'

Stevenson died aged 44, but 'the extraordinary drama of his life itself deserves to be considered as a kind of masterpiece,' concluded Motion.

'Damrosch's telling breaks new ground in the sense that it quotes more widely and generously than previous biographies, and includes many rarely seen illustrations… But its most significant achievement is to make a wise judgement about what continues to matter in Stevenson's work, and to catch the brilliance and flair of his engagement with other people.'

Recent Memoirs not to be missed

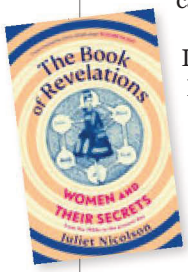
In **Fly, Wild Swans: My Mother, Myself and China** (Collins, £25), Jung Chang picks up the threads of her bestseller *Wild Swans*, describing how she came to pursue a life as a writer in the West, and how China then responds to her success.



Sebastian Faulks's **Fires Which Burned Brightly: A Life in Progress** (Hutchinson Heinemann, £20) offers a snapshot from his post-war childhood and Fleet Street to celebrated novelist.

Queen Elizabeth II by David Cannadine (OUP, £12.99), billed as **A Concise Biography of an Exceptional Sovereign**, is just that at 192 pages: a brief yet impressively rich and vivid biography.

Margaret Atwood's long-awaited **Book of Lives: A Memoir of Sorts** (Chatto & Windus, £30) charts the author's life from the forests of Quebec via 1980s Berlin and major political turning points to her lifelong love for the writer Graeme Gibson.

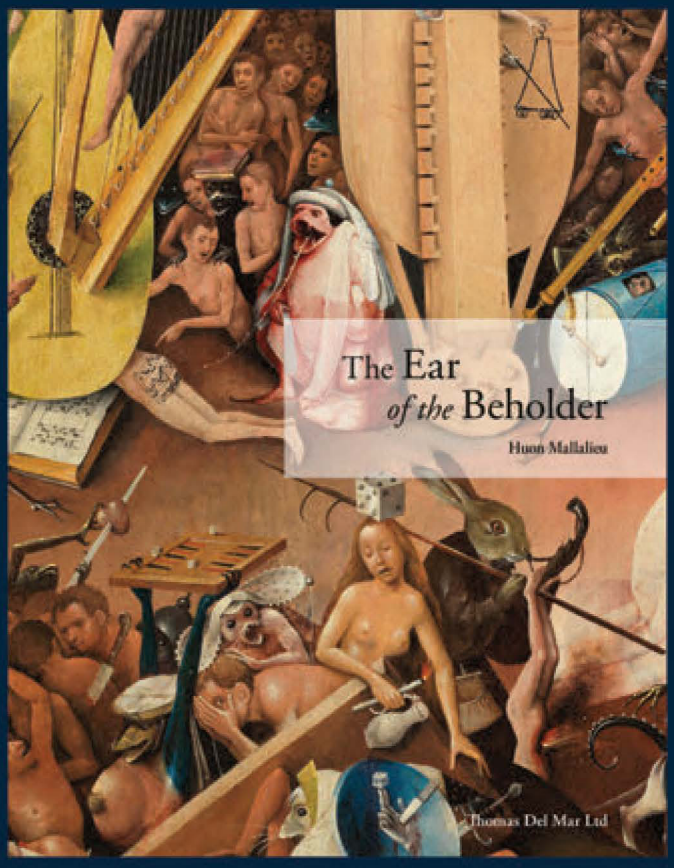


Arundhati Roy's **Mother Mary Comes to Me: A Memoir of Grief, Love and Legacy** (Hamish Hamilton, £20) is her most personal work yet. It's a tender memoir of her mother Mary, trailblazing educator and fearless activist, who helped to shape Atwood's voice.

Elizabeth Gilbert's **All the Way to the River: Love Loss and Liberation** (Bloomsbury, £22) recounts her love story with her late partner Rayya, that descends into a nightmare of addiction and terminal cancer.

In **The Book of Revelations: Women and Their Secrets From the 1950s to the Present Day** (Chatto & Windus, £22)Juliet Nicholson blends memoir, first-person stories and rich social history to explore the long-buried secrets held by three generations of extraordinary women.

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



Buy the new book by Country Life's own writer, Huon Mallalieu

THE EAR OF THE BEHOLDER

£25 RRP

In The Ear of the Beholder, distinguished writer and art historian Huon Mallalieu explores one of the most original and overlooked questions in European art: how painters across the centuries have suggested sound - music, voices, joy, suffering and silence itself - to tell their stories.

TO BUY VISIT:

OR

www.olympiaauctions.com/about-us/publications/

enquiries@olympiaauctions.com

+44 (0)20 7806 5541

Thomas Del Mar Ltd

BRAVE ACTS SHINE EVEN IN THE DARKEST TIMES

Following on from the journey in his critically acclaimed book *The Path of Peace*, Anthony Seldon walks the route from Kilometre Zero to Auschwitz, discovering the towns and people who resisted in the face of unbearable destruction and ruminating on the Second World War's legacy

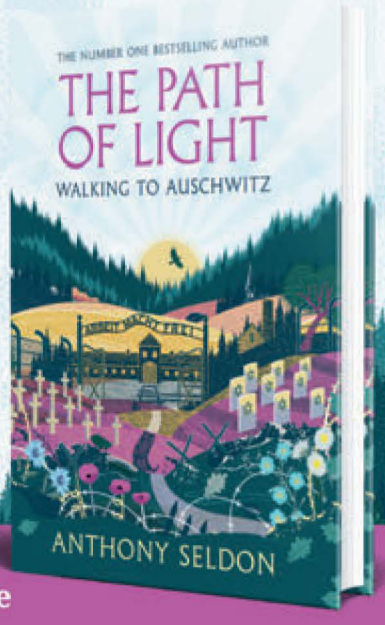
Praise for *The Path of Peace*

'Remarkable'
Michael Morpurgo

'Thoughtful, heartfelt'
Observer

'Profound'
Spectator

'Memorable'
Tristan Gooley



Available now from good bookshops and online



Samuel Pepys (1666) by John Hayls

THE CONFESSIONS OF SAMUEL PEPYS
HIS PRIVATE REVELATIONS

GUY DE LA BÉDOYÈRE

Abacus, 400pp, £25

The author charts Pepys's complex relationships with women, including his wife, Elizabeth, mistresses, servants, court ladies, and the actresses and friends in whose company he delighted, all recounted in shorthand in his diaries, the more salacious disguised in cryptic codes.

'By compiling, translating and commenting on the sections that focus on Pepys's personal life, De la Bédoyère presents a powerful case for the prosecution,' wrote Katherine Harvey in the *Times*, enhancing our understanding of 'this deeply flawed man'.

In the *Guardian* Kathryn Hughes concluded, 'While Pepys's dark side has long been known, it is something else to be confronted with the evidence laid out quite so starkly. The man who emerges from this meticulous filleting is no Restoration roustabout but a chilling embodiment of male entitlement'.

This view of Pepys does 'not negate the continuing value of his diary – which remains a magnificent historical resource – but from now on it will be impossible to go to it in a state of innocence, let alone denial'.

AUGUSTINE THE AFRICAN

CATHERINE CONYBEARE

Profile, 288pp, £25

As Jonathan Egid observed in the *TLS*, the sage of Hippo and father of the Western mindset came not so much out of Africa as out of *Africa Proconsularis*, a narrow strip of now-Arab coast on the southern Mediterranean, which had been Romanised five centuries before his birth (in 354AD). So might a better title have been 'Augustine the Provincial'?

Egid admitted Conybeare succeeded 'in revealing the benefits of reading him in light of his own sense of Africanness', and found that 'the reintroduction of this context allows us to appreciate his thought anew', which was 'amply demonstrated by this rich, erudite and sympathetic biography'.



Cavafy at home, Alexandria, c. 1930

In *Literary Review* Angela Tilbury praised the psychological insights in this 'beautifully written, thoroughly engaging and highly recommended book'.

And she was echoed by Michael Ledger-Lomas in the *Spectator*. 'The test of Conybeare's book is not whether it generates new information,' he declared, 'but whether it refreshens and deepens appreciation of Augustine's thought. Here it succeeds brilliantly.'

ALEXANDRIAN SPHINX
THE HIDDEN LIFE OF CONSTANTINE CAVAFY

PETER JEFFREYS AND GREGORY JUSDANIS

Summit Books, 560pp, £30

'Of all modern Greek poets,' wrote Maria Margaronis in *Literary Review*, 'Constantine Cavafy [1863-1933] is the one most deeply immersed in the stream of world literature, absorbing influences from Robert Browning to Baudelaire and Poe and shaping the sensibilities of later poets like W H Auden, James Merrill and Robert Hass ...

'The biography is thematic rather than chronological, approaching the poet obliquely, as you might a wary cat, exploring the worlds he inhabited as a way into his mind.'

In the *Guardian* Michael Nott though this a 'deeply researched and engaging' biography (the first for 50 years) that 'brilliantly recreates his world – two chapters about Alexandria are especially good – and investigates his place within it.'

During Cavafy's lifetime, Peter Parker in the *Spectator* explained, he 'did not allow a single volume of his poetry to be published, preferring to circulate privately printed sheets and pamphlets among his admirers.'

Parker thought it a 'richly detailed and clear-sighted account ... not afraid to lay bare the poet's occasionally brutal dismissal of those who considered themselves his friends (shades of Benjamin Britten) and his "ruthless self-promotion". Above all, it sends one back to Cavafy's extraordinary body of poems both enlightened and newly enthused.'

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS, ONASSIS FOUNDATION

CHRISTOPHER SILVESTER sifts through the tottering piles of new books about and by celebrities

'Tis the season to be luvvy, as celebrity memoirs, some by repeat offenders, and showbusiness biographies pile high in bookshops.

After *Teenage Revolution* (2010) and *Just Ignore Him* (2020), QI stalwart Alan Davies has written **White Male Stand-Up** (Monoray, 352pp, £25). Having lost his mother when he was eight and been sexually abused by his father between eight and 13, as described in *Just Ignore Him*,

> Celebrity memoirs, some by repeat offenders, and showbusiness biographies pile high in the bookshops

Davies 'found a whole new surrogate family, supportive and warm, on the 1990s alternative-comedy circuit,' explained *Telegraph* interviewer Helen Brown.

'Davies was a hit from the beginning, using quick improvisation and childlike charm to win over audiences. Today, he locates the root of those skills in trauma.'

Nigel Planer as Neil in *The Young Ones*

Brenda Fricker, who won the Best Supporting Actress Oscar for her portrayal of Christy Brown's mother in *My Left Foot*, has written **She Died Young: A Life in Fragments** (Apollo, 272pp, £20).

Sunday Times reviewer Julieanne Corr described it as 'a deeply personal new memoir' in which Fricker recounts 'a troubled childhood dominated by violence at the hands of her mother' as well as two rapes, one when she was a teenager at a party and another after she had become an actress, and 'a lifelong battle with depression'.

Laura Cassidy in the *Irish Examiner* said 'it is no glitzy showbiz diary, but rather a raw, often harrowing account of a life characterised as much by violence and tragedy as talent and success ... Fricker writes candidly, but also stylishly and eloquently about her struggles.'

In **Young Once: A Life Less Heavy** (John Murray, 352pp, £22), Nigel Planer, who played perpetual hippy gloomster Neil in 1980s sitcom *The Young Ones*, gives us his journey from Sussex University dropout to character actor in West End musicals, prolific author, voice actor and veteran therapy patient.

Amanda Barrie's **I'm Still Here: My 90 Years** (Mirror Books, 288pp, £22) is her second autobiography, after 2002's *It's Not a Rehearsal*.

Having grown up in Tameside during the Second World War, she ran away from home at 13 to be a Soho showgirl, becoming a West End star in *Carry On Cleo* and, later, Alma in *Coronation Street*. Now married to the novelist Hilary Bonner, who is her ghostwriter, Barrie kept her homosexuality a secret for much of her career.

The pop songstress Lulu's first autobiography, *I Don't Want to Fight*, also appeared in 2002. This year's **If Only You Knew** (Hodder & Stoughton, 336pp, £25) describes her chaotic childhood home in a Glasgow tenement,



Left: **Brenda Fricker, Oscar night, 1990**
Below: **Lulu in the 1960s**

GETTY

tells for the first time of her affair with David Bowie, and confesses to having been what she has called 'a highly functioning alcoholic' although it never interfered with her work.

In **Someone Like Me: Lessons in Life, Love and Staying True** (Bloomsbury, 368pp, £20), Penny Lancaster, aka Mrs Rod Stewart, describes being bullied at school, suffering from undiagnosed dyslexia as a young model, being a victim of sexual assault, her menopause problems, and her volunteering as a special constable with the City of London Police as well as her campaigning and charity work.

The creator of modern stage musicals, *In the Heights* and *Hamilton*, is the subject of **Lin-Manuel Miranda: The Education of an Artist** by Daniel Pollack-Pelzner (Atlantic, 400pp, £20).

This 'affectionate biography provides an illuminating look at Miranda's creative development and influences, as well as a detailed account of how his greatest achievements and other projects coalesced,' wrote Julia M Klein in the *LA Times*.

'The tone is mostly celebratory. But Pollack-Pelzner pays attention to Miranda's stumbles and wrong turns, including a failed time-travel musical, as well as to his precocity.

'Along with revealing interviews from school chums like current MSNBC host Chris Hayes, he draws on a previously untapped archive that includes family photographs, Miranda's juvenile videos and draft scripts of his high school and college musicals.'

It is 41 years since the satirical mockumentary *This Is Spinal Tap* came out in cinemas. Now the creators of that movie classic have written the behind-the-scenes story of how it came to be made: **A Fine Line Between Stupid and Clever: The Story of Spinal Tap** by Rob Reiner (the film's director and co-screenwriter), Christopher Guest (one of the actors) et al (Simon & Schuster UK, 288pp, £25).

'I read the book in an afternoon,' wrote Daniel de Visé in the *Washington Independent Review of Books*. 'It was fascinating and depressing to learn how hard Reiner and company labored to convince anyone to make the film. How could so many aging studio execs have failed to find it funny?... Reiner and his co-writers had a gift for "schnadling", a term evidently coined by Guest, which means settling into character and improvising stuff.'

> It was fascinating and depressing to learn how hard Reiner and company laboured to convince anyone to make the film

Super-oldie Clint Eastwood (now 95) is the subject of Shawn Levy's **Clint: The Man and the Movies** (Mariner, 560pp, £28).

'There's no new material here, and Levy doesn't appear to have interviewed the man himself,' wrote Anne Billson in the *Times*, 'but his rigorous and methodical triage of the available information builds into a thrilling record of a monumental career spanning seven decades, and presents an overdue appreciation of its subject's achievement in forging a path from TV star to icon.'

At the same time, 'Levy doesn't shy away from the man's less admirable qualities, professing himself "grateful that I never worked for him or was a woman in his life".'

Eastwood has fathered at least eight children with six women, and his two marriages have overlapped with serial liaisons both long-term and casual.'



Clint Eastwood in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1968) and Rod Stewart with Penny Lancaster

GETTY

TIM WILLIS heads back into the ancient past

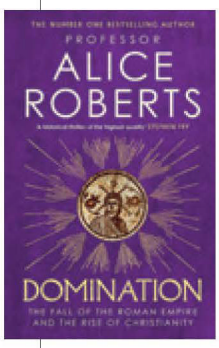
As borne out by the autumn crop of new books on ancient history, it's wonderful how many give fresh insights into antiquity. But there's always one bad apple; and this season it was TV academic Alice Roberts's **Domination: The Fall and Rise of an Empire** (Simon & Schuster, 432pp, £22).

Her assertion that the might and riches of Imperial Rome had survived in the structures of Catholicism was hardly novel to the critics; nor did they like the sneers with which it was made.



***The Consummation of Empire* (1836) by Thomas Cole**

The left-leaning press led the charge, with the *Guardian*'s Frank Cottrell-Boyce finding the story's detailed unfolding 'a revelation', but its 'cynicism' appalling. 'The trouble with rolling your eyes,' he wrote, 'is that you end up looking in the wrong direction.'



And in the *New Statesman* AN Wilson was of similar mind: the notion that 'some con was performed by the Christians when they became the dominant religion of the Roman empire and eventually the extremely powerful institutional church fails to look at what might have attracted people to the faith'.

Gladiatorial combat flourished in Roman territories from the third century BC to the fourth AD. After its demise, myths grew up, distorted further by a movie franchise.

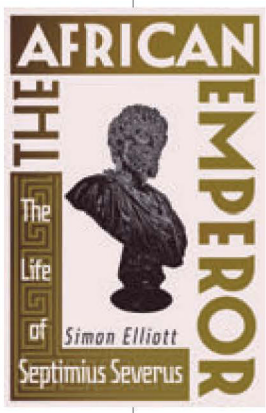
Thumbs-up, then, to Harry Sidebottom for his corrective **Those Who Are About to Die: Gladiators and the Roman Mind** (Hutchinson Heinemann, 416pp, £25).

On the *Aspects of History* website, the novelist Richard Foreman called it 'a masterclass in how to both educate and entertain'. Following a day in the life of a fighter – from pre-match rituals to corpse-stripping – Sidebottom made excursions into aspects of Roman life such as sex, diet, sleep, dreams and slavery.

If there was 'by necessity a lot of chronological hopping around', wrote Patrick Kidd in the *Times*, 'as a narrative device it worked'; and in *Literary Review*, a much-impressed Bijan Omrani delivered the takeaway: 'Violence provided a horrifying foundation for social concord.'

That order was rocked when the Emperor Commodus took to the ring; and in 193AD, after the paranoid narcissist's assassination, four contenders briefly claimed his throne.

It took a battle-hardened general to restore order. And as Simon Elliott relates in **The African Emperor: The Life of Septimius Severus** (Icon, 320pp, £25), he did so with extreme force.



In the *Spectator*, Peter Stothard remarked that Elliott 'accentuated the positive where he could' and concentrated on military matters; but he couldn't pass over Severus's 'mass killings of his rivals ... his genocide against the Scots ... and his budget-stretching generosity to his soldiers'.

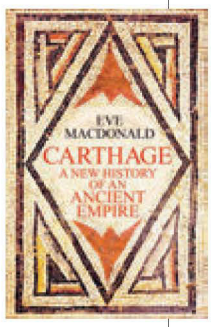
Severus was not black – don't believe reviewers who say otherwise – but 'he came to exercise more physical power than anyone born in Africa ever had or would, ruling an empire from the Firth of Forth to the Euphrates'. And that was 'enough of a claim for Elliott to justify the title'.

When it comes to titles, none could be more accurate than that of Eve Macdonald's **Carthage: A New History of an Ancient Empire** (Ebury, 368pp, £22).

Her subject was 'for centuries the western Mediterranean's dominant power and home to a rich and vibrant culture', wrote Philip Parker in *Literary Review*; and in demonstrating this, MacDonald had 'pulled off a startling act of historical recovery'.

It wasn't 'just a new telling, but an act of intellectual restoration', chimed the *Archaeologist*. And the reason, Pratinav Anil explained in the *Times*, was that Rome had been extraordinarily thorough in ensuring 'the voice of the losers was silenced'; replaced by accounts of child-sacrifice, brutality and barbarity.

For, having razed Carthage, the Romans sold the 50,000 survivors into slavery and destroyed all records and writing, save for one agricultural manual.



Lucky, then, that MacDonald deployed her archaeological grounding – she excavated Carthage's ancient site – to debunk the wilder propaganda.

She demonstrates that the Punic state, active from 814 to 146 BC, was its enemy's equal in technology, constitution and mercantile, maritime and military prowess.

What did for Carthage, of course, was Rome – and the Med wasn't big enough for both an established and a rising power. Macdonald herself conceded that 'without all that Carthage was, there would have been no Rome'; and the former's story could not be told without constant reference to the latter.

As for the writing, that was a matter of taste. The *Telegraph*'s Daisy Dunn thought this 'not a book of stylish prose or vivid description'. But Anil thought its author had 'the merit of brevity and a no-nonsense command of her material'. Who was right? History will decide.

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

THE WARS OF THE ROSES
A MEDIEVAL CIVIL WAR

JOHN WATTS

Cambridge University Press, 328pp, £30

Shakespeare has a lot to answer for. As Dan Jones wrote in the *Times*, far from being a tidy fight, the Wars of the Roses, between the Houses of York and Lancaster, spanned 30 years of 'bloody conflict between dizzyingly changeable factions ... during which the crown changed hands five times, three kings were killed, several popular rebellions erupted and foreign agents frequently seemed to dictate English affairs'.

All credit, then, to Watts, who has 'produced something amazing: a book about the 15th century that is clear, concise, nuanced, packed with sharp observations and a pleasure to read'.

The book not only corrected a notion, held since the 15th century – that the chaos somehow embodied 'a collective moral crisis' – but reframed it in terms of what we now call 'polarised politics'.

Jones continued: 'When history is at its best, this is what it does. It is a conversation between past and present.' And Watts had 'offered a mirror on our own times – even if, when we look in it, we may be appalled by what we see'.

THE TRAITORS' CIRCLE
THE REBELS AGAINST THE NAZIS AND THE SPY WHO BETRAYED THEM

JONATHAN FREEDLAND

John Murray, 480pp, £25

In 1943 in Berlin, the Solf Circle of influential high-society anti-Nazi dissenters meet one September afternoon to plot Hitler's downfall, unaware that one of them will betray them to the Gestapo.

'In 74 short, punchy chapters, each ending on a cliffhanger, Freedland tracks the twists and turns by which these reluctant heroes sought to evade and then face their fate,' wrote Kathryn Hughes in the *Guardian*, praising 'an impeccably sourced history book that reads as propulsively as an airport thriller'.

She went on, 'Yet this is also a profoundly serious work, posing an uncomfortable question. How many of us, given the chance to sit out an unpalatable political present without too much discomfort, would find the courage to step up, speak out and face the inevitably terrible consequences?'

Boris Starling in the *Telegraph* lauded this 'important and impressive book' and its conclusion that they risked everything to say no, setting an an example that lives on. "'When the moment came, they dared to be traitors – not to their country, but to tyranny".'

THE RAGE OF PARTY
HOW WHIG VERSUS TORY MADE MODERN BRITAIN

GEORGE OWERS

Constable, 576pp, £25

In the 1690s, Tories and Whigs began gathering in coffee houses and our current system came about, wrote Daniel Hannan on *Conservative Home*.



Tories vs Whigs during the Reform Act, 1831

Owers 'brings the age magnificently to life, dwelling on the personalities and the colour: the boneheaded stupidity of the High Tory faction in pushing for policies that Queen Anne had set her face against; the Whig Sarah Churchill openly accusing Queen Anne of lesbianism; the bigoted Dr Sacheverell, put on trial for an incendiary sermon, implausibly delivering the greatest Tory landslide of the era ... It makes for a terrific read, whether you are a historian or completely new to the era.'

In the *Telegraph*, Tim Stanley found this 'accomplished, funny' book 'does a clever job of implying comparison with the present without being obvious'.

Dominic Sandbrook in the *Sunday Times* agreed: Owers 'argues that the Whig-Tory competition set the intellectual and cultural tone for arguments that endure to this day, from Britain's place in Europe to the role of personal morality in public life.

'But the real joy of this tremendous book lies less in his thesis, persuasive as it is, than in the glee and vigour with which he tells his story. From the first page I found myself absorbed into a world of clubs and coffee houses, claret-quaffing squires and port-swilling financiers, seething crowds and shrieking preachers.'



***Edward IV and Lancastrian Fugitives at Tewkesbury Abbey* (1867) by Richard Burchett**

GETTY, WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

A SHORT HISTORY OF STUPIDITY

STUART JEFFRIES

Polity, 336pp, £25

Is ours a golden age of stupidity? Narcissistic politicians, mindless voters, influencers, conspiracy theories and dismissals of science?

From ancient Greece to artificial intelligence, Jeffries examines the growth of stupidity but also casts a sceptical eye over attempts to root it out – such as IQ tests, eugenics, gene editing, and racist education policies – finding them stupider than the problem they were devised to eradicate.

Julian Baggini in *Literary Review* noted that 'when Jeffries asks in the first chapter, "What is stupidity?"' we await an illuminating answer. He concludes, however, that it is a fuzzy concept that only the foolish try to sharpen. The result is that the book's subject remains amorphous throughout.' But, Baggini conceded, he 'treats idiocy with humour, intelligence and (relative) brevity.'

In the *Spectator* Tibor Fischer enjoyed this 'learned, picturesque ramble through world civilisation,' praising a 'thoughtful, ambitious book,' while Christopher Bray in the *Telegraph* found it 'bracingly clever, densely didactic, and intimidatingly well-informed. I doubt that anyone who spends some time with Jeffries' book won't feel a little less dumb than hitherto.'

In the *Guardian* Sam Leith observed, 'you could see this book not as a history of stupidity but as a slant history of its various opposites. It's an amiable and rambling tour through the history of philosophy, looking at the idea of rationality and its limitations. This is a learned and often exhilarating book, and it's a bit all over the place – but, given the subject matter, it'd be stupid to expect otherwise.'

THE FINEST HOTEL IN KABUL

LYSE DOUCET

Hutchinson Heinemann, 448pp, £25

Lyse Doucet has been reporting on Afghanistan for four decades. She first went there in 1988 where she stayed in the famous Kabul Inter-Continental Hotel – and she has been checking in to the hotel ever since. Built (by the British) in 1969, the Inter-Con (as it was known) symbolised a new Afghanistan, when Kabul was known as the Paris of the East and the city had jazz clubs, bowling alleys and ice-cream parlours and in the surrounding mountains were ski resorts.



PAULA BRONSTEIN

Lyse Doucet in a Kabul market

Since then, the hotel has seen the Soviet occupation, civil war, a US invasion and the rise of the Taliban. And the Inter-Con has not been spared: there were vicious terrorist attacks in 2011 and 2018 that left Mohammed Aqa, a treasured member of staff, confiding to a colleague that 'we are only living to be alive, not to live.'

Now Doucet has used this once-glamorous symbol of modernity to tell the story of the recent history of Afghanistan.

In the *Guardian*, William Dalrymple was full of praise: 'Today, despite everything, the hotel remains a monument to Afghan resilience and to the bravery and persistence of its staff. In Doucet, and her witty, observant and sometimes heartbreaking book, they have found a worthy chronicler.'

> The hotel remains a monument to Afghan resilience and the bravery and persistence of its staff

And at the *Sunday Times*, fellow travel writer Justin Marozzi noted that Doucet was a rare kind of journalist: 'She is a star reporter without an oversized ego. She doesn't behave, in other words, as though she is the story.'

Much of the recent history of Afghanistan, Marozzi observed, 'has unfurled within the hotel's suites, ballrooms, banqueting halls and conference rooms. Tantalising, handsomely realised cameos of some of the leading figures in the country's political and cultural worlds fizz through Doucet's narrative.'

In *Literary Review* Bijan Omrani noted: 'it is the day-to-day life of the hotel, its guests and staff, brilliantly captured by Doucet that most vividly reflects the country's history.'

The details are telling: 'Resident Red Army advisers made vodka the drink of choice. Rustic Mujahideen warriors got stuck in the revolving glass door. The Taliban, on first attaining power, outlawed the male staff's neckties (reminiscent, they said, of the Christian cross) and triumphantly destroyed the wine cellar. Amid the danger and endless uncertainty, its devoted employees strove to maintain the five-star service of which they were unflinchingly proud.

Just how dangerous is AI? And are we all doomed? SAM LEITH on new books on tech



Elon Musk speaks alongside President Trump at the White House, 2025

Will the titans of the new Gilded Age of tech save the world? Or will they cause us all to die of sheer rage by forcing unwanted AI slop into every aspect of our lives? Who can tell?

Eliezer Yudkowsky, a prominent 'AI doomer', has a shrewd idea – as set out in the unambiguous title of his new book **If Anybody Builds It Everyone Dies: The Case Against Superintelligent AI** (Bodley Head, 272pp, £22).

As James Ball noted in the *Spectator*, despite having been deeply influential on the development of AI itself, Yudkowsky and his co-author Nate Soares now believe that it poses an existential risk to humanity.

Their case is 'certainly urgent' but 'not well developed', proceeding through fictional 'parables' and 'blending third-rate sci-fi, low-grade tech analysis and the worst geopolitical assessment anyone is likely to read this year'.

It's the tech-bros themselves that preoccupy Jacob Silverman in **Gilded Rage**: **Elon Musk and the Radicalization of Silicon Valley** (Bloomsbury Continuum, 336pp, £20).

Harry Lambert in the *Times* said the book found that in just a decade Democrat-leaning tech bros came to stump for Trump because they found in him 'an amoral man who would give them much of what they wanted: praise, access, tax cuts and a pro-money, anti-woke cultural fightback'; in turn, they helped him consolidate his power and return to power.

Despite his name being in the title, this isn't a book about Musk so much as a 'group portrait' of those like him. It's full of interesting nuggets, though Lambert regretted Silverman's tendency to 'break the fourth wall with moralistic asides, undermining what is otherwise a dogged work of reporting'.

What a long way all this is from the optimistic early days of the internet. In **This Is For Everyone** (Macmillan, 400pp, £25), the man who invented the internet, Tim Berners-Lee, tells his own story.

In the *Times* John Arlidge was unimpressed by its 'what I did on my holidays' style, and wished for more analysis of what went wrong.

Berners-Lee, he said, 'sets out brilliantly how big tech has used the web not for good but for profit', yet can offer 'nothing more than hopey-changey platitudes' by way of remedy. His 'worst sin of all is blind optimism'. So. Doomed, it is then.

Yudowsky and his co-author Nat Soares now believe AI poses an existential risk to humanity

GETTY, NETFLIX

GETTY

POWER AND THE PALACE

THE INSIDE STORY OF THE MONARCHY AND 10 DOWNING STREET

VALENTINE LOW

Headline Press, 432pp, £25

The veteran royal correspondent Valentine Low's new book takes a long view of the relationship between the monarchy and the elected government, asking how the palace has wielded and benefited from political influence over the last two centuries.

In the *Evening Standard*, Robert Jobson judged it to be 'brisk, clear, never reverential' book which told a story whose basic arc was of the monarchy's 'slow retreat from political influence'.

In *Literary Review* Robert Hazell called it a 'serious and nuanced analysis which is also a rollicking read'.

However, in the *Spectator* Tessa Dunlop was pleased this wasn't just a work of sober constitutional analysis: 'I waded through tranches of 19th-century history in the knowledge that Low's gilt-edged gossip would not eventually disappoint.'

We learn that that Elizabeth II 'was a remainer' and that the present Queen once saw off a sex pest with a sharp kick. But above all, thought Dunlop, what came through was that even if His Maj exercises little or no formal power, politicians still quake before the crown; which is why 'the King ascended the throne the richest monarch in modern history'.



Brexit: 'a long, inglorious fudge'

BETWEEN THE WAVES

THE HIDDEN HISTORY OF A VERY BRITISH REVOLUTION 1945-2016

TOM McTAGUE

Picador, 560pp, £25

Tom McTague, the editor of the *New Statesman*, sets out in this book to trace the deep roots of the 2016 Brexit vote.

Despite being a direct journalistic rival and political opponent, the *Spectator*'s editor, Michael Gove, found much to admire in McTague's book, which he said showed not only 'fair-mindedness' but 'mastery of narrative sweep'.

In tracing Britain's relationship with Europe – which he identifies as 'a, if not the, key organising principle of our politics over the past 80 years' – McTague's special virtue is to dig beneath the day-to-day Westminster froth in search of ideas: 'McTague concentrates as much on historians, philosophers and even poets as politicians.'

We learn that Elizabeth II was a remainer and that the present Queen once saw off a sex pest with a sharp kick

In the *Sunday Times*, Dominic Sandbrook agreed. McTague's 'thesis is simple: once the European project got off the ground, Britain faced an unenviable choice' between joining Europe and losing sovereignty or staying out and losing influence.

The result was a 'long inglorious fudge' whose sticky history McTague traces in a 'lucid, thoughtful, and richly provocative book'.



GETTY

'Politicians still quake before the crown': Boris Johnson and the Queen, 2019



Jude Bellingham tackles Spain's defender Robin Le Normand, Euro 2024 final

INJURY TIME
FOOTBALL IN A STATE OF EMERGENCY

DAVID GOLDBLATT

Mudlark, 470pp, £22

Sadly – some would say – football has long since replaced cricket as our national game. Can you imagine saying, 'It's not football?' But does the state of the game reflect the state of the nation?

David Goldblatt appears to think so, and in the *Telegraph* Pablo Scheffer backs him up. Recalling that **Injury Time** is a sequel to Goldblatt's 'much heralded' *The Game of Our Lives*, Scheffer finds the author 'makes a convincing case for football's ability to illuminate the State of Britain' – not least because 14 million Britons regularly play.

In *Literary Review*, Robert Colls agreed that professional football 'has never been more popular', but he wonders why, given how far removed it has become from everyday life. 'Back in the day, football lived close to us … Everybody, including the players, got on the same bus to go to work.

Screenwriter Arthur Hopcraft said football was 'inherent in the people' in a way other sports were not, and so it was, but it is not inherent now.'

OFF THE RAILS
THE INSIDE STORY OF HS2

SALLY GIMSON

Oneworld, 298pp, £18.99

The proposed high-speed rail link between London and Birmingham (and, originally, beyond) has cost us all dear, with little to show for it.

'This is a story of equal-opportunities failure to which every part of the British establishment has contributed,' wrote David Leeder, a transport industry professional in *Literary Review*. 'It tells us much about the wider state of the country's governance structures, leadership class and politics.

'Gimson's book features all the ghastly types who have played a part in the decline of Britain's economy over the last 30 years, from ineffectual civil servants, MPs who think they are local councillors, human rights lawyers, sock-puppet lobbyists and quangos to rapacious suppliers who can't believe the perverse incentives baked into the system.'

Leeder recommended reading 'with a stiff drink'.

For Robin McKie in the *Observer*, the book 'suggests that, as a technological nation, Britain has now utterly lost its way… Other nations – Spain, France and Japan – have built high-speed lines. So why did Britain make such a hash of HS2?'

For a start, Gimson writes, the UK refused – out of hubris and arrogance – to take advice from other nations, and 'instead plunged ahead without a cohesive, intelligent strategy.'

Simon Heffer in the *Telegraph* found the book to be 'deeply researched and consequently highly detailed, though not well-written. At times it seems the author has but a casual relationship with English grammar and idiom, and cliché is her first resort too often… She seems to favour the project, though is outraged by the way it has been conducted. Yet from the evidence she presents, the Birmingham to London stretch was entirely unnecessary.'

EVERY LAST FISH
WHAT FISH DO FOR US AND WHAT WE DO TO THEM

ROSE GEORGE

Granta Books, 320pp, £20

George has written on a wide variety of topics, including sanitation, women's health, depression and an award-winning book on the shipping industry, about living for five weeks aboard a container ship and a week patrolling for pirates on a Portuguese navy frigate.

'It was a bold move,' Tom Fort wrote in *Literary Review*, 'for a publisher to commission a book on the murky and tortuous subject of the global fishing industry from an author who refuses to eat fish and develops seasickness every time she boards a boat … but her appetite for unearthing startling and often shocking information about how these [fish] delicacies arrive on our plates is insatiable.'

For the first time in history humans are eating more farmed fish than wild, and that consumption is expected to increase. But with warming oceans, diminishing fish stocks and questions about fish-farming practices, where will the fish come from?



Global fishing industry in the scales: 'murky and tortuous'

'It would not be difficult, technically speaking, to have a genuinely sustainable world fishing industry,' summed up Tom Fort (if the Global Ocean Treaty was observed and enforced).

'The solution, as [George's] honest, clear-sighted and recommendable book makes plain, lies within our own hands.'

GETTY

At a Nobel conference, PETER HARPER was dazzled by a sublime W H Auden – and staggered by a ridiculous Arthur Koestler

When I first heard the expression the Communion of Saints, I imagined a kind of endless conference in one of the more scenic parts of heaven.

In fact, I once caught a glimpse of it, not in heaven exactly, but in Sweden in the summer of 69, which seemed then to come fairly close.

It was indeed a conference on an extremely high plane, convened by the Nobel Foundation to debate 'The Place of Value in a World of Fact'.

Being the Nobel Foundation, they were naturally able to invite the greatest and goodest - all the most visionary stars of science and letters.

Cultivated oldies may recognise such demi-gods of their youth as Linus Pauling, Glen Seaborg, E H Gombrich, C H Waddington, Arthur Koestler and W H Auden – and it is about the last two that I tell my tale.

For reasons best known to themselves, the Nobel Foundation had seen fit to invite, along with the Communion of Saints, a gang of Yoof – perhaps to represent the Rest of Humanity or maybe just for light relief. I was one of the Yoof, in my twenties, awestruck but cheeky, supping with the gods.

Foremost in my memory is the Final Dinner, when after much wine and brandy the speeches were getting steadily riper. The atmosphere was dripping with bonhomie and self-satisfaction.

The president of the Nobel Foundation, Arne Tiselius, was graciously thanking the 'Yoof' for their sometimes unexpected contributions.

Indeed, we had tried to stir things up a bit. Suddenly, uninvited, Arthur Koestler (1905-83) was on his feet.

He launched into a long, detailed complaint about the toilet facilities n the conference centre.



Englishman in New York: Auden

It was tasteless and malapropos, but naturally we all thought it was a joke and patiently waited for the punchline. This was, after all, the author of *Darkness at Noon* and *The Act of Creation*, and one of the foremost arbiters of intellectual fashion.

After about ten minutes, it slowly dawned on everyone that he really was serious - and as sober as a newt. Bemusement turned to petrified embarrassment, then cries of 'Sit down, Koestler!'

He refused to be silenced, and we were forced into the tactic of mock applause. In a storm of furious clapping he finally sat down, glowering.

Blimey!

Tiselius, serving to retrieve the situation, rose again. 'Well,' he said, carrying on where he had left off, 'you young people have given us many surprises in the course of the week. Now, I fancy, we have given you one.'

And, amid appreciative guffaws, he announced the next item in the evening's events: the premiere of a new poem by W H Auden, read by the master himself.

Most of the distinguished participants were in fact scientists rather than literati – so Auden obviously felt himself something of a special case.

He announced that he was finally going to fulfil the purpose of his visit, in the manner of bards down the ages, to sing for his supper.

He proposed to read a poem he had written especially for the occasion, *Ode to Terminus*.

I don't think this poem is well known, but it made a profound impression on me.

I never forgot it, particularly the lines:

'... that scientists, to be truthful,
Must remind us to take all they say
as a tall story,
that abhorred in the heavens are all
self-proclaimed poets who,
to wow an audience,
utter some resonant Lie.'

This was recited in a calm, deadpan style. In the middle of that cosmopolitan assembly, it was all terribly English. And yet he had chosen to spend the latter part of his life in the United States.

Afterwards, I asked him, 'Mr Auden, after all these years, do you feel like an American?'

'Certainly not,' he replied in the crispest British diction, 'I'm a New Yorkah.'

Arthur Koestler launched into a long, detailed complaint about the toilet facilities in the conference centre

GETTY

Proust is gibberish – and *Middlemarch* horrifying, says NICHOLAS SHAKESPEARE

If I could be a fly on any wall in literature, I'd choose the cabin of a Colombian riverboat in the mid 1920's.

On the 7th of July at 6pm, a woman of 72 and man of 78 ascend a gangplank to begin one of the greatest adventures in modern fiction.

The man is Florentino Ariza, president of the Caribbean Riverboat Company. The woman is his childhood sweetheart, the recently widowed Fermina Daza. She has earache. He is bald and lame.

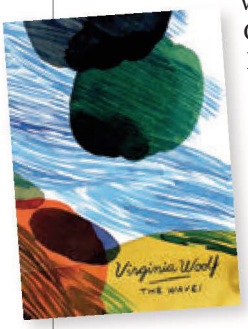
Their journey upriver holds out a shimmering promise: the consummation of an *amor interruptus* spanning half a century.



Giovanna Mezzogiorno and Javier Bardem in *Love in the Time of Cholera* (2007)

There are stories, like journeys, you never want to end, and **Love in the Time of Cholera** is one of those rare novels that become an enduring part of your life, offering us a miracle, a miracle within the grasp of each one of us.

It might appear in conventional frills parading the clichés of undying love but, underneath that lace, it proposes, in all seriousness, something more subversive, more affirming. We can have what we want, says Gabriel García Márquez. But we may have to wait a lifetime to appreciate properly its worth. To be worthy of our desire.



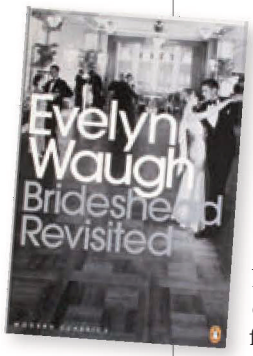
Another novel I've lapped up half a dozen times (along with Virginia Woolf's **The Waves** and Elizabeth Hay's **A Student of Weather**, about two sisters competing for the same man), is **An Explanation of the Birds,** by Portugal's pre-eminent living writer, António Lobo Antunes.

Forty years ago, I chaired a conversation with Antunes in Birmingham. Only one person turned up – and this interloper had mistaken the author for somebody else.

But Antunes, a former army doctor in the Angolan war, was not fazed. He'd just taken a call from the Swedish Academy to say he was on the shortlist for that year's Nobel. (Alas, José Saramago eventually pipped him to it).

Heart-clutchingly sad and funny, his fourth novel is about a man driving his sombre second wife to a lakeside hotel south of Lisbon, where he plans to tell her he wants a divorce – only she beats him to it.

It's best read at 18/25/45/65. There's an argument for sticking a label on books as on a single malt. Proust is ruined when quaffed too young; Joyce, Conrad, Shakespeare too. Not Evelyn Waugh, though.

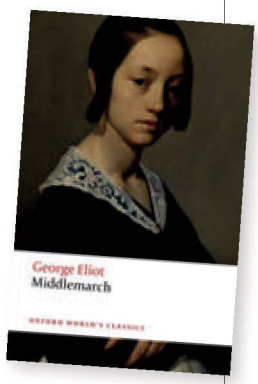


First gulped down at 17, **Brideshead Revisited** has yet to pass its sell-by.

The same is true, intoxicatingly, of Argentina's blind magus, Jorge Luis Borges. His stories collected in **Labyrinths** are inexhaustible. I inhale their smoky scent, as in the maturer pages of Graham Greene, whose own favourite of his novels remains one of my favourites too: **The Honorary Consul**.

The packed Cambridge English tripos allowed a mere week in which to compare Charles Dickens with George Eliot. Only last year did I finally complete **Middlemarch**.

Expecting it to be unassailable, I was shamed to recall V S Naipaul's verdict on Anthony Powell's **Dance to the Music of Time**, after Naipaul waited nigh on half a century – until Powell was dead – to read it.



'I was appalled,' wrote Naipaul, reacting with 'Ibsen- like horror' to Powell's failed project.

I confess this was how Eliot's authorial voice operated on me. **Middlemarch** seemed not a patch on **The Portrait of a Lady**, which Henry James is said to have written in response.

In the same disappointed fashion, I finished the novels of the hyperbolically rediscovered 'great witch of Brazilian literature', Clarice Lispector.

As a boy in the 1960s, I lived on the next beach in Rio. I so wanted to like Lispector's work. Instead, I encountered an author morbidly insensitive to readers who thirst for plot, character development, lucidity, precision, irony, excitement and humour ('the funniest thing is that I never learned how to live').

Her novels flung me back to Waugh and his immature pronouncement on Proust: 'gibberish'.

VENETIAN VESPERS

JOHN BANVILLE

Faber, 368pp, £16.99

This brooding tale narrated by newlywed hack Evelyn Dolman of his downfall on honeymoon in fin-de-siècle Venice is 'memorably eerie,' wrote Marcel Theroux in the *Guardian*.

'Each vividly evoked moment leads to the next with a deepening sense of intrigue. While the prose is dense, the action behind it is so clearly conceived that you feel as though you're watching it unfold before you. The geography of the city, the layout of the palazzo, the passing of time – it's all conveyed with a cinematic intensity.'

But Evelyn's 'orotund prose style' and pomposity create a 'strong sense that Banville regards his hero with mockery and indifference. It's hard, therefore, for the reader to care about him.'

In the *Spectator* Harry Cochrane declared the characters 'all despicable in their own ways, and readers will lose no sleep over Dolman's unravelling. That said, they will probably stay awake to finish the book.'

Of this 'memorable and disturbing read', concluded Theroux, 'the frustration I felt is that, written with more economy, it could have been a gasp-inducing stiletto of a book.'

A LONG WINTER

COLM TÓIBÍN

Picador, 141pp, £12.99

After arguing with her husband, Miquel's mother leaves their Pyrenean home, never to return. With his brother away on military service and his father ostracised by the townspeople, Miquel and his father must fend for themselves, battling their mutual resentment through a long winter.

As Miquel faces up to his mother's absence, orphaned Manolo arrives from the next village to help out, offering the promise of new love and another kind of life.

In the *Guardian* Clare Clark praised this 'most striking example of Tóibín's emotional control' as an 'eloquent expression of the bond between a mother and son,'



'Loss, loneliness, guilt and survival' in a long, Pyrenean winter

describing Tóibín as 'the consummate cartographer of the private self, summoning with restrained acuity … the thoughts his characters struggle to find words for.'

In the *Spectator* James McConnachie called it a 'superbly powerful tale of betrayal and desertion. Quintessential Tóibín.'

> A superbly powerful tale of betrayal and desertion. Quintessential Tóibín

'**A Long Winter** evokes loss, loneliness, guilt and survival in a few masterly strokes. If you've ever told your mother to "go away" in a fit of anger, read this story and weep,' concluded Rebecca Pearson in the *Independent*.



GETTY

Venice: setting for Banville's 'brooding' and 'memorably eerie' tale



In the Green Heart: 'a jungle caper that quickly descends into political commentary'

IN THE GREEN HEART

RICHARD LLOYD PARRY

Jonathan Cape, 304pp, £18.99

Cosmo Adair explained in *Literary Review* that the author was familiar with the horrors of war as he had been Asia editor of the *Times* for more than 20 years. This, his first novel, is 'a jungle caper that quickly descends into political commentary'.

In the *Times* John Self thought it 'essentially a thriller in a well-established genre: the westerner in a troubled foreign country' and found the opening sections 'terrific as Lloyd Parry establishes his characters with efficiency and colour'.

He summed up: 'This is a good, nasty, thought-provoking entertainment.'

In the *Guardian* M John Harrison found **In the Green Heart** was a 'strange tale: a little awkward, intensely political, designed to lay bare the fictions of contemporary colonialism yet inseparable from the close-up portrait of a man attempting to both shelter in and break out of an internal psychic trap. In short, very contemporary.'

THE SECRET OF SECRETS

DAN BROWN

Bantam, 688pp, £25

Fans of Dan Brown have waited eight years for his latest novel.

It 'reunites readers with the world's only professor of symbology, Robert Langdon ...[who] is still so world-renowned that, as doesn't happen for most academics, fancy hotels monogram his slippers for him', wrote Sam Leith in the *Guardian*.

Leith thought the book 'weapons-grade bollocks from beginning to end, none of it makes a lick of sense, and you'll roar through it with entire enjoyment if you like this sort of thing. Welcome back, big fella.'

Jessa Crispin in the *Telegraph* believed that Brown's novels were fantasies, and if you read them in that spirit, they were fun. 'Unfortunately,' she continued, 'the prose does its best to keep you grounded.'

Johanna Thomas-Corr in the *Times* thought the first half of the novel fun enough but ultimately 'you can't escape the fact that **The Secret of Secrets** is a novel that will only popularise yet more silly conspiracy theories — at a time when our confidence in traditional authorities and experts has never felt so diminished. There is no need to read this book: we're all living in a Dan Brown world already.'

THE TWO ROBERTS

DAMIAN BARR

Canongate, 320pp, £18.99

Sohoitis – a fatal addiction to post-war Soho's pubs and clubs – did for many writers and artists, including Robert Colquhoun (1914-1962) and Bobby MacBryde (1913-1966), the subject of Barr's joint fictionalised biography.

For a time these two gay Scottish painters were mentioned in the same breath as Bacon and Freud, but unlike the more famous artists, they never managed to strike a balance between work and play.

As Lara Feigel wrote in the *Guardian*, 'They lived and worked together, became famous together and then declined into desperate squalor together'.

In the *Times*, Peter Parker quotes Barr as saying, 'the Two Roberts are not as celebrated as they deserve to be'. Barr 'undoubtedly succeeds in his mission to 'write them back to where they belong', wrote Parker, charting their 'erratic progress from their first day at art school in 1933' to Ken Russell's 1959 documentary about them.

So, if you have one of their paintings, now may be the time to sell!



Tom Hanks and Audrey Tautou in *The Da Vinci Code* (2006)

Do men read women's novels?

STEPHEN COOPER celebrates the latest crop – and says they should

It is a truth universally acknowledged by the annual Women's Prize for Fiction that men don't – or at least didn't until recently – read novels by women.

The prize, which celebrates its 30th this year, is a valuable antidote, shining a spotlight on the best of women's writing, proving it can be literary as well as popular.

If arguably the finest novels in English since 1900 have been written by the Irish and the Americans, so some of the best authors writing today are defiantly not men: think Rooney, Shafak, Roy, Harvey, Alderman, Burns, Evaristo, Kingsolver, Strout and Smiths from Ali to Zadie, not to mention the late-lamented Mantel.

So here are some of the best to watch out for this winter.

One of Us (Fourth Estate, 352pp, £18.99), by podcast chart-topper Elizabeth Day, is the sequel to her 2017 *The Party* and is a story of betrayal and buried scandals, as the Fitzmaurice family confronts the consequences of privilege and the abuse of power.

Laura Hackett in the *Times* wrote that while it is 'compelling and, superficially, the comparisons to Alan Hollinghurst and Patricia Highsmith make sense,' she concluded, '**One of Us** is a parody of contemporary British life, a 350-page episode of *Dead Ringers*.'

I've followed Sarah Hall since her second novel, *The Electric Michelangelo*, a fictional biography of a fictional tattoo artist, was Booker-nominated in 2004 (before everyone got a tattoo).

Her latest, **Helm** (Faber, 368pp, £20) is the life-story, chronicled by humans, of a ferocious folkloric wind, scourging Cumbria since time began. For Susie Mesure in the *Spectator*, it 'sweeps from the cinematic to the specific, her prose pulsing with life and lyricism. **Helm** pushes both the boundaries of the novel and our relationship with nature.'



From left: **Clare Balding, Kiran Desai, Elizabeth Day**

GETTY

The *Guardian* called it 'a wondrous, elemental novel from a writer of show-stopping genius'.

Notably **Helm** is the first book to include a 'Human Written' stamp, devised by Hall, certifying that it has no AI-generated content. Surely a Hall-mark?

Kiran Desai's third book – her first in 20 years – **The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny** (Hamish Hamilton, 688pp, £25) is also Booker-shortlisted. (Her second *The Inheritance of Loss* won in 2006, making her the youngest woman to win at 35, until Eleanor Catton in 2013 at 28). The novelist Sonia and journalist Sunny meet on a train and, in their search for happiness together, they confront the forces that shape their lives: country, class, race, tradition and the complex bonds that link one generation to the next. At once love story and epic family saga it is rich, ambitious novel of ideas.

RF Kuang's **Katabasis** (HarperVoyager, 560pp, £22) is the eagerly awaited follow-up to *Yellow Face*. Katabasis means descent into the underworld, here into academia.

For Beejay Silcox in the *Guardian*, it is 'an infernal twist on the campus farce: David Lodge with demons ... far from perfect, but delivered with heretical glee.'

Natalie Haynes, quiz panellist, stand-up comic and classicist, retold the Perseus myth in *Stone Blind* in 2023. Now with **No Friend to This House** (Mantle, £20), she offers an extraordinary feminist reimagining of the myth of Medea, cementing her place in a female pantheon of classical interpreters with Pat Barker, Madeleine Miller and Margaret Atwood.

National treasure Clare Balding has written non-fiction and children's books, and *My Animals and Other Family* won Autobiography of the Year.

Now, encouraged by the late Jilly Cooper, we have her debut novel, **Pastures New** (HarperCollins, 400pp, £20). Heroine Alex unexpectedly inherits a decaying sheep farm in wettest Wales; as secrets surface, her heart pulls her in a new direction. 'Brimming with warmth,' praised Adele Parks in *Platinum* Magazine.

Kate Mosse founded the Woman's Prize, partly in response to the 1991 all-male Booker Prize shortlist. This year three of the six nominated authors are women.

Surely time for a reappraisal?

EMILY BEARN picks her favourite stocking fillers for Christmas

Forget *Where's Spot*? as board books become increasingly highbrow. This year's precocious toddler will be reading Ingela P Arrenhius's **Where's Jane Austen?** (Nosy Crow, 10pp, £6.99),in which we meet Shakespeare ('Here he is!') and Dickens, before finding the elusive Miss Austen hiding under a felt flap.

And **Oh Dear, Look What I Got!** (Walker, 40pp, £12.99) is a joyful new picture book by Michael Rosen and Helen Oxenbury of *We're All Going on a Bear Hunt*.

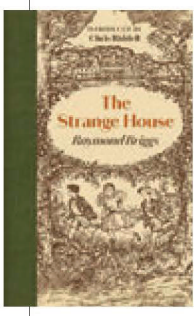
In another masterpiece of understated surrealism, they tell the story of a boy whose shopping trip goes counter to plan: 'I went to the shop to get me a carrot. Oh dear, they gave me ... a parrot!'



Jane Austen

Don't miss **A Good Night's Sleep** (Harper Collins, 32pp, £7.99) by Emma Chichester Clark, in which a tired child finds unexpected visitors obstructing her route to bed.

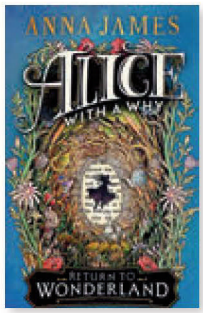
Chichester Clark's illustrations always delight, but this time the enchantment comes with a frisson of fear: ('"We're not going anywhere till we've eaten you up!" said the wolves, licking their lips.')



Raymond Briggs, meanwhile, is best remembered for his wordless *The Snowman*. But **The Strange House** (Manderley, 176pp, £19.99), contains two rediscovered novellas from 1961 and reminds us of what a good writer he was too.

Inspired by Briggs's own Wimbldeon childhood, the stories transport us to a world without mobile phones or boorish notions of health and safety. In one episode, two schoolboys outwit a gang of burglars by stealing their truck: 'Gerry bent over the great steering wheel gripping it with all his might. He pressed harder still on the accelerator ...'

Equally nostalgic is **Alice with a Why** by Anna James (Harper Collins, 256pp, £12.99), which reimagines Lewis Carroll's Wonderland, as seen by Alice's granddaughter Alyce.



Attempts to imitate Carroll often fall flat. But this is a skilled retelling in which nonsense, as Carroll taught us, is never nonsensical.

'You're certainly not our Alice,' the Hatter says on first seeing the heroine. 'No, I'm my Alyce ... Alyce with a Y.' 'A why?' 'Why yes.' 'Do you have a where or a who?'

Giant (Little Island Books, 224pp, £7) by debut novelist Judith McQuoid tells the fictional story of a working-class boy from East Belfast, whose life is transformed when he befriends the young C S Lewis.

Inspired by McQuoid's own family's roots, this touching story of

> The stories transport us to a world without mobile phones or boorish notions of health and safety

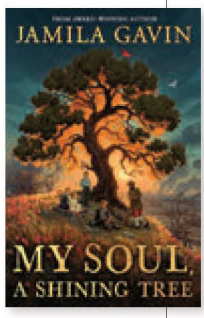
friendship across seemingly insurmountable social divides is one of this year's gems.

And the *Choose Your Own Adventure* books, icons of the 1980s and '90s, are finally back in print. 'You and YOU ALONE are in charge of what happens in this story,' we are warned on the opening page of **Journey Under the Sea** (Pushkin, 128pp, £8.99), one of the most popular titles. 'The wrong decision could end in disaster – even death.'

It sure can. Each book offers the reader 40 or so possible endings, and during the series we risk just about every conceivable form of catastrophe, from falling down mineshafts, to being eaten by intergalactic meatpackers.

For slightly older readers, Georgia Channon's **The Curse of the Silvan Oaks** (Pushkin, 272pp, £8.99) tells the story of the changeling boy from *A Midsummer's Night's Dream*, over whom Oberon and Titania famously squabbled.

In Shakespeare's version, Titania relinquished the boy to Oberon. But Channon imagines what might have happened had she been more ballsy.

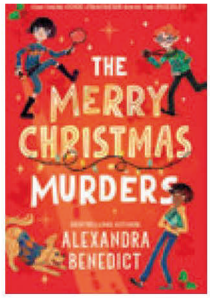


My Soul, a Shining Tree (Farshore, 160pp, £8.99) is another triumphant novel by 84-year-old Jamila Gavin, author of *Coram Boy*.

Set during the First World War, the story is told by four narrators, who include a teenage German soldier, and an ancient walnut tree witnessing the slaughter in Belgium: 'I have stood up here for over one hundred years. The souls of birds and angels have rested in my branches; and young children too. But I've never seen anything like this'.

And finally, it would not be Christmas without some cosy homicide. **The Merry Christmas Murders** (Simon & Schuster, 20pp, £7.99) is the eagerly awaited children's debut by Alexandra Benedict, author of *Murder on the Christmas Express*.

This time, writing for readers of eight-plus, she tells the story of an interschool mince pie competition that is thrown into turmoil by a series of brutal murders, the clues to which are embedded in the participants' puff pastry.





ACORN STAIRLIFTS

- NEXT DAY installation available
- Stay in the home you love
- For straight and curved staircases
- FREE no-obligation survey and quote
- 365-day local service and support

Scan for more information:

FOR YOUR FREE BROCHURE & QUOTATION

CALL ACORN NOW ON FREEPHONE

0800 326 5145



Join the Left Book Club

- Get inspiring, world-changing books direct to your door
- Based on the pioneering anti-fascist book club founded in 1936
- Join your local reading group and be part of our community
- Fantastic gifting options

Get a free book with every annual sub!

LEFT BOOK CLUB

Join or gift from £9.99/m+p&p

www.leftbookclub.com

Read. Debate. Organise.

'A beautiful, thoughtful book that brims with joy'
KATE MOSSE

'Suffused with gentle optimism and warmth'
TELEGRAPH



Thoughts and reflections to bring wonder and joy to daily life

Available from WATERSTONES

COMRADES IN ART
ARTISTS AGAINST FASCISM, 1933-43

ANDY FRIEND

Thames & Hudson, 360pp, £40

Launched in London 1933, the Artists' International Association united traditional and modernist artists in supporting the radical left against fascism and authoritarianism.

It is a story 'of collision – of art and politics, of aesthetics, of warring parties, and of unity,' wrote Millen Brown Ewens in *Elephant*. 'Despite the archival thinness left by their deliberate destruction of records after Dunkirk, Friend captures the striking prescience of the group's early work some 90 years on.'

In the *TLS* Charles Darwent found Friend tells the story 'dispassionately and with clarity: a triumph, given the subject's organisational and moral complexities. It also reintroduces artists who ... tend to have faded from history: [Cliff] Rowe and [Peggy] Angus both deserve to be better known'.

Stephen Smith in the *Observer* agreed that it tells 'a largely unknown story. Friend, who has written acclaimed studies of the painters [Eric] Ravilious and John Nash, has done an exemplary job, spending more time among the minutes of long forgotten meetings than is entirely healthy.'

The book's 'chief pleasure' is 'encountering old friends in new guises, for the story has never been told in such detail before,' wrote Ariane Bankes in the *Spectator*. By 'stitching together such a lively account of its protagonists, Friend has corrected a significant apolitical bias in 20th-century art studies ... He also shows how the coming of war only increased the AIA's impact and broadened its appeal.

'This thought-provoking, readable and beautifully illustrated book is a huge contribution to our understanding of the cultural landscape in the mid-20th century.'

VERMEER
A LIFE LOST AND FOUND

ANDREW GRAHAM-DIXON

Allen Lane, 416pp, £30

The art historian 'claims to have made startling, even revelatory discoveries about Vermeer's work and life', wrote Evgenia Siokos in the *Telegraph*. 'With the skill of a good showman, and the meticulousness of a scholar, he takes us back into the Dutch Golden Age.'

As Paul Abels of Leiden University noted, the author has made clear that Vermeer's paintings were not simply atmospheric genre pieces, but coded works with a deeply religious meaning.

In the *Observer* Vanessa Thorpe thought Graham-Dixon's 'detective work hinges on the faith of the painter's close circle of patrons, neighbours and benefactors, all members of a persecuted religious group who can at last step out of the shadows.

'The new information also allows Graham-Dixon to set out a persuasive case for naming the mystery woman in some of the artist's best-known portraits and for locating Vermeer's much-loved *The Little Street*.'



***Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* (1657-9) by Vermeer**

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

In the *Times*, Graham-Dixon identified the *Girl with a Pearl Earring* as Magdalena van Ruijven, the daughter of Vermeer's patrons, depicted as Mary Magdalene.

Siokos thought the more this 'enthusiastic' author leaned into some well-informed speculation, 'the more colour and intrigue he gives to the life of a man about whom very little is definitively known'.

CRAFTLAND
A JOURNEY THROUGH BRITAIN'S LOST ARTS AND VANISHING TRADES

JAMES FOX

Bodley Head, 368pp, £25

Art historian James Fox has travelled through Britain looking for the last practitioners of ancient crafts. Spoiler alert: there are not many left. Of 285 crafts still practised, 72 are critically endangered: it's these that Fox tracks down.

In the *Sunday Times*, James Macconnachie, praised Fox's 'great eye for telling detail' and had a nudge-nudge chuckle. 'You could be a bender, boner, flasher or willy man — and none of them involved sex. You could be a back-end girl (on embroidery machines), bottom stainer (of the outsoles of shoes) or butt woman (selling flatfish on the quayside). 'And in the *Guardian*, Kathryn Hughes added 'riddlers, slaggers and snobs' to the list.

Craftland can't help but be elegaic – a wheelwright, the last of the line, died days before Fox's visit. Hughes thought the book, with its woodcut illustrations, a swansong not only of crafts but of books about crafts.

But in *Literary Review*, Gillian Tindall thought there were reasons for optimism: 'In almost every corner of our overpopulated and over-industrialised island, a few people can be found who buck the trend. The craft of weaving Harris tweed seemed for a while to be facing extinction, but in recent years it has become the largest private-sector occupation in the Western Isles, generating millions for the local economy.'



Frenemies: *The Odd Couple* (1968)

ON FRIENDSHIP

ANDREW O'HAGAN

Faber, 160pp, £12.99

In the wake of *Caledonia Road*, his hefty Dickensian novel set in the present, Andrew O'Hagan has produced **On Friendship**, a slim, meditative volume consisting of eight chapters, each recalling a particular time or person.

'Romantic love,' he writes, 'gets all the headlines, but just as often it is strong friendship that properly describes the shape of your life.'

In the *Evening Standard*, Oliver Poole noted that O'Hagan's life is 'littered with a cast of famous figures', including Seamus Heaney, Edna O'Brien, Julian Assange and Mark Rylance. 'That should grate, but the book is saved by the writer's clear and genuine fondness for his subjects.'

In the *Times*, Ceci Browning concurred, saying 'he makes up for the name-dropping with wit and good humour.' At one point, says Browning, 'O'Hagan veers into pornography, AI and Trumpian politics, but the overwhelming tone of the book is joy, along with an optimism about friendship's enduring presence: "Life is better – life is life – when it doesn't just stop with yourself."'

O'Hagan veers into pornography, AI and Trumpian politics but the overwhelming tone ... is joy

LOVE'S LABOUR

STEPHEN GROSZ

Chatto & Windus, 208pp, £18.99

London psychoanalyst Stephen Grosz's first book, *The Examined Life*, was a compilation of case studies in which the cameos of his patients' experiences (heavily disguised) became strange, often almost allegorical, reflections on the strangeness and randomness of human lives.

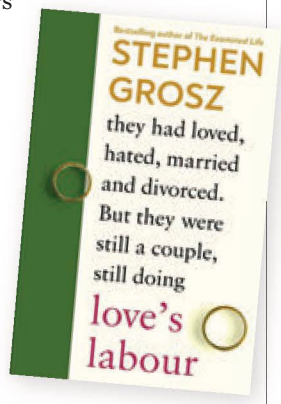
In **Love's Labour**, he again draws on 40 years of conversation with patients in a series of portraits that show how what we think we feel is often only the portal to feelings that we didn't realise we had.

And of course it isn't only about love. It's also about power and pain and grief – as it always is.

In the *Guardian*, Sophie McBain summed it up: 'In Grosz's telling, psychoanalysis resembles a painstaking, collaborative act of excavation, removing layers of self-deception and motivated reasoning to discover the conflicting fears and desires that lie beneath.'

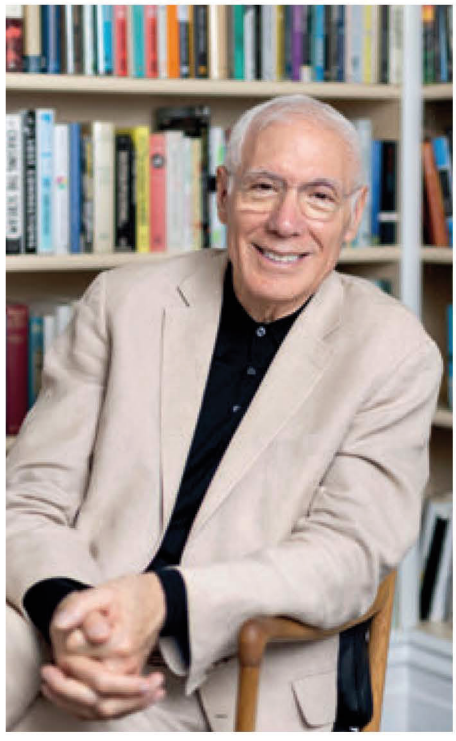
In the *FT*, Kathy O'Shaughnessy found 'the book as a whole serves to underline the unique oddity of the psychoanalytic couch: this place where people are free to show their truest and strangest selves.'

Hannah Rosefield in *Literary Review* however found the lightness of touch admired by other reviewers frustrating.



'Each offers a parable about human nature and supplies a satisfaction akin to that of solving a crossword puzzle: it all fits!

'But the tidiness is also one of the frustrations of reading **Love's Labour**. Grosz and his patient find an answer to why the patient behaves in the way she does, but we don't see what happens after that.'



Stephen Grosz: 'It isn't only about love'



A Lucille Clerc illustration in Elizabeth von Arnim's *Elizabeth and her German Garden*

THE BOOK OF KELLS
UNLOCKING THE ENIGMA

VICTORIA WHITWORTH

Apollo, 336pp, £35

The Book of Kells – setting out the four gospels amid ravishingly detailed illuminations, and now the pride of Trinity College, Dublin's rare books collection – is one of the best-known medieval manuscripts in the world.

For years it has been understood to have been composed on the island of Iona before being whisked to the monastery of Kells in Ireland after a Viking raid.

Victoria Whitworth seeks to upturn that assumption, arguing that it was created by Pictish scribes in a monastery north-east of Inverness. It 'rewrites our understanding of early medieval Scotland'.

'This is a fascinating story, but does it really matter that Scotland doesn't have any of the manuscripts created here during the golden age of Saints and Scholars?', wondered Thomas Keyes in *Bella Caledonia*.



Detail from *The Book of Kells*

'Yes, because the insular monks weren't just engaged in high-end colouring in, they were crucial to the emergence of Western civilisation after the fall of Rome.'

On the *Conversation*, Rachel Moss demurred: 'Whitworth's book highlights an important new potential provenance for **The Book of Kells**. However, it also serves as a timely reminder that our preoccupation with the "nationality' of the manuscript"... can distract from other considerations.'

Here, ultimately, is 'an object without borders'.

LITERARY GARDENS
THE IMAGINARY GARDENS OF WRITERS AND POETS

SANDRA LAWRENCE, ILLUSTRATED BY LUCILLE CLERC

Frances Lincoln, 192pp, £19.99

Lawrence wrote in her introduction: 'I promise that everyone who reads this book will grind their teeth due to at least one or two scandalously obvious omissions.'

But in the *Spectator* Ruth Scurr 'was delighted to find two gardens from novels I reviewed more than 20 years ago making the list.'

Scurr explained that the '30 gardens are far-flung geographically and range across great swathes of time, from "the court gardens of the Empress of Japan" in Sei Shonagon's *The Pillow Book* (c.1000) to "Mrs Bulpit's yard" in Edmund White's *The Hanging Garden* (2012).

'They are united by Lucille Clerc's distinctive illustrations. Lawrence and Clerc have worked together before and there is something defiantly joyful in their collaboration, even where "Death's garden" in Terry Pratchett's *Mort* (1987) is concerned: 'Pratchett's greatest contribution to botanical science is, without doubt, the reannual, a plant that you sow this season this season to harvest last year'.

Scurr thought Lawrence's literary gardens were a pleasing and eclectic mix of the predictable and unexpected in this lavishly illustrated book.

CHASING THE DARK
ENCOUNTERS WITH THE SUPERNATURAL

BEN MACHELL

Abacus, 304pp, £22

Since time immemorial, people have been disturbed by 'things that go bump in the night', but none apart from a British parapsycho-logist called Tony Cornell (1924-2010) have dedicated their lives to investigating psychic phenomena.

Cornell's mission is chronicled by award-winning thriller writer Ben Machell, and the result, said Chris Andrews in *Buzz Magazine*, is 'an absolute masterclass of scares', embracing 'poltergeists in the home, magical hermits in the hills and ghostly voices on the phone.'

Eighty percent of the phenomena



Ouija: 'chasing the dark'?

GETTY

Cornell investigated were delusional, said Andrews, but reading Machell's descriptions of the remainder 'will tweak your every nerve'.

Read this 'entrancing biography', said Dorian Lynskey in the *Guardian*, and like Machell 'you will hear the steady voice of a rational man methodically tapping the wall between reality and something else.'

Cornell, said Lynskey, 'had a true scientist's commitment to doubt and impartiality. At a time when beliefs leave facts in the dust, it's easy to share Machell's admiration for a man who was willing to say: "I don't know."'

THE QUIET EAR
AN INVESTIGATION OF MISSING SOUND

RAYMOND ANTROBUS

Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 208pp, £16.99

Diagnosed as partially deaf aged seven and with mixed Jamaican and English parentage, the award-winning poet 'soon realised he'd have "to define and defend my blackness to everyone outside my family, which was also true of my deafness",' wrote Samantha Ellis in the *Telegraph*.



Antrobus: 'missing sound'

Antrobus 'has made a book for the boy he was, but he's also given other readers an insight into life both between cultures and between sounds.'

This is 'an insightful, bighearted memoir that skillfully interrogates his own experience – and the experience of a multitude of others – of being deaf in today's world,' wrote S Kirk Walsh in the *New York Times*.

'Both expansive and precise', it 'manages to be many things at once: a coming-of-age memoir of moving between the orbits of hearing and nonhearing individuals, a nuanced discussion of the ways that race and deafness intersect, and a cultural appraisal of significant deaf figures in sports, literature, cinema and more. Antrobus, the author of three volumes of poetry and two children's books, lucidly braids all of this into an effortless, often lyrical account.'

As Kaitlin Jeffreys explained in *Voice* magazine, what makes it 'remarkable is its blend of memoir, cultural criticism, and poetic sensibility.

'Antrobus does not simply recount his experiences; he interrogates them, weaving together images, arguments, and histories that expand the narrative beyond the personal.

'His reflections on masculinity, race, and the complexities of miscommunication add depth to his journey, while his passion for literature becomes a lifeline that allows him to connect with others and reclaim his voice. This is a memoir that asks readers to consider not only what is heard but what is missed, misheard, or silenced.'

A YEAR WITH GILBERT WHITE
THE FIRST GREAT NATURE WRITER

JENNY UGLOW

Faber, 472pp, £25

Hampshire curate Gilbert White's *Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne*, never out of print since publication in 1789, was 'a form of autobiography, a work of 18th-century creative non-fiction woven out of the annual progress of frost, seeds, birds, trees, insects, clouds and bees,' declared Philip Hoare in the *Observer*.

'As Uglow writes, in this, her own glorious tribute to his journals, White was not an aspirational scientist, but "more of a philosophical muser". His was a "new kind of writing", she says, "imbued with such feeling", linking "scholarly knowledge to simple daily watching".'

In the *FT* Andrea Wulf found it 'charming...like Radio 4's shipping forecast for naturalists.'

In the *TLS*, Nicola Shulman acknowledged it is 'no easy task to write a biography – as this essentially is – of White. 'Despite half a century's worth of letters, these were all, as Uglow says, "on the same subject" and that subject was not himself. But we are never made to feel a scarcity of personal material or the patching-over of vacancies. Uglow controls the story with perfect command.'

THE BIBLE OF BRITISH TASTE
STORIES OF HOME, PEOPLE AND TASTE

RUTH GUILDING

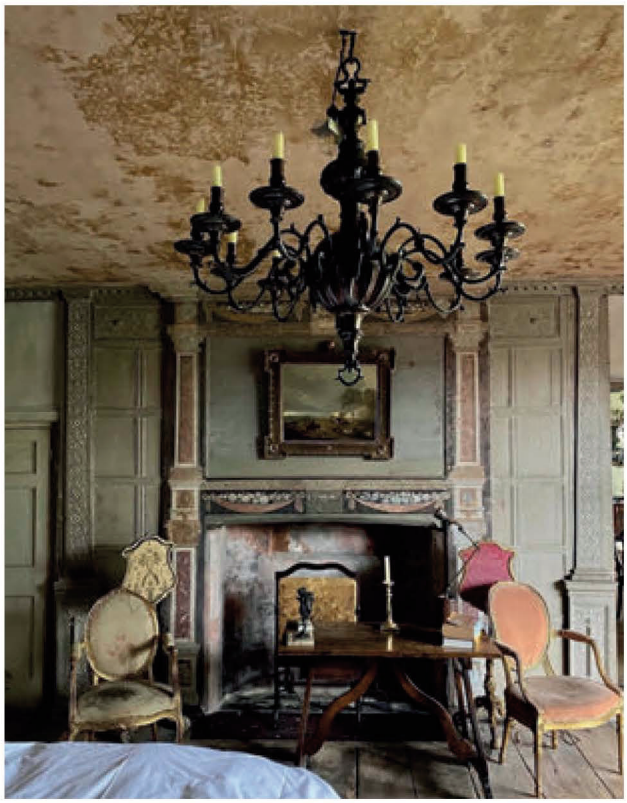
Frances Lincoln, 256pp, £32

A glance at the delectable Instagram posts of Ruth Guilding gives the gist.

Lovely, rook-racked old houses whose insides are kept in states of artful chaos (or inherited clutter, depending), full of rare bits and pieces that have been in the family for years or picked up for a song somewhere jolly.

It's a particularly English aesthetic (Staffordshire dogs and William Morris willow pattern abound) and it's hard to imagine another country where the artistic upperish classes go quite so mad over curling linoleum and pantry sinks.

Rebelling against her childhood in a neat Thameside suburb, Guilding is the official high priest of this department of British Taste and, as Matthew Dennison writes in *Country Life*, designer Jasper Conran has explained that Guilding's 'preference is for rooms in which one can see "toast crumbs"'.



Ruth Guilding's Instagram: a room 'with toast crumbs'

Yet American *Home & Garden*'s verdict was that this is 'a visual compendium of inspiration for Anglophiles who dream of artful British living'.

MICHAEL BARBER looks ahead to crime novels beyond Mick Herron's *Slow Horses*



King of Slough House: Gary Oldman as Jackson Lamb (Gary Oldman) in *Slow Horses*

One of the reasons I cherish Mick Herron is for sardonic asides such as: 'She's spent so long turning showers of shit into career opportunities, she could give Thames Water lessons.'

But is *Slow Horses* destined for the knackers' yard? Herron has said he knows how Jackson Lamb will die. And meanwhile – spoiler alert – he's bumped off one of Lamb's most egregious adversaries, the duplicitous slimeball, Peter Judd.

Lamb has been immortalised on screen by Gary Oldman, who played George Smiley in the film *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*. And now Herron is being touted as one of the writers who could assume John Le Carré's mantle if the latter's literary estate goes down the same road as Ian Fleming's.

Nick Harkaway, Le Carré's son, took the plunge last year with *Karla's Choice*, with a follow-up out next year. But he has stated that the way is clear for other writers to step into his father's shoes.

In 1974 Nicholas Meyer had the temerity to step into Conan Doyle's shoes and published *The Seven Per Cent Solution*, that became an award-winning film. Next year the seventh – and last – in the series, **Sherlock Holmes and the Real Thing**, will be published. It's set in the deceptively cut-throat Edwardian art world in which bodies pile up like discarded canvases.

Quite by chance, the Great Detective's nemesis has just been resurrected by Jack Anderson, author of **The Return of Moriarty** (Bloomsbury, 368pp, £18.99), in which the criminal mastermind turns coat and attempts to solve a mystery in the Bavarian mountains.

Meanwhile, how would you define police work? According to ex-DCI Jim Domino, 'it's social work, with aggravation thrown in' – not a bad description of his role in **The Lady in the Park** (Muswell Press, 362pp, £10.99), the first in a projected series by David Reynolds.

Investigating the murder of an unconventional mother of six by three different fathers, Jim encounters a house full of orphans, a family of Sudanese refugees, two asylum seekers from Belarus, a bent copper, a cannabis farm and a drug baron's deceptively obliging wife.

On *Crime Time* Maxim Jakubowski wrote: 'I was asked for a blurb and said it was clever, humane, affectionate and realistic. For once you can trust what it says on the cover!'

Talking of series, it would have been nice if a further volume of Susan Hill's addictive Simon Serrailler series was on the horizon, but sadly it isn't. Equally addictive, it would seem, are Richard Osman's *Thursday Murder Club* mysteries, the latest of which, **The Impossible Fortune** (Penguin, 448pp, £22.00), became an instant number one bestseller.

Without wishing to rain on Osman's parade, or that of any 'cosy-crime' writer, I can't help recalling what Raymond Chandler said of Dashiell Hammett: 'He gave murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse.'

That said, it's only fair to quote ex-DCI Jim Domino: 'The idea of a lone gumshoe working on his own is a romantic fantasy dreamed up by writers like Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett.' Unlike Philip Marlowe or Sam Spade, Domino wouldn't dream of confronting a villain without back-up.

There is nothing cosy about the Hogarthian world Scott Phillips depicts in **The Devil Raises His Own** (No Exit, 315pp, £10.99). The setting is Hollywood before the moguls arrived, when blue films were the industry's raison d'être. Attracted by the lure of easy money is a rapacious, low life crowd whose ranks are thinned by a series of brutal murders.

According to *Publishers Weekly*, Phillips 'marries cheeky comedy and noirish wit … James Ellroy fans will be thrilled.'

> Obscenely rich residents … on New York's Upper West Side come face to face with a murderous gang of smash and grabbers

Ellroy fans will also get a kick out of **The Doorman** by Chris Pavone (Head of Zeus, 386pp, £18.99), because it describes what happens when the obscenely rich residents of an iconic apartment building on New York's Upper West Side come face to face with a murderous gang of smash and grabbers.

Said Sarah Lyall in the *New York Times*, 'With its laser-sharp satire, its delicious set-pieces and its portrait of a restive city torn apart by inequality, resentment and excess, **The Doorman** invites comparison to *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, Tom Wolfe's lacerating dissection of New York in the 1980s.'

Omnibus

BARNEY HIGGINS

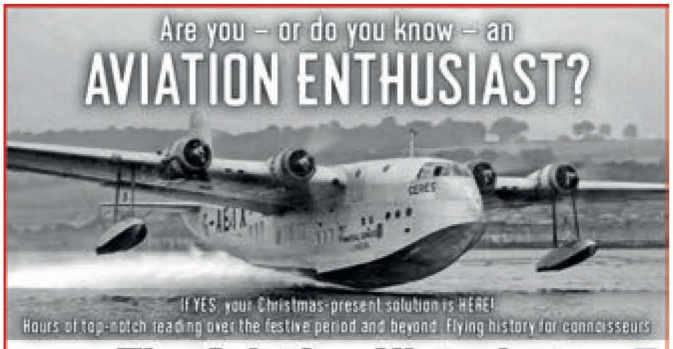


We are entering into a dark age of wokery and repression where actors will be limited in what roles they may take and writers, what they may write. Read what Barney Higgins has to say – before it's too late.

Available on Amazon Books and Kindle

Are you – or do you know – an

AVIATION ENTHUSIAST?



If YES, your Christmas-present solution is HERE!
Hours of top-notch reading over the festive period and beyond. Flying history for connoisseurs

The Aviation Historian

The modern journal of classic aeroplanes and the history of flying

TAH Annual No 1: £28 inc p&p in UK 260pp compact format NOT ON SALE IN NEWSAGENTS
Order from: www.theaviationhistorian.com ☎ 07572 237737 ✍ TAH, PO Box 962, Horsham RH12 9PP

SHORT STORIES
always welcome for *Scribble*, the quarterly magazine for writers.
Est. 1999. Details from Park Publications, 14, The Park, Stow on the Wold, GL54 1DX.
Or www.parkpublications.co.uk

ZULEIKA EDITIONS
Traditional book publisher Zuleika Press also offers
TRADE STANDARD SERVICES FOR PRIVATELY PUBLISHED PROJECTS
(from editing to design to printing).
Contact tom@zuleika.london

LGC | The London Ghostwriting Company



Ghostwriting
Editorials
Appraisals
Submissions
Coaching



020 7193 8257
enquiries@londonghostwriting.com

Struggling to read small print?

The HD **Essential** from Serious Readers helps minimise the eyestrain that makes words blur.



The struggle to see clearly in poor light is often a problem with the light, not your eyes.

The strain you feel is often your eyes fighting against the fractured, incomplete light from ordinary lamps. The High Definition Light **Essential** ends that battle. It is engineered to project the full spectrum of natural daylight, giving your eyes precisely what they need to focus effortlessly. You can finally enjoy what you love for longer, in absolute comfort.

The quality of light from my HD Essential is breathtaking.
Mr Hutchinson | Devon



- Ends the eyestrain caused by poor light
- Brings words and colours into sharp focus
- Puts precise, dimmable light where you need it
- Recommended by over 500 independent opticians
- 30-day risk-free trial and 5-year warranty

£150 OFF

HD Essential Floor Light
Was ~~£399.99~~ **£249.99**

HD Essential Table Light
Was £349.99 **£199.99**

Plus FREE Delivery worth £12.95

Quote offer code A131
at checkout or when calling.

For Advice. For a Brochure. To Order:
0800 085 1088
seriousreaders.com/A131

Serious Readers
Serious about light™

Why was Jilly Cooper praised on her death – and mocked during her life? By LULU TAYLOR

Every time I finished a big exam during my English degree, my reward to myself was a new Jilly Cooper novel.

I adored her richly peopled world of drama, sex, romance and escapist fun. The rollicking storytelling hid the masterful craft and iron structure beneath.

When Jilly died at 88, there was an outpouring of love for an author who gave so much pleasure and sold so many books, bringing oodles of revenue to the country.

Yet, for much of her lifetime, her books were considered a bit silly. For girls. Not something serious people would read.

Books are the last acceptable form of out-and-out cultural snobbery, tinged with not a little bit of sexism.

Many people who'd happily go to to watch the latest Bond film, or cheerfully admit to loving *Friends*, wouldn't read sexy, funny, romantic books, family sagas or intricate stories of domestic life.

I once went to talk to a ladies' book club in Oxford about my novels – family dramas, with interleaved timelines, secrets and relationships – and they told me they wouldn't usually read 'your kind of book'. They found them embarrassing. Why? It's not embarrassing to be entertained, is it?

Literary books make the reader look and feel clever. Obscure books with atmospheric covers look serious; men's writing seems to matter more than women's, and the stories that women read are often considered inherently silly, particularly if they sell a lot of copies.

Crime and thrillers get a pass, though, because men read those. Oddly, as long as murder is involved, it's respectable.

I started my career in publishing, commissioning commercial fiction.

For useful shorthand, we stuck labels on these books. 'Chick Lit' was epitomised by Bridget Jones (another amazing British success that made millions happy). Historical epics were dubbed 'Clogs and Shawls', 'Grinding Poverty' or 'Bodice Rippers'. Big glitzy sexy books were 'Bonkbusters'. More upmarket, middle-class books of domestic relationships were 'Aga Sagas'.

Despite loving our books and authors, we were all a little complicit in downplaying them. 'Chick Lit' is a term that has rightly gone out of fashion.

But, back then, we could afford to be blasé. We could sell books. There were book clubs (that advertised discounted books at the back of Sunday newspapers), lots of bookshops, libraries and plenty of media outlets who would review our fiction.



Jilly Cooper and Barbara, 1982

There was less competition for our readers' attention: fewer TV channels and practically no internet or social media. It's not the same now. There are far fewer high street bookshops (though we do have a thriving independent sector, thank goodness).

While literary novels are piled high in bookshops, I've seen some of the country's most talented and highly selling authors crammed on to one set of shelves, with the unappealing label of 'Romance'.

You are not going to find many men browsing that section, and lots of women would be put off too. The implication is that these novels are light, fluffy and meaningless, aimed at boy-mad birdbrains.

Sophie Kinsella, author of the *Shopaholic* series and other brilliant comic novels, recently celebrated selling fifty million copies of her books. Few literary writers could dream of such figures.

Many of our most successful authors, many of whom have sold staggering amounts of books across the world, are almost unknown – an unrecognised asset to the economy.

I am small fry by comparison, with 15 novels under my belt and far more modest sales, but those sales still make my literary author friends go slightly green.

Commercial books are supposed to sell – that's the point. Not because they are bad, but because they are good. They reflect human experience, women's concerns, life, love, relationships and families.

They are bloody hard to write, and often rigorously edited. The best are masterful, while seeming effortless.

And yet it's harder than ever for commercial fiction to be reviewed. Literary festivals are not interested in novelists who aren't already famous because, quite honestly, they can't sell the tickets.

Our covers seem aimed at girls rather than a real, more mature readership.

It's not all bad news. Audiobooks are a huge growth market. There are still hits: word-of-mouth sensations, dazzling debuts and adaptations that bring an author to a whole new audience.

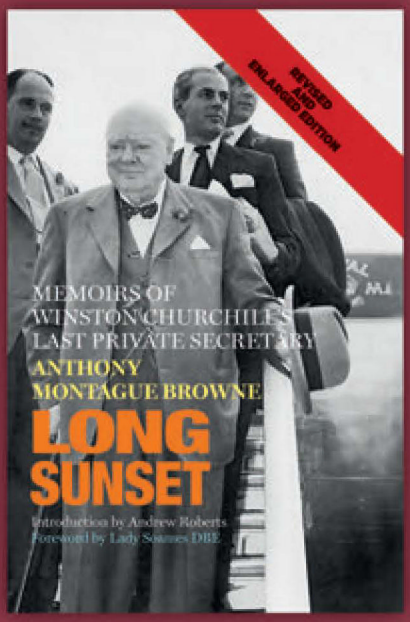
Readers still long for brilliant stories. Publishers and authors will soon find new, clever ways to reach them, through innovative social media use and new kinds of festivals.

In the meantime, we need to celebrate our marvellous commercial authors and do away with that ridiculous literary snobbery.

And, perhaps, after all those years of being sneered at, part of Jilly Cooper's remarkable legacy will be making popular fiction properly respectable.

A Legacy of Secrets *by Lulu Taylor is out on 4th December*

GETTY



"It is a memoir that achieves the ideal balance between author and subject, itself the reflection of the sympathy, integrity and humour of deep friendship."
Alan Judd, The Spectator

"Utterly Engaging. It is full of wit, mischief, affection."
– Alistair Horne, The Times

POD KIN PRESS

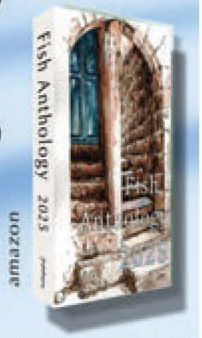
Price £33
Available at Hatchards,
podkinpress.com,
or 07824-567213.

Short Story Prize

Judge: Sean Lusk
Word Limit: 5,000
Closes: 30 Nov '25
Entry fee: £20 (£14 subsequent)

Prizes: 10 stories will be published in the
FISH ANTHOLOGY
2026

1st - £2,600
2nd - Workshop @ W. Cork Lit Fest + £300
3rd - £300 / £200 each for 7 others



Also online:
Short Story Writing Course + courses in Memoir, Flash Fiction, Poetry & Playwriting
Critique & Editing Services

Details:
www.fishpublishing.com

saltydog investor



Saltydog Investor is different

For more than a decade, our subscribers have relied on our clear, data-driven approach to steer their investment decisions.

The Saltydog system is based on proven algorithms that crunch vast amounts of UK fund data and present it in a way designed to help our members navigate ever-changing market conditions.

Each week, we analyse thousands of funds and show exactly which sectors are gaining ground, which are falling back, and which funds are leading the way.

Over the years, this clear and consistent approach has built a loyal community of private investors who value a system they can trust. We invite you to come aboard.

FREE 2 MONTH TRIAL

www.saltydoginvestor.com

Saltydog Investor Ltd is not authorised or regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority and does not provide financial advice. Any information that you use, or guidance that you follow, is entirely at your own risk. Past performance is no guarantee of future results.

A PLACE TO LIVE
THAT COULD CHANGE YOUR LIFE

"We wish we had done it years ago"



NEW GUIDE





GET YOUR FREE
BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO PARK HOME LIVING

Everything you need to know to start your new lifestyle

Or return this coupon to get your FREE Beginner's Guide to: FREEPOST TINGDENE PARKS

Title: .....

Name: .....

Address: .....

.....

.....

Postcode: .....

Tel: .....

Email: .....

The Oldie

Find out how moving to a residential park can give you financial freedom and more

Do you dream of having the financial freedom to make the most of every day? Moving to a residential park can be the key that unlocks a fulfilling new lifestyle.

However, we know it's a big step and you've probably got some questions.

That's where our **FREE** introductory guide comes in. It tells you all you need to know to decide if park home living is right for you, from the financial and legal aspects of buying to real life stories giving personal insights from some of our residents.

At Tingdene Parks we've helped many people realise their later life dreams, joining our welcoming communities in wonderful coastal, rural or semi-rural locations.

Claim your **FREE** copy of our introductory guide to park home living today. You'll be taking the first step towards a carefree future.

Call for more information or to request your FREE guide 01933 427809

Or scan here

TINGDENE RESIDENTIAL PARKS

I Once Met

Tom Jones

'Did he make a pass at you?' asked Gerry the sports writer on the *Jewish Gazette*, a weekly community newspaper circulating in Manchester.

I'd just interviewed Tom Jones in his bedroom at the Milverton Lodge hotel, south of the city, in 1966.

Gerry and Tom had known each other years before, when he was a trainee journalist in his native Cardiff and turned down Tom's request to be his manager.

'A singer I knew called Johnny Bennett brought Gordon to see me at the Top Hat Club one night,' Tom told me. 'I was fronting a band called Tommy Scott and the Senators. Gordon was already big in the music industry in London.

'I signed up with him and, instead of being Tommy Scott or my real name Tom Woodward, suddenly I was Tom Jones!'

Gerry the Sport was only too pleased to contact Tom to set up the concert for the benefit of a local charity. 'It was good to catch up with him again,' said Tom.

The singer was in town to sing at that fundraising event. The publicity officer had called at our offices some weeks earlier to say he needed our help. He wanted to attract a big name for a concert he was organising at the Palace, Manchester's largest theatre, with a capacity of 2,600.

'I haven't booked anything yet,' he said. 'We've got to find out when Tom Jones is available first. He's the biggest name I could think of.'

And so Gerry the Sport told Tom all about the concert to provide funds for a village for disabled children.

I arrived at the Milverton Lodge, expecting to interview Tom in one of the reception rooms, instead of which I was conducted upstairs to his room. I'd had a pop column on my previous paper – so I was used to interviewing so-called celebrities. But here I was, aged 18, facing the man destined to become the hottest thing on the planet.

And uppermost in my mind was the Jewish angle I had to find for the story.

Tom was helpfulness itself. 'How about I was born three doors away from the synagogue in Pontypridd?' he suggested.

Had there ever been a synagogue in Pontypridd, I wondered.

'There's never been a Jew in Pontypridd!' he laughed.

There was one pensive moment during our interview when he said he sometimes woke up thinking his success had all been a dream.

'What, with a voice like yours?' I was incredulous.

'Every bugger in Wales has got a voice like mine!' he said.

We returned to the problem of the elusive Jewish angle. Tom solved it by offering to record a song in a different genre. 'Tell you what I'll do,' he said, 'I'll record "My Yiddishe Momme".'

And he did, for his album *Tom Jones Live! At the Talk of the Town*, in June 1967.

And, no, Tom Jones didn't make a pass at me.

Delayed puberty resulting from congenital hypothyroidism meant I'd gained two stone in two months, a fair proportion of which was acne.



Rampant lion: Tom in 1969

The Milverton Lodge hotel subsequently changed its name to the Rampant Lion.

Nothing to do with me.

Judith Krebs

Dream teen job? Working on a pig farm

MEMORY LANE

I was never sent up a chimney but I was, at 14, stuffed inside a steaming pigswill cooker.

Every weekend I'd be up at five, drag on my stinking jeans – Mum made me dress in the garden – and cycle to a farm.

First, mucking out.

'Persuade' the pigs out of their beds with a broom, then fork out the bedding. Dry sties are easily cleaned but if one pig starts micturating inside, then they all will and the pens become gas chambers. Fork the solid matter into the dumper and squeegee out the wet.

Steal a five-minute break while the pigs nibble at your boots. Smiling assassins – if you sit there long enough, they'll eat you.

If they escape, you have to catch the muscly rascals. As George Bernard Shaw observed, never wrestle a pig because, while both of you get dirty, the pig is the only one enjoying it.

Then the lorries arrive with bins full of food waste from schools, hospitals and holiday camps. Tip it onto a conveyor and sort through it for bones, cutlery and broken glass. Clean out the cookers.

Plastic bags and entrails would get wound around the central shaft and paddles. Stripped down to my underpants, I get lowered into the still-steaming cooker to cut the tangles away.

None of the adult workers can do this job because they're too big to fit through the hatch – or so they say. Emerge dripping with grease and wash under a steam hose.

I easily win 'What's the worst job you've ever had?' competitions with this story.

Take the pigs to the abattoir – grim but fun for a 14-year-old. Pigs know what's coming and their shrieking shreds the nerves. The slaughter seems like a betrayal. Shove them in, and then visit the shop – where we buy pork pies, possibly made from our own pigs.

Foul though it was, I loved it. Washing swill bins was heavy work and my spindly arms were developing muscles. I learned to swear, smoke, appreciate soft porn and drive.

This came in handy when I became a Corona boy and the driver told me to get on with the round while he went for 'afternoon delight' with a customer. I'd drive the lorry around the estate, aged 15.

I've done lots of stuff since, but nothing has ever quite compared to the pig farm.

By Steve Overbury (author of *Swinging London: Who Was Who and Where It Was At*), London SE22, who receives £50

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

GETTY

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



'It's getting serious. Brad is taking me home to meet his wife'

Rude Brian Sewell

SIR: In the latest *Oldie* newsletter (online), Barry Cryer attributes his favourite dirty limerick to Brian Sewell, but Sewell stole it from elsewhere – and rather ruined it. The correct version runs:

There was a young tart from Peru
Who filled her vagina with glue;
She said with a grin,
'They'll pay to get in
And they'll pay to get out of it too.'

Giving the young lady back her proper sex-worker status makes more sense of the commercial nature of her proposal. The original was definitely around before 1967, when my father Vyvyan [Holland, Oscar Wilde's son], who used to exchange such naughty limericks on a regular basis with Alec Waugh, recited it to me.

It was among the many censored from his own book of limericks, published that year.

Merlin Holland, France

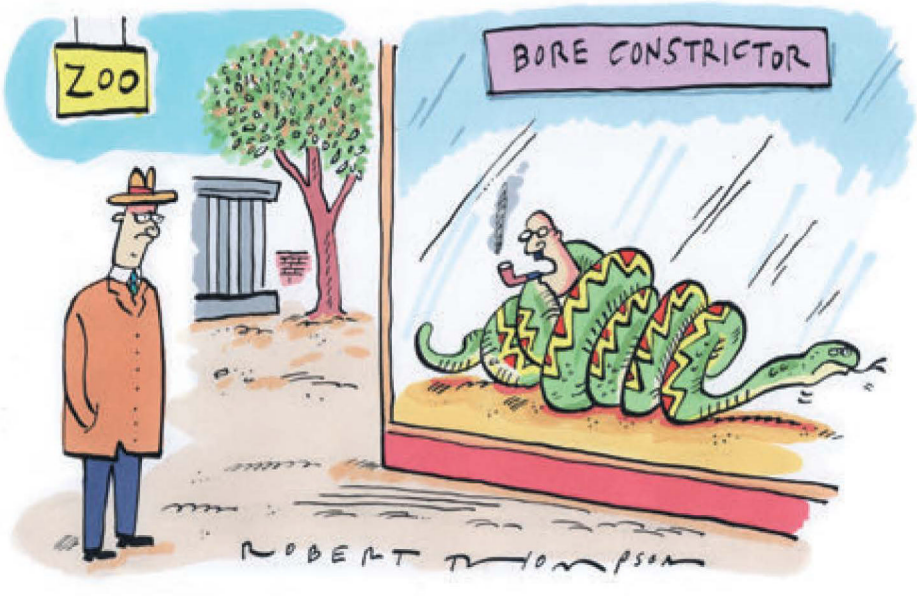
RIP literary biography

SIR: In his excellent review of a new biography of Katherine Mansfield (Books, November issue), Mr Wilson states that 'the lives of scribblers continue to sell'. I am going to disappoint him. Ask any publisher or indeed bookseller and they will say that it seems that this genre really has had its day. Maybe for the time being, at least.

Consider the endless number of biographies of Dickens that have appeared in the last decade. Then ask yourself, how many of these have we actually needed? Publishers not least have some responsibility for the decline in sales of books in this genre.

But I am glad Katherine Mansfield got through the net.

Robin Baird-Smith, Editorial Director of Swift Press, London NW3

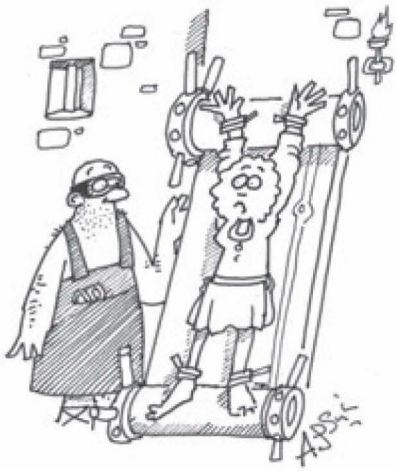


'The wife and I went to Lyme Regis last year'

His nibs

SIR: The service at James Smith & Sons (Overlooked Britain, October issue) is as delightfully old-fashioned as the shop itself. When I took an umbrella to them for repair, an impeccably well-spoken and well-dressed man used a fountain pen to write the necessary ticket.

Andrew Wardrop, London SW19



'OK, I'll talk. Just don't give me stretch marks'

Whistling for oldies...

SIR: Re the piece on whistling (Olden Life, November issue), I have to tell you I still whistle. I used to whistle when walking the dog, 20-odd years ago, and would whistle Britten's *A Ceremony of Carols* as I walked.

I haven't really whistled for a long time now, but I did learn to whistle between four fingers, and when I wish to attract my husband's attention because he has wandered off, I just whistle and he invariably turns, knowing it is me.

Then I can indicate that I am going into ... whatever, and he can wait for me. Works on my kids and my grandkids too.

Other people's reactions are wonderful, because I am a 72-year-old woman and nobody believes that it could have been me who whistled.

Always makes me laugh.

Yours,

Rhea Williams (not Whistler's mother, but the whistler herself), Ipswich, Suffolk

...and hospital patients

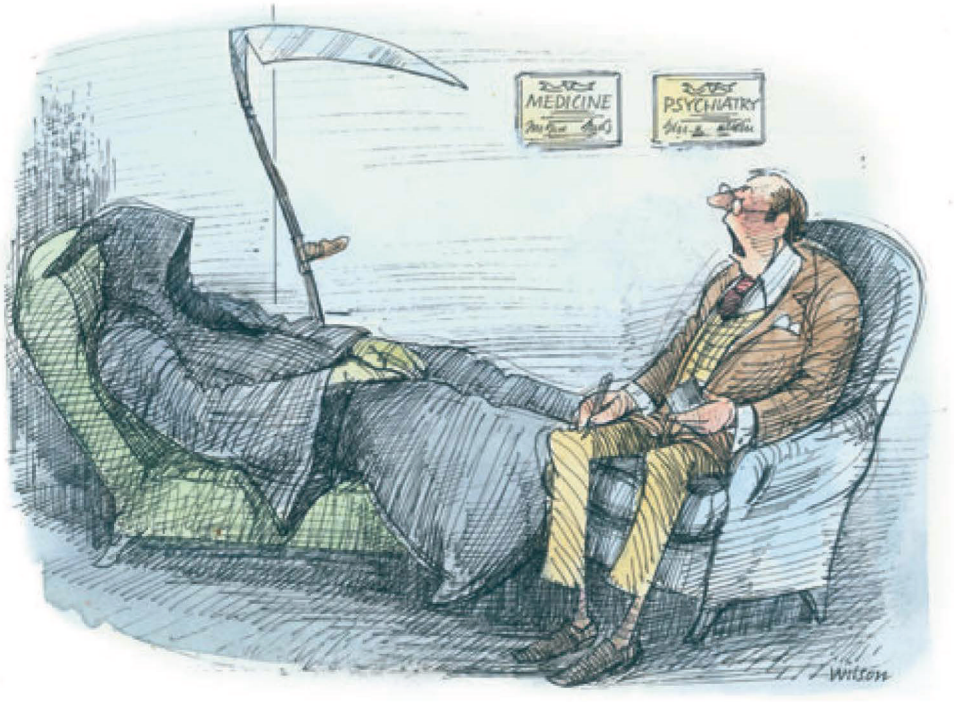
SIR: I smiled while reading the article on whistling (Olden Life, November issue). It reminded me of a misdemeanour of mine when I was a junior nurse in Edinburgh Royal Infirmary in the 1950s.

I was bed-bathing a patient in the eye ward. She had had a cataract operation, and in those days the patient had to lie flat for six weeks with small sandbags either side of the head, to keep still. The ward was silent by order of the Ward Sister.

Quietly I had gathered the equipment, drawn the screens and got started, and I decided to whistle a tune to cheer the lady.

The screen was pulled back and an angry Sister said, 'Nurse, stop that noise – you are causing a draught over your patient!'

Catherine Kay, Bathgate, West Lothian



'What do you mean, this will be our final session?!'

Highland Hallowe'en

SIR: David Horspool's article (History, November issue) repeats the misconception (among the English) that Hallowe'en is an American import, whereas it is, in fact, a Scottish export (to America).

Guy Fawkes Night has no relevance to Scottish history as it predates the 1707 Union, and was never widely celebrated in Scotland. In my Scottish childhood, Hallowe'en was always the main event.

Frank Duncan, Tain, Ross-shire

The write stuff

SIR: I was amused to read in Chris Platt's letter (November issue) that if you wish to find out about the Handwritten Letter Appreciation Society, you are directed to an email address.

Yours,

David Garnett, Northwich, Cheshire

Teutonic heroes

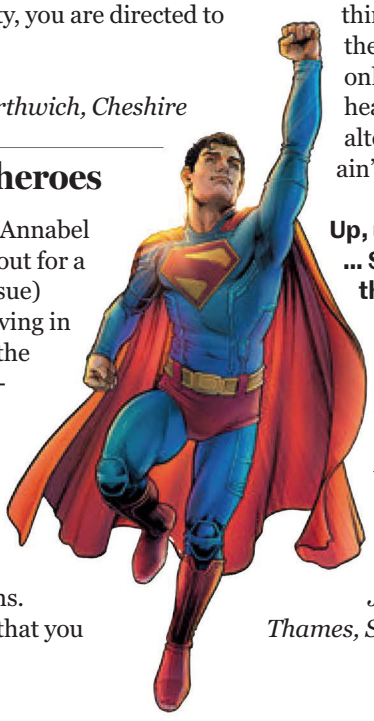
SIR: It sounds as if Annabel Venning ('Holding out for a hero', November issue) would be happier living in Germany, home of the *Hilfssherriff* or self-appointed deputy lawperson whose business it is to intervene whenever the collapse of civilisation threatens.

Heaven forfend that you should drop litter, fail to clear snow from the pavement in front of your house, stand on the cycleway, make a noise on a Sunday, or – almost too dastardly for words – cross the road in defiance of a red light! In the crowd waiting for the light to change will surely be a handful of *Hilfssheriffs* who will spew opprobrium upon you and call on you to repent your sins.

What a wonderful country. Unfortunately the trains are unreliable.

Yours etc,

Pat Malone, Bodmin, Cornwall



Up, up and away ... Superman to the rescue

Marrying for money

SIR: I had to laugh, ruefully, when I read Mary Kenny's Tipperary pre-nup 'What's thine is mine...' (Postcards from the Edge, October issue). It was only after getting married that I heard the punchline, slightly altered to '...but what's mine is ma ain' and followed by a wee laugh to soften the reality of it.

I didn't help myself by boldly promising our wedding guests that we would not quarrel over money; I would be in charge of income and she would be in charge of expenditure. After 60-plus years, I remain married to her – for my money.

James Robertson, Sunbury-on-Thames, Surrey

RIP Gillian Tindall

SIR: I have always loved Gillian Tindall's books, fiction and non-fiction, so was pleased to see her name on a recent article ('I lived too long', November issue).

Until I read the heading, then the article itself. Such a cry of sadness and despair, it haunts me still.



'As the cells separate, you see them updating their Tinder profiles'

By the time I had finished it, I myself felt like the subject of the picture *The Meditation* which accompanied the article.

It also made me consider her plea for the legalisation of assisted dying. As the proposed bill stands, her misery would not have qualified her for an assisted death, unless her recent un-specified illness would have.

I hope she was granted the perfect end she longed for.

Anne Penney, Hamble, Hampshire

Books



Franco's reign in Spain

CHRISTOPHER HOWSE

El Generalísimo: Franco: Power, Violence and the Quest for Greatness

by Giles Tremlett

Bloomsbury £30

Franco was an unlikely hardman: 5ft 4in tall, weedy in youth, with a high-pitched voice; pear-shaped in middle age, with the military nickname, Paca la Culona – Fat-Arsed Fanny.

Yet in 1936 he took over the coup that set off the Spanish Civil War. After the victory, he remained Caudillo for 36 years, until his death, aged 82, 50 years ago, on 20th November 1975.

He was not so much an enigma as a Sphinx without a secret. There were two Francos: as a soldier, fearless, confident and decisive; as a civilian, calculating, slow and cautious.

He never admitted to mistakes that nearly lost him the Civil War; like turning aside to secure Toledo before advancing on Madrid (allowing the Republicans time to shoot 2,400 prisoners).

Franco and, *rear*, Republicans surrender in Somosierra, 1936

Giles Tremlett makes the tally of shootings in cold blood: 130,000 Republicans during the war and 20,000 after it. The Republicans, he reckons, shot 50,000 behind the lines. These were on top of hundreds of thousands killed in combat. Franco exercised the same brutal suppression he had practised in the army in Africa, trying to put down Moroccan resistance.

So why, the author asks, was there so little rejoicing at his death? Partly, he

GARY WING

thinks, because there had been an economic boom after the early years of hunger. Partly, though, the Spanish people had been 'schooled in Francoism'.

In Franco's eyes, the military insurrection of 1936 was a crusade. The choice was clear: 'You are either with Communism and Moscow, sacrificing Spain and its Christian civilisation, or with the crusaders for a great, powerful and respected country.'

For myself, I paid little attention to Franco for years. He seemed an unpleasant reflection of an era that had passed. But I came to realise that he had poisoned the wells. He claimed to stand for the history and religion of Spain.

So anyone after his time who admired the art and architecture of old Spain and the pronounced character of its peoples ran the risk of being mistaken for a sympathiser with Franco.

In reality, his appreciation of Spanish culture, particularly religion, was largely a matter of externals. When the commander of the Italian forces that captured Malaga in 1937 sent him a relic of St Teresa of Avila's arm, he kept it safe for the rest of his life, as a sort of trophy or talisman.

We don't hear of his putting into practice the teaching of St Teresa on prayer. In the Spanish Foreign Legion, Franco was known for having no fear, no commerce with women and no attendance at Mass.

Through the influence of his wife, Carmen, Franco came to spend 20 minutes or so hearing Mass said by his chaplain each morning.

But the Vatican was unconvinced during the Civil War of the morality of his strategy: bombing civilians, mistreating the Church in the Basque country and allying with the Falangists, who resembled anti-Christian Nazis.

Franco's ideology was hard to discern. He welded together incompatible elements into his totalitarian 'Movement', the only party allowed. It wasn't as easy as combining the red beret of the Carlists and the blue shirt of the Falangists.

The Carlists were known as 'the oldest continuously existing popular movement of the extreme Right in Europe'. They fought for God and the (correct) monarch. The Falange opposed communism and capitalism. But Franco chose not to confess fascism; his attitude was military authoritarianism.

Estranged from his father (who had shamed Franco's mother by going off to Madrid to live with his mistress), Franco had made the army his family.

In Morocco, he vied with commanders such as the extraordinary José Millán-Astray, who lost an arm in Morocco and then an eye. With the sobriquet of El Glorioso Mutilado, he rejoiced in the motto of the Spanish Legion, '*Viva la Muerte!*' – Long live Death!

Giles Tremlett, a historian who spent years as a foreign correspondent in Spain and wrote a good biography of Catherine of Aragon, has an eye for the human peculiarities of Franco's times.

When Franco imposed his brother Ramón (regarded as a Communist Freemason) as commander of the air base in the Balearic Islands, his fellow officers, when he entered the mess, would stand up, salute and leave.

The author's compelling narrative cuts through the tangles of Spanish war and peace. If it doesn't supply the answer to what made Franco tick, it may be because the dictator's interior mechanism had seized up.

Christopher Howse is author of The Train in Spain

Down and out in Hove

RUPERT CHRISTIANSEN

From the Castle to the Hove-l

By Nicholas Lezard

Salt £10.99

Nicholas Lezard has sustained a feat rare in the annals of literary journalism: writing a weekly column about his own life that isn't either irritatingly banal or infuriatingly egocentric.

For more than a decade, he has been lighting up the back pages of the *New Statesman* with missives that are razor-sharp in observation and richly comic in incident, growing out of his sorry plight as a middle-aged writer, estranged from his wife and eking out an existence at a level once described by Theresa May as 'just about managing'.

This is his third collection, running from 2017 to the outbreak of Covid three years later. The columns have been assembled chronologically and they develop into a novelistic narrative, with recurring characters and ongoing situations. Their tone is neither tragic nor whiney.

Lezard isn't actually destitute or sleeping alfresco, and he benefits from occasional windfalls, writing book reviews (including for *The Oldie*) and the charity of compassionate friends. He buys books, drinks with gusto and 'just about' pays his bills.

Whereas most of us can merrily tap a plastic rectangle when we need or want something, Lezard is doomed to watch the pennies and count his coins.

Train fares and official letters in brown manila envelopes make him sweat. Far from being 'comfortably off', he survives on a good-humoured Micawberish optimism that something will turn up. 'I try to look on the bright side,' he sheepishly claims.

Booted out of his beloved 'hovel', 'a very wonky maisonette just off Baker Street' rented for ten years on grace and favour, Lezard embarks on a period of having no fixed abode, sofa-surfing round London, from Penge to Stamford Hill. Another chum's benevolence leads him north to Alyth, near Blairgowrie, where he occupies an annexe of a castle and embarks on a temporary romance with a nameless 'Welsh enchantress'.

Things pick up for him at this point, despite it turning so cold that he 'puts things in the fridge to stop them from freezing'. He even likes the dour Scots, warmly praising them without apparent sarcasm for their 'high level of civility and courtesy' and 'general level of intelligence'.

But he misses his three teenage children desperately – love for them is his softest spot – and moves back south to a 'hove-l' on the borders of Brighton and Hove, where he remains to this day, still at the mercy of the winds of fate and HMRC.

Does he write quickly or slowly, one wonders? His authorial voice gives the illusion of someone spontaneously chatting to the reader, and one never feels he is making things up or straining for effect.

Yet his turn of phrase has an elegance, suggesting that the prose must be more artfully composed than it appears, and one suspects that, for all the *Withnail and I* squalor of his domestic circumstances, he meticulously crafts what he puts on paper, drawing on an erudition that embraces both *Tristram Shandy* and Lee Child.

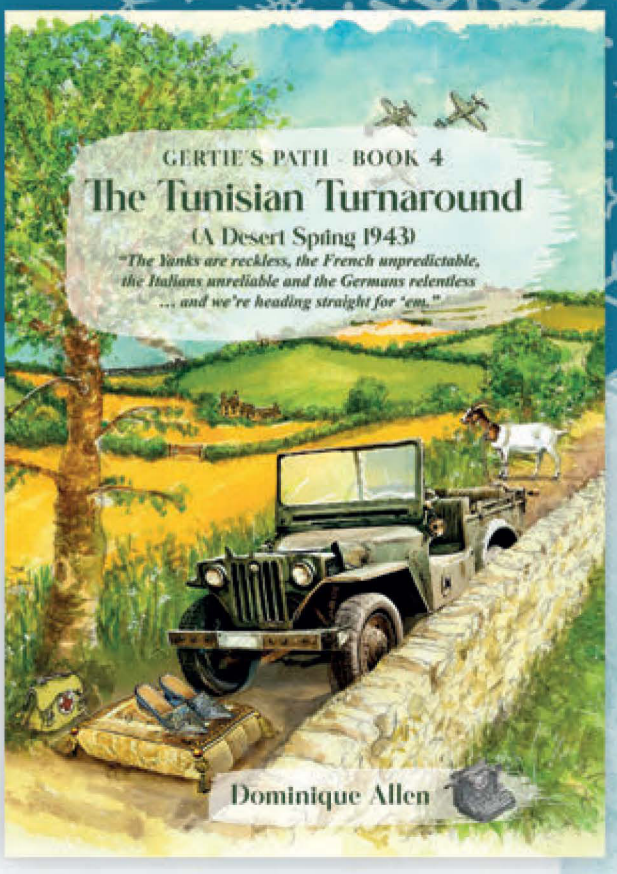
'I don't feel comfortable without being near a copy of *Ulysses,*' he admits.

Accepting of his parlous circumstances, he is not bitter and twisted.



'Will I still have to fetch things?'

New book in WWII series along Gertie's Path...



Gently-paced stories designed for an unhurried read.

These stories are set within the Second World War, during key moments and through decisive battles ... but they are essentially about an English village lad and his friends helping where they can, fighting when they must and discovering country wisdom and common-sense hold true the world over, war or no war!... ***of how to find a path through the worst of times... to recognise the best in each other.***

Following the popular **Salvaged Summer trilogy**

Bk 1: All for Overalls (Summer 1940)

Bk 2: If the Sock Fits! (Autumn-Winter 1940)

Bk 3: Raids, Rallies & Reserves (1941)

...this new series of books continue along **Gertie's Path:**

Bk 1: Not So Safely Forgotten (Spring 1942)

Bk 2: The Biscuit Tin Summer (Summer 1942)

Bk 3: Restless Torches (Autumn-Winter 1942)

Bk 4: The Tunisian Turnaround *(a desert Spring 1943) - The Yanks were reckless, the French were unpredictable, the Italians were unreliable and the Germans were relentless ... and they were heading straight for them.*

A hint of things within The Tunisian Turnaround:

Jack had his maps and aspirations, Mike his rifle and the memory of those Maltese airfields and Gertie had his satchel with that battered old biscuit tin ... and an abiding respect for Aunt Luci.

Between that long dusty slog and the sandstorm there was desert wisdom to be learnt. Only then, after the camel race, could that sniper be dealt with.

From there a nifty bit of negotiating was needed to resolve the skirmish between the rubble and the wreckage. Though, thankfully, the shepherds had a keen sense of humour and, with some tall-talking and fast-riding, the two tag-alongs were ready for more. They'd be late getting to the rendezvous, but for good reason!

It was a harrowing crawl along that Kasserine gully but 'message delivered'. After that the best advice was "think like a poacher, not a hunter,"... and with that in mind they retrieved 'Battered Bess' and got her shuffling again, ready to begin the Battle of Slipper Top Hill. Bess was the bait, the goats were decoy and Gertie needed that ledge to signal those RAF pilots ...

"You've come a long way from those gentle lanes of home, haven't you lad?"

[ahhh, dear readers . . . haven't we all!

"Came down to Malta holding steady, didn't it?" Gertie smiled. Mike matched him grin for grin. But Cyril knew the truth of it: "That's what 'did it' for North Africa in the end, Lads - the indomitable Malta, a few spanners ... and a village errand-boy with a satchel!"

Available from Walkers Bookshop and Ink&Ember Book Café, Stamford, also The Oundle Bookshop, also via Lincolnshire Life ONLINE Bookshop, or for any further enquiries contact the 'scrawny author' directly at dommyallen63@hotmail.co.uk Individual books £8.99 + £3.99 (P&P) ea.

He maintains a mass of friends, and enjoys plenty of innocent pleasures – cricket, grotty pubs, *University Challenge*.

He is intelligent enough not to exploit genuine tragedy or injustice for a cheap laugh: 'While my main purpose in life is to crack a joke, not everything is funny.'

His distaste for Brexit and the shenanigans of the Conservative Party may be evident throughout, but his politics aren't heavy-handed – he's not primarily a satirist; more a diarist. And it is for his vivid pictures and reflections of the quiddities of ordinary life that Lezard can be most relished.

He pays tribute to his favourite second-hand bookshop ('in it lie the fragments of a civilisation, shored up against its ruins'). He suppresses his rage at noise on the Quiet Coach ('Not the Letting Everyone in Astonishing Detail Know What You're Having or Not Having for Dinner Coach'). He loses a battle against a dysfunctional smoke detector: 'I've become quite used to it; almost fond, in a way. It's like the pulse on a heartbeat monitor: it reassures me that everything is ticking over.'

And he discovers he suffers from a condition known as dysania – 'a word for finding it very difficult to get out of bed in the morning'.

In 2019, Lezard computes that he must have written 500 of these brilliant columns. Six years later, things haven't got much better for him and he's still going strong: long may he continue.

Rupert Christiansen is author of I Know You're Going to Be Happy: The Story of a Sixties Family

Tudor pin-ups

DAVID EKSERDJIAN

Holbein: Renaissance Master

By Elizabeth Goldring

Paul Mellon Centre £40

The amount we do or do not know about the lives of Renaissance artists is almost mind-bogglingly uneven.

In the case of the hero of Elizabeth Goldring's biography, Hans Holbein the Younger (c 1497-1543), we are tolerably well-informed about his comings and goings, and indeed about his artistic productions, but completely in the dark about his inner life.

So we gain a vivid sense of Albrecht Dürer's personality from his correspondence, above all in the form of the chatty letters he wrote in 1506 from Venice to his great friend Willibald Pirckheimer, back home in Nuremberg.

But we do not possess so much as a single letter penned by HH, as he signed himself.

Holbein's first major biographer was Karel van Mander (1548-1606), whose *Het Schilder-boeck* (1604) is the Northern equivalent of Vasari's *Lives* (1568). Van Mander explains that unfortunately the person who had the



Favourite Holbein: *Christina of Denmark*

goods on Holbein, the art-loving Dr Amerbach, died eight or ten years before he tried to make contact with him.

He therefore wrote to his heir, Dr Iselin, who refused to assist unless handsomely remunerated. At this point, Van Mander, who says Iselin should really have been called Eselin (little donkey), gave up the chase. Admittedly, there may have been nothing very revealing in the Amerbach material, but we shall never know.

In the circumstances, Elizabeth Goldring very sensibly devotes a lot of her attention to the people who filled Holbein's life, and in particular to his patrons, who were often also his sitters.

She naturally follows Holbein on his various travels, above all to England, where he lived in Sir Thomas More's house from December 1526 to 1528, and then again from 1532 until his death in 1543.

This leads her to think about his day-to-day existence, and to wonder about how he communicated with people on his first visit here. She makes the point that when he reached these shores, he spoke German, but had no English, almost no Latin and minimal French.

Having said that, she fails to wonder whether he did not learn quite a bit of the lingo during the decade and more of his second sojourn.

This approach might not have proved very gripping if Holbein's subjects had been a bunch of boring nonentities or – as in a number of cases – remained stubbornly unidentified. Happily, on the whole they were what Miss Jean Brodie would have called the crème de la crème.

Better yet, they were not all of a piece but, on the contrary, ranged from humanists and ecclesiastics such as Erasmus, More and the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Warham, to the King and his entourage – not least his wives and near misses.

Picking out favourites is not easy, but the full-length portrait in the National Gallery of one prospective bride, *Christina of Denmark*, takes a lot of beating.

As promised, Goldring concentrates on Holbein's life, but this does not mean his art is ignored, and what emerges very clearly is the extent to which – as a result of the accidents of survival – our sense of his oeuvre is profoundly different from his contemporaries'.

Both in his native Basel and in London, he was responsible for large-scale decorations outside and in, none of which has survived other than in the most fragmentary form.

What is more, his most ambitious group portraits – whether of More and his family, of Henry VIII accompanied by his parents and current Queen (Jane Seymour), or of Henry again, this time with the Barber Surgeons – either are known only in the form of copies or are grievously damaged.

For us, therefore, it is his technically flawless and spectacularly beautiful single or occasionally double portraits – drawings and miniatures, as well as paintings – that guarantee his immortality.

No doubt, like all good courtiers he was more than willing to flatter, and it has been claimed that his *Anne of Cleves* – Goldring's cover girl – was far more lovely than the Flanders Mare herself and led to royal disappointment. Even so, Holbein did manage to keep his

Mulberry Live In Care

care straight from the heart

Across the UK

We provide 24hr Live-In Care

(short or long term) in many other areas like:-

- Dementia Care
- Companionship
- Palliative/End of Life Care
- Rehabilitation/Convalescence
- Respite
- Stroke
- And other care needs

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.

At Mulberry Live-In Care we provide highly experienced carers to give 24 hour care to our dementia clients and the main focus is continuity! So the carer can arrive and get straight on with looking after the client even though the client may not recognise the carer, things are easier because the carer knows what they are doing, knows the clients likes and dislikes, giving them added security and that is key!!

*Care is based on **YOUR** requirements not us telling you!!*

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

head, and was evidently supremely gifted when it came to capturing a likeness.

To Goldring's credit, it is hard to imagine that another biography will be required for quite some time, but there are still countless unsolved mysteries.

My favourite is to wonder what Holbein made of his wife, Elsbeth. Van Mander claims she was trouble and that he was only too delighted to steer clear of her. Moreover, on his return to London, he did indeed take a second 'wife' and have children with her.

Be that as it may, there are few more tenderly affectionate portraits than the one he painted in Basel in 1528 or so of Elsbeth with their son and daughter.

David Ekserdjian is author of The Italian Renaissance Altarpiece

Grecian 2025

PAUL CARTLEDGE

Greek to Us: The Fascinating Ancient Greek That Shapes Our World

By John Davie

Bloomsbury £14.99

John Davie is a lad o' (many) pairts.

Former Classics schoolteacher, lecturer at Trinity College, Oxon, published translator of Seneca, Horace, Cicero and Euripides, organiser of the Dead Poets – sorry, Pets - Society website and, not least, co-author in 2022 with a certain Arrius Montanus of *Et Tu Brute? The Best Latin Lines Ever*.

Nor is he a stranger to the pages of *The Oldie*. In the March 2020 issue, he lamented what he considered then a 'tragic decline' in language and essay-writing skills coupled with 'rampant' grade inflation.

It gets better, however, if we track back to 2012 – when we find him regaling the members of the Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies with the welcome news that growing old has its perks – at least, so it sometimes appeared in Ancient Greece.

In the book under review, Davie reverts to his Hellenic side. Borrowing from another Shakespearean saw for his title, he provides a lively conspectus of the world of the Ancient Greeks (not of 'Ancient Greece'; there was no such single politico-geographical entity), not digging too deep, and providing Greekless readers with all the help they might need to initiate them into the mysteries of the Greek alphabet and translations from Ancient Greek to English.

With one exception, Davie opts for a thematic mode of description and discussion. The exception is the chapter entitled 'Alexandria and the Hellenistic Age', a period (c 323-30 BCE) distinguished by the foundation and flourishing of Egyptian Greek Alexandria.

Through Alexandria's museum and library, the extraordinary intellectual riches created by Greeks from Homer to Aristotle were passed on to conquering Rome and thence, via Byzantium and the various Renaissances and Enlightenments, to us.

The other 12 chapters, occupying between them only a couple of hundred pages, cover the waterfront, from what we (but not they) call religion to what we (but not they) call art.

Davie starts at the very top with the gods (and goddesses), heroes and heroines and their often problematic interactions with more or less lowly mortal humans.

Love, including sex and friendship (*philia* covers affection and mutuality as well as being just good friends), comes next. Make love, not war is a modern trope – Ovid said every lover was a soldier.

Davie couples war not with love but with enmity. Ancient Greeks were uncommonly prone to hatred, and all too often resorted to warfare against fellow Greeks – indeed fellow citizens – as much as against non-Greek 'barbarians'.

Philosophy – the word as well as the thing – was one of the many fertile inventions of the Greek fifth and fourth centuries BCE, especially but not only in Athens – the 'city hall of wisdom', as Plato called it.

What of the other half of the human race? Aristotle, for all his many virtues, was by no stretch of the imagination a feminist. Most male Greeks didn't feel the need, as he did, to try to justify their chauvinism. So it's remarkable that at any rate some Ancient Greek women – for conspicuous instance, the women of Sparta – didn't always have to suffer at best second-class status.

Aristotle coupled his denigration of women with that of those he condemned as 'slaves by nature'. Davie segues all too smoothly from women to slaves, who were ubiquitous, usually non-Greek, mostly taken for granted and everywhere indispensable.

A happier note is struck with the transition to Ancient Greek science and technology. Readers may well have encountered the quite extraordinary – so far unique – second-century-BCE Antikythera mechanism, possibly connected distantly to maths genius Archimedes.

They will certainly have at least heard of the Hippocratic Oath. Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius's Greek personal physician Galen lies outside Davie's chronological range. He was second to none in acknowledging his debt to the school associated with the name of Hippocrates, the pioneer medical theorist from the island of Cos.

Even more will have at least a nodding acquaintance with the Ancient Olympics, of which the modern iteration is so bastard an offspring.

Finally, we have the art – or



'OK! OK! You can go to the pub!

SPINNING THE PLATES OF FEAR AND OPTIMISM

There is a famous Wall Street saying: "A rising tide lifts all boats."

That has certainly been true for the six months starting from the beginning of May. Global stock markets have staged an impressive recovery, and by the end of October many had reached new all-time highs. But while the breadth of the rally has been remarkable, what stands out most is who's leading the way.

Two of the best-performing areas are technology and gold, unusual bedfellows.

Typically, gold does well in periods of stress, when investors are worried about inflation, conflict or instability. Technology stocks, on the other hand, tend to thrive in more optimistic times, when people are excited about innovation and future earnings. It is rare for them both to rise together.

And yet, in 2025, that is exactly what has happened.

The Technology & Technology Innovation sector has risen by more than 40 per cent over the last six months. At the same time, specialist gold funds have climbed over 60 per cent, driven by central bank buying, inflation concerns and a weaker dollar.

It is a market "spinning two plates at once": hope and fear.

Investors want to take part in the growth story offered by artificial intelligence and digital transformation, but they are also looking for protection. They are chasing returns while hedging against uncertainty. Underneath the surface, there is still a lot of nervousness.

At Saltydog Investor, we organise funds into groups based on both sector and volatility. Our most adventurous category, 'Full Steam Ahead Emerging', includes areas like technology, Asia and emerging markets. These are often the fastest-growing sectors, but also the most volatile. You can make strong gains, but also suffer sharp losses if sentiment turns.

This year, the returns have been exceptional, but history shows the sectors that rise the fastest tend to fall the furthest when the tide changes. That is why it pays to stay alert.

The legendary trader Jesse Livermore once said: "After spending many years in Wall Street and after making and losing millions of dollars I want to tell you this: It never was my thinking that made the big money for me. It always was my sitting. Got that? My sitting tight!" There is wisdom in not selling too soon. When you are in a rising market, sometimes the best thing to do is nothing at all.

But Livermore also said: "Sell down to the sleeping point." If your investments are making you uneasy, if they are keeping you up at night, you may be taking on too much risk. Better to reduce your exposure than to be forced into a decision under pressure.

At Saltydog, we try to strike that balance.

We publish weekly data on fund and sector performance so you can see where momentum is building and where it might be fading. Our system does not try to predict the future. It simply shows what is happening now.



Douglas Chadwick, founder of Saltydog Investor

We also run two demonstration portfolios, using our own money, to show how the system works in practice. These portfolios are updated regularly and include a mix of mainstream funds for stability and more adventurous funds to take advantage of strong trends.

You do not need to gamble, and you do not need to guess. But you do need to pay attention.

The past six months have been kind to investors, but also unusual. The simultaneous strength of gold and technology suggests this is not a typical bull market. Confidence is rising, but caution has not gone away. At times like this, it helps to have clear data, a simple plan, and be prepared to head for safety if conditions change.

After all, as Warren Buffett said: "It's only when the tide goes out that you see who has been swimming naked."

For more information, or to take our two-month free trial, visit: www.saltydoginvestor.com



To receive our **free guide** *An introduction to Successful Trend Investing*', or to sign up for our **two-month free trial**, please go to our website **www.saltydoginvestor.com**

With our easy-to-use trend investing method you could protect your savings from downturns and still achieve excellent returns when conditions are favourable.

saltydog investor

Saltydog Investor Ltd is not authorised or regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority, and does not provide financial advice. Any information that you use, or guidance that you follow, is entirely at your own risk. Past performance is no guarantee of future results.

rather arts – of the Ancient Greeks, summed up in so many ways in just the one emblematic building known to us (but not to the Ancients) as the Parthenon.

As *Oldie*-readers would hope, indeed expect, from so skilled a pedagogue, *Greek to Us* is a primer of quality on almost all things Ancient Greek. It might usefully be complemented with Jim McKeown's ever-intriguing *Cabinet of Greek Curiosities* (2013), expansively subtitled *Strange Tales and Surprising Facts from the Cradle of Western Civilization*.

Strange but true? Possibly. John Davie would know.

Paul Cartledge is Professor of Greek Culture emeritus at Cambridge University

Dying of the light

PATRICK BARKHAM

Death of an Ordinary Man

By Sarah Perry

Jonathan Cape £18.99

The magpie has long been a harbinger of death.

The only bird that failed to mourn during the crucifixion of Jesus would be seen scavenging beside gallows and battlefields in medieval times.

One symbolises sorrow – but two magpies flit into Sarah Perry's luminous account of the nine days between when her father-in-law, David, is diagnosed with oesophageal cancer and his death.

The first appears in the novelist's prose when David begins breathing 'as if there are magpies chattering in his throat' – the much-feared 'death rattle'.

And the second comes a few days into what is Perry's first, vivid experience of a loved one dying: 'I understood that already I'd begun to form images and paragraphs out of what was happening to David; that I watched him not only with love's frightened attention, but with the assessing acquisitive eye of a magpie.'

This is searching self-criticism of the writerly disposition, and the moral turbidity around turning loved ones into 'material'.

It is said that if great literature shows people as they are, then good memoir must shine a light on the narrator's flaws. Perry's portrait of David, a retired chemist and a shy, decent, working-class Christian, is both loving and unsparing.

We see the particularity of him – the food he spills, his stamp collection, nylon trousers, bungalow and possessions, from a varnished pine chest of drawers to his bedside clock radio: 'not dirty, precisely; only greased with the deposits of his life'.

Perry also gazes at her own behaviour and character with the beady-eyed perspicacity of a magpie during what is a bruisingly speeded-up version of the terminal cancer rollercoaster that so many of us ride.

When she takes David to meet his oncologist and her father-in-law suddenly needs a wheelchair, she is thrown into a caring role that she (wrongly) fears, never having had children, she is unfit for. 'I felt as if I were an understudy stumbling onstage, who'd never bothered to learn her lines,' she writes. She confesses to impatience, admits to bemoaning the inconvenience of David's dying and has a sudden urge to buy an expensive coat.

Perry's writing is superb. As David weakens, his white hair takes on 'the downy look of a dandelion clock'. In hospital, David notices how many things are blue, from nurses' disposable aprons to gloves which seem 'too tight at the knuckle and too loose at the wrist'.

Perry explores her own lack of experience of death alongside the sometimes wonderful and sometimes jaundiced attitudes of the professionals – consultants, GPs, carers and health administrators – who are players in David's final act.

As she observes, the relationship between doctor and patient encompasses acts of service that resemble love within 'an extraordinary asymmetry of power'.

There is one gruesome encounter with a brusque GP who impatiently directs Perry and David to fill out a 'ReSPECT' (sic) form, a vital piece of paperwork in which a dying person chooses how they want to die – in hospital or at home.

She and David are 'hurried, frightened and anxious to please'. Perry brands the GP a 'stupid callous cruel woman' and yet undercuts herself by reflecting that it was not the doctor's job 'to wring her hands, or eke out our shock'.

Most powerful of all is Perry's writing about faith: David's quiet certainty and her own lack of it, despite a very religious upbringing. There is a stunning moment when Perry and her husband, Robert, join David's pastor at the bedside and sing a hymn. Despite being dosed up on morphine and slumbering, David starts to sing, word-perfect, and, eyes closed, raises his arms above his head.

When the song ends, he sighs, turns away on the pillow and rests.

'It was both the saddest and the most triumphal thing I'd ever seen,' writes Perry. David is never lucid again.

David does not fear death, perhaps because 'fear not' is the phrase that occurs most often in scripture – once for every day of the year. As Perry notes, it's either a coincidence or a marvellous piece of design.

Perry does not think that familiarity with dying can erase her own fear of death, but she hopes that 'it may be possible to bring the act of dying into the scope of living, and so fear its events and its struggles no more than life's other events'.



'Today's special is a chicken bone, lightly covered in dirt, left on the sidewalk for three days and licked by several local neighbourhood dogs'

We're here because you were there



All photos from Boom Radio listeners

BOOMradio

DAB+ and 'Alexa, play Boom Radio'

As the French rabbi Delphine Horvilleur writes, 'The role of the storyteller is to stand by the gate to ensure it stays open.' Perry does this and more in a dazzling and dignified tribute to living, loving and dying.

Patrick Barkham is The Oldie*'s Taking a Walk correspondent*

Rampant Rabbit

CHRISTOPHER BRAY

John Updike: A Life in Letters

Edited by James Schiff

Hamish Hamilton £40

A decade and a half on from John Updike's death, hefty books bearing his name keep on coming.

We have already had *Higher Gossip*, a posthumous collection of essays and book reviews. And there was *Always Looking*, a large-format, four-colour, super-calendared assemblage of Updike's writings on paintings and painters. Plus a two-volume boxed set of his *Collected Stories* from the Library of America.

Now we get *John Updike: A Life in Letters*, a book that, though nigh on 900 pages long, could be a whole lot heftier. By the editor's calculations, Updike (1932-2009) wrote at least 25,000 letters, 'though the number could be substantially higher'.

Updike took up his pen early. The first letter in James Schiff's selection was written when Updike was nine.

It's addressed to his father, who was in hospital, and if it's no great shakes as literature, there is no gainsaying its literacy. Young Johnny (as he signs himself) has already mastered the full stop, the comma, the dependent clause, the elision, the ellipsis and even the parenthesised throwaway gag.

Little wonder that, by 15, Updike was advising the editors of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* to check out James Thurber's story 'The Whip-Poor-Will', with a view to republishing it in their pages.

Nor that, by 17 – a time when most boys are doing nothing but chase girls – Updike was writing letters to *Life* magazine, saying how 'surprised and dismayed' he had been to read in the magazine letters from 'cranks who think they are being both wise and witty when they compare an infant's scrawlings or the dribblings on a garage door to the work of a sincere, unique painter like Jackson Pollock'.

In that same year, 1949, Updike sent a letter to the magazine from which his name would, eventually, become inseparable, the *New Yorker*.

Updike wanted advice on how he might get his cartoons into the paper.

'What size should they be?', he asks with touching naivety, before wondering whether the pictures should be mounted – and what weight of cardboard he should use. All to no avail. Updike never did get a picture into the magazine – though it published many of his stories.

Many, but not all. One of the most startling things about these letters is just how many of Updike's stories the *New Yorker* turned down.

As late as 1974, by which time Updike was a bestselling author of high critical stature, the magazine was giving the thumbs down to some of his stories.

Fortunately for Updike, he loved rejection slips. 'I always feel happier when I've received one,' he wrote to Mary Pennington, the woman who would become his first wife. 'I love them … for some damn perverse reason.'

These letters make clear how autobiographical much of Updike's fiction was. While Updike was alive, it was a critical commonplace that the salty urges and side-of-the-eye lusts central to his novels were exercises in style.

Updike, like many an American painter before him, was out to ascertain how low-rent subject matter could be while still providing an armature for high art. Fair enough – though anyone who has read the letters will have a hard time arguing that the bedroom antics in, say, *Couples* or *Roger's Version* weren't drawn straight from life.

Updike is disarmingly upfront and personal about the way one or other lover sates his prodigious needs. One lover has a 'yummy c**t'. Another is an all-round 'neat c**t'. And the woman who would become his second wife is 'all c**t'.

Luckily for Updike, his obsessions were reciprocated. In one of her letters, the woman who would become Updike's second wife fantasises about drinking tea laced with his seed – a reverie that sheds new light on that moment in *Rabbit at Rest* when Harry Angstrom ruminates on how 'c**t would be a good flavour of ice cream'.

All this fictional candour means that Updike's letters shed little new light on his life. He was a workaholic wizard with words. In 1996, he received a letter from one Duncan Andrews saying Andrews had loved Updike's book of poems from 1958, *The Carpentered Hen*, and asking, 'Have you written anything else?'

Only 17 novels, ten collections of short stories, five other volumes of verse and four books of criticism, Updike replied, mockingly adding, 'Well, such is fame.' Thankfully, as this collection attests, Updike's fame endures.

Everyone, including Mr Andrews, ought to read it.

Christopher Bray is author of Michael Caine: A Class Act



'They're nursery rhymes – not fake news'

COMMEMORATE THREE DEFINING MOMENTS IN BRITISH HISTORY

Piece together the history of VE Day, D-Day and the Battle of Britain with this commemorative three-puzzle set.

IWM IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUMS

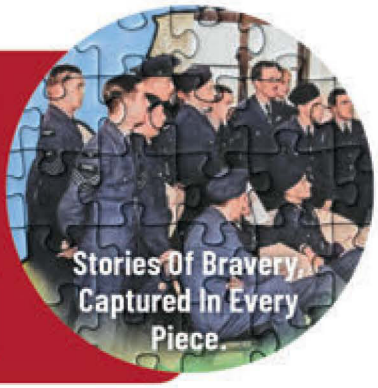
Officially licensed by the Imperial War Museums.



Stunning, historically inspired artwork perfect for collectors and history enthusiasts.

Officially licensed by the Imperial War Museums, these exclusive puzzles allow you to delve into some of the most significant moments in British history. Illustrated in glorious detail to tell stories of unforgettable courage and triumph, this exceptional collection combines powerful imagery with challenging puzzle design to keep you enthralled for hours. This superb commemorative collection makes a thoughtful gift for history buffs and ardent puzzlers alike.

1000 pieces. 50x66cm/19.7x26 inches.



SAVE 20% OFF

ALL WHEN YOU BUY THE VE DAY, D-DAY & BATTLE OF BRITAIN BUNDLE.

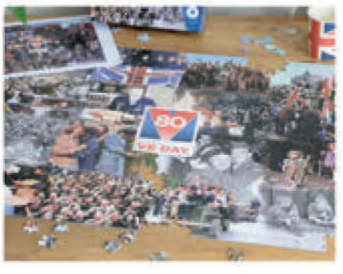
NOW £47.97*

FREE DELIVERY WHEN YOU USE CODE IMPERIALTO AT CHECKOUT





3 set bundle



Official Imperial War Museums puzzles - bringing monumental moments in British History to life.

This very special collection combines the best in high quality puzzles with some of the most significant events the world has witnessed. Each puzzle gives you the opportunity to delve further into the history of our great nation.

"Good value for money. My father was a Spitfire pilot in WWII and formed part of the cover for D-Day so the puzzles in a way are part of him too."

Mrs Hodge

Rated 'Excellent'

★★★★★ Trustpilot

*Price valid until 25/12/25

Order today and bring Britain's wartime history to life - one piece at a time.

Visit **alljigsawpuzzles.co.uk/ImperialTO**

Call **01837 811 317**

Lines open: 09:30 - 16:00 GMT Mon to Fri, exc. Bank Holidays Landline number costs standard UK rate.

Quote offer code **ImperialTO** when ordering

ALL JIGSAW PUZZLES

Commonplace Corner

The trouble is not that I am single and likely to stay single, but that I am lonely and likely to stay lonely.
Charlotte Brontë

The secret of being a bore is to tell everything.
Voltaire

Think before you speak. Read before you think.
Fran Lebowitz

Pure technique is the spider's web without the spider – it glitters and catches but doesn't kill.
Charles Wright

I've always loved high style in low company.
Anita Loos

Education is the ability to listen to almost anything without losing your temper or your self-confidence.
Robert Frost

It takes a very long time to become young.
Picasso

Who ever hears of fat men heading a riot, or herding together in turbulent mobs? No – no, your lean, hungry men ... are continually worrying society, and setting the whole community by the ears.
Washington Irving



Lauren Bacall (1924-2014)

Men need to feel important. They feel better when they're with younger girls or unknown girls.
Lauren Bacall

I don't think that because I'm not married it's made my life any less. That old-maid myth is garbage.
Diane Keaton

He wrapped himself in quotations – as a beggar would enfold himself in the purple of Emperors.
Rudyard Kipling

Technological progress has merely provided us with more efficient means for going backwards.
Aldous Huxley

You know you're getting old when the candles cost more than the cake.
Bob Hope

A lover's love is stronger than a lover's hate.
Euripides

It felt to me like America was always wanting to resolve things too quickly.
Robert Redford

Imperfection is beauty, madness is genius and it's better to be absolutely ridiculous than absolutely boring.
Marilyn Monroe

To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.
C S Lewis

All men who have turned out worth anything have had the chief hand in their own education.
Walter Scott

A good plan violently executed now is better than a perfect plan executed next week.
George S Patton

Polar exploration is at once the cleanest and most isolated way of having a bad time that has yet been devised.
Apsley Cherry-Garrard



TOM PLANT

Trendy hamburgers

Hamburgers have recently got completely out of control, particularly in height.

Kebab skewers are meant for kebabs, which are rightfully served horizontally on a plate, so you can slide the meat off with a fork. They shouldn't be used to keep the skyscraper of burger ingredients upright, just for the exact amount of time it takes to teeter from the kitchen to your table, before you collapse and take someone's eye out.

Soon the altitude of your lunch will mean it's brought to you on a trolley pulled across the floor, just so you can view the top before attempting to scale it with a mountaineer's pickaxe.

Unless you have a giant's hand span, these burgers are impossible to pick up. Instead, you need to grip the skewer and carve slices off, like the rotary donor-kebab meat at my local Turkish takeaway.

Either that or eat it like a corn on the cob, with sauce dribbling down to your elbows, while the 17 ingredients wait to burst forth from one side like a horde of slippery clowns escaping a circus car.

Oh, and what is a 'smash burger', and why is it twice the price?

The name indicates that the minced meat has been unnecessarily attacked during the cooking process.

Restaurants now employ handball players to run from one end of the kitchen to the other with the ball of meat, before slamming the thing on the grill to rapturous applause from the sous-chef.

If that's not bad enough, this K2 of a meal is then served to you on a chopping board or roof tile. The four oversize 'hand-cut' chips are arranged in Turner Prize fashion: displayed in an open brown paper bag or on a tiny replica of a shopping trolley.

What's next – soup in a giant sieve?
S A JOHNSON

SMALL DELIGHTS



Having the exact number of pegs needed for the washing to be hung out.
CAROLE GREEN, NEW ZEALAND

Email small delights to editorial@theoldie.co.uk

Arts



FILM

HARRY MOUNT

THE CHORAL (12A)

Alan Bennett, now 91, is one of the last living writers who grew up in the shadow of not just the Second World War – but the First World War too. He was brought up in Leeds, surrounded by First Word War veterans and war widows.

Bennett is completely drenched in the past, but not in a rose-tinted version. It's more nostalgia in its original Greek sense – the pain of going back.

No wonder he is pitch perfect in *The Choral*, a quite wonderful film. It's very moving and very funny – the rare combination that Bennett specialises in, where the poignancy heightens the humour and vice versa.

It's the story of the Choral Society, set in 1916 in a Yorkshire mill town – filmed in Saltaire's splendid, robust classical terraces and mighty Salts Mill.

The tragedy of war is the ever-present background to the story but, cleverly, you never see a single scene on the Front. Because the upmarket male singers of the Choral have joined up, the society must recruit rough teenagers – and a new choirmaster, in the shape of Dr Henry Guthrie (Ralph Fiennes).

Fiennes is in his element as the melancholy, buttoned-up Guthrie – who has to conceal not only his homosexuality but also the fact that his lover is from Germany, where Guthrie worked before the war.

One of the many tightly wound strands of Bennett's inspired plot is how the most beautiful German music is brutally damned by the war. The Choral were to sing the *St Matthew Passion*, but Bach is now banned – as are Brahms and Beethoven.

And so the Choral settles on Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius*, which allows for a masterly cameo by Simon Russell Beale, playing Elgar as a pompous, camp luvvie – horrified by Guthrie's butchering of his masterpiece to accommodate the restricted cast of a war-battered town.

Bennett calls on the best character actors as the backbone of the Choral's patrician committee: Alun Armstrong as the grumpy town undertaker; Mark Addy as the photographer, snapping the lads before they set off to fight; and Roger Allam as the town's mill-owning tycoon, his grandiosity concealing the tragedy of his son, an early victim of the war.

Director Nicholas Hytner, Bennett's long-term collaborator, deftly weaves all those plot strands together into a single gripping drama, without the mini subplots ever seeming gratuitous or incomprehensible.

There's the mill girl whose sweetheart is missing in action and so she embarks on another romance – only for her original squeeze to return from the war, minus an arm. Then there's the ageing town tart (Lyndsey Marshal), who selflessly sleeps with a virgin just before he heads for the Front.

As so often with Bennett, there's plenty of sex, full of awkwardness and longing. If Harold Pinter was, to use the hackneyed phrase, the weasel under the cocktail cabinet, Alan Bennett is the cream puff – and the long-dormant vibrator – under the settee.

In one scene that would have been ham-fisted in another writer's hands, the amputee asks his departing girlfriend for one last favour – to masturbate him because he's lost his right hand and hasn't yet trained up the left. She does so – and then he bursts into tears.

All this could be bleak – modern films *love* to be bleak. But Bennett's inspired humour always comes in to lift the mood, change the tone and maintain your constant attention.

The late Barry Cryer (1935-2022), born in Leeds a year after Bennett, often used to ring him up. Bennett would cry, 'Joke! Joke!' – hungry for some of Barry's perfectly delivered lines.

Barry wondered why Yorkshire produced fewer comedians and comic writers than Lancashire (not forgetting Leeds-born Ernie Wise, whose centenary is celebrated on page 16).

Bennett said he prefers Yorkshire's



SONY PICTURES CLASSICS

All together now: Dr Henry Guthrie (Ralph Fiennes) in *The Choral*

low-key humour to the cheeky-chappie Cockney and Lancashire variety.

That laconic, glass-half-empty Yorkshire wit is in full flow here. And the Bennett miracle is to combine deadpan humour and outré sex with high art.

Guthrie suddenly quotes German – causing horror all round – when he recalls his favourite *St Matthew Passion* lines. The amputated squaddie sings in Latin as Gerontius.

But it's never clever-clever for the sake of it; never the writer advertising his planet-sized brain, as so many vain writers like to do. It's all in the service of that Bennett cocktail – a mixture not so much of high- and lowbrow, but of serious and comic. And unique – long may he continue to write.

THEATRE

WILLIAM COOK

DEATH ON THE NILE

Touring nationwide, until 23rd May

'Plays are much easier to write than books,' said Britain's queen of crime Agatha Christie. 'You are not hampered by all that description which clogs you up – and stops you from getting on with what's happening.'

That's why her whodunits are perfect for the theatre. Her prose is clunky but her plotting is sublime, and in Hercule Poirot she created a sleuth to rival Sherlock Holmes. No wonder her light, compulsive novels have spawned so many dramatisations. Unlike highbrow novelists, she gives dramatists room to breathe.

This creative freedom has resulted in a huge array of adaptations, of hugely variable quality. I adored the 1978 film of *Death on the Nile*, starring Peter Ustinov as Poirot. I couldn't stand Kenneth Branagh's 2022 remake. So where does this theatrical adaptation rank? I'd say somewhere in between.

This touring production is a second outing for writer Ken Ludwig, director Lucy Bailey and designer Mike Britton, who staged a successful adaptation of *Murder on the Orient Express* last year.

The main challenge of dramatising Agatha Christie is that she asks us to believe the unbelievable.

Why on earth would any murder suspect, be they innocent or guilty, agree to be interrogated by a fussy little Belgian with no official authority whatsoever, and then sit down with all the other suspects to hear how he cracked the case?

Of course, the entire premise is utterly absurd – and though Christie gets away with it in print, stage and screen are less forgiving. Any adaptation must tackle this fundamental problem. It must play the whole thing either tongue-in-cheek or completely poker-faced. This lively yet uneven production never quite makes up its mind.



GARY SMITH

Deft on the Nile: Hercule Poirot (Mark Hadfield) investigates

This *Death on the Nile* falls between the two stools of straight suspense and wry self-mockery. Consequently, you're never quite sure how to react – whether to gasp with horror at the bloody slaughter of a beautiful young woman, or to snigger knowingly at Poirot's humorous asides.

This discord is reflected in the diverse playing styles of this seasoned cast.

Individually, they're fine, but collectively they feel awkward because the tone of the play keeps shifting. Esme Hough is deliciously creepy as jilted fiancée Jacqueline de Bellefort (the part immortalised by Mia Farrow), but her nervy rendition is undermined by the comic tenor of the other roles.

Mark Hadfield's amiable Poirot embodies this uneasy compromise, alternating unpredictably between levity and gravitas. I found him far more persuasive in his graver, darker moments. I'd say the same for this play as a whole.

I was intrigued to hear James Prichard, Christie's great-grandson (and chairman/CEO of Agatha Christie Ltd) describe the interaction between writer Ken Ludwig and director Lucy Bailey: 'She probably angles towards the more serious side. He likes the humour.'

Prichard seemed to suggest this was a winning combination. I'm inclined to disagree. For me, the scary stuff worked much better than the self-deprecating jokes.

And yet, when I saw this show, at a midweek matinée, the theatre was packed with oldies, obviously loving every minute. Why were they so keen to see it, when they must know perfectly well who did it (surely they'd all read the book, or seen it in the cinema or on TV).

Maybe it's because, in these troubled times, we yearn for something familiar and reassuring. And what could possibly be more reassuring than an Agatha Christie mystery?

In Christieland, the good end happily and the bad unhappily. The villains get their comeuppance, and the old order is restored. Though the setting of this tale is foreign, like all her tales it's about a vanished England, and that's why it endures.

Like Shakespeare's Arden, Christieland is an imaginary English idyll – a place we'd love to escape to, if only we knew how.

Happily, the appeal of Christieland isn't confined to nostalgic senior citizens like me. I took my 21-year-old daughter along, and she really enjoyed it (she particularly liked Mike Britton's spooky cruise-ship set). She said the afternoon flew by.

Afterwards, we decided an Agatha Christie play is pantomime for grown-ups. Sure, it's terribly cheesy, but even a flawed production, like this one, is a lot of fun.

RADIO

VALERIE GROVE

'One feature of this age of relentless technical innovation,' said Amol Rajan on *Today*, 'is those American men you may never have heard of but who wield unimaginable influence and power.'

Enter Matthew Prince, 50-year-old billionaire founder and CEO of Cloudflare, a utility company whose customers number six billion. Geek, wonk, nerd (his words), ex-lawyer, richest man in Utah, and a descendant of the Browning who designed the first semi-automatic shotgun.

We must put up firewalls and 'block the bots',' Prince said. Google's AI Overview and ChatGPT are changing the business model of the internet, making any number of 'crawls', without 'content-creators' getting paid much. Hence firewalls. That was the gist.

But Amol had something to read out: 'We asked Google for a response,' he said, 'and they pointed us to what they said after the Competition and Marketa Authority decided to designate the company with strategic market status…'

For crying out loud! Gobbledy-Google. I think Amol felt a bit ashamed.

Later in the programme, shoehorned among the items *Today* whizzes through in the final ten minutes, came a human voice – talking coherent good sense, drawing on the wisdom of his 90 years. It was Don McCullin.

Since he first went to photograph scenes of war in Palestine and Vietnam in 1965, making himself famous, 'what's kept me awake at night is how awful the world is. I've spent the last 60 years not making much difference to the way the world behaves.'

But surely his work has made us all more aware of the futility of war, said Justin Webb. 'Photo-journalism has died,' McCullin said. 'Newspapers aren't interested in the miserable lives of suffering people, but in our narcissistic world of footballers, beautiful people, film stars.'

Anyway, who would go to war nowadays and be at the mercy of invisible drones? Nor did he know what would become of his profession.

Amol said he hoped he would sound like McCullin at 90. He won't, but it's something to aim for. My audio awards for this month go to Miss Nemone Lethbridge at 93 (on *The Magnificent O'Connors*), recalling the Krays, and to Petula Clark at 92 (on *Woman's Hour*). She remembered how Frank Sinatra got out a 'piece' – gangster slang for handgun – and put it on the table when mobsters walked into an LA club.



Witness of the century: Don McCullin, 90

Katherine Rundell's voice (on *A Carnival of Animals*) had a crystalline clarity. And Stewart Copeland, ex-drummer of the Police (son of Miles of the CIA), was unable to name a single Beatles song but gave a memorable onomatopoeic rendering of Ringo's drumming (pshfwah-oom-boom-thump-boom) – on 'Come Together'.

Adrian Chiles's taking over of *Saturday Live* has caused a *Feedback* flurry; I welcome the absence of shrieks and giggles. Lord Bragg's replaying of old *In Our Times* episodes at least stops speculation about his replacement.

And congrats to Paddy O'Connell for his practical joke on the day the clocks went back. At 9am, instead of his voice, we heard Eric Coates's 'By the Sleepy Lagoon'. Aargh! We clutched hands in horror – had we missed *Broadcasting House*?

Then, with perfect timing, Paddy played the jaunty *Archers* switch-off tune. And he came on to introduce Gyles Brandreth, reading Keats's *Ode to Autumn*.

TELEVISION

FRANCES WILSON

First stop for producers pitching a new TV drama is location, location, location. Find your place in the sun and the script will follow.

Frauds, ITVs so-so heist drama, starring Jodie Whittaker and Suranne Jones, was set for no particular reason in Malaga and filmed in Tenerife. *The Day of the Jackal* was filmed with maximum expense in Croatia and Spain. And Sky's new thriller *The Iris Affair* gives us a tour of Sardinia, Florence and Rome.

The Iris Affair is a cat-and-mouse caper starring Niamh Algar as code-breaking genius Iris Nixon. Algar, who was superb in *Malpractice*, specialises in women who have just about had enough, which makes this role a no-brainer.

Iris happily spent her time solving crosswords and online puzzles until she was recruited by Cameron Beck (Tom Hollander) to activate a topological quantum device, invented by a mysterious man called Jensen who has since lost his mind.

'Genius is madness on a good day,' Cameron tells Iris in his darkest and most faraway voice. 'Jensen ran out of good days.'

Jensen called his device, which can sing sad songs, 'the lamentation of God', but everyone else calls it Charlie Big Potatoes. For the scientists among us, Charlie, who looks like a giant fungus and



Cameron Beck (Tom Holland) and Iris (Niamh Algar) in *The Iris Affair*

SKY

is kept beneath a bell jar in a concrete barracks in Slovenia, uses Majorana zero mode quasi particles for cubits and has organic tentacles which have allowed him to grow his own brain.

Charlie's purpose is to cure cancer, reverse climate change and 'think thoughts which have yet to be thought', but none of this can happen until he's activated. And if he's not activated soon, the evil investor who provided the billions to build him will have Cameron killed.

But Jensen, who hates Charlie and attacked the device with an axe, is now mute and unblinking in a wheelchair. His codes, however, are kept in a diary, using an encryption system which only Iris can break. It doesn't take her long to see that one of Jensen's strange illustrations is the DNA sequence of *Deinococcus radiodurans*, which means he's using a book code based on DNA, 'the book of life'.

When Jensen goes on a murder spree, Iris takes the diary and hotfoots it to Sardinia, where she hides, under various aliases, in a beach hut to die for. Not only are the Sardinian and Roman police now in pursuit of her; so too are a gang of murderous drug-dealers, while a conspiracy YouTube channel, called Two Seconds to Midnight, is devoted to locating her whereabouts.

The show's creator, Neil Cross, cites as his influences Hitchcock's *To Catch a Thief* and Patricia Highsmith's Ripley novels, but the likeness is superficial at best. *The Iris Affair* wants to be a classy thriller, but is instead a madcap comedy.

The show reminded me of *The Man with Two Brains*, where Steve Martin plays Dr Michael Hfuhruhurr, whose colleague Dr Alfred Necessiter has invented a way of storing living brains in jars.

When Dr Hfuhruhurr discovers he can communicate telepathically with the disembodied brain of Anne Uumellmahaye (they sing 'Under the Bamboo Tree' together), it leads to a love affair. There is a very touching scene where they go on a romantic date in a rowing boat.

Time was we had no idea why so many middle-aged women in 19th-century novels lay swooning on sofas, because menopause was a taboo subject. It is now mainstream, thanks to Davina McCall's groundbreaking 2021 Channel 4 documentary *Myths, Sex and the Menopause*.

For further menopause TV, try ITV's *The Assassin* (location: Athens and the Greek island of Salamis), with Keeley Hawes as a retired gun for hire going through a hormonal shift, and ITV's *Small Achievable Goals*. In this excruciating Canadian sitcom, Julie (Jennifer Whalen), a producer overlooked for promotion on her 50th birthday, and Kris (Meredith MacNeill), a TikToker with a make-up show for older women, start a podcast together.

When we first meet them, Julie is having a hot flush and Kris is pulling open a door that clearly says 'Push'. Later that morning, Kris has a meltdown in the local supermarket where she is buying adult diapers.

The whole thing is almost too painful to watch. Where is the topological quantum solution for women who have just about had enough?

MUSIC

RICHARD OSBORNE

JOHANN STRAUSS AT 200

It's Johann Strauss's stepdaughter, Alice von Meyszner-Strauss, who's said to have spotted Brahms dining in his favourite Viennese restaurant. After making herself known to him, she asked if he would mind signing her napkin.

Taking out his pen, Brahms sketched the opening bars of the *Blue Danube* waltz and signed it, 'Alas, not by Johannes Brahms.'

Compliments don't come much greater than that. Strauss (1825-99), born on 25th October 1825, is celebrating his bicentenary.

The *Blue Danube* is Strauss's most popular composition and one of his most profound – the kind of smiling-through-tears piece of which Mozart and Schubert were also consummate masters.

At Vienna's annual New Year's Day concert, the waltz follows the orchestra's traditional new-year greeting '*Prosit Neujahr!*'. In 1987, Herbert von Karajan, whose sense of the music's incipient melancholy had few equals, followed the greeting with the plea 'Peace, peace, and once more peace'.



Johann Strauss II (1825-99)

As a gesture, this was both timely and historically apt. The *Blue Danube* had begun life in 1867, not as a glitzy concert waltz (it was never that), but as a Shrovetide choral waltz written in the wake of Austria's debilitating defeat by the Prussians at the Battle of Königgrätz.

The original text, by Josef Weyl, had attempted to counter national

melancholy. 'What's the use of regrets, all this mourning? It's carnival. Defy the times. Rejoice, be of good cheer!'

The more famous orchestral version was commissioned that same year by the Benjamin Bilse Orchestra (the Berlin Philharmonic to be) for performances during Napoléon III's self-aggrandising 1867 Paris World Fair. Strauss himself directed from the violin.

It was an instant success. By Christmas, more than a million copies of the sheet music had been shipped worldwide.

By the oddest of coincidences, Strauss's theatrical masterpiece *Die Fledermaus* (*The Bat*) also had its roots in the 1867 World Fair.

In 1866, Jean-Jacques Offenbach had joined with two of the most gifted writers of the day, Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy (Offenbach's collaborators on *La Belle Hélène* and the librettists of Bizet's *Carmen*), to create a mischief-making vaudeville designed to subvert the event in advance. It was called *La vie parisienne* and shows sensation-seeking tourists flocking to 'gay Paree' where they're royally fleeced and seduced by unscrupulous locals.

Meilhac and Halévy returned to the theme five years later with their play *Le Réveillon – Die Fledermaus* to be – lampooning what they saw as the self-indulgent behaviour of Paris's well-heeled upper class in the wake of their country's catastrophic defeat in the Franco-Prussian war.

Offenbach being unavailable, the rights were sold to Vienna, where a team of highly skilled writers honed the drama into a text tailor-made for Strauss's particular genius.

Just as the Parisians had adored *Le Réveillon*, so the Viennese adored *Die Fledermaus*. Their enthusiasm prevailed despite those who thought the city should still be dressed in sackcloth and ashes after the humiliation of 9th May 1873 – Black Friday – when the high-rolling Viennese banking system collapsed, sending shock waves throughout the Western world.

In a city in which duplicity is a way of life, the story itself was never a problem. Who, after all, is Dr Falke, the eponymous bat, if not the *maître de plaisir* – 'pimp' would be too ungentlemanly a term – of the dissipated young Russian Prince Orlofsky whose champagne-fuelled ball sits at the heart of the opera?

Die Fledermaus hasn't been seen in Britain as often as it should be. But then, where sexual peccadillos are concerned, ours has always been a somewhat prurient land, as well as a less forgiving one. Better safe sex with G&S than these French-inspired shenanigans which end – shock, horror – with forgiveness all round, and yet more champagne.

Luckily for this year's bicentenary, the Grange Festival bucked the 'ignore *Fledermaus*' trend with a new staging by Paul Curran. It was sung in English, which tends to give the piece a somewhat G&S feel. But no matter; it was a joy.

It was Gustav Mahler who changed the work's designation from 'comic operetta' to 'comic opera' – a reclassification that saluted the work's manifold musical riches while allowing Mahler to stage it within the sacred portals of the Vienna Opera itself.

He introduced it with a fundraising gala. None of the company's international stars was exempt from taking part. Real champagne was provided for the final chorus.

And it caught on. Houses such as the New York Met soon took up the idea. It even reached the gramophone, with Decca's famous 1960 Vienna Opera celebrity-studded 'gala' recording conducted by Karajan.

GOLDEN OLDIES

MARK ELLEN

RIP THE HATCHET JOB

'The Clash,' the *New Musical Express* bellowed in 1976, 'are the sort of garage band who should be speedily returned to the garage, preferably with the motor running.'

I remember being stunned by this. Imagine them reading it! They'd probably just pack it in and get a proper job. They didn't.

But the *NME* was brimming with that kind of bile.

It's far easier to be funny when vitriolic, and half the thrill of the knockabout music press back then was the shameful, toe-curling pleasure of a jarring dismissal.

Who can forget *Creem* magazine suggesting the singer of Black Oak Arkansas was 'obnoxious' and 'should be assassinated'?

Or the *Village Voice* two-word tilt on George Harrison's *Dark Horse* – 'hoarse dork'?

Rolling Stone's one-to-five rating couldn't encompass Andrew Ridgeley's first solo album. They had to cook up a new category: half a star. The wounded Wham! guitarist never made another record.

Sometimes this venom was elegantly chiselled, as when the *NME* (again) said Tom Verlaine of Television's voice was so strangulated 'he sings like a woman from that African tribe where they stretch their necks to giraffe lengths by wrapping brass coils around them'.

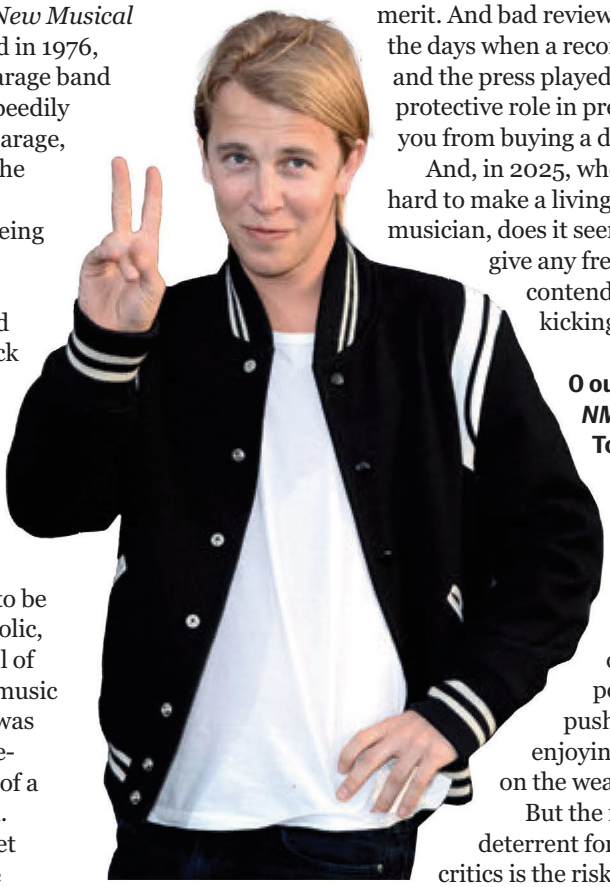
Other times, it was blunt and brutally colloquial, like *Rolling Stone*'s opener on Bob Dylan's *Self Portrait*: 'What is this sh*t?'

Even more painful for Tom Odell than the *NME*'s nought-out-of-ten assault – 'He'll be all over 2013 like a virulent dose of musical syphilis' – was the agony of his father ringing their office to complain.

But the damning review is now a rare event. I can't remember the last time I read one.

Part of the reason – unlike advance notice of books and films – is that the music being assessed can now be sampled free online and you can make your own decision about its relative merit. And bad reviews are from the days when a record cost £20 and the press played a protective role in preventing you from buying a duff one.

And, in 2025, when it's so hard to make a living as a musician, does it seem harsh to give any fresh-faced contender a kicking?



GETTY

0 out of 10: *NME* roasted Tom Odell

Taylor Swift's song 'Mean' accused one such poison-pen-pusher of enjoying 'picking on the weaker man'. But the main deterrent for most critics is the risk of

NATIONAL GALLERY; NATIONAL MUSEUMS LIVERPOOL



***An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* (1768) by Wright of Derby**

retaliatory wrath from their target's supporters. Even the mildest slight about an established act spurs the fan base into lynch-mob savagery on social media, naming the writer and, often, the publication he or she represents.

Both are usually keen to appeal to 20-year-olds and don't want to seem cruel, old or out of touch.

That is why the last bastions of the vicious review are the lone gunslingers on their YouTube channels such as the no-nonsense, valuably honest, American hotheads Anthony Fantano and Rick Beato.

The tables have turned. 'What is this sh*t?' outraged viewers often post.

This suits everyone. The fans feel they've got even. The critics get more clicks and, thus, more advertising. Win-win.

EXHIBITIONS

HUON MALLALIEU

WRIGHT OF DERBY: FROM THE SHADOWS

National Gallery, 7th November to 10th May 2026

Joseph Wright of Derby (1734-97) has frequently been tagged the Caravaggio of the Enlightenment for his best-known subjects. This show concentrates on them – the theatrically-lit, often night-time, scientific experiments and industrial processes.

Caravaggism – otherwise tenebrism – refers to the light-dark *chiaroscuro* style and intense realism developed by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1610). It swept much of 17th-century Europe, coming late to Britain, where Baroque art was suspect, as an expression of the Counter-Reformation.

In France, it was the art of the authoritarian monarchy. Even in the Dutch Republic, where tenebrism flourished, Caravaggio's closest disciples were principally centred on Utrecht, which had a large Roman Catholic population.

Comparatively few British artists visited Italy until the 18th century was well under way – and by then the religious significance was less important. Wright's 1753-55 tour of Italy was the making of a previously conventional portrait- and landscape-painter, by introducing him to Caravaggio's work.

Another form of Italian light also stayed with him. Although he did not actually witness a major eruption of Vesuvius during his time in Naples, he will have seen Volaire's explosive night-time paintings of them, and he went on to paint many of his own.

Back in London, Wright was not the only artist to fall out with the young Royal Academy, and he retreated to Derby, though he was not regarded as a provincial until after his death. Derby was close enough to Birmingham for him to benefit from close relations with the scientists, philosophers and industrialists of the Lunar Society – who powered the Enlightenment.

The frequent full moons in his pictures may well refer to the monthly meeting day that gave them the name.

Luckily, Derby was far enough removed to escape trouble when the 1791 Birmingham rioters targeted the self-styled 'lunaticks' as French Revolutionary sympathisers. Did Edmund Burke have him in mind when he castigated radical scientists who 'consider men in their experiments no more than they do mice in an air pump'?

The exhibition focuses on the candlelight series painted between 1765 and '73, including Derby Art Gallery's *Lecture on the Orrery*, the National's own *Experiment on a Bird in an Air Pump*, and *Viewing the Gladiator by Candlelight*.

There are also some of the mezzotints that won him an international reputation. The exhibition goes on to Derby in 2026.

HOW TO STAY SANE IN AN INSANE WORLD

How to Stay Sane in an Insane World is a good-humoured and honest mental health podcast.

Listen to our well-known and some not so well-known (but always interesting) guests open up about their mental health struggles, how they learned to cope, and their triumphs, and the practical ways that they stay mentally afloat today.

8TH DECEMBER
Watch our first LIVE filmed episode on Youtube, with filmmaker
CAROL MORLEY
at London's Riverside Studios cinema
www.youtube.com/@howtostaysaneinaninsaneworldjt/videos

How to stay sane in an insane world



Check your dials daily

Past guests include:

- Tim Clark *(Robbie Williams' manager)*
- Ian Rankin *(#1 crime writer)*
- Nicky Chinn *(pop maestro of Chinnichap)*
- Charlie Mortimer *(author of Dear Lupin)*
- Richard Morton Jack *(biographer of Nick Drake)*
- Lord Clive Brooke *(House of Lords member)*
- Jan Ravens *(Dead Ringers)*
- Gordon Darroch *(All the Time We Thought We Had)*

Listen on Spotify, or anywhere you get your podcasts

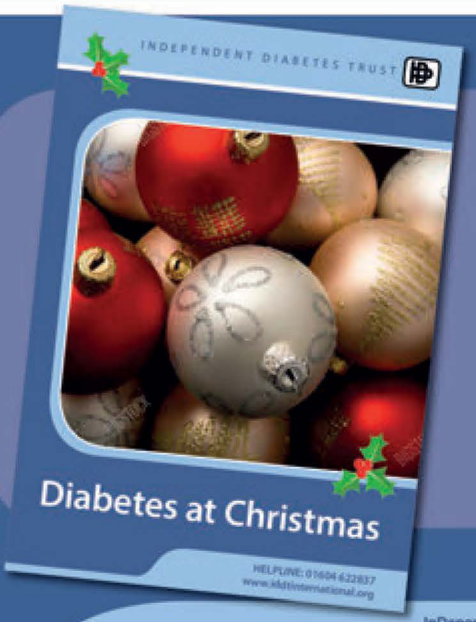
- howtostaysaneinaninsaneworld.co.uk/mental-health-podcasts/
- audioboom.com/channels/5031372-how-to-stay-sane-in-an-insane-world-shed-talks

INDEPENDENT DIABETES TRUST

WORRIED ABOUT DIABETES AT CHRISTMAS?

DIABETES AT CHRISTMAS – this booklet is full of tips and advice for enjoying the festive period.

ASK FOR YOUR FREE COPY TODAY
TELEPHONE: 01604 622837 or
EMAIL: martin@iddtinternational.org



InDependent Diabetes Trust
P O Box 294, Northampton NN1 4XS.
www.iddtinternational.org
Charity Number: 1058284 Registered Number: 3148360

Pursuits



GARDENING

DAVID WHEELER

FEEDING TIME

'Feed the birds, tuppence a bag/ Tuppence, tuppence, tuppence a bag.'

Oh dear – I've probably given you an earworm that'll annoy you for 24 hours.

But that's my sermon today, although you don't need to pay anything.

I'm on my ancient knees in a long, curving flower border, wondering which dead perennials to cut down and which to leave. So many have seedheads, avian larders for the approaching cold months.

To provide seeds for birds, many plants with prominent seedheads, such as teasels, sunflowers, coneflowers (echinaceas) and cosmos, allow their flowers to mature and dry on the plant to form nutritious seeds. These provide natural, protein- and fat-rich food sources for various bird species throughout autumn and winter, supplementing their diet while offering shelter for overwintering insects.

We didn't come to this garden until late August. So I'm having to guess what the buff and fluffy remains – snapped, bent and sticking out in awkward angles – were in their summer magnificence.

The peonies were resplendent when we first viewed the property in June. By moving day, their dying but still attractive foliage was spiked with stout stems bearing open capsules filled with glossy black seeds.

Alas, peony seeds are not safe for birds and considered toxic to most animals, owing to the presence of paeonol, a compound that can be harmful if ingested.

So, moving on… Ah, buddlejas, no longer waving fragrant, come-hither pink and mauve racemes. Instead, they're dangling brown tassels filled with minuscule seeds.

Here's food aplenty for sparrows, bullfinches and many another garden bird.

If you're without buddlejas and want one for its summer beauty and nectar-rich flowers to attract butterflies, be careful not to choose any of the sterile (seedless) or poor-seeding forms, such as 'Miss Ruby', 'Miss Molly' or any of the Lo & Behold hybrids.



Echinacea flowers will also attract butterflies in summer, along with an assortment of bees and other pollinators. Their seeds are rich in protein and beloved by many members of the finch families.

Echinacea purpurea, the purple coneflower, is the most common of the brigade and a reliable buffet-provider if you forget to refill the bird-feeder.

Sunflowers provide birds with a nutritious food source – especially black oil sunflower seeds and sunflower hearts, which are rich in fats, proteins and essential vitamins and minerals for energy and survival.

They're easily grown annuals, fast-growing with enough of a spurt to keep the grandchildren amused throughout the long summer holidays.

If their large, seed-filled, decaying 'faces' annoy you, simply cut the old stems and hang them upside down under a sheltered eave to provide a safe takeaway service for our feathered friends. *Helianthus annuus* 'Mammoth Russian' sunflower can be grown specially for bird food – its 12-to-14-inch-wide flowerheads will provide bags of fun for the kids and pounds of seeds for the birds.

Teasels are crucial. Wildlife artist Hannah Longmuir says, 'Their brown, prickly stems can reach the height of a person and beyond, providing a dramatic and architectural element to a garden design. Goldfinches have beaks that are specially shaped to be able to extract the seeds from between the spikes.' We have for many years planted them close to our windows.

Purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*)

The jewel-like goldfinches' comings and goings provide hours of pleasure on the most dreich of winter days.

As difficult as it may be, especially to the tidy-minded among us, the secret is to adopt a hands-off regime. Let the plants wither in their own time, feeding an abundance of wildlife during the most taxing of seasons. Tweet, tweet.

David's Instagram account is @hortusjournal

GETTY

KITCHEN GARDEN

SIMON COURTAULD

KOHLRABI

If there was one meal that prisoners of war, coming back from Germany in 1945, never wanted to be given again, it was probably a stew or soup made from kohlrabi. This was the staple vegetable mentioned by many prisoners in their memoirs as tasting of wood and barely edible.

The name is German – *Kohl,* cabbage – and the Bundestag chose a Kohl as their Chancellor in the 1980s. The rabi is from the German *Rübe* meaning turnip, though it was first recorded in Italy in the 16th century, when it was called something else.

This curious vegetable, with a swollen stem growing above ground, is not a true root vegetable. It is spherical, with leaf stalks sprouting from the bulb, and has been likened to a Sputnik satellite.

Kohlrabi seeds can be sown outdoors from April, and seedlings should be thinned to about six inches apart and watered regularly. A purple-skinned variety, such as Kolibri, is suitable for late-summer sowing, avoiding the risk of the plants' running to flower.

They should also be safe from most caterpillars, though this year some of the little creatures were still around in October.

My experience has been that, among the brassicas, kohlrabi is the most appealing to caterpillars, both of the white butterflies and of cabbage moths.

Some nibble away at the outer leaves, while others bore into the heart of the plants. When and if the bulbs do swell, they should ideally be cut when about the size of a tennis ball.

Perhaps my advancing age has something to do with it, but I don't think I shall be growing kohlrabi again.

The vegetable is widely available in markets these days, and may be enjoyed in a number of ways. It can be grated raw into a salad, cut into matchsticks with celeriac to make a remoulade, or sliced and roasted with olive oil.

A soup is well worth making with puréed kohlrabi, garlic, chives, sour cream and a sprinkling of Parmesan – rather more palatable than the pottage served in German prison camps.

COOKERY

ELISABETH LUARD

SOUP, GLORIOUS SOUP

Supper for one. Soup of the evening – beautiful soup.

What could be happier, in the last hours of a winter day, than a steaming bowlful of something you've been hoping for that's taken you 20 minutes from scratch? That's all it takes if there's only one of you.

Better still, complete control of the remote means the choice of movie is yours – and the choice of soup: carrot and ginger (Fred Astaire?); cauliflower and cumin (Ava Gardner?); butterbeans and allspice (Marilyn, naturally).

Add cheese straws for the fun of it, and nothing lumpy or challenging for the soup – smoothness is all.

Leek-and-potato soup

A well-matched couple that already love each other, so there's no need for a stock cube or ready-made stock (even if it's your own) to spoil the party. Serves 1.

1 large leek, white and green, finely sliced
1 baking potato, peeled and diced



1-2 bay leaves
A splash of cream (single or double – it's up to you)
Salt and pepper

Simmer the leeks and potato in a tumblerful of water with a little salt until perfectly tender. Use a whizzing stick or purée in a food-processor till the mixture is smooth; taste and season. Reheat if necessary, and swirl in the cream.

Pumpkin-and-cinnamon soup

A splash of white wine improves the shining hour, but isn't essential. And don't be tempted to stir in cream – the butter does it all for you. Serves 1.

100g-piece of pumpkin, peeled and de-seeded
Splash of white wine (if available)
Short stick of cinnamon
½ teaspoon wine vinegar
Generous lump of butter
Salt, pepper, sugar

Chop the pumpkin into bite-size chunks. Pack them into a roomy pan with a glass of water and maybe a splash of white wine. Push the cinnamon or cassia bark into a piece of pumpkin so that you can remove it easily.

Bring to the boil, lid loosely, turn down the heat and cook for about 20 minutes, until the pumpkin is perfectly tender. Mash thoroughly with the cooking juices, or whizz up in the liquidiser. Reheat, add the vinegar and beat in the butter. Season with salt, plenty of freshly milled black pepper, and a little sugar to bring out the sweetness.

Tomato-and-chilli soup

Nothing to it. In the food-processor or liquidiser, process a can of plum tomatoes with a slice of onion, a pinch of chilli flakes and a tablespoon of olive oil.

Heat to boiling point, add water or milk to double the volume, reheat, taste and adjust the seasoning (maybe a pinch of sugar?). Finish, if you like, with a spoonful of thick Greek yoghurt.

Easy cheese straws

Work together an equal weight of plain flour, grated Cheddar and chilled butter, chopped small. Use your fingertips to press in enough egg yolk to make a smooth dough ball (don't overwork it or it'll toughen). Cover with clingfilm and leave to rest in the fridge for an hour or two till you're ready to bake.

Pat out between two sheets of clingfilm and cut into finger-width strips. Bake in a medium-high oven at 375°F/190°C for 15-20 minutes till golden and dry. Transfer delicately to a baking rack. They'll crisp and firm as they cool.

RESTAURANTS

JAMES PEMBROKE

JE T'AIME, CARLA BRUNI

There isn't a boulevardier, a chancer or even a gigolo who is unaware that Carla Bruni is lonesome tonight.

I'm too modest to say I'm in with a chance but, unlike you, I once met her. And not just anywhere – but in Venice, in 1990, at a ball (I gatecrashed) for the granddaughter of the last King of Italy, the short-reigned Umberto II, who, at 34 days in office, couldn't even hit Liz Truss's target.

As meetings went, it was a brief encounter: she wanted a cigarette while chatting to Jack Nicholson, and I was laden with Silk Cut. Yet the memory of her misty eyes through the torch of my lighter will never leave me.

No more 'what might have been's. Let's concentrate on what might be. I must find a venue to restart my wooing. She'll know Paris too well, and Paris will know her back.

So let's start with somewhere small and discreet. London. Clearly, a smoking terrace or handy pavement is a must, but no bars on balconies. She might be reminded of Nicolas's current accommodation.

We'll spend our first evening together at raucous Canteen at the end of the Portobello Road. We'll have to share a table with *la jeunesse*, but she'll like the short menu, industrial kitchen and cherubic Notting Hill gels.

The menu changes daily – don't they all? – and the last time I went, I had delicious agnoli with oxtail followed by pork shank and polenta. The chefs are all ex-River Café, so you're getting the same dishes at a third of the price.

This is good because I want to keep my wallet ready for the following evening at Sael, another hopping joint off Lower Regent Street and part of Jason Atherton's empire. The service is *très* slick and their *côte de bœuf* will thrill La Bruni. It's one of the few places I know that plays music

ELISABETH LUARD

at the right volume: loud enough to fill the gaps in my monologues but not so loud that she'll feel obliged to dance.

Now, here's something a little different for night three: Tatar Bunar, a Ukrainian restaurant near Old Street. This will convince her that, far from being a self-gratifying, shallow and frivolous profligate, I am all heart and conscience.

The owner's other Tatar Bunar is in Odessa, from where they dragged back all the doleful earthy plates and bowls, into which they pour sprats and other delights.

It will give Carla the chance to tell me how if only Nicolas were at large, he could bring the crisis to a close. I will comfort her that we are just two lost souls tossed by the waves of history, like Zhivago and Lara.

I will then summon up a tear as I stare knowingly at the wholly absorbing photo of happy 1970s farm labourers standing proudly in the Communist sunshine next to a huge pile of watermelons. We'll feast on minced beef, lamb varenyks and chicken hearts with tahini, before sharing a crème brûlée with two teaspoons.

And where for our first breakfast together? Where else but Kettner's, where Edward VII met Lillie Langtry, in one of their *cabinets particuliers*. Yes, we'll probably be surrounded by opened laptops and men wearing baseball caps back to front, but we'll have each other and the regret of 35 years apart.



'At last! A regular service that runs on time'

DRINK

BILL KNOTT

CHATEAU KYLIE

This month marks the 30th anniversary of my first drinks column, for the launch issue of a long-defunct food-and-drink magazine.

It was a list of recommendations of wines for less than £3. That, as you might recall, was in 1995 quite a lot of money: according to the Bank of England's website, it is the equivalent of £6.20 today.

I wrote about a Bulgarian Chardonnay Sauvignon from Kwik Save; a French red called Le Midi from Victoria Wine; and another French red, Domaine St Pierre, from M&S.

In the intervening three decades, much has changed in the drinks world, and not just the prices. One notable phenomenon has been the inexorable rise of 'celebrity' brands. Stars of the entertainment world (Kylie Minogue, Brad Pitt, George Clooney, Beyoncé, Idris Elba and, according to one online source, 176 others) have lent their names to alcoholic drinks from wine to whisky and beer to tequila.

Back in 1995, the only celebrity I remember being involved in the drinks business was Francis Ford Coppola, who had used his proceeds from *The Godfather* to open a winery in Napa Valley, California. His first vintage was in 1977, and he was a thoroughly hands-on winemaker. Feet-on, too: he roped in his father, wife and children to tread the grapes.

Coppola's wines, which now include some serious Pinots noirs from Domaine Lumineux in Oregon, will pique the interest of any wine-lover, and they continue to win awards. But which of the plethora of other celebrity brands are actually any good?

Having sampled more than a few of them, I find it clear that the quality of the drink rarely has anything to do with the celebrity involved and is much more to do with the people who actually make it.

Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie had a famous post-marital bust-up over Château Miraval, their brand of Provençal rosé.

It was famous for being served from chilled magnums beside the swimming pools of five-star hotels. But their trouble and strife (drolly nicknamed the War of the Rosés) has had no effect on the wine, because it is made by the Perrin family – who also own Château de Beaucastel, one of the greatest wines from Châteauneuf-du-Pape. The Perrins know their *oignons* when it comes to wine-making.

In recent years, other American film stars have been lured south of the Mexican border, lending investment and pulling power to brands of tequila and mezcal.

Very profitably, in some cases: George Clooney and two friends founded Casamigos Tequila in 2013. Four years later, they sold it to Diageo for nearly a billion dollars.

But my favourite celebrity tequila (and indeed one of my favourite tequilas) is Teremana (the Blanco is £39.95 at thewhiskyexchange.com), owned by Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson, which has won a sombrero-ful of awards. It is thoroughly delicious, fragrant with agave, lingering long on the palate, and very smooth.

Still, I must admit that, until he made a tequila, I had never heard of Mr Johnson.

The Oldie Wine

This month's *Oldie* wine offer, in conjunction with DBM Wines, is a 12-bottle case that would grace any wine rack. Two bottles of top-notch Champagne from an excellent grower; five bottles of delicious white Burgundy; and five bottles of a fruity and complex claret, all perfect for making your festive parties go with a swig. Or you can buy cases of each individual wine.



Champagne Gallimard Père et Fils, Cuvée de Reserve, Les Riceys NV, offer price £31.50, case price £378.00
100% Pinot Noir, pale orange in colour: beautifully made, with hints of toast and baked apple. Very moreish.



Bourgogne Chardonnay Cuvée Eugene Dupard, Domaine Jean Chartron 2023, offer price £21.95, case price £263.40
Classic white Burgundy from a top Puligny producer: long and savoury, with nicely restrained fruit.



Château Carignan, Cadillac, Côtes de Bordeaux 2019, offer price £18.95, case price £227.40
Ripe, well-structured Bordeaux, mostly Merlot; medium-bodied with supple tannins.

Mixed case price £267.40 – a saving of £56.09 (including free delivery)

HOW TO ORDER

Call 0117 370 9930
Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm; or email info@dbmwines.co.uk
Quote OLDIE to get your special price.
Free delivery to UK mainland.
For details visit www.dbmwines.co.uk/promo_OLD
NB Offer closes 6th January 2026

SPORT

JIM WHITE

FOOTBALL'S KILLING ZONE

A few Novembers ago, at a Premier League match, I bumped into a football manager I knew, who was at the time out of work.

He was doing some radio co-commentary, he explained. It was the first time he had done it, he added, and he admitted he was terrified. He wished he hadn't agreed to do it.

'But my agent told me to get my face out there,' he added. 'Or at least my voice.'

'Why was that?' I asked.

'It's November,' he said, as if it was perfectly obvious. 'We're coming up to the killing zone.'

The what?

'The third international break of the season,' he explained. 'It's when managers get sacked. You've got to be ready for the killing zone.'

For those without a job, he added, the ten days when the English league programme is stalled – to allow players to turn out for their international teams in World Cup or Euro qualifying rounds – is when the axe falls. And so that's when the vacancies come up.

I asked whether he thought a lot of managers were vulnerable.

'Let's hope so,' he said. 'Always are.'

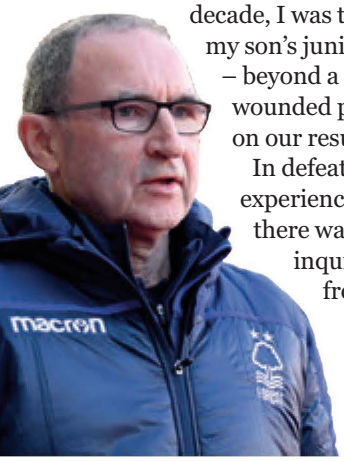
Being the manager of a leading club is the toughest job in world sport. Actually, just make that the world. The pressure on Keir Starmer, worrying whether he is going to make it to the next election, is as nothing to the pressure on managers.

In football management, there is no such thing as solidarity. Just a recognition that your failure might be another's opportunity.

And yet here is Martin O'Neill, former Ireland manager, returning as Celtic manager, aged 73, some 20 years after he left Celtic after a five-year spell.

Why do they do it? For almost a decade, I was the manager of my son's junior team. Nothing – beyond a little bit of wounded pride – depended on our results.

In defeat (and we experienced a fair few) there was no media inquisition, fans frothing on social media or chairmen with itchy trigger fingers. Yet still I found it the most all-consumingly demanding thing I have ever done. It filled my every waking thought. Plus most of my night-time terrors.



Comeback kid: Martin O'Neill returns to Celtic

Goodness knows how the guys in charge of top clubs, carrying the aspirations of tens of thousands, with the ever-present possibility of seeing their contract terminated, remain sane.

And why do those who have been sacked previously, with first-hand experience of the brutality of the calling, who know this is a position with the longevity of a mayfly, line up for a job the moment it becomes available? In fact, they are at it before the job even comes up, circling like sharks even as the previous incumbent is bleeding in the waves.

When I asked the reluctant radio co-commentator why he was trying to land a job from which, statistics suggest, he would be removed within 12 months, he smiled broadly.

'Because it's not a job,' he said. 'It's an addiction.'

This month, as the killing zone opens for business, the addicts will be waiting, nervously drawing attention to themselves, hoping above all else for a colleague to fall.

A strange calling indeed.

MOTORING

ALAN JUDD

TOP TRACTORS

I've sold my tractor again.

It was a 1960 Fordson Power Major, blue with orange wheels – big by the standards of the time; dwarfed nowadays by those great-wheeled John Deere behemoths that fill our country lanes from hedge to hedge.

They lived hard lives, those old British tractors of the 1950s-'70s. It's a testimony to their rugged simplicity and over-engineering that so many are still around despite a strong export demand in previous decades.

All its life, mine was a Sussex tractor, worked into the ground until rescued and restored about 20 years ago by the previous owner who used it mainly for agricultural shows and tractor runs.

I took it on a few runs too, but mostly put it to work when we had fields and woods to maintain. It smoked a bit on starting (over-fuelling) but never let me down. Nor did I ever run out of diesel. There's no fuel gauge and you had to remember to use a dipstick; that's what rugged simplicity means.

Its high ground clearance is one reason why you still occasionally find them not semi-retired, like mine, but working full-time in forestry. It also delighted generations of children, who rode in the box on the back.

When we sold the farm, I kept it, giving it pride of place in the garage while our other, far more expensive vehicles slept outside. Then I persuaded myself that I didn't need it, that it was a pointless nostalgic indulgence, and sold it to a neighbour. After a year or so, I could bear the loss no longer – and bought it back.

Now I've sold it again, partly for the same reason and partly to give my Defender the garage space it deserves. I don't regret it – it's gone to a good home – but it was a wrench. It was a noble, faithful old beast.

Does it make any sort of sense, this sentimental attachment to inanimate things – in this case, dirty, oily, noisy, complicated lumps of metal we don't need? It's largely this that keeps the classic-car industry going, not to mention steam railways, traction engines, elderly boats and aeroplanes.

Sentiment is all the stronger when there's a personal attachment, such as inter-generational family ownership. But it still means you're endowing an inanimate object with an inappropriate emotional investment it cannot possibly reciprocate or be aware of. This is especially the case with steam engines, which, with all their smells, hissings and clankings, generate the illusion of animal life.

Of course, such attachments extend beyond mechanical contraptions to jewellery, watches, pens, books etc. We feel, or want to feel, that the patina of use connects us with the previous owner, almost as if we're bringing them back to life, softening the edge of mortality.

Among the tools my father left is a large, well-worn, old screwdriver, 17 inches long with a broken and split handle. I use it whenever I can and it never fails to evoke him – if only to imagine what he'd say about the mess I'm making of the job.

Is it reasonable to indulge ourselves in this way, or is it just plain silly? Not everyone does it; some people are rigorously rational, as most are when compelled by economic necessity or whatever.

At any rate, it's so widespread as to be, I think, forgivable. Thus I forgive myself for already scouring adverts for other unnecessary old tractors.

Perhaps a Massey Ferguson next time, or maybe a David Brown Cropmaster – a two-seater, so that I can persuade myself it's not just for me.

SHETLAND TOURS & HOLIDAYS

2026 dates now available

03 –08 May 05 –10 June

08—13 July 07—14 Aug



Request our full colour brochure or see our website for the full itinerary and pick up points in Scotland - travel & hotel packages also available from within the UK

www.rrobertsonandson.com
office@rrobertsonandson.com
(+44) 01595 741234
Book now, make memories!

CLASSIC BATTLEFIELD TOURS



An invitation from classic battlefield tours to Military history enthusiasts who enjoy the finer things in life.

For UK and European tours, one day experiences, guided walks and expert talks.

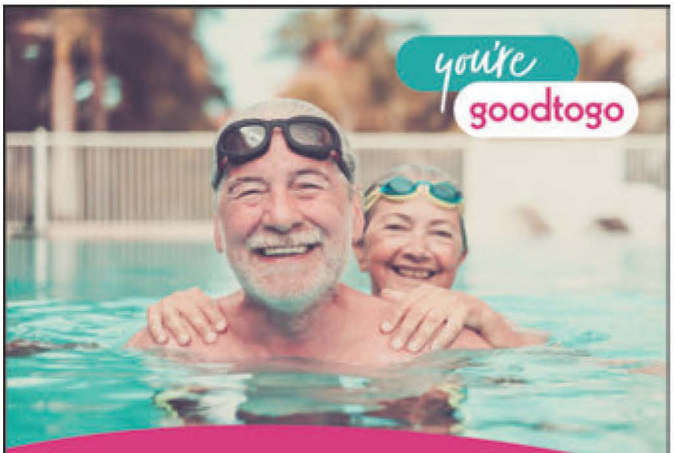
www.classicbattlefieldtours.com

Contact James on:
james@classicbattlefieldtours.com | 0203 960 5302

MEMBER 712

PROUDLY SUPPORTING THE GUILD OF BATTLEFIELD GUIDES

you're goodtogo



Travel Insurance

Cover for medical conditions and no age limits

- 24/7 medical emergency assistance
- Experts in cover for medical conditions
- Cover for cruise holidays

Special Offer for The Oldie Readers
20% OFF*
Save on single-trip and annual cover
Quote code od20

Excellent ★ Trustpilot

defaqto EXPERT RATED

Call us FREE for an instant quote 0808 196 2115

Or visit us at
goodtogoinsurance.com

Authorised & Regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority - No. 471641. Terms and conditions apply. 5-star Defaqto rating applies to Platinum policies and Premium Cruise single trip policies only. *Discount applies to base premium only. Discount valid until 31 Dec 2025.

Travel Insurance

Medical conditions? No Problem!



Trustpilot Excellent

10% OFF* BASE PREMIUM Quote code: TOD10

We do medical screening differently. You could get a better price!

- No upper age limit
- Cover for all types of conditions

Call free:
0808 175 6417
totaltravelprotection.com

Authorised & Regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority No. 471641. Terms & Conditions apply. *Discount applies to base premium only. Discount valid until 31st Dec 2025.

Total Travel Protection

Matthew Webster: Digital Life

Big Brother is costing you

What are we to make of the plan to issue digital identity cards to everyone?

I sincerely doubt it will ever happen. It's been tried before, along with other similar grand computer schemes, and many of them have come to grief.

The elderly lady I overheard in a shop saying she didn't want the government knowing her every move may have been expressing a fairly commonly-held view.

I do worry about privacy. I don't really see why the NHS, HMRC, DVLA and county councils, for example, should be able to link their databases.

Whatever safeguards are put in place, be in no doubt that, once a government department has the ability to snoop around, sooner or later they will do it, especially if it can be done at the click of a mouse.

That possibility is even provided for in the announcement. Despite saying, 'User control is at the heart of our proposals,' they also say they will allow third-party access only as permitted under UK data-protection laws. And who makes those laws? Oh yes…

The record of other huge government IT schemes is pretty woeful. A basic cultural problem exists: computer and software development moves fast, but large organisations, especially in the public sector, tend not to. So there is a conflict before you start.

Tony Blair introduced the Identity Cards Act in 2006; it was designed to store data on all of us in a national database. It was eventually abandoned in 2010, partly because of the change of government and also because it had already cost over £250 million, with no tangible results.

Then there was a plan for a National Health centralised records scheme, also proposed by Mr Blair in 2002 (which itself was odd given his famous inability at the time even to send an email). In 2011, it was finally abandoned after more than £10 billion had been spent.

In 2004, the UK FiReControl project was supposed to integrate 46 separate fire-control rooms; It was cancelled in 2010 after £469 million had gone to money heaven. The National Audit Office described it as 'one of the worst cases of project failure' it had ever seen.

What about a scheme to cut the Department of Transport's costs by means of new computers? In 2008, the Public Accounts Committee described it as an exhibition of 'stupendous incompetence'.

In 2021, Birmingham City Council tried to save money by installing a new IT system. It went very badly. The original budget was £19m. The final cost was over £100m, with no cost savings.

Large IT projects are not much different from large building projects. No matter how hard the architects try, many problems are revealed only when the spades, real or digital, hit the ground.

The sheer size of these national schemes is in itself a problem. They cost hundreds of millions of pounds even if they go well. But if it turns out they don't work, that money is still gone, with probably more following it, spent on trying to put things right. Often, it's good money after bad.

So, you can see why I am sceptical about digital ID cards ever appearing; easy to announce, difficult to deliver. Tellingly, the announcement had no target date for implementation; very sensible.

Probably, in fact, the most sensible part of the proposal.

Webwatch

For my latest tips and free newsletter, go to www.askwebster.co.uk

britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/titles/tv-times
Browse old editions of the TV Times. Relive your youth.

https://bruegel.analog.is/
A 16th-century Bruegel painting of 100 Dutch proverbs; click to see the proverbs illustrated.

I will happily try to solve your basic computer and internet problems. Go to www.askwebster.co.uk or email me at webster@theoldie.co.uk



'They search for the people who still watch TV'

Neil Collins: Money Matters

Silver Lining to the Gold Rush

'The louder he talked of his honour, the faster we counted our spoons.'

As well they might, if the cutlery were English sterling silver.

The metal has been gold's poor relation, but it seems to have caught some of the gold fever gripping the bullion market.

After bumbling along for years at around £13 per ounce, silver has shot up, in two frantic bursts, to around £35 today. That magnificent canteen you inherited, which needs so much polishing, is worth enough to pay off the rest of the mortgage.

Silver is, in truth, a rather odd commodity. Unlike gold, which has very few commercial uses (but has been a store of value for millennia), silver was for a long time the stuff of coins, being cheap enough while difficult to counterfeit.

Indeed, until 1920, the British 'silver' coins in circulation were substantially silver. They were then debased, cutting the proportion to 50 per cent, where it remained until 1947.

When the Americans sold us armaments in wartime, they demanded payment in silver, a market they commanded. Rather than being a forced buyer, the wily Brits paid by debasing the coinage, replacing silver with cupro-nickel.

The Americans took the silver out of their currency later; after all, no Treasury likes to issue coins that are worth more

melted down than their face value. Silver today is used in electronics, green tech and armaments. Again unlike gold, it is *used*.

Demand has exceeded supply for the last five years, and not for fancy cutlery. Recovery is more expensive than mining and the bulls point to uses in solar panels and some kinds of new-age batteries.

Silver coins struck by the Royal Mint escape capital gains tax (under current legislation) but if you want to clink them in your hideaway rather than just having a piece of paper confirming ownership, you will have to pay VAT, which rather destroys the attraction as an investment to have and to hold.

The Silver Institute reckons that prospects for the metal are, well, glittering, but they are hardly likely to say anything else. A persistent shortage is a fine driver of continuing rising prices, but commodities are not for faint-hearted investors.

Batteries are evolving fast, and nobody knows which elements will be the winners in the pricing stakes. They might need some rare earth controlled by the Chinese, or they might be something as common as iron or sodium. The rise and fall of lithium is a painful example of the market's backing the wrong horse.

Silver is nice to have and to hold, and to impress the neighbours, but … as an investment? Just remember the first law of commodities: today's shortage is tomorrow's glut.

Neil Collins was City Editor

Follow Huon Mallalieu in the footsteps of

The Oldie



the Plantagenets in the Loire Valley

14th to 21st September 2026

Genius at Amboise, murder at Blois, beauty at Chenonceau, a musical mystery at Le Mans, the Maid at Orléans, the cradle of the Plantagenets as well as the French monarchy… with not only history but wonderful food, wine and poetry, the Loire really does have it all. And Huon has designed a completely fresh itinerary.

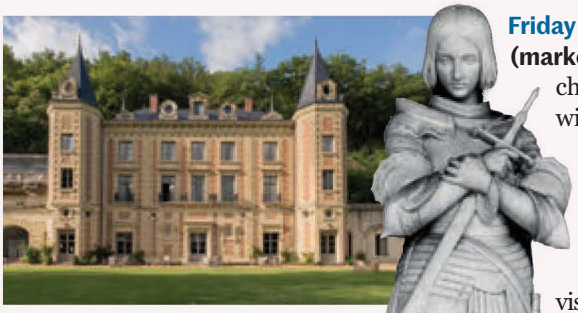
We shall be returning to the splendid Château Perreux, partly carved into the cliff face, which has been magnificently restored by its owner Olivier Fructus. Lucy Ogilvie-Grant and the excellent staff ensure our comfort, and we'll have exceptional drivers for our excursions.

ITINERARY

Monday 14th September – Departure Catch the 12.31 from St Pancras, arriving at 15.51; transfer to Montparnasse to get the 17.27, which arrives at 18.48 at Tours. Talk by Huon and dinner at the château.

Tuesday 15th September – Leonardo day in Amboise Château Royal d'Amboise and Leonardo's tomb; lunch at the jolly Chez Bruno, followed by visit to Clos Lucé, where Leonardo spent his last three years, and visit to the gardens of Domaine Royal de Château Gaillard.

Wednesday 16th September – Fougères-sur-Bièvre and Beauregard Fortress rebuilt in late-15th century after its destruction by the English in the Hundred Years' War. More recent restorations provide a masterclass in medieval building techniques.





***Above:* Château Perreux**
***Right:* statue of Joan of Arc**

Beauregard was the hunting lodge of François I, then the residence of ministers in the 16th and 17th centuries. The Cabinet des Grelots is one of the most beautiful French Renaissance interiors, while the Galerie des Illustres has 327 portraits representing key historical figures.

Thursday 17th September – Blois The Château Royal was the seat of the Valois kings at the height of their power. Its décor runs from Gothic gargoyles and pinnacles to Renaissance and Classical sobriety. Lunch at Bistrot du Cuisinier, followed by a visit to the lovely rose garden at the old Archevêché.

Friday 18th September – Le Mans (market day) The old city centre is a charm of half-timbered houses within Roman walls, and the cathedral has a superb band of angels. Among them is a most mysterious musical instrument, a medieval predecessor of the Enigma machine. Lunch, then a visit to the Romanesque Abbaye de l'Épau nearby, with lovely gardens. Wine-tasting and evening picnic.

Saturday 19th September – Orléans Morning tour of old Orléans including Hôtel Groslot, built 1550. The cathedral has a 600-year building history, and the collection at the Musée des Beaux Arts is one of the best outside Paris. Shopping at Martin-Pouret, created in 1797. Lunch, then visit to Château de Sully.

Sunday 20th September – Chenonceau River cruise aboard *La Belandre*, with lunch under the arches of Chenonceau Tour of the château. Supper in Amboise.

Monday 21st September – Paris and home 9am depart for St Pierre-des-Corps station for 10.39 train; 11.38 arrive Montparnasse. Taxis to Gare du Nord; lunch at Brasserie Terminus du Nord before the 15.07 train, arriving at 16.40 at St Pancras.

HOW TO BOOK: Call 01225 427311 or please email Katherine at reservations@theoldie.co.uk.
Price per person sharing a double/twin room: £3,495, including 7 nights' accommodation and all transport. Single supplement £500. Flights are not included. You need to pay for drinks outside of meals. Deposit £750 per person; balance due 1st June 2026



Warm homes, full plates, bright futures

How your kindness this Christmas can go twice as far

As temperatures drop and the nights draw in, thousands of families across the UK are making impossible choices between heating their homes or putting food on the table. For many, Christmas is not a time of comfort and joy, but of cold and worry.

At Turn2us, we believe everyone deserves the dignity of a warm home, full plates, and the chance to thrive.

This year, we're taking part in the **Big Give Christmas Challenge**, where every donation made to Turn2us via the Big Give platform between 2–9 December will be doubled. That means:

- Twice as many warm homes where families can feel safe
- Double the families able to afford full plates with hot, nutritious meals
- Twice the brighter futures for people finding their way forward

Your support powers our cash grants, Benefits Calculator, and Grant Search tool which are vital resources that help people overcome hardship and build financial stability, while we work to change the systems that cause it. Last year alone, we gave £3.3 million in grants to over 2,000 people, helping families get back on their feet.

Turn2us grants are a lifeline for people facing financial crisis. They help with essential items from heating and household goods to school uniforms and fridges, giving families the breathing space to get back on their feet.

This Christmas, you can be part of that change. By giving between 2–9 December, your donation will be matched, meaning twice as many families can experience warmth and hope this winter.

Together, we can build a future where no one has to choose between staying warm and having enough to eat. Because everyone deserves a home that's warm, a plate that's full, and a future that's bright.

"The grant came at a time when my family were struggling to make ends meet. It eased some of the stress of our situation. Receiving a grant helped me to cover the cost of living including my utility bills, heating and hot showers. The grant helped us to stay warm, which was essential for caring for my mum through her dementia. This didn't just help me and my mum, but also my children and grandchildren – keeping them warm too."

Emma – Turn2us Grant Recipient

turn 2US Tackling financial insecurity together.

Give between
2–9 December
at http://bit.ly/4ngHX6j
to double your kindness this Christmas.

Turn2us is a trading name for Elizabeth Finn Care, a charity registered in England and Wales No: 207812; and in Scotland No: SCO40987

Registered with FUNDRAISING REGULATOR

BIRD OF THE MONTH

Brent goose

BY JOHN McEWEN * ILLUSTRATED BY CARRY AKROYD

The brent goose (*Branta bernicla*) is the smallest and most marine of geese.

There are seven types of brent, two of which migrate to the UK. Commonest is the dark-breasted (*bernicla*), which breeds in Siberia and winters in Western Europe.

In the UK, it is largely restricted to coastal east and south England. The paler-breasted (*Branta bernicla hrota*) breeds in Canada, Greenland and Svalbard (Spitsbergen) and predominates in Ireland. Svalbard birds can also come via Denmark to Northumberland, especially Lindisfarne, and east-coast Scotland.

Unlike grey geese (greylag, pink-footed etc), which fly in V-shaped skeins, brents fly in bunched or ragged groups.

The British visitors (around 105,000) start arriving in late October and early November. *Zostera*, a type of eel grass, is their favourite food, confining them to tidal sand, mud flats and lagoons. In the 1930s, much *Zostera* was lost to disease. The plant recovered but the brent had survived by grazing on grass, which often took them inland like grey geese.

To learn about geese and ducks, wildfowlers' books are best, from the last century especially – particularly the self-illustrated accounts by Denys Watkins-Pitchford (1905-90), BB by pseudonym, and Sir Peter Scott (1909-89), the famed conservationist and inspirer of David Attenborough.

They were the last of their literary kind, shooting for free and strictly for the pot – before nature reserves, shooting permits, and weekend yuppie or foreign groups happy to blaze away for the sake of it.

By contrast, wildfowlers – when it was a sublimely solitary sport – became expert from answering the call of the hunt as instinctively as any fox. To do this, they endured all weathers and even moonlit nights. As artists and writers, BB and Scott have served us royally, their wildfowling books climactic testimony to a romantic, noble, almost lost tradition.



The marine brent goose was the wildfowler's ultimate challenge. BB wrote in *Dark Estuary* (1980), 'I have never shot a brent goose as I am not a puntsman [punt gunner] and the black geese are the puntsman's finest sea game.' Scott, whose youthful wildfowling led in middle age to conservation, was a puntsman. To navigate the easily swamped cannon-bearing boat 'in the wildest remaining part of this over-populated land' was to experience 'one of the few remaining sports that offer adventure' (*Morning Flight*, 1933). And always there was the setting: 'At sunset, drifting homeward on the tide ... into a brilliance of scarlet and gold.'

Scott's base was a lighthouse, today named after him, at Sutton Bridge, Lincolnshire. He travelled to other coasts, but on his home estuary the brent was a novelty. 'Suddenly we heard a new note ... a rolling "crronk". It is only in hard weather that we hear brent geese on our estuary. There is no *Zostera* there, and nothing to attract them.'

BBC2's *Mortimer and Whitehouse: Gone Fishing*, which has transformed Bob Mortimer's post-heart-surgery life, shows fishing can offer much in common with true wildfowling. Walt Disney said the world's trouble was 'that too many people grow up'.

BB, Scott, Mortimer and Paul Whitehouse exemplify their agreement.

Bird of the month 2026 calendars available from carryakroyd.co.uk



Treasured island

Nicholas Courtney managed Mustique – and cooked dinner for a starving Princess Margaret

'Just f**k off – dinner will be ready when dinner's ready!' I said to yet another ghostly figure who appeared out of the Stygian gloom at the kitchen door of the Cotton House Hotel on Mustique.

'Yes, but *how* long will it be – we're all *starving* out here,' piped the familiar voice of Princess Margaret.

The day had not gone well. The new chefette, terrified at the reports of Mustique founder Colin Tennant's vicious temper, had scarpered just before he, HRH and the rest of the party arrived on the island for the 1971 Thanksgiving weekend.

Since there was no chance of replacing the cook, it was up to me, as general manager of the Mustique Company, with overall responsibility for the island and the hotel, to prepare dinner … with the help of 20 volumes of the exotic *Gourmet Cookbook*.

Then the generator gave up the ghost, plunging the island into total blackness. Dinner did appear, eventually, though the *beurre blanc* sauce was heavily laced with candle wax.

I managed Mustique from 1971 for nearly four years. I owed my position not to my qualifications as a land agent but to my acquaintance with Lord Finchley. At my interview, Colin (later Lord Glenconner) said he was a suitable electrician.

I reminded him of the death of Hilaire Belloc's lord through incompetence and failing the 'duty of the wealthy man to give employment to the artisan'.



COURTESY OF LADY GLENCONNER

Princess Margaret and Nicholas, taken by Lady Glenconner. Mustique, 1972

I had been warned that, as Mustique was in its infancy – the 'pioneer years', as I called them – nothing ever happens.

The day after my arrival, the French liner SS *Antilles* went aground on a coral reef and we rescued all 600 passengers

and crew, save for the captain and officers, who took the only motorised lifeboat to the neighbouring island of Bequia.

For the first three months, life was surreal, with an ever-changing cast of the great and the greater; the rich, the exotic, the famous and, most of all, the interesting.

There were grand picnics and even grander dinners, through the food tended to centre round the limbs of the chicken.

During the full moon, the fishermen from Bequia camped on the beach. So our diet was enlivened with their catch of the day – strange and wonderful fish: mahi-mahi, snapper, crevalle. Later, they learned to scuba dive and picked lobsters (they were actually pincerless crayfish) off the sea bed.

Another improvement came when more houses were built and avocado trees thrived by the soakaways of the septic tanks. With a surfeit of lobster and avocado, we longed for the humble fish finger.

With the completion of more houses, the social scene burgeoned. The first to build was Lady Honor Svejdar, a Guinness who had been married to Chips Channon. Paul was their son. She was total heaven. She had bought on Mustique solely for the snorkelling, but when I asked her what she had seen after her daily preprandial dip, she invariably replied, 'Grunts!'

Reading Chips Channon's diaries recently, I lamented how ignorant I was in those days; idiot me not to ask her about her prewar life and her part in the abdication.

Instead I played constant games of backgammon with Frankie, her second husband, and discussed island matters. Honor was one of many missed opportunities.

When Princess Margaret came – every February for a couple of weeks, then again at Thanksgiving – life on Mustique ramped up. We all walked on a tightrope as Colin became even more neurotic than usual, though we were fortunate always to have the indomitable Anne, his wife and lady-in-waiting to HRH, to calm matters down.

There was much genuine jollity as we entertained ourselves, with either a small dinner party or a large soirée. At these, we put on a cabaret, where we would all perform.

Colin relished his self-appointed role as the ringmaster. When asked if he was a 'frustrated showman', he replied, 'I'm not frustrated!'

One of the problems during these royal visits was to keep the press away from what is a private island.

On the other hand, the press was vital



Nicholas and Bianca Jagger at Colin Tennant's 50th birthday party, 1976

in promoting the development. One June, during the 'off season', a woman from *Gourmet* magazine came to write about the Cotton House, which was closed.

The sun shone and the rum punch clearly addled her brain as the resulting article was all about the gastronomic fare she had sampled, served by waiters in white gloves.

The piece was seen by Mick Jagger a few months later in the waiting room of his New York dentist and, on the strength of it, he came down hotfoot. He later bought – and is still a house-owner, some 50 years on.

Alongside this hedonistic life, Colin's primary object was to sell land – by any means, including playing the eccentric card.

Once he was showing some prospective purchasers the shallow Lagoon Bay, who asked whether the water was deep. Colin strode into the sea, fully clothed, sank to his knees on the sea bed, then disappeared under the water a few yards further on, leaving only his hat floating on the surface. In those early days, the island was financed by land sales, or out of Colin's own pocket.

My job was to run the island and to create the infrastructure that made it all work. Here we constantly fell out.

Insisting we needed more electrical power, I showed him a picture of a sexy 135kW Caterpillar generator. Colin had a tantrum and threw the tea tray at me, declaring that it was more important to pay for a party.

It was, of course, not all bad. Colin was extremely generous, with a quick and ready wit – seeing a broken *chaise longue* lying in a ditch, he remarked, 'Ah! A chaise no longer.'

It was infectious, too. Driving John Lindsay, the then Mayor of New York, around Mustique, we stopped at the magnificent Macaroni Bay.

Colin embarked on the story of how Queen Elizabeth II came in 1965 and, though she (unlike her sister) hated swimming in the sea, she could not resist diving into the waves, while the Duke of Edinburgh swam the full width of the bay.

'And what's more,' I added, 'we have not changed the water since!'

A few years ago, I was asked back to celebrate 50 years of the Mustique Company to give a talk on what it was like in 'my' day – those pioneer years.

Elizabeth II hated swimming in the sea but could not resist diving into the waves

It was interesting to compare and contrast. Mustique is now both well-funded and well-run. It is home, and host, to the super-rich of many nationalities. It works.

It is the preferred choice of those who go there year on year – as opposed to the neighbouring islands of Bequia (what Mustique was like 30 years ago), or Canouan, where billionaires go to escape from millionaires.

In my day, the season was just the first three months of the year (and November). When all had left, there was nothing, save the mosquitoes, unpassable mud in the rainy season and boredom.

This was known as Mustivitus, cured by a trip to metropolitan Martinique, or any of the other islands – even Guyana.

So, is it better now than in my day? It is not better, not worse; just different.

After all, you remember only the good times.

Dr Nicholas Courtney managed Mustique, 1971-1975

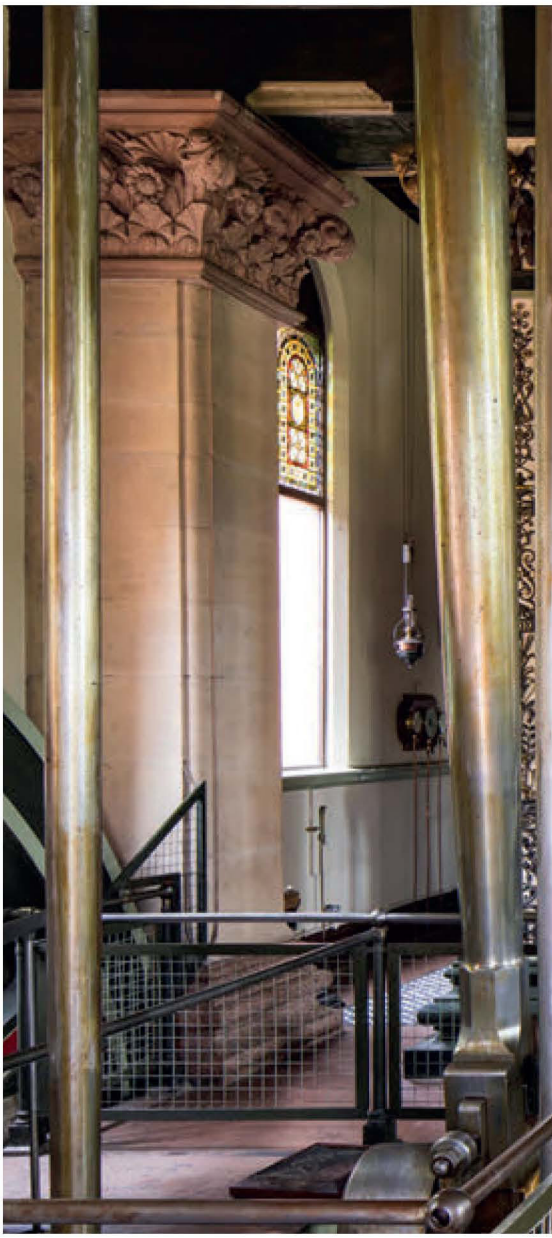
LIZVYVYAN

Pumping for joy

Papplewick Pumping Station, a classical wonder, supplied water to Nottingham

LUCINDA LAMBTON







In open agricultural land, you find it – a ravishingly beautiful pumping station.

It's an architectural and decorative triumph of a building, some three miles away from the Nottinghamshire village of Papplewick.

It was built by the Nottingham Corporation Water Department between 1881 and 1884, to pump water from the Bunter sandstone (the major geological formation beneath the city) to provide drinking water to the city of Nottingham.

Blessed with two beam engines supplied with steam by six Lancashire boilers, it was housed in the richest architectural splendour, with pillars smothered with decorative ironwork of flowers and leaves as well as twirls and swirls of every description.

The link between water supply and water-borne diseases, such as typhoid and cholera, was established in the 1850s. The need to supply clean, filtered water resulted in a series of projects.

The felicitously named Ogle Tarbotton had been appointed the Borough Surveyor in 1859 and subsequently engineer to the gas and water systems.

His first move had been to increase the supply of water. So he sank two wells at Papplewick, where he also designed and erected a pump house – which as a glorious extra was splendidly ornate.

Papplewick Pumping Station, 1884

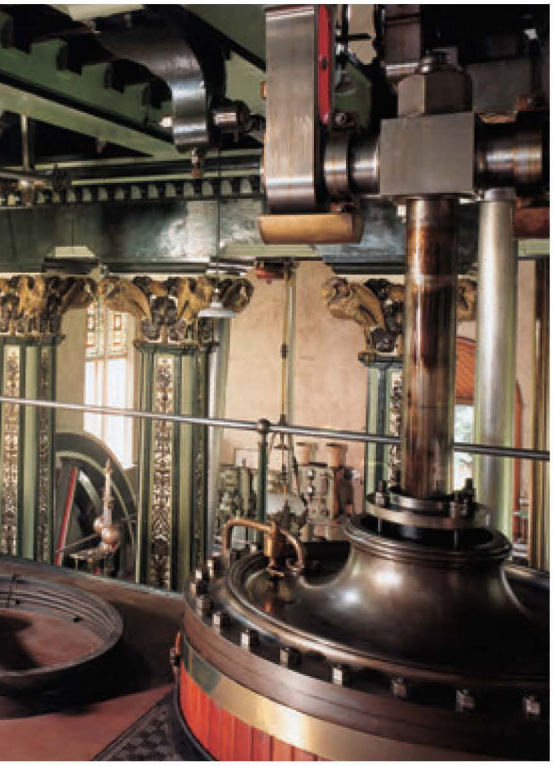
The great beam engines, supplied by the renowned James Watt of Birmingham, weighed 13 tons and were 25 feet long. They drove a main pump to raise water from the wells, which are 200 feet deep. Each pump could raise 1.5 million imperial gallons of water per day.

The Lancashire boilers were some 29 feet long and 7 feet in diameter, encased in a brick lining to conserve heat. Each had two fire boxes, measuring six feet by three feet, and held 3,200 imperial gallons. Each engine had a flywheel, which was 20 feet in diameter and weighed 24 tons.

When operational, each of the boilers consumed about two tons of coal per day. The cooling water was obtained from an ornate pond, with scalloped edges and a central fountain, set in ornamental gardens. The water flowed by gravity from a reservoir to Nottingham.

All the surrounding buildings were, and still are, scheduled grade II listed and also scheduled as ancient monuments. They were all – wrongly in my view, as there is barely a hint of Gothicry – listed as being in the Gothic Revival style.

The main engine house has a wealth of beautiful cast-iron fittings, as well as a good deal of stained glass.



The station was to remain untouched until 1969, when it was decommissioned and the works replaced by four submersible electric pumps and the decoration quietened down somewhat.

A trust was formed in 1974 to conserve the site as a museum. Today, with the engines refurbished, its original vibrant finery is still most marvellously intact. Arrangements for visitors have been made, and a grant of £1.6 million was given to this excellent scheme by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

The restoration of the building was overseen by an architect and – wait for this – Ibstock Brick actually made new bricks and terracotta pilasters to match the originals. In 2006, the high standard of this restoration won the Best Refurbishment Award at the Brick Development Association Awards.

Alongside the original beam engines are several other historic engines, such as the colliery winding engine from the nearby Linby Colliery, which was built by Robey and Co of Lincoln in 1922.

In 2002, two engines were taken from the Player's tobacco factory. The trust also runs a single-cylinder oil engine, which once generated power for the lights in the projector at the cinema in Bolsover.

A number of times a year, on steaming days the station is open to the public for people to enjoy its working magnificence, with its several engines in full working order. Very fine they are too – and built by Ogle Tarbotton.

The station is superbly run, with enticing invitations to join in the many delights of steam, such as 'Do you dream of running a steam-driven beam engine?'

If so, you can 'learn the art of stoking an 1883 Lancashire boiler and acquire the skills to run one of the James Watt beam engines'.

HURRAY!

Left and below: **inside the engine house**



HISTORIC ENGLAND

HEBRIDEAN ISLAND CRUISES

Pioneers of Small Ship Scottish Cruising



DISCOVER BREATHTAKING

beauty and indulgent luxury

Find out more call 01756 704704
Scan the QR code or visit hebridean.co.uk

My great escape

Alf Dubs, 92, a peer and former Labour MP, tells *Louise Flind* about fleeing the Nazis and leaving his native Prague on the Kindertransport

Is there anything you can't leave home without?
I hope I could leave home just as I'm standing. I lost all my belongings when I came to Britain on the Kindertransport, aged six.

What are your earliest childhood holiday memories?
Southern Austria, and when the Nazis took over, we went to Hungary. I was taken once to the seaside in Britain, and I was terrified because I'd never seen the sea before.

What are your early memories of Prague?
Seeing my uncles and aunts, Wenceslas Square, the tennis courts being turned into ice rinks in winter and at school.

When the Germans occupied Prague, we had to tear down the picture of the Czech President Beneš and stick in Hitler, and there were German soldiers everywhere doing their Heil Hitlers.

Then my mother putting me on the Kindertransport train. I can still see her standing there, with German soldiers with swastikas.

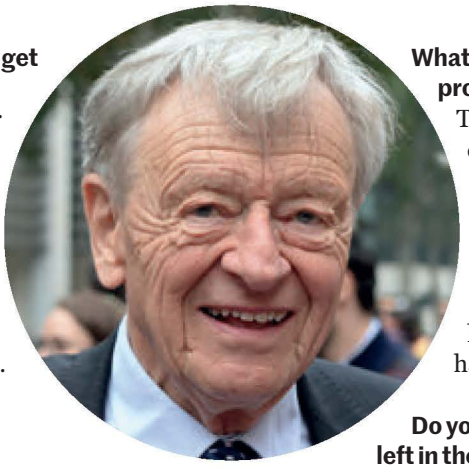
What do you remember of the Kindertransport?
I didn't know anybody on the train. There were hard wooden seats. It was a two-day journey to Liverpool Street Station. In some compartments, the German soldiers apparently tipped the luggage out, just out of sheer nastiness.

When we got to the Dutch border, the older children cheered. All I was looking for in Holland were windmills and wooden shoes. We went on a night boat to Harwich, and on arrival were examined by doctors. When I got to London, though my mum had given me some sandwiches, my father [who had fled a few months earlier] said, 'You haven't eaten anything.'

What was Nicholas Winton like?
He was a fantastic individual. He loved talking politics and he had a sort of a fatherly interest in all the 699 of his children he'd got out of Prague on the Kindertransport.

GETTY

How did your mother get out of Prague?
The Nazis refused her permission to leave and threw her down the stairs – luckily with her passport. She knew someone on the Austrian diplomat staff, who got her an exit permit.



Why did you move to Northern Ireland?
A friend of my father's opened a factory there and there was a job. A few months later, he had a heart attack and died. So we went to Manchester.

What was boarding school like in Wales?
It was a Czech boarding school, and I had a sense that I didn't have a home, having left my mother sleeping on some friend's sofa in Manchester.

What sparked your interest in politics?
Reflecting on what happened to me, I began getting passionately interested in politics, and started following the news during the war, and then came the 1945 election. I was totally Labour by then.

When Winston Churchill didn't win, somebody said, 'Oh my God, it's the end of England.' I was 12.

What do you think about all the small boats in the Channel?
I think we should be more generous to refugees, particularly refugee children, but we can't take them all.

Why do you think so many people in this country are so anti-immigration and anti-foreigners?
When we have political leaders who attack the new arrivals as if they were the enemy, then public opinion is less sympathetic.

Do you think antisemitism is getting worse? Do you ever suffer from it now?
The tragedy in Gaza has exacerbated it. My mother suffered from it. Personally, I don't, but people find it a bit hard to take me on.

What are you most proud of?
That there are some child refugees who have got here thanks to my pushing some amendments. And I'm delighted to be happily married and have children.

Do you still have family left in the Czech Republic?
My mother went back just after the war and found nobody.

What is it like for you when you visit Prague now?
A little bit emotional. We had a celebration on the very platform where the Kindertransport trains left, and the Czech Prime Minister came. But it's good to be in a European country, especially the one I was born in.

And now you have a Czech passport?
I put my passport through the machine and sailed through while the Brits were all queuing, but then somebody started saying something to me in Czech, and that was more difficult.

Where did you go on your honeymoon?
Brighton in 1959.

Do you have a go at the local language?
I asked the way in Prague and the chap took me for a Czech, but he answered in rather rapid Czech. Mine's almost the Czech of a six-year-old. I speak better German.

The strangest place you've ever slept?
When I was head of the Refugee Council, we crossed into Myanmar illegally by river and slept in an area that was under threat from the Burmese.

What's your favourite destination?
The Lake District is the love of my life.

Lord Dubs campaigns for the Safe Passage charity

MARTIN RANDALL TRAVEL

LEADING EXPERTS IN CULTURAL TOURS

We create exceptional cultural journeys, led by expert lecturers. Our tours offer privileged access to art, history, music and architecture across the world, thoughtfully crafted to reveal each destination in greater depth and context.

'This was my first tour with Martin Randall Travel, and easily the best tour I've ever been on; a perfect combination of interest and sheer joy every day.'

Choose from over 150 original itineraries including:







Prague Spring

12–18 May 2026

The International Music Festival amid Bohemia in bloom

7 days from £3,940pp

Civilisations of Sicily

16–28 March 2026 & more

Mediterranean crossroads: three thousand years of creativity

13 days from £6,140pp

Cornish Houses and Gardens

21–29 April 2026

Country houses & landscapes

9 days from £3,820pp

Find out more:
martinrandall.com
0203 514 3922

Rated Excellent by over 99% of travellers in 1,100+ reviews

ATOL 3622 | ABTOT 5468 | AITO 5085

Genius crossword 459

EL SERENO

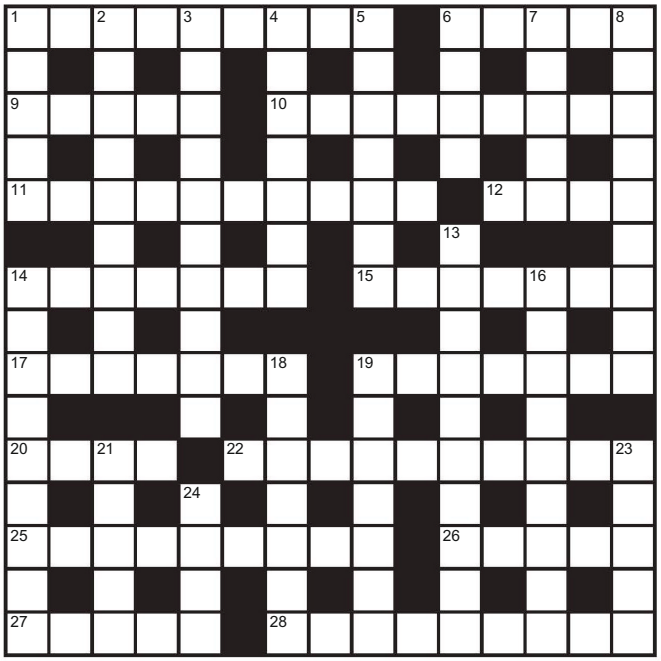
Some clues have no definition. This may be found in the solution to 6 Across

Across

1 Big cat doctor on this is missing (5,4)
6 See preamble (5)
9 One of 6 in the old days shielding uranium (5)
10 These are shelled to store, potentially to keep Independent (9)
11 Puts fear into new sites concealing mistake (10)
12 Party animal? (4)
14 What angler might get pet shark for example (7)
15 What islander cooks with no end of oil? (7)
17 A way linked to bankrupt flyer (7)
19 Bugs popular religious cults (7)
20 One case of Brie? Ten for this animal (4)
22 A positive sucker after a night flight? (7,3)
25 Expert on line extensions for some 6 (9)
26 One may snap if judge releases leading couple (5)
27 Fish barrel nearly empty (5)
28 Disturbed rest here, wailing but not suffering (4,5)

Down

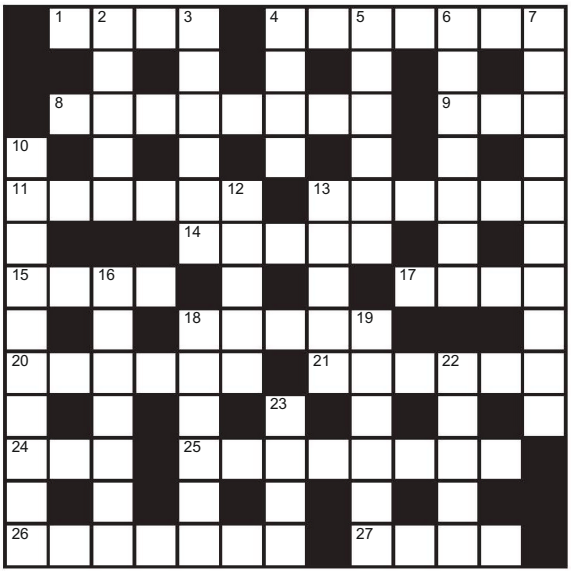
1 Gospel mostly full of love (5)
2 Produces inheritance costs (9)
3 Question that makes you a lot richer possibly (10)
4 Person denying reality of ring road made of money (7)
5 Felt regularly beset by hooters and buzzers (7)
6 Creature that may appear before March? (4)
7 Unhappy at university place (5)
8 Adult understands accepting notice from those granted authority (9)
13 Orders journalists to hold copy (electronic) (10)
14 Accountant with spirit getting lease car (9)
16 Popular island rubbish put up as generator of growth (9)
18 Pull clear for police search (7)
19 No way out for pimp as seen hiding (7)
21 Former Tory whose time is over? (2-3)
23 Cast lose on purpose (5)
24 State must accept women's influence (4)



How to enter Please scan or otherwise copy this page and email it to **comps@theoldie.co.uk**. **Deadline: 12th December 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 459



Across

1 Lads (4)
4 Troublesome little kids (7)
8 Fearful (8)
9 Broadcast (3)
11 Meander (6)
13 Mental image (6)
14 Reason (5)
15 Comfortable (4)
17 Biting fly (4)
18 Thespian (5)
20 Rump (6)
21 Tell (how) (6)
24 Everybody (3)
25 Hidden (motive) (8)
26 Child (7)
27 Rip (4)

Down

2 Celestial hunter (5)
3 Spade (6)
4 Helen of ___ (4)
5 Rural (6)
6 Speech (7)
7 Fortify (10)
10 Darling! (10)
12 Fish. Insect (5)
13 Eyeshade (5)
16 Sleazy (7)
18 Genuine (6)
19 Rue (6)
22 Pleasant smell (5)
23 Lead actor (4)

Genius 457 solution



Winner: Peter Moody, Fareham, Hampshire

Runners-up: Mrs A Jackman, Marlow, Buckinghamshire; Mrs E Knights, Wisbech, Cambridgeshire

Moron 457 answers. Across: 3 Cook, 7 Hook, 8 Loch (Cuckoo clock), 9 Yeast, 10 Sags, 11 Breeze, 13 Borrower, 15 Doom, 16 Rump, 17 Botanist, 18 Corral, 21 Epic, 23 Infer, 24 Exam, 25 Exit, 26 Ugly. **Down**: 1 Toga, 2 Skyscraper, 3 Coax, 4 Outburst, 5 Doze, 6 Phlegmatic, 10 Subtracted, 12 Endangered, 14 Wobbling, 19 Roam, 20 Iffy, 22 Iris.

Busy day ahead?

Start the day with the Mighty Memo.



THE MIGHTY MEMO

No bias, no opinions.

Just a short and impartial morning news briefing sent to you by email.

We write the news, the old way.

Scan the QR code or subscribe at **MightyMemo.co.uk**

Free subscription.

Sophisticated comedy and music

THE SONGS OF ABRACADABARETS



Words by Jim Drife Music by Walter Nimmo

Their greatest hits from the Edinburgh Fringe 1974 - 2012

Search "**The Songs of Abracadabarets**" and "**Abracadabarets Exposed**" on Spotify, Amazon, Apple Music, Lycos



"My stairlift has made a massive life changing difference."

Mrs. Taylorson, Cumbria

NEXT DAY INSTALL

ACORN STAIRLIFTS

- NEXT DAY installation available
- Stay in the home you love
- For straight and curved staircases
- FREE no-obligation survey and quote
- 365-day local service and support

Scan for more information:

FOR YOUR FREE BROCHURE & QUOTATION

CALL ACORN NOW ON FREEPHONE

0800 326 5145



Your December challenge is to make 4♥ after West cashes the ace-king of spades and switches at trick three to a trump.

Dealer South Neither Vunerable

North
♠ 65
♥ K1054
♦ QJ
♣ QJ976

West
♠ AKJ43
♥ 98
♦ K763
♣ A4

East
♠ 10982
♥ 63
♦ 1092
♣ 10853

South
♠ Q7
♥ AQJ72
♦ A854
♣ K2

The bidding

South	West	North	East
1♥	1♠	3♥	Pass
4♥	end		

The Polish declarer drew two rounds of trumps finishing in dummy, then led a club to the king. West won the ace and returned his second club.

Declarer won dummy's queen-knave but, with the ten not falling, had to try the diamond finesse. He ran the queen but, all too predictably, West won the king. One down.

The Poles are really good at bridge (I mean *really*) but this performance was, dare I say it, a tad unpolished. Watch Barry Noble of Australia make a small but crucial improvement.

Noble drew two rounds of trumps finishing in his hand, then led the two of clubs towards dummy (key play). West was forked (you may wish to mispronounce that slightly).

If he rose with the ace (to exit with his second club), declarer could win the king, then cross to a third heart and drop all his three low diamonds on dummy's ♣ Q J 9.

When, at the table, West played low, declarer won dummy's queen and returned a second club to his king and West's ace. If West held a third club, the suit was likely to be splitting 3-3.

Here, West was endplayed – a diamond from the king would avoid a loser, while a spade would enable declarer to drop a diamond from dummy, ruff in hand and again avoid losing to that king of diamonds.

'Whether 'tis nobler...'

ANDREW ROBSON

Competition

TESSA CASTRO

IN COMPETITION No 325 you were invited to write a poem called *On the Train*. They came in by the shoal. Some told of the misfortunes of a bridal train; Pat Gannon-Leary wrote of a westbound wagon train. For Erika Fairhead, it meant memories: 'I venture through the tunnel of the past./ The sleepers wake at last! I'm on the train.' Albert Caton wrote of electric power 'Permitting quite alarming speeds/ Compared to those of equine steeds.' Rafe Potter, aged seven, sent a clever acrostic.

Commiserations to them and to Teresa Charman, D G Herring, John Moore, Ian Nalder, D A Prince, Con Connell, Frances Aitken, Ian Higgins, Clive D Brand, Bill Greenwell, Sue May, Peter Hollindale, Linda Dobbs, Penny Langton and Diana Cutler, and congratulations to those printed below, each of whom wins £25, with the bonus prize of *The Chambers Dictionary* going to Stephanie Wallace.

The backside of a town.
Row upon row,
Fence upon fence in the smoke and the rain.
Flicking fast past the window,
The gate and the shed and the roof and the drain.
Glimpses of another's life,
Door upon door,
Open and closed in the dark and the light.
Flicking fast past the window,
The washing and the bucket and the bin and the bike.
Slowing, the rhythm fades,
To a sluggish scene upon scene,
Which imprints on my eye and remains in my brain.
The bare backside of humanity
As seen from a train.
Stephanie Wallace

I'm on Darjeeling's dragon, a toy train,
Chugging puffs of steam clouds as we gain
Height from Siliguri up to Ghum
Through mist, wet earth and smells of cardamom.
As whistles echo off the hills, the bells
Of monasteries answer. Each one tells
Of times long past, before these tracks were here,
Edging cliffs vertiginously sheer.
While Kangchenjunga's soaring summits loom
Like lonely clouds, and ghost-white orchids bloom
Beside the railway, prankish monkeys play
'Trick the tourists', often coming away
With tasty treats. Now, chugging through a lush
Forest of oak and pine (no, there's no rush),
I hear from somewhere beyond these clattery cars
The trance-like twangs of faraway sitars.
Martin Elster

On the steam train going home
First came the brickworks chimneys, long since gone,
Next the pitheads, slag heaps – then I'd look for them
For they meant I'd soon be having toast for breakfast –
Small creature comforts back again!
There they were, a pair of white-clad decorating men
Marching through the grassy fields,
Carrying a ladder with its ad:
'HALL'S DISTEMPER' stridently it said –
While for me they meant: not long until that comfy bed!
On the journey back I would not miss
That static pair still caught mid-stride,
While with sinking heart I'd bid a quiet farewell –
No more comforts till the next time when 'HALL'S DISTEMPER' would be there to greet,
Raise my spirits again!
Ted Lane

Meal-deal crisps and fizzy pop,
Tea or coffee, trolley stop.
Chocolate bars and nuts and sweets.
Plastic bags and lost receipts,
Noise from headphones, rap and bass,
Reserved seat there – you're in my place.
Phone alerts, breathing, sneezing,
Coughing, sniffing, snoring, wheezing,
Slurping, burping, chews and sips,
Cheap scent, engine oil and chips.
Eight months to eighty, standing, sitting,
Reading, TikTok, dreaming, knitting,
Rush hour, move up, guard's broadcast,
Excuse me, please – can I get past?
Clattering, chattering, station approach –
Pick up your bag, leave the quiet coach.
Linda Atherfold

COMPETITION No 327 I was very glad to find an independent café when I was wandering around Whitehaven, in Cumberland. A poem, please, called *The Café*. 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 327', by Thursday 8th December.



The Bermuda Triangle of Northants

PATRICK BARKHAM



GARY WING

Triangles are paranormal places where people go missing. The Bermuda Triangle. The Bass Strait Triangle. The Devil's Sea Triangle.

'The Woodford Halse Triangle' doesn't have the same tingle and, thankfully, I found no mention of mysterious disappearances before I dared take a walk there.

It is a junction where the Great Central Main Line – the last railway to be built in Britain until the 21st century's HS1 – crossed the Stratford-upon-Avon line. Now both lines are green ghosts in the landscape, and this triangle of old embankments and cuttings has become a nature reserve.

South Northamptonshire has a touch of the Bermuda Triangle: it is a region most visitors miss when they race past on the M1 or M40. Its rolling countryside, the wellspring of important southerly rivers, the Great Ouse and the Cherwell (one half of the Thames), is remarkably unpopulated.

Most remarkable are the villages – Sulgrave, Culworth, Chipping Warden, Priors Hardwick – each one as gorgeous as anything in the Cotswolds, replete with thatched cottages and cosy pubs. Many still cling to a community shop or even a primary school. One, Preston Capes, even sounds like a superhero.

Woodford Halse has one pretty old street. When the railways arrived, it became a significant junction, and filled up with red-brick terraces for the railway workers and, later, postwar housing estates.

In its prime, it was served by 30 trains every hour and its goods yard housed 3,000 wagons. After the final passenger train departed to Marylebone in 1966, Woodford Halse was left in peace once again, although its residents must have mourned the loss of jobs.

An early dusk was falling when I parked – on Station Road, naturally. I was slightly disorientated by the village, which resembled Coronation Street more than its Cotswold-style neighbours.

My disorientation deepened when I walked beneath two high bridges built from the fine, dark purple brick of the Victorian railway network. Between the two bridges felt pure inner city. Within seconds, out the other side, I was back in bucolic south Northants.

I took a bridleway south, through pastures bordered by curvaceous hedgerows, plump and neat after their end-of-summer flail.

Storm Amy was rising and ubiquitous red kites surfed the bumpy breeze. The black-faced sheep were skittery. 'Hello, I'm a wolf,' I teased, as they scampered away.

We've been blessed with vivid autumn colours this year. Green sycamores wore punk highlights of vivid carotene. Hedgerow hawthorns were still laden with red haws, blackthorns bowed with purple sloes and leaves of field maple dazzled yellow.

I crossed an iron footbridge over the first disused railway and entered the nature reserve. I smelt the tang of crab apples before I reached the tree, which had spilled its bounty everywhere.

Apart from salt marsh, there's nothing wilder in southern England than a disused railway. Any abandoned cutting not turned into a footpath becomes an impenetrable tunnel thicket of green. As this one had become a nature reserve, its wildness was managed by a flock of rare-breed sheep, which kept the old trackbed a green meadow.

Dusk was falling and I was the only person inside this railway triangle, although there was a farm hidden in the middle as well. I jumped when a green woodpecker laughed in my ear, and climbed from the deepest cutting to a higher embankment, finding a linear meadow studded with hummocks built by meadow ants.

Next I explored the western arm of the railway, which opened onto a wider glade of knapweed in seed. Here I was relieved to find company – the rare-breed sheep – and I silently apologised for mocking their brethren earlier on my walk.

Before it became too dark, I scrambled out of the eerie, wild triangle and walked back towards the village – briskly, occasionally glancing over my shoulder – on a country lane. It was familiar, smooth and utterly, reassuringly tame.

I parked at what3words: bracelet. demotion.split. Take Jurassic Way south, left across to the Wildlife Trust nature reserve and follow Eydon Road north back to Woodford Halse

Traditional seasonal treats by Charlotte Metcalf

The countdown has begun. The carol service at my local church kickstarts the season in early December, prodding me to donate to charity and scurry in search of a door wreath and stocking fillers.

I'm looking for a traditional Advent calendar – and find instead countless beautiful, contemporary ones, concealing mini-gifts, from chocolates to beauty products.

I'm already planning how to decorate my new flat and what to cook on the day. Bread sauce for the turkey. Goose fat for the spuds. Mince pies, proper old-fashioned plum pudding and brandy butter.

I'll soon be seeking out my mother's embroidered tablecloth, counting my wine glasses and plates, polishing my silver and thinking about what coloured candles to buy.

As per family tradition, I'll go with my daughters to choose the tree, which we'll decorate with fragile baubles passed down the generations. Then there are the carols, presents, charades and squabbles over which classic movies to watch.

Such festive rituals are consoling because they are unvarying and – unlike us – ageless.

Happy Christmas.

UK Travel

Self Catering Holiday Cottages in Sandwich, Kent



Cottages 2 & 6 are available for holiday let. Ideal for 2. Town centre but in peaceful private garden (parking) WiFi. No6 £450 pw, No2 £520 pw.

01304 613270 • www.sandwichcottages.co.uk

THE FAT LAMB



RAVENSTONEDALE

Grumpy? Reclusive? Hate crowds of tourists?

Then visit the Howgills, Britain's most underrated beauty spot.

No pool tables, no sky sports blaring, just comfortable rooms, friendly service and miles of open countryside (and our own private nature reserve).



"The Oldie" - Winter Offer

Quote this ad when booking

Enjoy a two night stay for two people, including full English breakfast and dinner* on both nights. Ground floor rooms are available.

FOR 2 PEOPLE £320 | SINGLE £250

Valid until 31st March 2026 excluding the festive Season

*The dinner included is a £27.50 allowance per person per night to use against our food menu. Saturday nights incur £10 supplement per person

Christmas - rooms still available

Twixmas

Recharge your batteries between Christmas and New Year. Two and three night breaks available from £360

Vouchers

Can't think of anything for Grumps this year? Gift vouchers available from £20

Just call us on the number below to personalise your voucher

CROSSBANK, RAVENSTONEDALE, CUMBRIA, CA17 4LL

TEL: 015396 23242 EMAIL: ENQUIRIES@FATLAMB.CO.UK

AA ★★★★

WWW.FATLAMB.CO.UK

Pattard Cottages



Located N Devon Coast in AONB. Well equipped holiday cottages sleeping 2-8. Pets welcome. Now with fine dining on site.

01237441311

www.pattard.com

on site restaurant

www.pattardrestaurant.co.uk

01237 441444 for table reservation

TOPSHAM, DEVON

Two-bedroom cottage overlooking Exe estuary & hills. Shops, inns, teashops, walks, cycleways close. Coast, moors, Exeter nearby.

02920759314, jonesda19@outlook.com

The Oldie

To advertise, contact Honor Brown on **0203 8597093** or email **HonorBrown@theoldie.co.uk**

Welsh Border

Spacious properties sleeping 7 & 14. Wheelchair friendly. Pets welcome. Indoor swimming pool. Games room. BBQ cabins. Open all year.

Tel: 01544 260237

www.hicksfarmholidays.co.uk

DEVON

Off the beaten track

Cottage sleeps 2-4

Dog welcome

www.horrymill.com

01769 520266

Personal

COMPLIMENTARY MEMBERSHIP FOR THE RIGHT CHAP

Carpe Diem would like to offer several memberships to professional chaps on behalf of their educated, understated slim and attractive female clients. If you are reasonably well read, 50+ and not totally falling to pieces and would like to meet women who share the same values and humour.

Contact Sarah Howes

CARPE DIEM INTRODUCTIONS

0208 313 0918 / 07951917507

Sarah@carpediemintros.com

Gifts

Carry Akroyd

BIRD OF THE MONTH CALENDAR 2026

illustrations from The Oldie

order from www.carryakroyd.co.uk



£11.00 inc P&P

or cheques to Carry Akroyd 4 Luddington in the Brook, Peterborough PE8 5QU

Food & Drink



Food & Drink

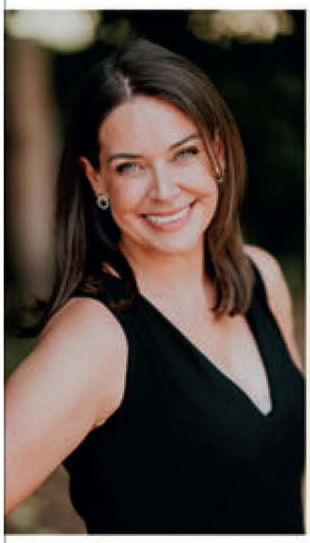


Huni® - crafted from a blend of Acacia Honey and Natural Flavouring. Adding floral sweetness and delicious flavour to your morning coffee.
Approx. 40 servings per bottle.

Available from
foodieflavours.com, amazon.co.uk

Personal

A Discreet Invitation
to Exceptional Gentlemen



We represent intelligent successful women seeking equally accomplished partners.

If you are a discerning gentleman open to a meaningful introduction, we would be delighted to hear from you.

B&L
BOWES-LYON
PARTNERSHIP

A leading matchmaking agency with a 16-year reputation for excellence.

Please email
charlotte@bowes-lyonpartnership.co.uk
quoting 'The Oldie'
0203 866 4440 | www.bowes-lyonpartnership.co.uk

To advertise, contact Honor on 0203 8597093 or via email HonorBrown@theoldie.co.uk
scc rate £48+vat. The copy deadline for our next issue is 24th November 2025

York Publishing Services

YPS are the one-stop-shop for self-publishers

From Design to Distribution
Copy-editing & proofreading
Full book design service
Printing & binding
Print on demand
Book distribution

Commission-free online bookshop
eBook production & distribution
Partnered with a Professional Rights Agent
Free & friendly advice
Cup of tea and a chat!

A trusted name in self-publishing for over 30 years

York Publishing Services Ltd
tel. 01904 431213
enquiries@yps-publishing.co.uk

www.yps-publishing.co.uk

GPSR Compliant



Home & Garden



Books & Publishing

THINKING OF MOVING?

We buy mainly houseful of books; we thin existing collections and clear deceaseds' libraries. History, art, architecture, travel, other subjects. Prompt payment; no commission or charges.

ROTHWELL & DUNWORTH LTD

Antiquarian Booksellers, 2 Bridge Street, Dulverton, Somerset TA22 9HJ
Tel: 01398 323 169 Fax: 01398 331 161
Email: info@rdbooks.co.uk

PUBLICITY FOR YOUR BOOK

Top Publicity for Your Book or eBook to All Press, Book Reviewers, Radio/TV Book Shows, Online and Book Bloggers Just £195.

www.prforbooks.co.uk
0207 692 0707

Food & Drink



RACING BOOKS
NEW AND OLD

Many signed Lester Piggott, Oisin Murphy etc

01934 613996 / rupertof25@gmail.com
www.marlboroughbooksandprints.gbr.cc

Video



KENTCHURCH BUTLERS

A CHRISTMAS GIFT THAT WILL LAST FOREVER

Carson!

Kentchurch Butlers stand 38" tall, Guardsmen stand 45" tall. Their sturdy trays are 25" above the ground.

Oscar

From ONLY £139 +p&p*

For more models and to order from home or abroad email: roger@kentchurchbutlers.co.uk

Text or tel: 07774 95 95 61 or go to:
www.kentchurchbutlers.co.uk

Footballer in your club colours or ABS

Kentchurch Butlers, Sunnymead, Smallwell Lane, Ashprington, Totnes, Devon, TQ9 7ED

Guardsman or Jockey in your own silks

Jewellery

POLLY GASSTON
JEWELLERY



07940 838618
pollygasston.com

Polly Gasston works only in 22ct gold and semi-precious stones.

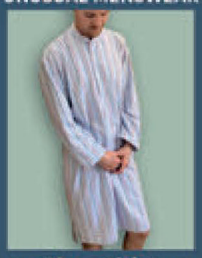
Each piece is hand made and therefore unique, and is a beautiful, precious heirloom.

Commissions are welcome and working closely with the client ensures perfection every time.

Clothes & Bedding

JOYCE BROOKS LINGERIE
Cavendish House, Promenade, Cheltenham
Pyrenean 100% Wool Wrap or Button Dressing Gowns
Pyrenean 100% Wool Cape Style Bed Jackets
Cotton Nightwear. Traditional Underwear

SALES & INFOMATION 01242 524706
BUY ONLINE www.joycebrookslingerie.com

Elgar Shirts
FOR TRADITIONAL & UNUSUAL MENSWEAR

www.ElgarShirts.com

Jewellery

WE BUY & SELL
Silver, Jewellery and Quality Watches, Signet rings and Crests engraved.
A & H PAGE
(Est. 1840)
Antiques / Repairs
Valuations for insurance
66 GLOUCESTER ROAD, LONDON, SW7 4QT
TEL: 020 7584 7349
Email: ahpage@yahoo.com
www.ahpage.uk
Member of NAJ and Registered Valuer

Wanted


OLD FOOTBALL PROGRAMMES
WANTED BY COLLECTOR
020 8306 6292 / 07932 173 103
Email: david.sturge@btopenworld.com

Genealogy

YOUR ANCESTORS FOUND
Cambridge historian, genealogist for 50 years, researches your family's history. No task too big or small. Phone 07517 662870 for brochure, sample report and free estimate.

Health

MELROSE™ SKINCARE
Soothes dry, painful cracked hands, heels, sore lips and finger tips.
John Richard Roberts mixed and patented MelRose Skincare from 1880 until the factory was bombed in a night raid in 1941. The family and factory relocated to Holton Mill, Oxon, which remained there until 1950s. Production moved to Birmingham. MelRose has continued in family hands controlling this high quality multi purpose skincare as effective today as it was in earlier years.
We supply nationwide wholesalers which supply local pharmacies.

melroseellamay@aol.com
www.melrose-skincare.co.uk
Skincare stick £6.50p
ESTABLISHED IN 1880
MELROSE Skincare™ Established 1880.
A SKINCARE PRODUCT THAT WORKS

arelle
Incontinence products for confident living.

Call 0800 389 3597 or email sales@arelle.com

Sore Stiff Aching joints?
Happy Joints® capsules help remove the cause and bring lasting relief.
Totally natural ingredients.
Tel: 0800 612 7496
finefettleproducts.com

Motoring

THINKING OF CHANGING YOUR CAR...
and don't know where to start?
We will find you the right car at the right price
(No consultancy fee for Oldie readers)
ADA WITH INTEGRITY
The ADA Car Consultancy
Please telephone (01256) 701221
and talk to a real person
Or email us on info@adacarconsultancy.co.uk


Management Consultancy

AI-ADA
Listening is Profit
AI stands for Audio Intelligo – I hear I listen
Case studies show that organisations who treat their staff as an asset tend to be more profitable than those treating them as a cost.
To discuss this higher profitability concept, PLEASE TELEPHONE 01256 701221

Health

PETITE ORIENTAL BEAUTY
Stunning Young Slim Classy Elegant and Friendly Lady.
2 mins from South Kensington.
Call 0207 373 2325 IN/OUT calls.

UNDERSTANDING ATTRACTIVE CONTINENTAL LADY Offers memorable massage to discerning gentlemen in discreet Marylebone surroundings. 07932644459

Societies

The Prayer Book Society
More than 50 years keeping the BCP at the heart of the Church of England.
Join us to keep this wonderful tradition thriving.
www.pbs.org.uk




Rogues' over-restored gallery

Paintings at Chequers and the National Gallery have been cleaned to death

QUENTIN LETTS

Donald Trump's fake tan was not the only dazzling curiosity when the US president visited Chequers.

In my duties as a political reporter, I was at the PM's country house that day. Entering its great hall for the Starmer-Trump press conference, I was almost blinded by the 17th-century portraits. Aieee, the brightness – such gaudy colours and the strange, glistering sheen.

The most glaring offender was a group portrait, *The Perryer Family*, by Peter Lely (1618-80), blazing directly behind Sir Keir and The Donald.

A near-full-length oil of Lady Croke attributed to Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger (d 1636) made one's retinas throb. So did a Van Dyck of Queen Henrietta Maria with the infant Charles II. These paintings were so shouty that they seemed almost to be barging into the political event.

Unless I am sorely mistaken (Downing Street will not confirm or deny, and the Chequers Trust, which runs the PM's grace-and-favour 16th-century manor house, is incommunicado), those portraits had been cleaned by 'experts'.

Art restoration took off in Britain in 1946 after Philip Hendy became director of the National Gallery and retrieved artworks from a Welsh quarry, where they had been kept during the Blitz.

Hendy, bullishly go-ahead, felt some of the paintings could do with a tickle.

When the National later exhibited Rubens's *Le Chapeau de Paille*, Koninck's *View in Holland* and Rembrandt's *Woman Bathing*, there was an uproar from critics who claimed they had been wrecked. An internal inquiry cleared Hendy. Then and now, art-world top brass were smooth political operators.

Cleaning of old masterpieces is now commonplace. Public-relations operatives depict this as an entirely wholesome activity: a sign of progress, of retrieved authenticity.

Cleaning has even become spectator sport. At Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum, Rembrandt's *The Night Watch* is being tarted up in full view of the public. It's like watching a Hollywood actress have plastic surgery.

Technicians sponge away at Rembrandt's canvas with swabs and solvents – and the public gawps. Oh look, there are some bods in lab coats and heavy-duty masks, wielding delicate brushes. We are told they are 'meticulously dissolving the varnish to reveal dramatic shadows and colours, bringing new depth'.

They must know what they're doing. Mustn't they?

Michael Daley of the monitoring group ArtWatch is sceptical.

'Restorers always want to remove mellow, well-established varnishes which impart a unifying yellowish cast through which the colours underneath emerge,' he says.

'When varnishes are removed, the colours look cooler. If we respected mellow finishes – as it was when connoisseurs appreciated the golden glow of the Old Masters – there would be no work for restorers.'

Varnishes are typically removed with white spirit. In 1995, the *New Scientist* magazine found that solvents penetrate the paint film and make it swell and soften:

'Softening leaves the paint vulnerable to the abrasive action of swabs. Swelling is no less serious: because the paint is attached to a board or canvas, it can only expand upwards. During this distortion, pigments may become separated from the oil used to bind them, thus lowering the colour value or leading to actual paint losses.'

Michael Daley notes that 'everybody admits bad things were done in the past'. Past assurances that solvents were 'safe' were plainly untrue. Yet we still accept such assurances. Experts use scientific terms that elude non-initiates. Museums depend on sponsorship, and sponsors like novelty. Old Masters? Yawn. Old Masters rejigged? Oooh, that might grab us some attention.

Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne* was given such a scrub-up that the word 'butchery' was used and an Italian artist, Pietro Annigoni, spray-painted 'MURDERERS' on the doors of the National Gallery. An internal report later conceded there had been 'injudicious conservation', but such admissions are rare.

One of the most infamous cleaning jobs was done to Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, a work hailed for its anamorphic skull which makes sense only when you view it from an angle. After cleaning, the skull was altered. Holbein's genius had apparently been corrected, if that is the word, by a computer.



Horror show: *The Ambassadors* by Hans Holbein the Younger, 1533

Art restoration has become a form of Chinese whispers. Restorers undo and redo their predecessors' work and soon the original truth is lost. When does it cease to be an original and become a forgery?

David Lee, editor of the bravely independent art magazine *Jackdaw*, feels 'the motto of those who look after our pictures should be "If in doubt, leave it alone".' But they can't resist the temptation to fiddle.

The shinier a picture, the more suspicious you should be of its fidelity to an original appearance. I'm with Degas, who said all restorers should have their hands cut off.

Oldie-readers might not go that far. But they might feel there's nowt wrong with the patina of age.

Virginia Ironside is away



PETER SOMMER TRAVELS

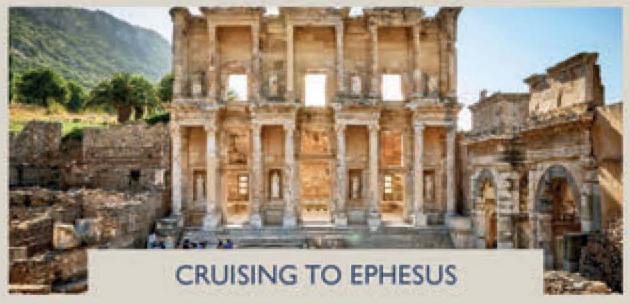
EXPERT-LED ARCHAEOLOGICAL & CULTURAL TOURS FOR SMALL GROUPS



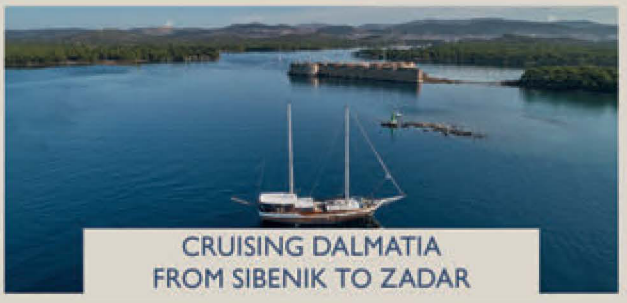
EXPLORING SICILY



EXPLORING CRETE



CRUISING TO EPHESUS



CRUISING DALMATIA
FROM SIBENIK TO ZADAR



CRUISING MONTENEGRO



EXPLORING MACEDONIA

Visit: petersommer.com **Email: info@petersommer.com** **Call: 01600 888 220**

8 TIMES
UK TOUR
OPERATOR
OF THE YEAR

AITO GOLD AWARD 2015 · AITO SILVER AWARD 2016 · AITO GOLD AWARD 2017 · AITO SILVER AWARD 2018 · AITO SILVER AWARD 2019 · AITO GOLD AWARD 2022 · AITO SILVER AWARD 2023 · AITO GOLD AWARD 2024

AITO The Specialist Travel Association
ABTA
ABTA No.Y6151

green pastures

DO MORE WITH YOUR SAVINGS & INVESTMENTS THIS CHRISTMAS



Earn up to 5% p.a. and help someone facing homelessness

1. Lend

Invest anything from £1000 for one or more years

2. Help

Your money helps provide a home for someone in need

3. Earn

Choose to earn up to 5% and your money is repayable

By investing with Green Pastures you can be an everyday hero, using your money to provide a safe home and transformative support to those most in need and still earn a return.

greenpastures.co.uk

0300 365 4500

Registered with the Financial Conduct Authority