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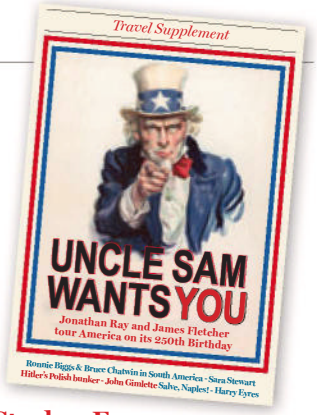

RACHEL JOHNSON
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The Oldie

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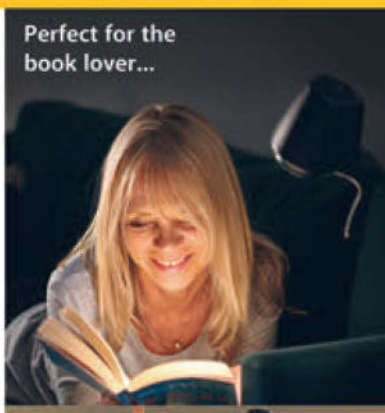

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Editor Harry Mount
Sub-editor Penny Phillips
Art editor Michael Hardaker
Supplements editor Charlotte Metcalf
Editorial assistant Amelia Milne
Publisher James Pembroke
Patron saints Jeremy Lewis, Barry Cryer
At large Richard Beatty
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Advertising
For display, contact Paul Pryde on 020 3859 7095.
For display and classified, contact Jasper Gibbons on 020 3859 7096
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HAVE YOU HAD A KNEE REPLACEMENT?

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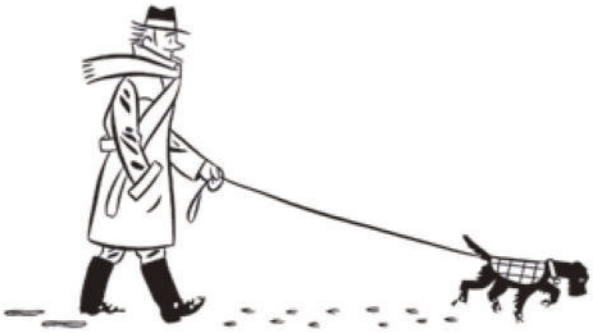


The Old Un's Notes

Happy 70th birthday to the Establishment!

The expression was first used in autumn 1955 by journalist Henry Fairlie in the *Spectator*.

What's often forgotten is that Fairlie used the term in reaction to the defections of Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean to Russia in May 1951.

Piers Blofeld – nephew of cricket commentator Henry Blofeld, of the clan that gave Ian Fleming one of his finest villain names – reveals all in his new book, out in May, *Master of Lies: How Anthony Blunt's Treachery Shaped Our World*.

Blofeld writes, 'No one was certain where Burgess and Maclean had gone. Beria and Stalin were convinced they were British double agents. When they arrived in Russia, they were spirited away and interrogated intensively for years on end. Burgess had all his teeth knocked out. Maclean attempted suicide – not quite red-carpet treatment.'

It wasn't until the 1954 defection of Vladimir Petrov that the British authorities could at last be certain the two 'missing diplomats' were in Russia.

The Foreign Office and the secret services were then forced to consider how the two men had been allowed to escape in the first place.

A white paper, put together in a couple of months in the late summer of 1955, absolved everyone. It claimed that the two men had little access to secret material of any importance, and they didn't have any accomplices – no harm done, they said.

Henry Fairlie was so incensed that he coined the phrase 'the Establishment':

'By [this] I do not mean only the centres of official power … but rather the whole matrix of official and social relations within which power is exercised… No one whose job it was to be interested in the Burgess-Maclean affair from the very beginning will forget the subtle but powerful pressures which were brought to bear by those who belonged to the same stratum as the two missing men.'

J Edgar Hoover, equally outraged, tipped off the *New York Daily News* that Kim Philby was the Third Man.

This led to the Foreign Secretary, Harold Macmillan, being forced to deny in the Commons that Philby was a traitor.

Piers Blofeld writes, 'At the beginning of 2025, MI5 released into the National Archive a great quantity of Anthony Blunt's security files and for the first time it began to be possible to trace his 20-odd years of interrogations.'

Although only a fraction of the total has yet been made publicly available, these files still shine a light on the failed attempt to get to the bottom of how extreme the Russian penetration of the British state was.

Establishment spies: Donald Maclean and Guy Burgess

Among this month's contributors

Simon Berry (p16) was Chairman of Berry Bros & Rudd. The company, founded in 1698 at 3, St James's Street, is still there today. You can join Simon for a wine tour of Bordeaux's Right Bank – see page 84.

Rachel Johnson (p19) is a presenter on LBC radio. She was editor of *The Lady*, 2009-12. Her books include *Notting Hell*, *Winter Games* and *Rake's Progress: My Political Midlife Crisis*.

John Humphrys (p22) presented the *Today* programme, 1987-2019. He presented the *Nine O'Clock News*, 1981-87. He was the host of *Mastermind*, 2003-21.

Mary Killen (p28), our beauty and fashion correspondent, is married to Giles Wood, our Country Mouse (p33). Together, they wrote *The Diary of Two Nobodies* and *Country Life: A Story of Peaks & Troughs*.

NOT MANY DEAD

Important stories you may have missed

Man banned from garden centre without explanation
Reading Chronicle

Wheelbarrow race under threat
i

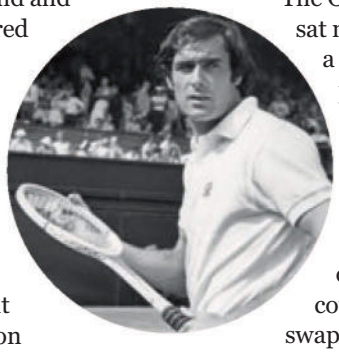
Woman drunk on EasyJet flight
Argus

£15 for published contributions

'It's called a burner phone'

It's more than half a century since Roger Taylor, 84, played his last Wimbledon semifinal.

But the former British number one still wonders whether his friend and sporting hero Fred Perry (1909-95) secretly wanted him to lose.



Tennis envy: Roger Taylor at Wimbledon

Taylor made it to the Wimbledon semifinals in 1967, 1970 and 1973.

Taylor says he has a nagging suspicion that the three-time champion, a spectator at the All England Club in Taylor's era, saw him as a 'potential threat to his Wimbledon legacy'.

Perry, the most successful British tennis player in history, won three consecutive Wimbledon titles (1934, 1935, 1936), the French and Australian Opens and the US Open (also three times).

Taylor, author of a new book, *The Man Who Saved Wimbledon*, says, 'Maybe it was my imagination but I couldn't help but suspect that, deep down, he supported my opponent.'

Taylor said it was a 'hunch' that troubled him throughout his career, adding, 'There was never any animosity between us and he always came up to congratulate me when I won or lost.'

Sky News's political editor Beth Rigby (b 1976) comes across as a figure of almost perpetual crossness, or at least great energy. How does she do it?

The Old Un recently sat next to Beth at a Westminster press conference. Beforehand, she whipped a pair of stiletto heels out of a white cotton bag and swapped them with the gym shoes she'd been wearing.

'I'm getting into character,' she explained.

Carrying two pairs of shoes has its drawbacks. On a recent trip to Washington DC, she accidentally left a £300 pair of killer heels in the White House.

'If Mrs Trump didn't grab them, I imagine they were blown up as a security hazard,' lamented Beth.

Distinguished cardio-thoracic surgeon Keyvan Moghissi died in November, aged 98 – just weeks after the publcation of his third book of memoirs, *In My Memory*.

He was born in Persia – now Iran – and still remembered his first cub-scout camp in 1937, aged 11. At the foot of the Alborz mountains, north-east of Tehran, Moghissi played his violin for the King of Kings, Reza Shah Pahlavi.

Once the boy had finished, the Shah placed his hand on his head and said, 'We are entering a troubled world. God bless our children.' It was 1937.

Moghissi left his native land in 1947 for the University of Geneva's medical school. He spent the last 55 years in Hull, where he established a leading European centre for open-heart surgery at Castle Hill hospital.

His series of books, *Tales of a Cardiothoracic Surgeon*, include the wittily titled *Off My Chest* and *From My Heart*.

One drawback – or advantage – of being in the House of Lords is that some of your old enemies are still around you. At a recent Lords committee hearing into the Assisted Dying Bill, Labour's Lord Falconer was

GETTY

***Right:* Euston Arch in 1895. Built in 1838 by Philip Hardwick, the Doric arch was tragically demolished in 1962.**

It features in the new book, *Panoramas of Lost London: Work, Wealth, Poverty and Change, 1870-1945*, by Philip Davies

given a markedly dusty time by his former ministerial colleague Lady Scotland. Boy, she chewed him up!

It can be observed that when the two were in the Blair government in 2003, there were moves to make Patricia Scotland Leader of the Lords.

Tony was talked out of it, people said, by his former flatmate Charlie Falconer.

'There's no gender pay gap here – we don't hire women'

Ivor Novello (1893-1951), the great Welsh actor-singer, died 75 years ago, aged only 58.

To commemorate him, there will be a celebratory 75th-anniversary broadcast from Cardiff (Ivor's birthplace), performed by the BBC National Orchestra of Wales and a trio of Welsh finalists from the Cardiff Singer of the World competition.

It will be broadcast live on BBC Radio 3 on the exact day of his premature death in 1951 from a coronary thrombosis – 6th March.

The Old Un can't wait to hear Novello's great composition 'Keep the Home Fires Burning', his heartbreaking song composed at the beginning of the First World War.

Many congratulations to *Oldie* contributor Nicky Haslam, interior designer, writer and singer.

At 86, he has released *One Night*, a live album recorded at the Pheasantry. He's the only living singer who knew Cole Porter to record a new LP featuring his songs 'True Love' and 'Goodbye, Little Dream, Goodbye'. Nicky met Cole over 60 years ago in the Waldorf Towers, New York.

He clearly remembers Cole, disabled by a riding accident 30 years earlier. He died in 1964, aged 73.

Nicky says, 'I saw this Mandarin-like figure, carried in burly arms, being arranged on a sofa, razor-sharp creases tugged perfectly, the tiny feet crossed, the carnation placed just-so. And then the voice, the signal to turn: "My dears, would you like a Gibson?"

'I was to hear that voice, and see the neat obsidian head, often.'

They often followed the ritual – the initial Gibson, before an elegant dinner on his Capodimonte porcelain.

Nicky remembers, 'He'd encourage me to sing his and other writers' songs, now and then humming, or, faintly, joining in.'

How De-lovely, as Cole might have put it.

Annoyed by the most irritating expression in modern life, 'See it. Say it. Sorted'?

Well, Ysenda Maxtone Graham, author *of Screams: Shrieks of Horror and Yelps of Pleasure from Modern Life*, certainly is.

She asked a Latin teacher friend to translate the saying into Latin. The result – '*Vide. Dic. Rectum*' – is much funnier and less annoying than the English.

A Latin translation, it seems, removes irritation from the worst expressions. In a new book, *The Language-Lover's Lexipedia*, author Joshua Blackburn asked Latin scholar Katie Walker to translate dreary advertising slogans into Latin.

How they come to life. Nike's 'Just Do It!' is '*Age Modo!*' L'Oréal's intensely smug 'Because you're worth it' becomes '*Cum operae pretium sis*'. And Ronseal's 'Does exactly what it says on the tin' turns into the magnificent '*Quidquid inscribitur, est*'.

Many a wife will be familiar with her dear husband's weaponised incompetence: 'I just can't get the hang of the washing machine controls'; 'How does the dishwasher work again?'

The aim of weaponised incompetence is to show you're so bad at a domestic task that someone else – ie your wife – will do it instead.

Well, cello maestro Pablo Casals (1876-1973) was a genius at the art of weaponised incompetence, as revealed in a new book of his sayings, *Viva Casals!*

Casals once said, 'Recently, I couldn't manage to open a carton of cottage cheese. Exasperated, I called out to my wife, "Marta, I can't do anything with my hands."

'"That's not entirely true, Pablo," she said, pointing at my cello standing in the corner.'

★GREAT BORES OF TODAY – MODERN CHRISTMAS★

It's only five minutes since we had last Christmas. It's insane.

It comes around so fast, there's no point taking down the fairy lights,

Only just had Hallowe'en. Pumpkins? What's that all about?

And we'll have Easter eggs in the shops before you can say chocolate buttons.

The price of chocolate! It's daylight robbery. Same at Christmas. Two hundred for a Norfolk turkey!! What do they do – send a taxi for it? Give us a break.

What's the point of sprouts? What IS the point? And let me ask you one question – ever met someone who wants a slice of Christmas cake after all that pudding and mince pies? Forget it.

Course, Christmas is for the kiddies. That's what the vicar said, unless I'm very much mistaken. And this year the kids wanted *Call of Duty: Black Ops 7*. Yeah, I know it says 18 on the package, but it's what all the kids want. So that's another £70 down the drain.

My partner wanted Mounjaro for Christmas. Have you seen the price of it? I couldn't believe it. It can give you flatulence, they said at Boots.

That's about all we need during the King's Speech...

By Michael Heath and Christopher Howse

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.

An apple a day, if well-aimed, keeps the doctor away

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Iain Macleod, my dream Christmas elf

Worried about buying the perfect present? A Chancellor of the Exchequer had the right idea – leave it till the last minute

My favourite day of the year is 27th December.

Christmas is over, Boxing Day is done, and, if you have planned it properly, 27th December can be all yours. No visitors, no emails, no phone calls.

A day to yourself to do as you please, finishing up the leftovers (the leftovers, in my experience, somehow tastier than the original thing) and dipping into those books you've been given to decide which you are going to keep on the bedside through January and which need to go straight into the charity box or the re-gifting drawer.

Iain Macleod (1913-70)

GETTY

My second-favourite day is 24th December. In my late teens in the late 1960s, I got to know the great Iain Macleod, One Nation Tory and mentor to many of my generation of aspiring politicians. In the run-up to Christmas 1969, Macleod explained to me that the only way the busy thinking man should do his Christmas shopping is on Christmas Eve. And on the *afternoon* of Christmas Eve, at that.

Macleod recommended a light lunch at Wilton's in Jermyn Street (just a few oysters, sole *meunière* and *épinards en branches,* with nothing heavier than a young Chablis to wash it down) and then, he said, get your driver to drop you at one end of Piccadilly Arcade, which runs between Jermyn Street and Piccadilly.

Walk the length of the arcade twice: once to look into the windows of the 28 shops (they sell everything from chocolates to jewellery, from clothes to antiques), and once to go into the half-dozen shops whose windows have taken your fancy.

If you know what you want, buy it. If you don't, simply describe the proposed recipient of your gift to the shopkeeper, tell them what's in your budget, and let them choose something for you. They will wrap it, too.

Macleod had a wife and two children (and a few female friends he liked to remember at Christmas) and told me he could get a dozen gifts in under two hours. He had his driver waiting for him at the other end of the arcade.

'Home by six,' he said, happily, 'job done.'

I abandoned the Macleod method years ago when my wife told me she was decluttering and really (*really*) did not want to be given anything more.

And we twigged that our children and grandchildren quite like to get cash at Christmas. And then our youngest grandchild was born – on Christmas Eve.

Kitt is ten this 24 December, and I can't be out shopping (and quaffing and sluicing in Jermyn Street) on his special day. I have to be at his party. It's going to be a Chinese feast in Sheen, I think.

Another of my mentors was a Christmas Eve baby.

Dr Anthony Clare, the Irish psychiatrist, was born in Dublin on 24th December 1942. He died of a heart attack in Paris, aged only 64. He was one of the wisest and most delightful men and I always think of him at this time of year, not only because of his birthday, but also, and more so, because he told me that my New Year's resolution every year – and particularly as I got older – should be 'Embrace change.'

According to Anthony Clare, 'Change is the salt in the soup of life.' He said it's change that keeps life interesting. 'Change is inevitable,' he told me. 'Resist it and you will be unhappy.'

I know people who haven't got into podcasts or online banking yet. That's ridiculous. Yes, Radio 4 Extra is marvellous, but podcasts are amazing, have so much more variety to offer and are easy to access. (Ask any seven-year-old.) And my NatWest online banking app is a joy to use. (Truly.)

My plan for 2026 is to master every aspect of AI, so that I am using it rather than its using me.

I am already using AI a bit, and not finding it wholly reliable. I got it to help me with writing the Brandreth Family Boxing Day Quiz.

In the politics section (it's a big quiz), I started with a question that I had already tried out at a fun gathering of MPs.

'Who was the shortest-serving British Chancellor of the Exchequer?' I asked.

Quick as a flash, Rishi Sunak, who happened to be there, called out, 'It was me!' At 5'6", Rishi could well have been our shortest Chancellor, but his time at No 11 was around two and a half years.

I went to AI via Google for the answer to my question, and this is what I was told: 'Kwasi Kwarteng was the shortest-serving Chancellor of the Exchequer, holding the position for 38 days from 6th September 2022 to 14th October 2022.'

Not so. My mentor Iain Macleod was Chancellor for just a month, from 20th June to 20th July 1970. He died – in No 11– of a heart attack, aged 56.

At Christmas 1969, he gave me a New Year's resolution to consider: 'Do not open your mouth, unless you have something new or pertinent to say.'

It's going to be a quiet New Year at Brandreth Towers – and a happy one, I hope, wherever you are.

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

THIS SHOULD BE FRONT PAGE NEWS

Over 118,000 young people faced homelessness in the UK last year*

This Christmas, Sam and many others are at breaking point.

The odds are stacked against people like Sam. He is autistic and has OCD, and his family needed help to support him. When that help didn't arrive, Sam's mum struggled. After their relationship broke down, Sam had nowhere safe to stay. **"When I was on the streets, I didn't care if I lived or died," he remembers.**

With support from Centrepoint, Sam feels more in control of life. But rising costs of food and other essentials coupled with youth unemployment makes every step forward a mountain to climb for him and thousands of other young people.

Will you help a young person at breaking point find their way forward?

Give £25 to Centrepoint this Christmas and you'll give a young person safety, stability, and life-changing support.

Please give £25 this Christmas and help a young person turn their life around.

Scan the QR code using your smartphone camera or visit **centrepoint.org.uk/sam** and select "advert in a newspaper" from our dropdown.

Call **0808 2814 750** and quote your four-digit code on your form, or fill in and return the form below.

69% Of young people who left Centrepoint in the last year found a home*

82% of young people supported by our psychology team saw positive results*

CENTRE POINT ENDING YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

*Based on Centrepoint's estimate that 118,000 young people aged 16-24 presented to their local authority as homeless or at risk of homelessness between April 2023 and March 2024. Using Centrepoint's Databank Report 2023-2024.

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YES, I'll GIVE £25 THIS CHRISTMAS TO HELP A YOUNG PERSON LIKE SAM

☐ **£25** could give emergency food support, so hungry young people aren't forced to skip meals

☐ **£50** could help us answer another urgent call from a young person at breaking point, with nowhere else to turn

☐ **£144** can give a traumatised young person a course of psychotherapy sessions to help them come to terms with their past and plan for a brighter future

☐ **Other** £ _____ (your own amount) 25AT

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Show me Farage as a schoolboy...

... and I'll show you what his teenage 'banter' really means

MATTHEW NORMAN

In exciting news from the world of neurology, it has been discovered that the human brain undergoes four distinct changes en route from cradle to grave. Apparently these happen at the ages of approximately 9, 32, 66 and 83.

Sadly, I haven't the minuscule professional self-respect required to spend a few minutes researching what these changes are or mean. But then I've only just turned 62, and the next brain change in four years (if I'm spared) may permit the required level of concentration.

All I can say today, speaking from my favoured standpoint of near absolute ignorance, is that the discovery looks exquisitely timed for Nigel Farage.

Until now, I have cleaved to the belief – as relentlessly posited by Hugh Laurie's genius diagnostician in the TV medical drama *House* – that nobody changes.

The Jesuits didn't go far enough. Show me the toddler of 18 months, and I will show you the adult.

But if there is potential for dramatic change, Nigel may have a better defence against recent allegations than any he has yet offered.

As I compose this latest outpouring of borderline gibberish, the media is laden with persuasive claims about the adolescent Farage's muscular take on matters of race.

According to 20 Dulwich College schoolmates, and one teacher, he enjoyed treating fellow students to pithy, ethnically based reflections.

Brown and black boys would be cordially invited to return whence they came (and implicitly to locations further afield than their south-London homes).

Jewish contemporaries, meanwhile, vividly remember him not only singing a bespoke version of the music-hall song that began 'Gas 'em all ...', but also hissing at them to replicate the sound of Zyklon B flooding the chambers.

Such elegances may be familiar to visitors to football grounds such as Stamford Bridge and Elland Road. Less commonly heard these days, hissing was once how Chelsea's legendarily effete supporters serenaded Spurs fans.

Equally routine at stadiums were ditties with lyrics adapted on lines similar to Nigel's. In 1999, for example, I wrote about Leeds United fans singing a version of an old Tottenham Cup Final anthem at White Hart Lane.

A day later, I was invited to discuss this on that magnificent broadcaster Nicky Campbell's radio phone-in. The first caller, Paul, had journeyed to the soft south from Leeds for the game, and was outraged by what I'd written.

'Mate, we never sang, "Spurs are on their way to Belsen/ Hitler's gonna kill 'em again",' he rebuked me. 'What we sang was "Spurs are on their way to Auschwitz/ Hitler's gonna gas 'em again".'

'Paul,' I said, mortified, 'I don't know how to begin to apologise. There's nothing more distressing in this world than having your neo-Nazi chant misquoted on the radio.'

That gifted Yorkshire ironist accepted the *mea culpa* with impeccable grace, and took his leave.

It was even longer ago than that, of course, that Nigel was treating other boys to what he now pleases to classify (you'll recall his friend Donald Trump applying the word to his admission about grabbing women by their front bottoms) as 'banter'.

Since no one (so far) has made similar claims about the adult Farage, should we hold against him what he doesn't seriously deny saying, singing and hissing some four decades ago, at around the time his testes were descending?

> Anyone capable of 'bantering' in such a manner is unfit for the highest office

Both were in situ at the time, by the way, and I wish to make this crystal clear: the subsequent halving of the tally was due to cancer, and not in homage to the Führer's rumoured gonadic shortfall.

Or should we follow the teachings of Dr Gregory House, accepting that no one changes, and acknowledging that anyone capable of 'bantering' in such a manner with Jewish people at any age is unfit for the highest office?

In strictest sooth, unbearably smug, bleeding-heart lefties like me were never odds-on to put a cross beside a Reform candidate's name.

But had I ever been so minded, I would until now have felt queasy – and less because I am a Jew than because I am a human being – about helping to propel a hisser such as him towards Downing Street.

Now that we know about these sporadic changes in the brain, it can't be ruled out that Nigel Farage awoke on his 32nd birthday to the startling realisation that tormenting the descendants of the gassed was something a shade less harmless than playground banter.

And who is to say that, in a little more than four years, when his next cerebral revolution takes place on his turning 66, he won't think to himself, 'Do you know, it might not be a catastrophe after all if a Romanian family moved in next door'?

And we can't know whether or not that scenario would necessitate a Reform Chancellor with a surname ending -escu, now that he remains the favourite to become PM after the next election.

What this tells us about our poor old country is one of those matters on which, at least until my own next brain change, I lack the stoicism to reflect.

OLDEN LIFE

WHAT WERE periodicals?

Periodicals – magazines published at regular intervals – took off in the 18th century. They were popularized by novels such as Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) were published in sections, with great success.

In 1764, the *Wonderful Magazine* or *Marvellous Chronicle* was first published. It featured subjects designated as 'miraculous, strange, queer and out o' the way' to entertain its readers. Although short-lived, it returned for a brief and final flourish in 1793. In 1825, the *Terrific Register of Crimes, Judgements, Providences and Calamities* became the first real crime magazine to gain popularity.

Over the centuries, periodicals were launched to cater for every taste. In 1923, Compton Mackenzie, author of *Whisky Galore*, founded *The Gramophone* for lovers of classical music. He edited it until 1961, and it is still published monthly today as, simply, *Gramophone*.

Peculiarly British pursuits are still well-served. *The Morris Dancer* began publication in May 1978, following revived interest in this rural pursuit. Bellringers got their magazine in 1911, when *The Ringing World* rolled off the presses for the first time. It still resonates every week with its readers.

Every industry group or business sector has its own publications. I went to Sutton one rainy day in the winter of 1975 to meet the charming editor of *Poultry World*, when I was researching the Bernard Matthews turkey empire.

Over lunch in a Berni Inn, he told me how he had applied for the editorship of *Rugby World*, a sister publication, but the post had already been taken – so he took the vacancy at *Poultry World* instead. He was full of wonderful anecdotes about turkeys – and international rugby players.

Catering for every taste – literally

A favourite of mine is *Onion World*, covering the international onion industry and related topics. Does reading it bring a tear to the eye? Other obscure titles include *Sewage Today* and *Van Hire Monthly*.

Intrigue and skulduggery lurk within these media circles. An obituary of a former editor of *Railway Modeller* revealed how he caused uproar when he changed trains to become editor of *Model Railway*.

In 1980, I was at a reception in New York for the editors of trade publications. Over a strong Martini or two, I met editors from many influential publications.

One fellow was reluctant to tell me the name of his magazine. When he eventually gave me his card, I realised why. He was editor of the *Journal of Sexually Transmitted Diseases*. He told me the circulation was rapidly increasing. I did not doubt him.

Piers Pottinger

MODERN LIFE

WHAT IS the Lunch Club?

Oxford University is home to many clubs – and, allegedly, lost causes.

This December, two Oxford dons' clubs celebrate their centenary.

The coincidence is boosted by their both bearing the same name – the Lunch Club.

A booklet published in 1993 by its former convenor E T Williams, once Warden of Rhodes House, says one was 'invented' by Austin Lane Poole (of St John's College) with a nucleus of college history tutors.

Apart from excursions to the Derby in 1934 and the Cheltenham Gold Cup in 1957, its members did not meet except to eat.

The majority of members have been and are heads of colleges, though one celebrated exception was Felix Frankfurter (1882-1965), then a visiting professor and later a Justice of the US Supreme Court.

The history of the other Lunch Club is found in another booklet, published in 1992 by David Cox, a history fellow at University College and a mountaineer. It was in origin strongly biased to Balliol College but evolved into a club for proctors, chairs of the general board and other university officers. Heads of colleges were not elected, but if any member obtained such a position post-election, he or she was not compelled to resign.

Both clubs, whose numbers do not exceed 20, meet four times a term – the former on Thursdays, the latter on Fridays, to avoid clashes were anyone to be a member of both.

The members emerge through an amiable mechanism, even more obscure than those for the election of the President of the International Olympic Committee or the Pope.

Dons dine, as well as lunch. To increase the obscurity over Oxford gatherings, there are two evening social bodies, both called The Club. The first was founded in 1790. The second was founded in 1883 by dons who claimed that they were 'untainted by research and devoted to our colleges'. Academic grandees, such as historians Hugh Trevor-Roper and Robert Blake, were members of the second.

These clubs are not alone in their name! In 1911, Winston Churchill and F E Smith named their 1911 creation The Other Club, to distinguish it from the still surviving The Club, founded by Joshua Reynolds and Samuel Johnson in London in 1764. It has nothing to do with The Club at Oxford.

Though members of Oxford's two versions of The Club still refer to each other as brethren, they had female members long before – and with less, if any, dissent than the Garrick.

Michael Beloff KC, who was President of Trinity College, Oxford

Brando vs Sinatra

Harry Cluff salutes the 70th anniversary of *Guys and Dolls* – and its sparring stars

He's the most overrated actor in the world,' Frank Sinatra said about Marlon Brando just before co-starring with the Oscar-winning actor in *Guys and Dolls*.

Brando retorted, 'Frank is the sort of guy who, when he gets up in the morning, the Devil says, "Oh no, he's up!"'

The two superstars were at loggerheads throughout the filming of the musical, 70 years ago, in November 1955.

The musical – based on two short stories by Damon Runyon – had music and lyrics by Frank Loesser; the book was written by Jo Swerling and Abe Burrows. A hit on Broadway in 1950, it was snapped up by Samuel Goldwyn – who paid a record-breaking million dollars for the film rights.

Runyon's world of New York card-sharps, quirkily named crooks and lovable gangsters was peppered with show-stoppers: 'Sit Down You're Rockin' the Boat', 'Fugue for Tinhorns', 'Sue Me' and the eponymous 'Guys and Dolls'.

Goldwyn's executive decision to cast actors with little musical experience – such as Brando and Gene Simmons – raised the odd eyebrow.

Critics attacked Brando's singing skills – or lack of them – as Sky Masterson. Italian-American Sinatra as Nathan Detroit, a Jewish New Yorker, also tested the credulity of the audience. Still, the film was a big commercial hit.

Sinatra preferred to do just a few takes, while Brando needed dozens to get it right. Both were known for their tempers and hissy fits on set, and their alpha-male behaviour. Years afterwards, the film's director, Joseph L Mankiewicz, said he spent as much time managing the two divas as he did directing the picture.

Sinatra was bitter at being rejected for the leading romantic role of Sky Masterson in favour of Brando. He had to settle for the secondary, comical role of Nathan Detroit. Still, given Sinatra's exceptional voice and screen presence, Loesser wrote an extra song for Frank, that earworm of a tune 'Adelaide'.

Brando was genial to Sinatra at the start of filming. Nervous about singing, he graciously asked Frank for some technical advice.

Brando said that, as he became more confident with the music, he would 'find' his character. Frank's reply to this innocent suggestion? 'Don't give me any of that Actors Studio bullsh*t!' he bellowed within earshot of other cast members.

Hurt by Sinatra's attitude, Brando began to goad and tease him.

They share a scene in Nathan Detroit's favourite diner. Nathan tries to trap Sky into making a bet about which dessert is served more at the restaurant – cheesecake or strudel.

Sinatra had to eat a slice of cheesecake in the scene, a pudding he hated. Every time they were about to finish the shot, Brando would mumble on purpose or pretend to misremember his line, forcing Sinatra to eat another mouthful of cheesecake.

At the tenth take, Sinatra slammed his fork down on the table and yelled, 'How much cheesecake do you think I can eat?'

Their feud escalated dramatically.

According to legend, Brando was driving home from the studio on his motorbike, when a big car suddenly zoomed ahead of him and braked hard, forcing him to follow suit.

Top of the bill? Brando

Three goons wearing white fedoras got out, grabbed an astonished Brando and shoved him into the back of their car. As they drove through the night, a large man sitting next to Brando threatened the star with death or disfigurement before saying, 'Sinatra sends his regards.'

It's a real gem of an old Hollywood tale. But, after some research, I'm afraid to say this version of the story never happened.

The real story is just as thrilling. While researching the role of Masterson, Brando lived at the Astor Hotel in New York. He would venture out every afternoon into the heart of Runyon's world and observe wiseguys at work.

One afternoon, after watching Brando gawping in their direction, some Mafia boys picked him up and chauffeured him around the Manhattan underworld.

There were no threats. On the contrary, the gangsters were very amused and flattered by Brando's interest in their day-to-day lives. They dropped him off at the Astor at the end of the tour in one piece and wished him well.

Back on set, Sinatra developed a nasty nickname for Brando on the back of the delivery of his lines: Mumbles.

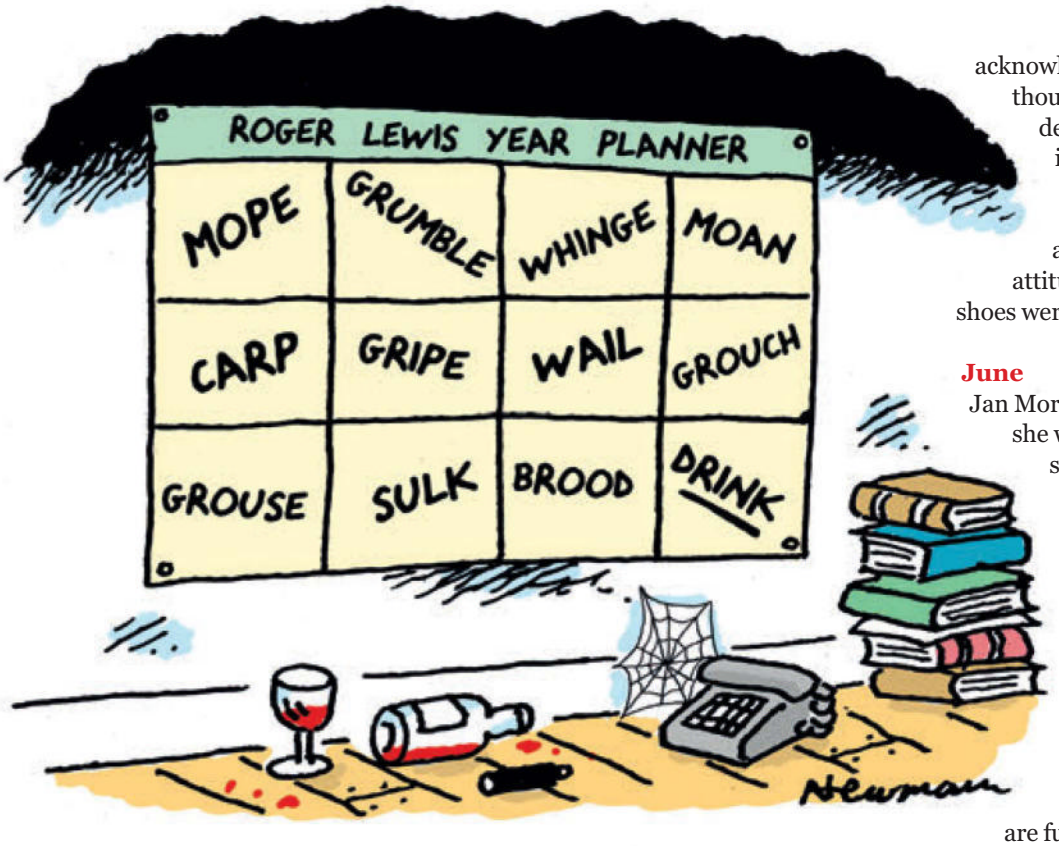
Brando fought back. Gossiping with the cast, he described Sinatra as 'The kind of guy who, when he dies, will go to heaven and give God a hard time for making him bald.'

Still, if the brilliance of the film was partly due to the duo's differences, then thank God for their mutual loathing.

GETTY

Forget the season of goodwill. *Roger Lewis* reviews the miseries of 2025 – from his ballooning waistline to his shrinking savings

Year of living grumpily



January

I have been in Normandy on my own for ages, emptying my cellar. I could drop dead and not be found for weeks, like Willie Donaldson, whose corpse was discovered still logged on to a lesbian porn site.

Anna went back to England to do her Samaritans shifts, Esther's Childline shifts, grandchildren duties, looking-after-her-ratbag-of-an-old-mother duties. She has to write up psychological reports about her mad patients; loads of things – I get the feeling I am being avoided.

And no wonder. I am a complete crasher. Whenever I embark on one of my stories, she says, 'I've heard that before.'

'What do you expect,' I retort, 'after 46 years…?'

But it is the case that I'm not much good at mixing with other people, entertaining them. I don't know about the things normal people know about, like cars, sport, reality television programmes and cookery shows. Mary Berry, I could never see the sense of her.

April

The only things I know about nobody else knows about. At family gatherings or parties – not that I go to such, haven't for decades – I'd sit or stand about in furious silence.

Now Barry Humphries is dead, there's no one to whom I can mention Marmaduke Pickthall, Lafcadio Hearn, Edgar Saltus and A E Coppard. I cherish obscure writers – perhaps because I am one myself.

The phone hasn't rung for several years. Barry Cryer used to call with a latest joke – he's gone. Paul Bailey used to bore me to death with his interminable maunderings about Turkish waiters – he's gone. And good riddance! I doubt whether anyone managed to finish one of his 'literary' novels, which were thoroughly moribund.

He was spiteful, too, Paul. I knew one day it would be my turn – and thus when I completed my Richard-Burton-and-Elizabeth-Taylor opus, he took the trouble to contact the publisher and insisted his name was removed from the acknowledgements section, even though he'd been the one to describe for me Burton on stage in the fifties.

I think what I most disliked about Paul, apart from the affected posh voice and attitudinising, was the fact his shoes were too highly polished.

June

Jan Morris said to me that once she was 60, she decided she'd never again travel in economy, only business or first class.

I made the same decision, except as I can't afford upgrades and nobody else looks as if they'll foot the bill, what this means is I don't go anywhere. I'll never again go to New York. I'll never see California or Australia.

Week after week, the papers are full of expensive and colourful advertisements for Caribbean cruises and exotic holidays in jungles or up rivers.

Who can possibly afford these trips? I can tell you. It's all these doctors, teachers, police 'officers' and public-sector persons on massive index-linked pensions and whopping tax-free lump sums. Even a biology teacher in a duff comprehensive receives on retirement a tax-free lump sum of about 80 grand.

I know this for a fact because some of Anna's relatives fall into the category. They are never not coming and going from Gatwick.

And then there's me, with a First and an Oxford fellowship at age 24 and the author of numerous quite well-received books, and I

haven't any pension provision. I won't even get a full state pension, either, as I never had the wherewithal to keep up the National Insurance contributions.

I know I am going to end up with my clothes on back to front, barking mad, joining the Hastings tramps at one of their frequent outdoor sherry receptions, putting on a frizzy charity-shop wig, and singing, with misplaced enthusiasm, Tina Turner's 'What's Love Got to Do with It?'.

August

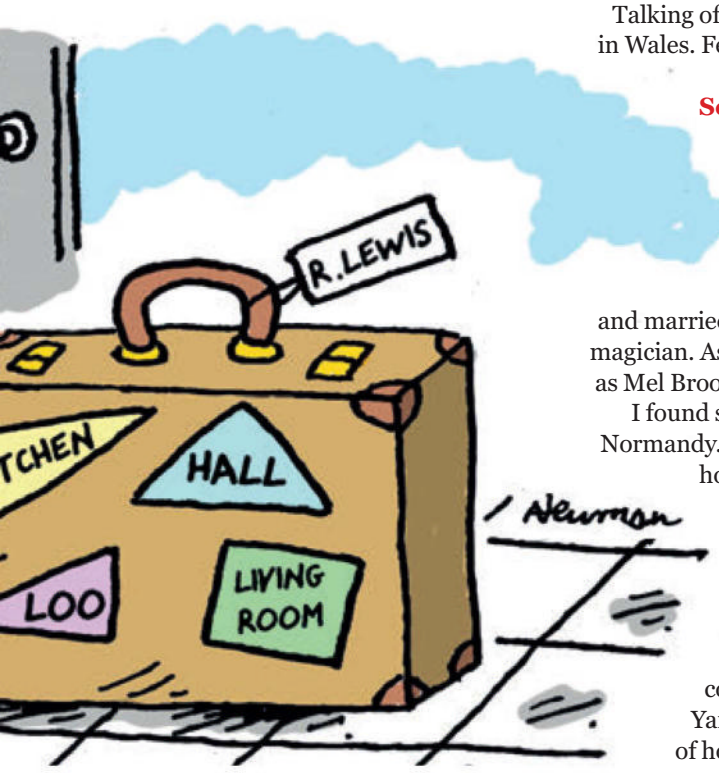
My Burton/Taylor book was meant to have done quite well, and it was a highlight for me when it turned up in a Pedro Almodóvar film – my hardback fondled by Julianne Moore and Tilda Swinton.

But when it came to actual earnings, as the booksellers take 33 per cent and the publishers 67 per cent, there's not much left over for the author.

I wish I had the gumption to be like April Ashley, who, if asked to make any sort of personal or promotional appearance, used to say, 'No fee, no me!'

I have been doing heaps of podcasts – often of an hour or more's duration – and of course there is zero remuneration.

CARTOONS BY NICK NEWMAN



Podcasts have taken over from radio spots, which at least were mercifully brief. Indeed, I don't think there is arts coverage on the radio any longer, just as regional newspapers don't review books – yet the *Yorkshire Post* and the *Western Mail* used to be esteemed. Once AI takes over, there'll be no need for journalists or writers anyway.

Talking of fees, I did a literary festival in Wales. Fee £300. Hotel bill £298.

September

I am meant to be writing a little book – a monograph – about Victoria Wood, called *Fog by Teatime*. Such talent, but what a misery, and married to the Great Soprendo, a magician. As odd and puzzling a match as Mel Brooks and Anne Bancroft.

I found some old photo albums in Normandy. How slender I used to be; how beautiful Anna. Now we are a pair of puddings on blood-pressure tablets.

October

Where we did end up this summer was on a motor-coach tour to Great Yarmouth, staying in the sort of hotel where bath plugs had been removed to prevent people from having baths and using up the hot water. Showers only – which can be an obstacle course for the elderly. I did enjoy myself, nevertheless – the model village, the floral clock, the boat ride on the Broads.

Norfolk, however, is being covered with new housing estates, which will suck in more immigrants. Diss, of all hitherto unspoilt spots, has a large quota of asylum-seekers.

I watched a Betjeman documentary about Diss. I wonder what Sir John would have had to say about today's desecration of England and the outlawing of traditional Englishness.

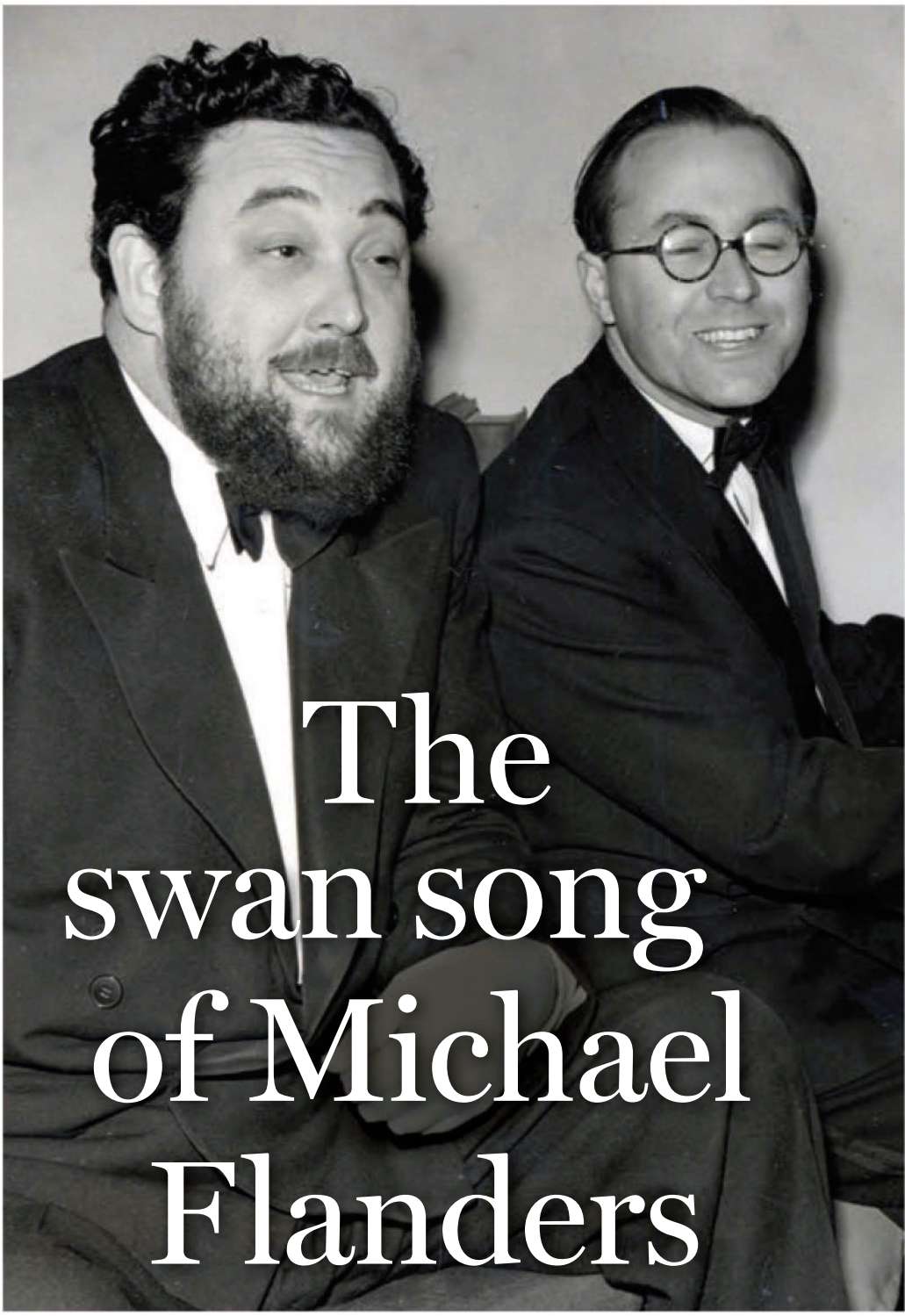
It's heartbreaking what has happened in Croydon, too. The library closed down by the council, the books piled up outside in the rain ready for the skip, and the building to be 'repurposed' as an Asian Resource Centre.

December

Last year, I gave Christmas a miss, and shall do so this year too. No cards, no gifts, the baubles and tinsel remaining in the loft, with the fondue set. It comes around so fast. What on earth was Our Lord thinking of?

Roger Lewis's Erotic Vagrancy: Everything About Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor *is being made into a TV series*

The swan song of Michael Flanders



On the 50th anniversary of his death, *Simon Berry* salutes Flanders – and Swann

The year 1975 was a sad one for British comedy.

Fifty years ago, we lost two of my heroes within months of each other. In February, P G Wodehouse died at the age of 93. Two months later, Michael Flanders died aged just 53, unexpectedly, of an aneurysm, in a guest house on a farm in North Wales while on holiday with his family.

Flanders (1922-75) – the lyricist half of Flanders and Swann (1923-94) – may not sit quite as high on Mount Parnassus as Wodehouse, but he's not far below.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of his death. Next year will be the 70th anniversary of the first performance of *At the Drop of a Hat* in 1956. Both milestones deserve celebration.

I remember exactly where I was when I first heard Flanders and Swann. It was the drawing room of a friend's parents' house in early 1973. The parents were out, and my friend suggested we explore their record collection – a concept that may need explaining to the youth of today.

He put on *At the Drop of Another Hat*. The afternoon vanished in laughter as we listened over and over to those wonderful songs and Flanders's witty introductions, delivered before an audience who were clearly loving every minute.

I bought my own copies of *Another Hat*, its prequel *At the Drop of a Hat*, and their *Bestiary* of animal songs. I played them until I knew most of the songs by heart. The lyrics, the turns of phrase, the perfectly timed monologues all slipped into my own vocabulary – in the vain hope that their perfection might be mistaken for my own wit.

Two years later, when I was at school, I even spoke to Michael Flanders himself. Or, rather, I telephoned him. I had managed to get his number from his agent, passing myself off as the Cultural Correspondent of the *Eton College Chronicle*.

He was not entirely delighted to be bothered by a snotty-nosed schoolboy asking impertinent questions, and suggested I send him a list, which he would answer after his holiday. That was in early April 1975. I never sent the questions – before I could, I heard that he had died. Flanders and Swann met at Westminster School, where they collaborated on a revue. Later, both attended Christ Church, Oxford, though not at the same time.

After the war, Flanders was unable to return to his studies, having contracted polio while serving in the Navy.

Years later, Donald Swann spotted Flanders in his wheelchair in the audience at a concert. He needed someone to write 'funny words' for his tunes, and so their partnership was reborn.

In the eight years before *At the Drop of a Hat*, they wrote more than 200 songs for other performers in Laurier Lister's popular revues – including Ian Wallace, Max Adrian, Hermione Gingold, Joyce Grenfell and a young soprano named Rose Hill, later immortalised as Madame Fanny, René's bedridden mother-in-law in *'Allo 'Allo!* Their first solo revue opened at the New Lindsey Theatre in Notting Hill Gate on New Year's Eve 1956, for a three-week run. When offered a transfer to the West End, they almost refused – Swann wanted to compose 'serious music', and Flanders was already an established radio actor.

But the show became a phenomenon – over 11 years and 1,700 performances

Michael Flanders (*left*) and Donald Swann (*right*), in the late 1950s

worldwide. The live albums, produced by George Martin (later of Beatles fame), have never been out of print.

For all their establishment image – dinner jackets, impeccable diction – both were lifelong supporters of the Labour Party. When Harold Macmillan asked Flanders backstage for advice on holding an audience's attention, Flanders replied, 'Have you tried singing to them?'

It was that blend of elegance and subversion that made him irresistible.

Behind the charm was a performer of immense discipline and courage. Confined to a wheelchair and lacking a lung, he was convinced that performing nightly strengthened him. He was funny, learned and humane and never – ever – talked down to his audience.

In the end, though, it all comes down to the songs. 'The Hippopotamus Song' and 'The Gnu Song' have become national treasures. 'The Gas Man Cometh', 'Ill Wind', 'A Song of Patriotic Prejudice' and 'The Slow Train' remain gems of comic writing and social observation. And the lesser-known pieces are treasures too. 'The Wompom', originally the title song for a musical about a miraculous plant, is an absurd joy:

'You can do such
a lot with the
Wompom;
You can use every
part of it too;
For work or for pleasure
It's a triumph, it's a treasure,
Oh, there's nothing that a Wompom
cannot do!'

'Misalliance', a love duet between two climbing plants, is pure poetry. 'The Warthog Song' tells a touching tale of inner beauty. And 'By Air', describing Flanders and his wheelchair being loaded onto a plane by fork-lift truck, still makes me laugh every time I fly. Many of the songs take us back to a long-vanished world. 'A Transport of Delight' celebrates the long-departed London omnibus. 'The Song of Reproduction' recalls a world of fibre needles and gramophones. 'The Sloth' dreams of ambitions forgotten by today's world obsessed with influencers:

'I could climb the very highest
Himalayas
Be among the greatest ever tennis
players
Win at chess, or marry a princess or
Study hard and be an eminent
professor
"O Tempora, O Mores. Oh *Times*, Oh
Daily Mirror."'

Flanders loved words – their sound, their rhythm, their mischief. He could rhyme 'plage' with 'hot potage' and 'Swanage'. He could teach you a new word – 'embouchure' for example – and make you grateful for it. His linguistic contortions in 'The Gnu Song' changed the English language: most people today pronounce the *g*.

And what lyricist could better the narrative finesse of 'Madeira, M'Dear?' – the way its rhymes carry the story towards its deliciously ambiguous end?

'She let go her glass with a shrill little cry,
Crash, tinkle! It fell to the floor.
When he said, "What in heaven—?",
she made no reply,
Up her mind, and a dash for the door.'

I could quote Michael Flanders's perfect lyrics endlessly, but I simply don't have the space. Perhaps *The Oldie* could print a line or two each issue, as they have this year to celebrate Wodehouse.

Michael with his wife, Claudia Cockburn, and their daughter Laura in 1961

Flanders and Swann's songs have outlived the LP, the cassette and even the CD. They are streamed now, modestly but persistently: around 8,700 monthly listeners on Spotify, compared with their American contemporary the late Tom Lehrer's 320,000. Lehrer was sharper, crueller, more satirical; Flanders and Swann were gentler, wittier and ultimately more English.

They may have been the staple of the back-row-of-the-bus chorus during our recent *Oldie* trip to Porto (you know who you are, ladies). Children still adore the animal songs – 'Mud, mud, glorious mud!' – and I plan to pass them on to my grandson this Christmas. If we don't keep singing them, who will?

Flanders once said he hoped his songs would 'last a little while'. Half a century after his death, they are still alive – witty, literate, humane and gloriously singable.

> Intellectual without being pretentious; satirical without being cruel

He and Swann made comedy musical again; intellectual without being pretentious; satirical without being cruel.

In an age of irony and outrage, Flanders's blend of intelligence and joy feels more precious than ever.

Simon Berry was Chairman of Berry Bros & Rudd, the wine merchants, where he worked for 40 years

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Confessions of a party animal

Dreading Christmas gatherings? You must go, says *Rachel Johnson* – who always says yes

Party time: Scrooge (Alastair Sim) and the Cratchits in *Scrooge* (1951)

When I lie on my deathbed, I can promise you this. My last words will never register any regret when it comes to one thing.

I will never clutch at my pink candlewick bedspread in my care home and exhale, 'I wish I'd gone to more parties. Even more *Christmas* parties.'

Like Churchill when it comes to alcohol, I have taken more out of parties than they have taken out of me.

If I'm invited, my instinct – as when it comes to most things – is to accept. It's genetic. I don't think I've ever heard my father, Stanley, use the word 'no' and, like my ubiquitous, genial and energetic surviving parent, I am the definition of a yes person and have this learning to pass on.

Always say yes to parties. If you decline or cancel at the last minute, this is the aching void you will be left with for the rest of time. You will never know what it was like. You will never know whom you might have met, flirted with or exchanged a meaning glance with across a crowded room.

The late Knight of Glin (father of Catherine FitzGerald and father-in-law of actor Dominic West) used to say to his three daughters, 'Always go to a party. You don't know what might happen.'

This wasn't just a Mr Bennet observation. Gossip, anecdote and incident come out of parties, as well as love and marriage – and sex, of course. I've got jobs out of chatting to people at parties.

As you get older, it's very important to go to parties to harvest younger people into your social hayloft, as insulation when your oldies hop the twig. You have to keep replenishing your circle and this – much better than Parkrun – is still the tried and tested method to grow the base.

To this day, I am tormented that I didn't go to my beloved little brother Leo's wedding in Paris (I'd just given birth).

More recently, I lie awake mourning the fact that I missed tycoon David Ross's birthday weekend this summer at his Nevill Holt Schloss, especially as the Friday night was Austrian dress and I can still rock a pair of lederhosen (the women, ie sister-in-law Carrie and co, looked scrumptious in dirndl).

I remain dejected that I had to miss Zac Goldsmith's Cotswolds wedding (Nicky Haslam banned me from saying 'society wedding', on common grounds) this autumn as I was having an undignified procedure. I got a column out of it, of course: read the 'endos-copy' in my Substack.

I needed to work out how to go to both the celebration of the late Sir David Tang *and* the reopening of the Chiltern Firehouse. So I turned to one of London's most invited, Sir Nicholas Coleridge, former head of Condé Nast, whose instinct is always to say yes.

'If I find we are already going to something that night,' Coleridge, now Provost of Eton College, says, 'I immediately type both postcodes into my phone, to see if it's possible to go to both.

I can think of very few parties I've ever been to where I wish I hadn't bothered, but plenty I missed that I regret. I enjoy all types of parties; not just swanky ones.

'My only rule is always have your own transport, in case you want to leave. This is particularly true of dance-type parties or weddings. There is a moment when you want to be outta there – urgently – and it is such a comfort to have the key to your own car nestling in your pocket.'

Since the pandemic, the importance of meeting people IRL – in real life – has been upped by those dreary months of Zoom cocktails and online quizzes. The *Times Literary Supplement* has – hurray – just restored its party, a lifeline for the threadbare provincial eggheads who otherwise never get to meet their editors and top London sophisticates.

> Gossip, anecdote and incident – and sex – come out of parties

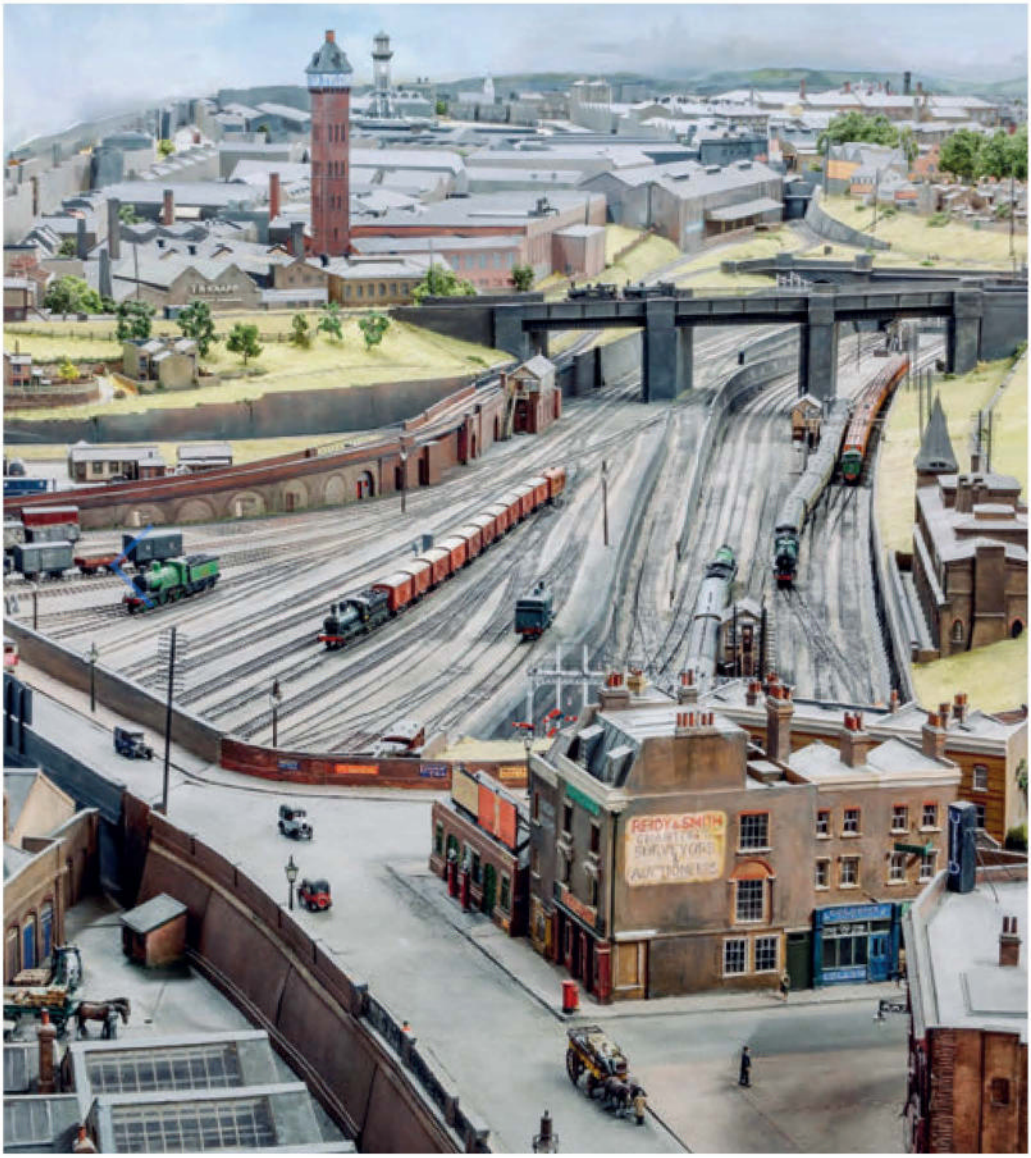
How we party animals felt lost during Covid without our nightly rendezvous in clubland with a cold glass of champagne – even a warm glass of white at a book launch – followed by dinner somewhere with a fellow traveller from our inky trade.

It is the element of serendipity that makes a party irresistible.

When John Gross, the late man of letters, returned from America – where he'd been on the *New York Times* – he was in need of a job. A sub at the *TLS*, with whom he had worked, invited him to a retirement party in Dulwich. Not the most exciting.

The 'best-read man in Britain' didn't want to make the ghastly effort to go – but, out of loyalty, he went. As he walked in, Peregrine Worsthorne, the new editor, said, 'Would you like to be the theatre critic of the *Sunday Telegraph*?'

No surprise that Mary Killen (who told me this clincher of a story) says, 'John Gross said to me, "It's always worth going to a party."'



First-class ticket to heaven

As the railways turn 200, *Harry Mount* visits the world's oldest model-railway club

A few minutes' walk from King's Cross, Euston and St Pancras lies a fourth magical British railway terminus.

Here you'll find trains hurtling into north London tunnels, shooting over a Derbyshire viaduct – and chuff-chuffing through Putnam in upstate New York.

The difference is that these trains are a lot smaller than the ones at King's Cross. For this is the Model Railway Club (MRC) – the biggest model-railway club in Britain (with 300 members) and the oldest in the world.

The year 2025 was the 200th anniversary of the first train in the world, the Stockton and Darlington Railway, which opened on 27th September 1825.

Well, the Model Railway Club isn't far behind. Founded in 1910, it's celebrating its 115th anniversary in 2025.

To salute the anniversary, I'm being shown round the club on one of its regular Thursday-night openings by the Chairman, Tony Cox, 67, a retired accountant. Tony is about to stand down as Chairman, after nine years. His successor is Carole Bevis-Smith, the first woman to chair the club.

The first model trains in the 1840s were 'carpet railways' – trackless trains running across your carpet. They were nicknamed Birmingham Dribblers, for their place of manufacture and tendency to drip water. The first tracked model railway was built in 1859 by the Emperor Napoleon III for his three-year-old son, also Napoleon, in his Château de Saint-Cloud in Paris.

Railway modelling was exclusively a rich man's game in the late-Victorian and early Edwardian years. It wasn't until 1910 that enough enthusiasts got together to form a club of like-minded modellers.

They called it *the* Model Railway Club – no geographical modifier required – because it was the only one. The club is now famous around the world. On the night I visited, wide-eyed modellers from Shanghai and Buenos Aires also made a pilgrimage.

To begin with, the MRC attracted an itinerant group, gathering in Waterloo and Holborn. And then, in 1960, they built Keen House, their splendid, huge clubhouse, where they still meet today, just off Pentonville Road, seven minutes' walk up the hill from King's Cross. It was custom-built, to factory dimensions, on the site of an old emergency reservoir used for putting out fires in the Blitz.

One of the problems for modellers is finding enough space to build their track layouts. Space is no problem at the MRC. One large room in the basement is given over to layouts in atmospheric historic settings.

The joy of railway modelling is the Martini Rosso effect: as in the 1980s ads, you can set your layout 'any time, any place, anywhere'.

Current layouts at the club (on show or in storage) include Putnam Yard, upstate New York, in the 1950s. Or head to Ingatestone, Essex, as it is today, 1960s Docklands or 1970s east London, at the height of the British Rail era.

Some layouts are so prized that they are taken across the country to star at modelling shows. The MRC helps organise the two biggest British model-railway exhibitions – the London Festival of Railway Modelling at Alexandra Palace in March, and the National Festival of Railway Modelling at the NEC in November. There is also a thriving Saturday club for junior modellers.

There are no hard and fast rules to modelling. Except, as Tony Cox tells me, 'Rule one – it's my train set. I'll do what I like.' So you can use your modeller's

Opposite page: **the club's 1930s King's Cross layout – begun 1983, still under construction – features scenes from *The Ladykillers* (1955)**

artistic licence and make your own impressionist fantasy of a train line.

Or combine fact with fiction. On his 100-feet track, musician Jools Holland includes his favourite London buildings – among them his native Greenwich in the 1950s, Hawksmoor's Christ Church, Spitalfields, and the demolished Euston Arch. Then his model Eurostar train supersonically connects London with St Petersburg and Cold War Berlin and Checkpoint Charlie.

Holland has taken modelling advice from his friend Rod Stewart.

Rod told Jools, 'First, a layout must be placed in the largest room available.

'Second, and most importantly, creating a large model brings enormous happiness and a sense of wellbeing to the builder. Finally, subscribe to *Model Railroader* magazine, because American homes were larger than in Britain and so America leads the world in large-size, home-based layouts.'

Rod Stewart's layout (*pictured*) is modelled on New York and Chicago in 1945. When on tour, he works on his mini-skyscrapers in a dedicated hotel room. In 2019, he gave £10,000 to the Market Deeping Model Railway Club to restore their layout after it was smashed up by four drunken thugs.

The MRC's layouts are not just large but also extremely detailed. Tony Cox shows me the one for Lacey Dale, in 1950s Derbyshire.

The grass is made from nylon fibres painted green – the fibres are given an electric charge to stand up. Trees are constructed from florist's wire and florist's tape, fleshed out with plaster, glue, false bark and leaves. The local Derbyshire limestone is painted plaster.

Layouts can take decades, requiring intensive planning, carpentry, electrical and programming skills. Some modellers even follow original timetables to schedule their trains.

One layout shows Copenhagen Fields (*pictured*), right next to King's Cross, in the 1930s. The layout was begun in 1983 – and still isn't quite finished. Like painting the Forth Bridge, perfecting the ideal layout is an eternal quest.

MRC ARCHIVE & LEEDDS STEDMAN TRUST; ROD STEWART PORTRAIT, RAILWAY MODELLER MAGAZINE

From top: **Chairman Tony Cox; Geoffrey Percy Keen (1889-1973), an early chairman, with Garratt loco; record plaque; Rod Stewart with his US layout**

The display includes King's Cross Goods Yard, York Way viaduct and York Way Tube Station. The area – the setting for *The Ladykillers* (1955) – includes Professor Marcus (Alec Guinness) and Mrs Wilberforce's house.

Model trains have come on in leaps and bounds. The first electric models ran on variable resistors, where you dialled up the voltage to increase the speed.

Now, with microchips, you can turn on the train lights and produce sound effects – the squeal of the brakes; the magic chuff-chuff that whisks you back to the hallowed days of steam.

Around the club, I'm surprised to see several Rail Blue and yellow diesels from the bad old days of British Rail.

'People sometimes say, "Everyone's modelling steam,"' says Tony Cox. 'No, they aren't. You often model the trains you grew up with.' So you can get models of Stephenson's 1829 Rocket – but you'd have to be about 200 to have witnessed the train running in its prime.

Another club room allows members to run in their trains on a winding test track. If they need to check a fact, they can consult their library, one of the world's biggest railway-literature collections, with 5,000 books and periodicals.

When I drop in, Simon Bradley, author of *Bradley's Railway Guide: A Journey through Two Centuries of British Railway History, 1825-2025*, is hard at work on his next volume.

When the 40 to 50 members who come to Thursday club nights want a break from driving their trains across Britain and the planet, they retire to the club bar, watch railway videos, buy and sell trains, pick up repair equipment and admire the club's collection of models.

The club is decorated with stirring pictures of railway scenes by Terence Cuneo (1907-96). Every picture – such as *Memories of Willesden Junction* and *Memories of Clapham Junction* – has Cuneo's trademark mouse hidden in a remote corner.

The Guinness World Records certificate for the world's oldest model-railway club greets you in the hall. All round the club, you see its charming 1923 logo: of Hermes, the Greek god of travel, admiring a model train. Members call him Percy after Geoffrey Percy Keen (*pictured*), an early Chairman of the MRC, who gave his name to Keen House.

A trip to the MRC is a journey back to a romantic age. There are no rail-replacement services or strikes here. Every carriage is a quiet carriage. The beer is cheap, club membership is only £80 a year and the trains don't just leave on time: they run whenever and wherever you like – because you're the driver.

themodelrailwayclub.org

We're doomed!

John Humphrys worked with three BBC chiefs – who all met grisly ends

It's possible that I am the last BBC observer on the planet prepared to shed a few tears at the resignation of Tim Davie as Director-General of the BBC.

Yes, I know that important heads had to roll over the Trump-edit disgrace and, God knows, I demanded enough rolling heads in my 33 years on the *Today* programme. But I've always had a soft spot for Tim.

On the morning he became DG, one of the first things he did was summon me to his office and demand (rather flatteringly, I thought) that I give him three pieces of advice. So I did.

First: 'Your interview on *PM* yesterday was a shambles. In future, do some prep.'

Second: 'You're a public figure now. Stop dressing like a teenager. No more scruffy trainers.'

Third (and here I pointed through his glass wall to the next-door office, which housed a very senior executive): 'Get rid of him.'

He listened politely and said, 'Yes to your first. No to your second – I'm not dressing like a bureaucrat. As for your third … too late. I've already sacked him!'

Hard not to warm to a boss like that, eh? And, anyway, I had already been held responsible for the resignation of another DG. As Oscar Wilde almost put it, 'To lose one DG may be regarded as misfortune. To lose two looks like carelessness.'

My earlier victim was Tim's immediate predecessor, George Entwistle. He was forced to resign in 2012 as DG a couple of hours after I had given him what was described as a 'roasting' on *Today*.

My criticism was levelled at his reaction – or, rather, failure to react – when *Newsnight* falsely accused an eminent Tory, Lord McAlpine, of being involved in a child-abuse scandal.

Under my not particularly tough questioning, George had to admit he'd been asleep at the wheel. In fact, he hadn't even switched on the telly – even though there had been warnings aplenty that McAlpine was in *Newsnight*'s sights.

The BBC Chairman called an emergency meeting of the board that Saturday morning – and that was that. George had to go.

Not so for Tim Davie. The new Chairman, Samir Shah, said he had the 'unswerving and unanimous support' of Shah and the board.

It wasn't the first time Tim had considered resigning. The Glastonbury crisis was another. The BBC had broadcast a duo (wittily known as Bob Vylan) leading a chant of 'Death, death to the IDF [Israel Defence Forces]'. Viewers could watch the Vylan vitriol via a live stream on BBC iPlayer. Davie wanted to resign, but was talked out of it.

One DG who resigned when he should not have was Greg Dyke – forced out in 2004 by the Hutton Report into the massive crisis that resulted from an interview I did with the *Today* Defence Correspondent, Andrew Gilligan.

And, yes, I know there's a pattern developing here, but I did not set out to get DGs fired. Honest.

Not even Gilligan could have imagined the fallout when he told me the British scientist Dr David Kelly believed the Government had 'sexed up' its dossier on Iraq's so-called weapons of mass destruction. At the height of the crisis, Kelly killed himself.

Tony Blair eventually ordered a public inquiry, chaired by Lord Hutton. On the afternoon Hutton was to announce his verdict, the enormous newsroom in TV Centre came to a standstill. I'd never seen anything like it. We all knew how devastating it would be for the BBC if Hutton were to clear Blair and blame us for getting it wrong – and that's exactly what he did.

The word 'whitewash' rang out across the land – but within hours we were to see yet another BBC DG fall on his sword.

Months later, I was told by the most senior spy in the land that Kelly had been right. But top spies don't give interviews, and I'd have probably been pushed under a train if I'd blabbed. But someone, somewhere, leaked it. Of course they did.

Six years later, another inquiry was launched.

GETTY

Greg Dyke (Director-General, 2000-04), George Entwistle (Sep-Nov 2012) and Tim Davie (2020-25)

This was no whitewash. It was devastating and ripped Hutton to shreds. Blair did only one solo interview – with me, the following morning.

It was the longest live interview *Today* had ever done. At one point, Blair used a phrase that puzzles me still.

When I challenged him about the truth (or otherwise) of his 'weapons of mass destruction' claims, he answered, 'I only know what I believe.' I've always been puzzled by that. Surely you *know* only what can be proved.

I count myself lucky that my lifetime at the BBC preceded the birth of the DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) movement and the growth of a mighty force who call themselves the 'activists'.

They have gone from strength to strength – aided and abetted by the phenomenal social revolution in this country, the like of which some of us struggle to comprehend.

There is no longer a boss in the BBC who doesn't know that he/she will be out on their neck if they fail to promote DEI – as the activists define it.

Their rise to power has not been universally welcomed, which helps explain why the newsreader Martine Croxall felt she had to add 'women' when she was faced with a script that said 'pregnant people' in a live broadcast and why many of her colleagues silently applauded. Note the use of 'silently' there.

To use their own definition, the activists are 'genderqueer, bisexual, gay, lesbian, transgender, non-binary, pansexual, intersex, asexual, queer or an ally'. Their word has become law. And why not? Equality matters.

The BBC has even advertised for a 'Head of Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging', with a salary of up to £125,0000. Well worth it – maybe for someone who can define 'belonging'.

And then there are all the LGBTQIA+ desks and the 'gender and identity' correspondents who staff them. And so it goes on. And woe betide the BBC boss who raises a questioning eyebrow. No wonder Tim had had enough.

> At one point, Blair used a phrase that puzzles me still ... 'I only know what I believe'

But the BBC will survive, and I hope and believe it will emerge from the Trump crisis bloodied but largely unbowed.

And if it doesn't?

Well, here's where I have some breaking news guaranteed to put a spring in the step of even the most unconvinced of broadcasting sceptics out there.

A new podcast is about to be launched aimed specifically at you, dear *Oldie*-reader. It will be a conversation (of sorts) between Matthew Norman and me. I've always regarded Matthew, this magazine's Grumpy Oldie Man, as the funniest and – in some ways – the most perceptive columnist in British journalism.

He's also a nightmare to keep under control. But that's what I'm going to have to do, because I'll be presenting the podcast with him. Here's what he says about it:

'Much as anyone on nodding terms with sanity hates pleasuring the political class, in this case that will be unavoidable. I will be interrupting John constantly, regardless of the topic at hand, and demanding he answer the question even when – particularly when – he is plainly doing just that.

'We all know that he can dish it out, as he did for half a century. It will be intriguing to discover if he can take it.'

Hmm... We'll see!

John Humphrys presented the Today *programme from 1987 to 2019. His podcast with Matthew Norman begins in the New Year*

Hot date

Christopher Sandford looks back 50 years to 1976 – and the raid at Entebbe, the Sex Pistols and the hottest summer for two centuries

In early 1976, it seemed as if British politics might be in danger of becoming a little dull.

Harold Wilson was in his fourth term as prime minister, and, despite rumblings about the UK's balance of payments crisis, the Labour government looked like it would muddle through until the next general election, likely in 1978 or early 1979.

But then Wilson abruptly resigned in March 1976. Either he wanted to go out on top and, so he said, make way for a younger man (in the event his successor, Jim Callaghan, would be four years older), or there was some dark scandal lurking in the shadows.

The outgoing PM himself privately – and later publicly – claimed to have been the victim of a black-ops campaign conducted by rogue elements of the UK security forces in cahoots with operatives in the USA and South Africa.

Wilson's resignation honours list was notable both for its questionable names and for the fact that it appeared written on his secretary Marcia Williams's lavender notepaper.

As the nation's economic health continued to deteriorate under Callaghan and his chancellor Denis Healey, with a series of public-sector strikes (and IRA bombs exploding on city streets), there was talk of the UK becoming 'ungovernable'.

According to one popular rumour, a citizen volunteer force, much like the one raised for the General Strike 50 years earlier, would join with disaffected military units to stage a coup d'état and reimpose law and order.

The rebels would seize Heathrow Airport, the BBC and Buckingham Palace. Then, with Lord Mountbatten as interim dictator, the Queen would read out a statement urging the public to support the new regime because the civil government could no longer keep order.

Pending such developments, there was an unusually dramatic sporting calendar to savour. In May, second division Southampton defied 50-1 odds to beat Manchester United in the FA Cup Final at Wembley.

Too hot to trot: Trafalgar Square fountain, 1976 drought

The British Grand Prix at Brands Hatch was won by the Austrian Niki Lauda – after the home favourite James Hunt crossed the line first, only to be disqualified on a technicality.

The American Johnny Miller won the Open Championship at Royal Birkdale, cruising to a six-stroke victory over his countryman Jack Nicklaus and an unknown Spanish teenager named Seve Ballesteros.

The tournament that year was also notable for golf's own Eddie 'the Eagle' prototype in the form of 46-year-old Maurice Flitcroft, a newcomer to the sport whom officials rashly allowed to participate in the Open's qualifying competition. Flitcroft managed to get lost while driving to Royal Birkdale and made straight for the bar on arrival.

His subsequent round of 121 would put him 49 over par, and was 38 shots more than that taken by the next-worst player.

The news in cricket that summer was the arrival of Clive Lloyd's West Indies team, which included Gordon Greenidge, Viv Richards and Michael Holding in its ranks.

England's captain Tony Greig assured a reporter from BBC's *Sportsnight* that the home side would make the visitors 'grovel' before the season was out.

Alas, events proved otherwise: Lloyd's men won the Test series three-nil, with two draws, and took all three of the one-day internationals. Greig himself finished the series by crawling on his hands and knees in comic supplication across the Oval outfield as Lloyd's team wrapped up yet another decisive victory.

It was particularly ironic that rain should have washed out the Saturday of the Lord's Test on 19th June, sending some 30,000 cricket fans home without a penny's compensation. The downpour not only denied England a slim chance of victory, but also marked the eve of the UK's longest period of sustained dry weather for more than 350 years, and its driest summer for more than 200.

Pole position: Niki Lauda and James Hunt

Over the next ten weeks, the iconic images were of uninhibited young sunbathers plunging into the Serpentine in Hyde Park, dressed in attire of the most sparing cut (or, in the words of the *Times*, 'no attire at all'), or bowler-hatted businessmen

rolling up their trousers and splashing in the Trafalgar Square fountains.

In time, a few makeshift-looking water-detector vans began patrolling the streets in an effort to enforce the latest hosepipe ban.

The drought was even given its own minister in 52-year-old Denis Howell, a former professional football referee. Howell caused some mirth by promptly inviting reporters to his constituency home, where he revealed he was doing his bit to help conserve water by sharing baths with his wife, Brenda.

With a certain inevitability, the dry spell came to an abrupt end over that year's August Bank Holiday, with soaring temperatures and blue skies replaced by gale-force winds and heavy rain.

As Britain's weather lurched from one extreme to the other, Howell became known as Minister for Floods, causing him privately to remark that his ministerial career was a case of 'one damn thing after another'.

Hearing this, his colleague Denis Healey may well have found himself wondering at the parallels to his own situation.

Idi Amin: 'Never marry ladies in a high position'

In a crowded field, the prize for the defining symbol of Britain's 1976 economic crisis probably came on 28th September, when Healey was forced to turn his car around at Heathrow Airport. The Chancellor had been due to fly out to a finance ministers' meeting in Hong Kong, but instead hurriedly returned to his office, as the pound embarked on yet another freefall on the foreign-exchange markets.

Healey spent much of the rest of the year in increasingly fraught discussions with negotiators from the International Monetary Fund, who eventually agreed to provide Britain a loan of £2.7 billion in exchange for a range of public-spending cuts.

Overseas, there was the drama of Operation Thunderbolt, the Israeli special forces' raid to rescue the passengers of a hijacked Air France plane being held by terrorists at Entebbe Airport in Uganda. Like all the best such missions, it nearly came to grief.

The Israelis' commander, 30-year-old Lt Col 'Yoni' Netanyahu, older brother of the future Prime Minister, incautiously opened fire on a civilian airport guard, and was himself fatally wounded by a Uganda Army sniper.

In the end, the raiders overcame the hijackers and successfully freed most of those held captive. Two hostages were killed by friendly fire, while a third, 74-year-old Dora Bloch, initially said to have 'disappeared', was murdered by Ugandan troops acting on the orders of their nation's tyrant Idi Amin.

No one ever knew quite what to expect from Amin, who kept up a steady stream of correspondence with the British government. Proving that he could flatter as well as threaten, the Ugandan hardman told Harold Wilson on his retirement, 'It is my sincere wish that your party will in due course name your successor, and I will co-operate with this person, whether he is Welsh, Scottish, Irish or English.'

Turning to the tragedy of Princess Margaret's divorce from her photographer husband, Lord Snowdon, Amin commented, 'I hope this will be a lesson to all of us men not to marry ladies in a very high position.'

If nothing else, 1976 will always be remembered for the moment in early December when an up-and-coming quartet called the Sex Pistols found themselves being interviewed by the *Today* programme's presenter Bill Grundy on teatime TV.

Although the segment in question lasted barely two minutes, it was enough to spell both the overnight arrival of the Pistols as an international talking point and the effective end of Grundy's career.

It would be difficult to nominate a single highlight of what amounted to a greatest-hits collection of broken broadcast taboos, but the moment when the Pistols' guitarist Steve Jones unleashed the f-bomb on live TV might make a strong bid for the prize.

The *Daily Mirror*'s 'THE FILTH AND THE FURY' was only the most indelible of the many headlines, bringing a suitably stormy end to a turbulent year.

Christopher Sandford's 1976: The Year That Scorched *(The History Press) is available now*

NEWS GROUP NEWSPAPERS LTD; GETTY

Grandpa's long shadow

Somerset Maugham was tricky, touchy – and affectionate. By his grandson *Jonathan Hope*

My grandfather William Somerset Maugham (1874-1965) cast a long shadow. He died 60 years ago, on 16th December 1965.

For years, I refused to talk about him or read his excellent books. As an oldie, I mind things so much less; old wounds have healed and disappeared.

Now I can remember with delight sunny days at the Villa Mauresque – playing on the rocks behind the house with my brother, Julian; being taught to swim in the pool at the Grand Hôtel du Cap-Ferrat by the dazzling Pierre Gruneberg; and luxuriating in the Mauresque's heavenly gardens.

I would gaze in wonderment at the exotic carp with streaming tails and fins, swimming in narrow, landscaped ponds, and enjoy the scent of sun-baked leaves and herb and the sounds of chirping insects. It was all a far cry from the village near Henley-on-Thames that was home. Up at the villa on the Riviera, I had the sense of another country in another world, which I have spent much of my life trying to find.

The oriental treasures carefully placed throughout the house enhanced this otherworldliness. Dominating the hall was an astonishing Song-period Guanyin. My brother and I would pretend to be worshippers at its feet, to the amusement of my grandfather.

Despite his reputation, Somerset Maugham could be affectionate and warm. He definitely liked children, possibly preferring us, in our uncorrupted state, to the grown-ups.

'Grandpa' often visited his daughter, Mary (1915-98), my mother, in London. We were all photographed together by Yevonde in 1956 (*pictured above*).

My first clear memory of his presence dates from 1958, when we went, *en famille*, for a fortnight's stay at the Villa Mauresque. My father, the Conservative politician Lord Glendevon (1912-96), did not accompany us. He was probably shooting grouse in Scotland – and his relationship with his father-in-law was deteriorating after a promising start.

We boarded a Vickers Viscount at London Airport and flew to Nice. It was my first flight and I remember being thrilled by the view of what appeared to be tiny houses similar to my toy model village. I also remember some unnaturally pink cherries in the fruit salad served with the BEA lunch.

Grandpa Maugham came to meet us at the airport, where several paparazzi with fizzing flashbulbs forced him to say a few words.

I started to be violently sick, pink cherries and all. Jean, the chauffeur, saved the moment by picking me up and holding me over a gutter.

I remember waking up at the villa later to find my grandfather sitting on the end of my bed, smiling gently and looking a little concerned.

He said, 'There's a long queue of people outside, stretching all the way down to the Cap, wanting to know if Jonathan is feeling b-b-b-better.'

That was the first time I heard the famous stammer which had so blighted his early life. One evening, I tiptoed out of our bedroom to listen to the grown-ups' dinner conversation in the courtyard below.

'How are the boys getting on at school?' Grandpa asked my mother. She replied that Julian was very clever, passing all his exams with ease, while I was blessed with a 'wonderful imagination'. I was happy with that.

My mother had told us to treat him with great respect and not to enter the long sitting-room unless invited, but the old boy was not at all frightening to us children.

We were told to never go onto the flat roof, where he had his writing room – but of course we did. There we saw the Gauguin glass panel he had bought from the artist's housekeeper, some time after his death on Tahiti.

It was set into the wall, like a magic

***Left:* with Julian, six, and Jonathan, four, in London, by Yevonde, 1956. *Right:* with Jonathan and Julian, Villa Mauresque, 1961**

window through which one could see way beyond the Mediterranean.

My grandfather's hospitality was famous. I remember the delicious food served in the patio, where we lunched with the grown-ups, or in the dining-room, where we were given an early children's supper. On the wall, over the sideboard, was Picasso's *Death of Harlequin*.

Annette, the brilliant cook, would produce wonderful puddings, such as geranium ice cream and *poire belle Hélène*, to our delight. Surprisingly, Grandpa Maugham's favourite dish was the uniquely English silverside of beef.

Avocados, almost unknown in England, grew in the garden. They were known as alligator pears and I once asked my grandfather if he ever ate real alligators. My father, who had recently become Minister of Works, was present on this occasion and Grandpa's answer to my question was, I think, for his benefit: 'Only when the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh come to luncheon.'

If I was finding something difficult to cut, Grandpa would say, 'Fingers were made before forks. Use them.'

I remember an elaborate picnic in a wood a short drive from the villa, followed by a precipitous walk down to the sea to bathe. He kept himself remarkably trim by swimming daily, usually in his elegant pool, having given up tennis as he approached his eighties.

One day, I found a photograph in a drawer of my grandfather, a fit 50-year-old, leaping through the air, stark naked. I put it back after showing my brother, who, unlike me, was a little shocked.

I have more than 70 of his handwritten letters to my mother. These are both familiar and affectionate and are usually signed 'your loving Daddy'.

They show how interested he was in his grandchildren and even in my father's career. In one, he adds a postscript: 'Please tell Julian and Jonathan not to grow up too fast.' I also have three or four charming letters written to Julian and me. He must have felt a longing for the family life denied him after the death of both his parents.

Aged ten, he was adopted by an austere cleric, an uncle, and his German wife. Their vicarage in Whitstable became his home during the holidays from boarding school. He must have been appalled by the food after his Parisian childhood.

Diana Marr Johnson, his niece, talked to me at length about her uncle. He had bought her a wonderful evening dress by Worth when she was 18, and often took her to his first nights.

He found her easy to be with, as the author of several rather good novels herself. She felt he enjoyed being generous, and liked to give pleasure to others, but she was aware of his dark side – if less so than my father.

My dad was the son of the Marquess of Linlithgow, Viceroy of India, and a high Tory politician representing the rigid British establishment that had made life in England too difficult for Grandpa.

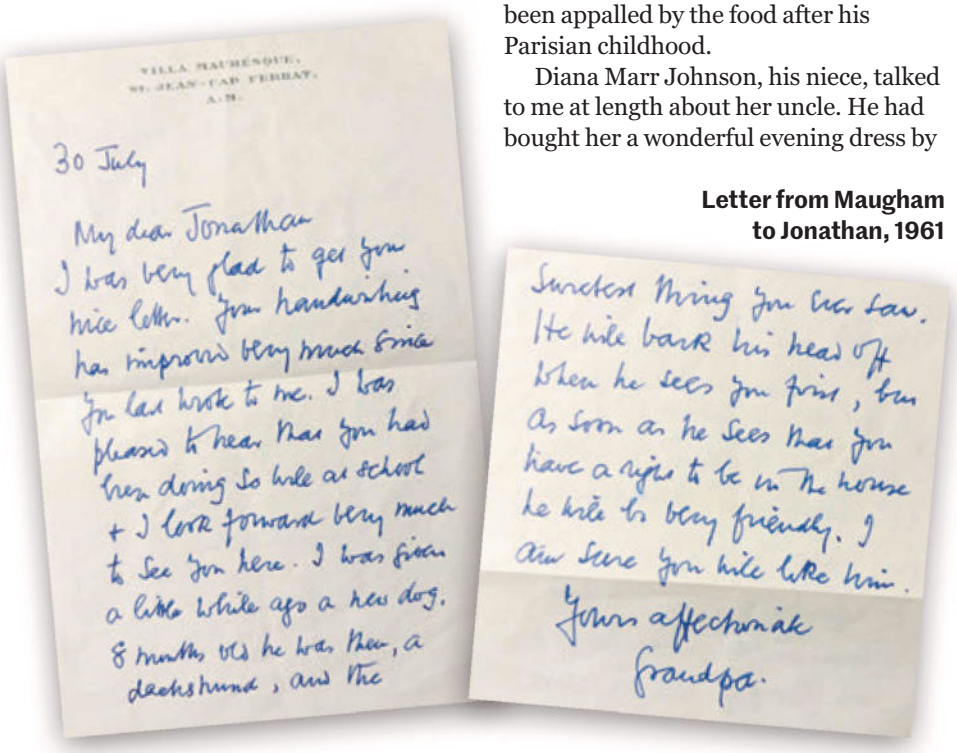
My grandfather was easily upset and could certainly hold a grudge. It has taken me a long time to forgive his treatment of my parents at the very end of his life, but I have done so.

I wish I had known my grandmother, Syrie Maugham (1879-1955), who died when I was three. She was Dr Barnardo's daughter and a liberated, talented woman, separated from her first husband, Sir Henry Wellcome, when she first met Grandpa.

He was fascinated by her at first. There was definitely a mutual passion, but he could not handle being married and would not give up his American boyfriend. Inevitably, they divorced, against his wishes, and he never forgave her. A few years ago, I found myself staying in the old-fashioned Hotel Le Royal in Phnom Penh. By chance, I was put in the Somerset Maugham Room. He wrote about Cambodia in *The Gentleman in the Parlour* (1930).

There was a photograph of him on the wall. 'My God, you caused a lot of trouble,' I heard myself say. Then I burst out laughing – and could hear him laughing back from very far away.

Letter from Maugham to Jonathan, 1961


VILLA MAURESQUE,
ST. JEAN-CAP FERRAT,
A.M.

30 July

My dear Jonathan
I was very glad to get your nice letter. Your handwriting has improved very much since you last wrote to me. I was pleased to hear that you had been doing so well at school + I look forward very much to see you here. I was given a little while ago a new dog. 8 months old he was then, a dachshund, and the

Sincerest thing you can say. He will bark his head off when he sees you first, but as soon as he sees that you have a right to be in the house he will be very friendly. I am sure you will like him.

Yours affectionate
Grandpa.

Don't get the hump

Osteoporosis – and the iPhone plague – lead to bad posture. Here's how to stay ahead of the curve

The 19th-century term 'dowager's hump' was coined because the abnormal curvature of the spine was more likely to afflict older, richer, women than younger, poorer women.

An old, rich widow did less physical labour than an old female peasant, too. The peasant was less susceptible to the curvature because her hard work made proper use of her muscles and didn't allow them to decline.

As with 'housemaid's knee', the sexist diagnosis does not exclude male sufferers. But, still, women are simply more likely to have it than men. At a modest estimate, the NHS judges that osteoporosis afflicts half of women over 50 but only a third of men over 60.

Osteoporosis causes the spine to start giving way and the head incrementally to move forward, thus creating the hump. It is not a lump growing on your back, as with a camel. It is all to do with the change in posture.

For every inch your head protrudes away from its normal alignment, you add around ten pounds more force on your neck.

The head is heavy, and the projection is part of a vicious circle causing the upper spine to curve.

When the back is out of alignment, the lungs are compressed and denied the full space they need to function.

'Foul bunch-backed toad': Richard III, by Sir John Gilbert RA

And proper breathing is the key to proper physical functioning.

No wonder Gwyneth Paltrow and Kate Winslet bellow, 'Breathe!' in response to every minor crisis.

But you can do something to self-correct.

First, go to your NHS doctor – anyone over the age of 60 can ask for a DEXA scan to test for bone density. If you find you are one of those with osteoporosis – and it tends to be hereditary – then you can begin to help yourself, not least through weight-bearing exercise, diet and vitamin intake.

There is an almost magically effective 'wall angel' exercise, which you can perform in your own home and should do at least twice each day.

Stand against a wall so that the back of your head and your buttocks are touching the wall. Raise your arms into a wide Y above your head. Keep the back of your head, your buttocks and the back of your arms in contact with the wall.

Bring your elbows down so that you form a W. Build up to be able to do three sets of ten. It will be very difficult at first to keep the back of the arms in contact with the wall, but practice will make perfect.

Clothing to minimise dowager's hump

Modestly sized shoulder pads, scarves, big collars and polo necks offset the imbalance. Arab thawbs can be good as they fall straight down, without changing direction thereby silhouetting the hump. Long hair is better. If possible, learn to knit so that you can make the back hem of your polo-neck jumper longer to offset the imbalance.

Tech neck

As a result of the iPhone plague, spine curvature is now afflicting not only women over the age of 50; alas it is afflicting girls and boys over the age of 13. Tech neck means younger heads are projecting forward and chin-line definition is going. The double chin is a huge turn-off.

Laptops are bad because the young balance them on their pelvises when lying in bed, or on their knees. And they stare downwards and forwards towards the screens. The spine starts incrementally and insidiously to curve. Desktop computers are much better, because the screen can be at eye level.

Even if they don't mind the dowager's hump, the young WILL mind the double chin. A whole new attitude towards iPhone-handling needs to be implemented. The aim is always to have the screen at natural eye level.

When using the phone at home, try to sit with your back against a wall or flush against a good upright chair. Use your elbows or knees as leverage to hold your telephone up, so that it's in direct line with your face.

While out and about, place one hand into the armpit to form a 'bridge' across your chest. Rest the other elbow on the bridge and hold your iPhone in this hand.

Get into the habit of using the microphone button on your iPhone, so you can dictate – rather than type – messages. This will facilitate keeping the screen at eye level. And, when in bed, lie on your front to use your iPhone.

One thing the London Mayor, Sadiq Khan, has done to benefit Londoners is ensure that staring-down-at-mobile-screens time has been reduced. We no longer walk through the streets, staring down at our phones. Brigands on bikes, unpoliced by Khan, will snatch them. We must be thankful for small mercies.

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2026 EXHIBITIONS

FOR DISCERNING TRAVELLERS

Kirker Holidays creates carefully-crafted short breaks and tailor-made holidays including individually selected hotels, private transfers, flights from your local airport or travel by rail and a range of complimentary extras – from museum passes and gallery tickets, to Kirker's exclusive Guide Notes to restaurants and sightseeing. For many discerning travellers, the great museums and galleries of Europe and the Mediterranean are the catalysts which inspire our travels – and the latest exhibitions provide fresh reasons to return to some of our favourite cities. We have selected four of the best for 2026 below, but the Kirker concierge is at your disposal to arrange tickets – or perhaps an expert local guide – for any exhibition in Europe.

PARIS

TRAVEL BY EUROSTAR

Renoir & Love

At the Musée d'Orsay

From 17 March to 19 July 2026

Alphonsine Fournaise, 1879

According to Pierre Auguste Renoir, "a picture should be a pleasant thing, joyful and pretty". In the first retrospective of his work to be held in Paris since 1985, the Musée d'Orsay will display Renoir's works between the 1860s and the 1880s, a period during which he developed a light, bright and fluid manner of painting, focusing on new subject matter such as the relationships between men and women, as well as modern life. Whilst in Paris, you may also wish to visit the Musée de Montmartre which was Renoir's studio in the late 1870s, in an area of Paris to which many an artist and bohemian flocked at this time.

3 night holiday price from £848 per person, staying at the 3 deluxe Hotel Le Senat*

Includes a 48hr Paris Museum Pass

VIENNA

Canaletto & Bellotto

At the Kunsthistorisches

From 24 March to 6 September 2026

Next spring, the Kunsthistorisches will host an exhibition of views of Venice, London and Vienna, painted by the great Venetian artist, Canaletto, and his nephew, Bellotto. Under the theme of two artists across three cities providing three perspectives, the *vedutisti* artworks will be turned into a thought-provoking dialogue, and will offer fresh insights into the relationship of art, urban landscapes, and society in the eighteenth century, which both artists were committing to canvas.

The Riva Degli Schiavoni in Venice - Canaletto c.1730

3 night holiday price from £948 per person staying at the Konig Von Ungarn (4 deluxe)*

Includes a Vienna Masterticket

HELSINKI

The Tove Jansson Gallery

At the Helsinki Art Museum

From 13 February 2026 to 24 January 2027

A new gallery devoted to Finnish national treasure Tove Jansson opens at the Helsinki Art Museum in early 2026. Much more than the creator of the much-loved Moomin characters, Tove Jansson was an author, novelist, painter and illustrator with a prolific artistic output from murals to magazine covers and paintings which ranged from naturalist scenes to vast abstracts. The new gallery includes three halls of work, bringing in art by other members of the Jansson family, as well as the tools and materials they used.

Party in the City, 1947
© Tove Jansson

3 night holiday price from £998 per person, staying at the 5 deluxe Kämp*

LILLE

TRAVEL BY EUROSTAR

Kandinsky – Face Aux Images

At the Musée de l'art Moderne (LAM)

From 20 February to 14 June 2026

Lille's collection of Old Masters is world-famous, but its modern art museum also has a remarkable collection including works by Braque, Klee, Léger, Miró and Modigliani. Reopening after a major renovation, the LAM has teamed up with the Pompidou Centre to offer a new exhibition which celebrates the role of images in the inspiration of abstract pioneer Vassily Kandinsky. The core of the exhibition is composed of a unique collection of works and archives from Nina Kandinsky's bequest to the Centre Pompidou as well as some rare loans from public and private institutions.

Bild mit rotem Fleck (Painting with a Red Spot), 1914

3 night holiday price from £898 per person, staying at the 4 superior Hermitage Gantois*

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ABTA

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FOR DISCERNING TRAVELLERS

Let them bake cake

I occasionally turn up in support of some worthy cause. I'd like to claim this is because I'm a philanthropic do-gooder 'giving back' in gratitude for the great good fortune I've been blessed with.

I suspect it's because I enjoy the attention, and it's interesting. Recently, I arrived at an industrial park in Witney for the launch of a production unit for Yellow Submarine, a charitable bakery providing traineeships for adults with learning difficulties.

I was so moved by their story, I couldn't get my platitudinous speech out of my mouth. I ended up just telling them they were beyond marvellous and quickly cutting the ribbon. What moved me so much was that it is such a perfect model of a community enterprise.

Yellow Submarine started as a charity helping young people with learning difficulties, taking them on holiday trips and giving their carers a bit of respite.

When a shop came vacant in Oxford near their office, they thought a café might provide valuable training and experience to members who were able to work. That was a success, both as a café and as a training school. So they opened a second café, in Witney.

They originally bought in their cakes, biscuits and pastries, then soon started making their own – cheaper and better

Fresh bread: Prue Leith opens Yellow Submarine, the new Witney bakery

– using the café kitchens on Sundays to produce the bakes for the week.

The team quickly realised how well some members, particularly those with Down's syndrome, responded to the calm, predictable routine of baking, away from the bustle and stress of serving customers.

During lockdown, desperate to keep valuable activity going for their trainees, the charity set up Life Changing Bakes, selling online. Today, they bake not just for their online and café customers, but also for shops and rival cafés, providing sandwiches and cakes for local companies and catering for private parties and events.

They provide mini-Christmas cakes and biscuits (their Almond Kisses and Double Cheese Biscuits both have Great Taste Awards) for Christmas hampers.

Today, 50 per cent of sales are wholesale, hence the need for a production unit.

Many of the attendees at the launch party were past trainees. They'd learnt a skill, yes, and they had also learnt to communicate: to look people in the eye, make friends, laugh and enjoy themselves.

Others were parents or volunteers who'd raised the money, or physically fitted out the industrial unit, or who work in the charity's more traditional role of running ambitious programmes and activities for adults and children, from the age of 11, with learning disabilities and autism.

They could go swimming, visit Legoland, go on trips to learn bushcraft or just have a holiday.

Running a profitable catering business is really hard. Running a charity teaching people with learning difficulties is even harder. To do both, so successfully and with such joy, is miraculous.

Prue Leith presents
The Great British Bake Off

Town Mouse

G K Chesterton's Tips for an Old-Fashioned Xmas

TOM HODGKINSON

ROBERT THOMPSON

At Christmas, this mouse likes to remember the great G K Chesterton (1874-1936), poet, writer of detective fiction, spinner of paradox, essayist and old Catholic grumbler.

A speciality of his was Christmas. Every year, it seems, he wrote a new essay on the subject. His mission was to attack the way Christmas was celebrated in the modern world.

For Chesterton – and for everyone else who lived at the time – the 1910s and '20s, with their tramcars, aeroplanes, electricity and wireless telegraphy, were exhaustingly modern.

Many of his moans and whinges are familiar to us today. He hated the way Christmas celebrations started months before the festival itself, reserving peculiar scorn for magazines:

'The editors of the magazines bring out their Christmas numbers so long before the time that the reader is more likely to be still lamenting for the turkey of last year than to have seriously settled down to a solid anticipation of the turkey which is to come.'

Another target was busyness. Christmas was for slowing down and staying in, he said, not speeding up.

'The Christmas season is domestic,' he wrote, 'and for that reason most people now prepare for it by struggling in tramcars, standing in queues, rushing away in trains, crowding despairingly into teashops, and wondering whether they will ever get home.'

And he added a very Chestertonian paradox:

'Just before the great festival of the home, the whole population seems to have become homeless.'

Chesterton said Christmas had got too commercial – another familiar moan. Yet he also attacked the utilitarian George Bernard Shaw for saying something similar. Shaw cynically called Christmas 'a conspiracy kept up by poulterers and wine merchants'.

In similar fashion, Granny Mouse always used to say Father's Day was invented by the greetings-card companies.

Chesterton's argument was that Shaw missed the magic. He might as well have said, 'The two sexes were invented by jewellers who wanted to sell wedding rings.'

Today, we have utilitarian fun-haters in the shape of environmentalists such as George Monbiot, who once warned in a piece in the *Guardian*, 'Your festive meal could be more damaging than a long-haul flight.'

Another grumble was the growing passivity of the Christmas consumer:

'Now the old and healthy idea of such winter festivals was this; that people being shut in and besieged by the weather were driven back on their own resources.' In our modern world, he complains, the bright young things 'cannot amuse themselves; they are too used to being amused'.

Today, we complain that Christmas is all about stuffing our faces and watching telly.

Lest you think he was being too negative, the Catholic convert did have some positive ideas. He reckoned we should spend Christmas time getting creative. The Christmas spirit, he said, is childlike. It's about play:

'How pleasing it would be to start a game in which we scored so much for hitting the umbrella-stand or the dinner-wagon, or even the host and hostess; of course, with a missile of some soft material.'

He emphasised that Christmas is all about the home. It's about being at home, feasting at home, being with family, and it's a glorious paradox, he said, that the family we celebrate in midwinter were themselves homeless at Christmas.

As a lazy mouse, I like to stay in as much as possible at Christmas. But, to stay in, I need to go out at some point to bring in the winter stores. This is a point that seemed to escape Chesterton. We dash about first in order to create a sea of Christmas leisure later.

Christmas should last a long time. I remember the Christmas at Camelot, as celebrated in the 14th-century *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, when the feasting and fun went on for days and days – 15, to be precise.

'For there, the feast was alike full 15 days,' says the poet, 'with all the meat and mirth men could devise.'

I disagree with Chesterton about the need to be amused. TV-watching is ideal for those of us who can't afford to hire circus performers at Christmas, which is pretty much everyone. Nothing wrong with being entertained. I bet King Arthur employed jesters and tumblers.

Merry Christmas. Oh, and don't be over-assiduous about clearing up the crumbs. We mice will take care of them.

Country Mouse

My winter's tale? A bumper harvest of fruit 'n' nuts

GILES WOOD

Three weeks into the traditional season of 'winter', there was still no sign of it.

The warm winds from the Azores helped sustain the last of the red admiral butterflies bobbing about the borders and onto the still-flowering heads of gold and purple cosmos.

All summer, these stalwarts of the cottage-garden style had refused to oblige. But, rather than hack down their stubborn closed cups, as most tidy gardeners would, I left them to their devices.

Like Bob Flowerdew's, my garden is an ongoing experiment – and the experiment yielded results. The cosmos were saving their glory for a final flourish at the tail end of one of the most extended summers on record.

This has also been a mast year for trees – a natural phenomenon, where certain species produce an unusually large crop of fruits, nuts or seeds.

Typically, the following year will offer a very low yield – just like the boom-and-bust cycles of economics.

Meanwhile, extra body fat for hibernating dormice has emerged from this year's surplus of fruit 'n' nuts and edible pears in my field.

For three decades, the pears have been 'mealy' in texture and as hard as conkers. Not this year. Mary has made pear crumbles galore with oat-and-walnut topping. It will be difficult to eat our way through the suitcaseful of walnuts I have foraged.

Mary also makes apple crumble. A local do-gooder with an apple press will take our fallen fruit and turn it into bottled juice.

At a time when we are being urged by our local ex-Tory MP Danny Kruger, a defector to Reform, to focus our energies on food supply, self-sufficiency and general local 'resilience', unseasonal weather can have its advantages.

For, as Henry Massingham confirmed in *The Wisdom of the Fields*, 'Many crops prefer drought: certainly stone fruit, apples, figs, pears, quinces, walnuts and sloes. They will not suffer; indeed the opposite is the case.'

The squash prefers the drought only if deep pits are dug for each plant and manured with organic matter and plant foods. I explained to Mary that my triumphant squash harvest is a testament to slow food. My aim is to emulate the pre-Colombian Inca empire's productive agriculture and to have three to seven years' food in storage.

Mary dislikes any mention of slow food. She prides herself on making her crumbles in 'no time'. She was influenced by her own Irish mother's cooking style.

When complimented, the mother usually responded, 'Well you know, I just threw it together.'

Mary takes the throwing injunction a bit too literally, meaning I have to come after her, like Jean Marsh's character, Rose Buck, in *Upstairs, Downstairs*, with dustpan and brush. I don't wish to curb her enthusiasm, but definitely want to curb any further explosions in the cottage silverfish population.

Unlike my own mother – who was taught by the stickler herself, Constance Spry, at Winkfield, in the full expectation of marrying a company director – Mary feels it's unnecessary to peel the fruit.

Still, as with the garden's late flowering, I should be grateful for the late-flowering culinary interest inside the cottage. The food, no matter how crudely prepared, is certainly edible.

Mary is trying to restore the only room in the cottage that will fit more than four people at a time to its original purpose, as what they call in Irish hotels a 'function suite'. At the same time, I am adding quantities of horticultural produce to every available surface.

Mary wants to entertain village elders again, but the double-size windowsills were expressly designed to be wider than average in order to preserve the fruits of my labour, and honour William Cobbett's cottage economy.

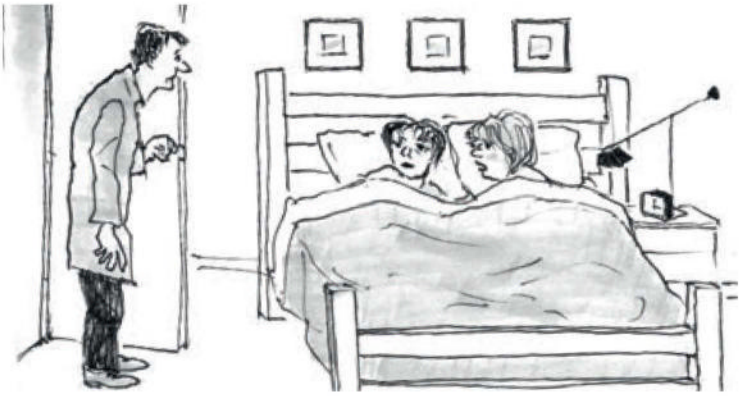
The windfall walnuts – over a thousand in number, from the local big house – take up the whole table top and render the table unusable for socialising for three months or more.

This is protein 'for less', literally stolen from the jaws of the already corpulent grey-squirrel population, some of the creatures now barely able to move.

Two bridge tables have been thrown up to accommodate winter-squash varieties, hailing from Russia, Hungary and America. The droughts of last summer, which farmers cursed for the poor grain yields, have delivered a squash year par excellence.

Squashes are sometimes accused of insipid flavour; the sunshine will serve only to sweeten the caramelised chestnut nuttiness – well paired with partridge or pheasant, which we can pick up for next to nothing from local shoots and put in our freezer.

This winter, at least, resilience is here, even if we can't fit the neighbours into the cottage to share the bounty with us.



'If you can have a mistress, George, so can I' Nick Downie

Moscow's useful – and generous – idiot

Richard Gott was a traitor and a fool, but he was very nice to a young *Mary Kenny*

You never forget someone who was kind to you when you were a young pipsqueak.

Thus it was that, when a friend asked, 'Did you know Richard Gott on the *Guardian*?' I answered, 'Yes – an absolute sweetie!'

Gott, who died at the end of October aged 87, was recalled in the obituaries as the journalist who 'took Moscow gold'. He was a paid KGB informant, although he probably didn't tell the Russians much they didn't know already.

But Richard's career was one of defending the hard left wherever it cropped up, even suggesting we were a bit too unkind about Pol Pot, the Cambodian mass murderer.

He was a complete fool, politically. But Richard Gott was very nice to me, when I was a 21-year-old secretary on the *Guardian,* where I mistyped Brian Redhead's letters (I could never read my own shorthand). Gotty always took time to be kind and friendly.

In the summer of 1965, the Chilean Communist poet Pablo Neruda was visiting London and there was to be soirée dedicated to his honour at a swish gallery in the West End. Because I had mentioned that my father had lived in Chile, Richard offered me his invitation.

'But won't you regret not being there?' I asked.

'It doesn't matter,' he said. 'You go instead.'

And so I attended the party, greatly excited. There was champagne, and the finest Russian caviar, the most delicious thing I had ever tasted.

Pablo Neruda seemed a nice old chap – and genuinely regarded as a great poet – but it was the caviar that impressed me most.

Richard Gott attracted a certain *réclame*, subsequently, as the man who identified the dead body of Che Guevara, since he had known the Argentine-born revolutionary (or terrorist, according to choice).

He really did have some terrible opinions, and it was wicked of him to try to smear Sandy Gall, reporting from Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion. Richard's own entanglements with the Soviet Union were disclosed in 1994 by the *Spectator*. He was wrong, wrong, wrong about so much. But I still remember how nice he was to me; and I can still summon the taste of that Russian caviar.

The most on-trend Christmas gift is a slim novel published this year: *Perfection* by Vincenzo Latronico. It's the kind of book that explains all the cool stuff, set in the world of nomadic hipsters.

Ostensibly, it's about a rootless techie couple, Tom and Anna, who move to Berlin in 2000s. There's much focus on the things they cherish and acquire – the Berber rugs, the 'pre-Napster' (pre-digital) music, the Monstera plants and the Java script in which their website designs must be printed.

Their friends are graphic designers, video makers, artists, chefs, gallery assistants and 'creative professionals'.

It's a picture of commitments to fashionable causes – such as not eating tuna and contributing monthly to an LGBT+ charity – that are yet supported by globalism. Their Ukrainian cleaner is 'paid through a French gig economy that files its taxes in Ireland' – with a commission paid to a California hosting platform, taxed in the Netherlands.

Cleverly translated by Sophie Hughes (and barely over a tenner, bought online), the novel has been highly praised for the quality of its writing. But it's also very chic and existential – *branché*, as Parisians say.

And I acquired a new portmanteau German word from the text: *Schwangerschaftsverhütungsmittel* (birth control).

I'm all for equality between the sexes. But I'm not sure about Viscountess Garnock (née Lady Violet Manners) calling for more gender equality in aristocratic succession. The primogeniture tradition – of the first male heir's inheriting all – needs revising, she has said.

There's a group, Daughters' Rights, that urges equal rights for girls and boys of the nobility. It sounds progressive, but the problem is that aristocracy itself is blatantly unequal.

Seeking 'equality' within it seems a conceptual oxymoron – and brings into question the whole system.

I learned only this year that Hugh Dennis, comedy legend, is the son of a bishop. Moreover, both his aunts married vicars, which made it a very churchy family.

Hugh is not personally religious, but he favours religion generally. He speaks about the 'dear old Church of England', a phrase I've often heard. I've seldom heard anyone refer to the 'dear old Catholic Church': the Vatican may command loyalty, but seldom seems so cosy.

Anyway, people should attend a Christian service at Christmas, in my view, whether they're believers or not.

Bijan Omrani's superb book *God Is an Englishman*, published this year, explains why. Christianity is part of our civilisation – the roots of law, ethics, culture, art, music and so much else go back to St Augustine landing on these shores in 597 AD.

And, yes, let's stick with Anno Domini!

TOBY MORISON

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INSIDE TRACK

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Father's in love with the postman

Pity the poor postie when Dad tickled him behind the ear

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

For successful relationships, listening is key. Or so some fashionable therapists like to say. It's finally come true for my parents.

Father has always prided himself on his excellent hearing: 'Still got my RAF ears. Can still hear mice in Scunthorpe.'

Mother's spinal stenosis has left her bent literally double. When she speaks, she projects away from me and admonishes the dirty carpet instead.

So, for the first time, Father is unable to hear her well. This may initially seem a blessing, given her forthright opinions and dictatorial ways.

Father says, 'The tone is still there – it's like "parsing" classical music. I can still pick out the difference between insult, instruction and insinuation. Just can't work out what she wants doing or whom she wants insulting.'

Mother has an alternative theory for their recent communication problems: 'He's gone daft.'

Her evidence? When she was some rooms away, looking out of a bedroom window, she announced, 'That poor cat's at the front door. Show him some love and give him one of those cat treats.'

Father duly went off and reported back, 'He says he doesn't have a cat.'

'Who?' we both asked.

'The postman,' he said.

'You've just given the postman a cat treat?' said Mother.

Father nodded silently.

'I said "poor cat", not "poor postman". How on earth did you show the postman some love?'

'The normal way – I shook his hand,' Father said, adding, 'and I may have scratched him affectionately behind the ear.'

'We'll never get a Damart order delivered safely again,' Mother said.

I set off for my corner coffee shop. There, I was distracted by a man who was ordering a coffee with such a loud voice that I went to put my headphones on – only to find I was already wearing them. And yet his voice still boomed.

After generations of families working in fish-processing factories and shouting to hear one another, it's said that it's in the DNA of Grimsby-area folk to use an 'outside voice' when inside.

A small but noisy part of any northern population live all their inside lives outside: rowing on streets, partying in backyards and phoning their nearest and dearest on buses, shouting, 'Can you tell Tezza to pick up the drugs, 'cos it took ages to get my tag back on and now I'm late for the probation man.'

'Living out loud' was never in our genes. We prefer hushed side-mouthing and side-eyeing.

It causes problems. When Father was re-hospitalised, I had to take care of all Mother's needs. Because of her rug-addressing posture, I ended up getting her ten bin-liners instead of pantie-liners.

Mother yelled, 'First, I had cloth ears looking after me. Now I've got cloth brain!'

Back out I went to buy the liners and to buy Father a hospital-compliant pyjama set. I showed them to Mother, cooing, 'He'll look like the little boy in *The Snowman* wearing these.'

Mother said, 'I don't know about that, but if they don't get him on the operating table this time, he'll be "walking in the air" soon enough.'

Mother dispatched me, with his pyjamas in a bag – and strict instructions to tell the nurses, 'He'll refuse to wear these, but you have full permission to force him into them if need be, for the sake of everyone on that ward.'

I did so – but when I got home, Mother said, in an unusually clear voice, 'You left the pyjamas on the side, you twerp.'

'I most certainly did not. I have just handed over the bag to a senior member of the medical team. And how can I hear you so well?'

As she slung a Boots carrier bag with the pyjamas in it at my head, she explained, 'Oh, Marion from the physio team found the bottom teeth I'd lost. She couldn't understand a thing I said till I got them back in.'

I looked down at the pyjamas in the Boots bag, with cold dread, saying, 'Mother, I may have made Father's hernia his most painful experience in 2025.'

That afternoon, when Father was forced into a fresh pair of pantie-liners by a resolute nursing team, he finally found his outside voice.

God

SISTER TERESA

The shepherds' Christmas message

Pieter Brueghel the Younger painted *The Faithless Shepherd* in around 1600.

It is for the most part a landscape: undulating countryside in shades of green and gold, and it is pretty – until one looks at it closely. In the middle distance, it becomes thoroughly sinister.

A flock of sheep is on the run in all directions, chased by wolves. The nearest wolf is devouring the bloody carcass of a newly killed sheep.

In the foreground, and dominating the whole scene, is the faithless shepherd, bolting at speed with his huge, brawny legs enclosed in bright red tights. He can't get away quickly enough from the chaos going on behind him.

A plum, burly dandy, with fastidiously groomed fuzzy hair, he has remembered to take with him his elegant hat, in spite of the slaughter of the sheep in his care.

There are frequent references to shepherds in the Old Testament. They should be the guardians of God's people, and they stand for kings, princes, priests and prophets. 'I will give you shepherds after my own heart, and these shall feed you on knowledge and discretion' (Jeremiah 3:14-14).

Brueghel's *The Faithless Shepherd*

This ideal is often not met. 'Doom for the shepherds who allow the flock of my pasture to be destroyed and scattered – it is the Lord God who speaks.

'This, therefore, is what the God of Israel says about the shepherds in charge of my people. You have let my flock be scattered and go wandering and have not taken care of them' (Jeremiah 23: 1-2).

We frequently sing Psalm 23 with gusto; it can become over-familiar. We may not be aware that it is unique in that the shepherd has a one-to-one relationship with the individual. Elsewhere, the shepherd – that is to say God – is the leader of the people of the covenant: more powerful but less personal. And the psalmist changing his references to God from 'he' to 'thou' halfway through the psalm is moving and often little noticed.

It is in keeping with the fundamental humility of God and Jesus that shepherds are chosen to be the first to hear of the good news of Jesus's birth in Luke's account of the Nativity: 'The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone round them. They were terrified' (Luke 2:9-10).

And well they might be. By then, shepherds were a byword for the scum of the earth and they knew it. The 'great throng of the heavenly host singing' must have come as a considerable surprise to them. It managed to persuade them to go to Bethlehem. From there, they went away glorifying God.

As we will do, this Christmas.

Thanksgiving Service

Hilary Weston CM CVO OOnt (1942-2025)

Thick blobs of sleet landed in Windsor Great Park, creating unseasonal Arctic conditions for Hilary Weston's thanksgiving service at St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle.

Hilary was a former model, born in County Dublin. In 1966, she married the late Galen Weston, whose Anglo-Canadian business dynasty controlled Selfridges in London, ABC Foods and other enterprises. She served as the 26th Lieutenant Governor of Ontario in 1997.

They lived at Fort Belvedere, Surrey, famous as the Duke of Windsor's home. She died there in August, aged 83. A philanthropist, she was a huge supporter of St George's Chapel.

The Dean of Windsor, the Rt Rev Christopher Cocksworth, presided, with the chapel's three Canons in attendance. The King and Queen, the Duke and Duchess of Edinburgh, the Princess Royal and Princess Alexandra were represented and Prince Michael of Kent was there in person, as were Queen Noor of Jordan and Prince Amyn Aga Khan.

There was a strong Irish element in the music. 'Port Na bPúcai' was played by a flautist. 'Be Thou My Vision' was set to the traditional Irish melody, 'Slane'. *A Gaelic Blessing*, with words and music by Sir John Rutter, was performed.

Hilary's twin son and daughter, Galen G Weston and Alannah Cochrane, gave well-delivered tributes. Galen praised his mother's style and attention in every detail. Alannah told the congregation her parents never spent a night apart in their long marriage.

All four grandchildren took part. Especially touching was 'I Think of Angels', sung by Lola Cochrane, with Emily Elliott on cello. Maia Cochrane read W B Yeats's 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree'.

Griffin Weston read 'Idyll' by Siegfried Sassoon. Graydon Weston read Sassoon's 'Everyone Sang'. The last hymn, 'Thine Be the Glory', was accompanied by a trumpeter in the organ loft.

The family held a reception at Fort Belvedere. I enjoyed acting as an amateur equerry to Prince Michael. He sat in the octagonal room where his uncle's Abdication was signed in 1936, with guests coming to chat to him in relays.

HUGO VICKERS

The fall and rise of heart attacks

They were in decline – before Covid came along

DR THEODORE DALRYMPLE

Do you want the good news first, or the bad? The latter is always the more interesting – so let's get the good news over with.

Between 2005 and 2019, the mortality rate in the first year after a heart attack declined in England and Wales very steeply, from 23 per cent to 14 per cent. The question is – why?

According to an analysis of the 852,912 cases recorded to have occurred in those years, about two thirds of the improvement was caused by improvements in medical treatment – principally drug therapy (statins, beta-blockers, ACE inhibitors) and stenting. The authors of the study were not able to explain the other third of the improvement, but of course some explanation must exist.

Not only was survival improved, but the chances of needing to survive after a heart attack in the first place declined.

It is estimated that, since 1961, deaths from heart attack have declined by about three quarters. Part of the explanation of this must be the decline in the rate of smoking: in 1974, 51 per cent of men and 40 per cent of women smoked; now the figures are about 14 and 12 per cent respectively.

In fact, the precipitous fall in the rate of heart attacks in the second half of the 20th century has given rise to a theory that infection is an important cause of myocardial infarction.

The rate started to decline before there was either proven prevention or treatment. So the cause of the decline must have lain somewhere else, perhaps in a decline in the severity of viral illnesses owing to improvement in general health.

But what of the rise in the rate of heart attacks in the first half of the 20th century? With the electrocardiogram becoming ever more widely employed (the first was in 1902, but it was not used clinically much before 1930), recognition of the condition was much improved.

It is also thought that changes in diet, increased smoking and an increase in sedentariness caused the increase before the decline.

This is not incompatible with the infectious theory, because infection increases the inflammation in already damaged arterial linings.

Epidemiological evidence suggests that heart-attack rates are raised in the wake of a viral infection – sometimes greatly raised.

This leads me straight to the bad news, for which I know readers must be avidly waiting (there is nothing like bad news to cheer one up). The improvement in rates of death from heart attack in this country has stopped and indeed gone into reverse since the Covid epidemic.

This again is explained multifactorially, as we doctors say when we are not sure of the cause of something. I remember the days when the peptic ulceration caused by *Helicobacter pylori* was also multifactorial – thanks to type-A personality, for example, spicy food and smoking.

First is the effect of the virus itself, which probably caused just the kind of inflammation of the coronary arteries that leads to heart attacks, not only during the infection but for a considerable time afterwards.

Moreover, increasing age was, and is, a risk factor for both severe Covid infection and heart attack: the risk of the two rises *pari passu* with age.

Then, of course, there was the effect of the epidemic on precisely the kind of medical work that, according to research, played a large part in the decline of mortality after heart attack.

The reduction during the epidemic in the medical procedures and tests leading to effective treatment has continued to this day, although all Covid-related restrictions were lifted more than three years ago.

What is the cause for this? I think the answer must be multifactorial. It must include the inflammation of bureaucracy, leading to overgrowth, as friction exacerbates the formation of keloids in scar tissue.

Philip Larkin was gloomy – and wonderful

The poet was one of the funniest, kindest men I ever knew

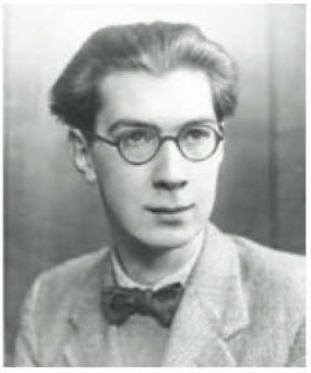
A N WILSON

It's 40 years since Philip Larkin died, aged 63, on 2nd December 1985.

It's 50 years since he first came up the steps of my modest house in Oxford and sat, shy and stammering, in our sitting room. Here was one of the greatest living English poets in our midst, and one felt some profundity would surely be forthcoming.

After a bit of silence, and looking at the modest back garden through the window, and then walking to the front window and surveying the tiny space there, he asked, 'Where do you put out your rubbish?'

The mood was lightened when my first-born daughter, as shy as he was, came into the room – following Francis, a large black and white rabbit. Larkin melted. When, a few years later, Francis died, Emily received a perfectly worded letter of condolence.



Forty years on: Larkin (1922-85)

Larkin once wrote, 'When I was a kid, I thought I hated everyone. Then when I grew up, I realised it was just kids I hated.' But, in reality, he could not have been a nicer friend to Emily and her rabbit.

Larkin, the Librarian at the University of Hull, made visits to Oxford every term, as he was a Fellow of All Souls. His first visit to my house was to pick my brains about Barbara Pym – he was writing the entry on Pym for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

In the early 1970s, Pym had fallen so out of fashion that her publishers, Jonathan Cape, had sacked her.

It was Larkin, in the *Times Literary Supplement,* who championed her work and was responsible for the Pym revival. Her stories of quiet people sustaining dull lives of emotional deprivation were prose counterparts to his poems.

'Life is first boredom, then fear. Whether or not we use it, it goes.' 'Home is so sad. It stays as it is left.'

Thousands – probably millions – of people who do not consider themselves to be poetry fans respond to such lines; and do not merely respond: they remember the lines. This is surely one of the tests of good poetry – you remember the stuff without having to 'learn' it.

Rather like Betjeman, that. Larkin had a key to Betj's house in Chelsea and an arrangement that he could stay whenever he and Monica were in London.

Not that he much liked making the railway journey from the north – 'to London, spread out in the sun,/ Its postal districts packed like squares of wheat'.

When the Spenders asked him to dine, he would moan to his other friends at the expense – itemising the cost of the return ticket and the taxi fares to and from St John's Wood.

The advantage, to him, of living in Hull was that it was so difficult to get to. Visitors had to change at Sheffield.

In spite of this obstacle, I took to going up to see him three or four times a year, and he would visit me in the south about the same number of times. In the meantime, we wrote to each other.

My Hull host was Francis Bown, a clergyman whom Larkin also befriended and whom he asked to take his funeral.

The church was absolutely packed, of course, and the oration, given by his lifelong friend Kingsley Amis, scarlet-faced and tear-stained, was the most moving I ever heard. Kingsley said Larkin was distinguished, as a man and as a writer, by total integrity. He never wrote anything that he did not mean.

The relationship between the two men was not an easy one. Larkin was a little in awe of Kingsley's success, and he took an almost serious delight in the unhappiness of Kingsley's marriages. He liked saying what a 'bloody fool' Kingsley – come to that, anyone – was to marry.

Yet when Larkin eventually let his long-term girlfriend Monica Jones come to live with him in Hull, he admitted to me that it was because he had been so lonely without her. The other two girls in his life were less pleased.

His talk – once we had got over the awkward silence and the question of where I put the dustbins – was all good.

He loved talking about our shared favourite authors: Hardy; Michael Innes (and the 'straight' novels Innes wrote under his real name, J I M Stewart, which he rated better than Anthony Powell's); and Beatrix Potter – his admiration bordered on idolatry.

He liked college life, and would ask me to dinner at All Souls. When Larkin's last, sad poem, 'Aubade', was printed in the *TLS*, A L Rowse came up to us in the Common Room.

'What have *you* got to be so gloomy about?' asked the Cornish bard. 'You're tall, aren't you?'

We laughed at the time but, later in the evening, when drink had been taken – a LOT – he splurged a long list of things that made him gloomy: his deafness, stammer, fatness, intense loneliness and intense desire *not* to commit to women, leading to dreadful loneliness. And the general ruination of all that made England a good place to be.

The boredom of his Coventry boyhood partly explained his low spirits, but the funny thing was that his company was seldom ever anything but amusing and uplifting.

He was one of the funniest men I ever knew – and one of the kindest.

A N Wilson presented
Return to Larkinland *(BBC4)*

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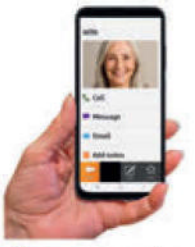

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Alastair Sim and Stanley Holloway

In 1971, I was 28, and two national treasures, Alastair Sim and Stanley Holloway, were starring in my first West End play. What could go wrong?

For one thing, they hated each other from the moment they met.

Alastair Sim (1900-76), star of the Christmas film *Scrooge*, was a comic genius – though, strangely, he refused to acknowledge it and claimed only to be 'an actor'.

Mutual loathing: Sim and Holloway in *Siege* (1971)

Stanley Holloway (1890-1982) came from the tradition of Victorian music hall and concert parties. He was a performer who played straight out to his public.

Every night, when the curtain went up, the audience gave Alastair a round of applause – which, like a proper actor, he ignored. Stanley, however, couldn't resist acknowledging them with a grin and a wink – which set Alastair's teeth almost audibly on edge.

Off-stage, they were equally different. Alastair rejected the trappings of stardom with an almost Calvinistic puritanism. He never gave interviews. If asked for an autograph, he would launch into a finger-wagging diatribe about the moral degeneracy of the practice. Stanley bathed in the attention that came with stardom, giving interviews and autographs with unfailing charm and generosity.

And then there was politics. Alastair was a left-wing firebrand. He regarded America with supreme contempt as the home of capitalism and the root of all evil.

Stanley loved America, and America loved him. After his all-singing and dancing triumph in *My Fair Lady*, he'd had his own TV series there, was a regular guest on *The Dean Martin Show* and co-starred with John Wayne and Kirk Douglas in the Hollywood blockbuster *In Harm's Way* (1965).

Rehearsals for my play, *Siege*, were in the basement of St James's Church, Piccadilly. Alastair, a fiercely committed atheist, arrived on the first morning with his coat collar turned up and a tweed hat jammed on his head, lips curled in distaste and eyes darting around behind tinted glasses, like an arsonist in search of the best spot to set a fire. He made me a gift of a terse little volume entitled *The Misery of Christianity*, itemising the church's multitudinous abominations since its foundation.

Stanley had no strong feelings about religion, but was concerned about the growing power of the unions and the efforts of the far left to take over the country. Alastair sat hunched over his script in a corner muttering, 'Bloody right-wing old fool.'

Another of Alastair's hobby-horses was a near-obsessive worship of youth. The young were to him mankind's only hope. 'Nobody over 30,' he proclaimed, 'should have the vote.'

Stanley, whenever he was within hearing distance of one of these rants, would react with a sniff of disdain and return to his *Daily Telegraph*.

I suspect the only reason the two of them never got into a blazing row was that they never spoke a single word to each other, except on stage, throughout the whole rehearsal period and run of the play – which opened three days after the start of the miners' strike in 1972. It was a disaster, and we closed almost at once.

A disappointment for me – but a relief, perhaps, for my two national treasures.

David Ambrose

MEMORY LANE

The Great Manure Race

When I was a boy, in the early 1950s, my family lived in a crescent. The house opposite was owned by Old Mr Mordue, as he was known to all the neighbours. No one knew his first name, nor did anyone want to.

Old Mr Mordue had one passion in life, and that was growing roses. He was a very good rose-grower, and often won prizes for his blooms.

In those days, the Co-operative Dairies still used horses and milk carts for their daily deliveries. The horses were smart animals, usually white, and nicely turned out. Each horse and milkman had a morning run and a well-worn routine, as they wound round the streets and housing estates, in all seasons.

Our milk horse would stop every 10 or 20 yards, while the milkman, who must have been very fit, delivered to the houses on either side of the street. I would lie in bed at six in the morning, listening to the reassuring sounds of crashing milk bottles and clopping hooves.

The horse was extraordinarily regular in its habits. Two or three days a week, it would deposit a load of manure into the road, at almost exactly the same spot – outside Old Mr Mordue's house.

My father, a keen gardener, coveted the manure for his rhubarb patch. The steaming pile became a target for both my father, aged 45, and Old Mr Mordue, aged at least 70.

My father was an early riser, and he got the lion's share. I can see him now, rushing into the street with his bucket and shovel, bearing the manure back in triumph.

After a while, my father's advantage in age and agility made him realise it was a very unfair contest. He struck on a very clever solution. Instead of collecting the manure himself, he would get me, aged eight, to do it.

I was not keen, but Dad had an ace up his sleeve. He was a good craftsman in wood and metal, and made me a very cute wheelbarrow and shovel.

I was thrilled with it – but not so thrilled when I had to get up on cold winter mornings and dig in the snow for manure, under the malevolent gaze of Old Mr Mordue.

By Mike Doig, Porirua, New Zealand, who receives £50

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

GETTY

Search for the Holy Grail

When the *Reverend Steve Morris* isn't taking Christmas services, he's a bookseller on the hunt for priceless, antiquarian volumes

Yesterday, I was up at 4am – not for service of morning prayer, but to load the car up with boxes of books and get on the road for a book fair in Sussex. It was a long day.

Four years ago, when I was an unpaid priest in the Church of England, my finances were looking a bit dicey. I needed an income and work that would fit around my role as a carer.

How difficult could it be to earn a shilling or two buying and selling old books? Could I earn what I might have got as a paid, full-time priest, somewhere in the twenty-thousands?

I started by buying and selling the things I knew about – mainly fiction. I soon realised that many classic authors are difficult to sell – Galsworthy, Sir Walter Scott and Thackeray, for example.

Authors who seemed culturally relevant and literary superstars cross over the hill into obscurity, and sometimes very swiftly. And those big sets of these authors just find their way to landfill.

But others remain very saleable – I recently sold a *Jane Eyre*, published under her pseudonym, Currer Bell, in the 1890s, for £75. I'd bought it cheaply for £10.

You can find first-edition Charles Dickenses out there, although they are quite hard to identify. A leather-bound first of *Little Dorrit* is on the internet at the moment for £400.

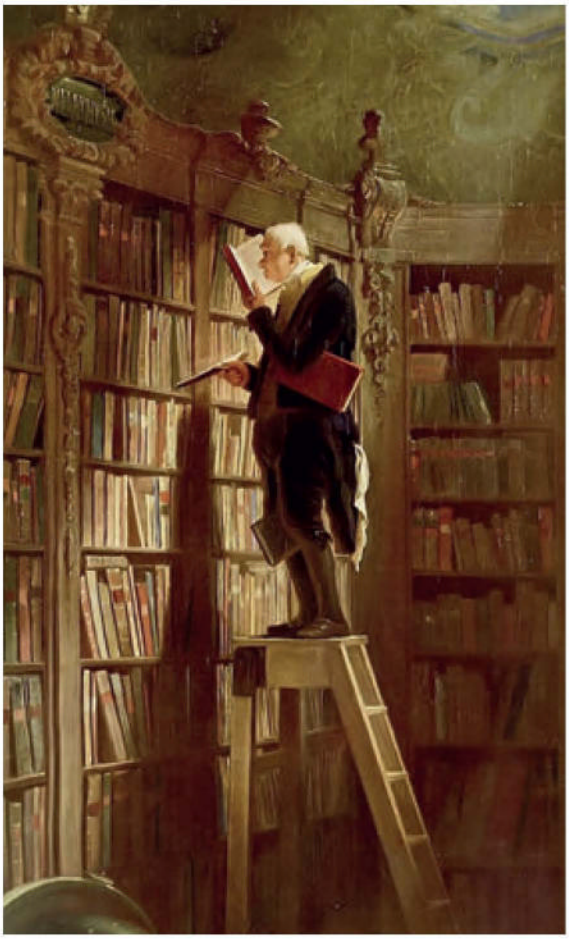
But it's the learning that is so exciting – and the chance of finding treasure. Dealers who have been in the business for decades tell me they still love the thrill of a book chase.

In the trade, you learn more from your mistakes than from your triumphs. I recently bought what looked like a lovely copy of Ovid's poems in Brussels. It was quite reasonable, I thought, at €90.

But I made a schoolboy error. I bought it swiftly, without really inspecting it. When I got it home, I realised that it didn't have the actual cover it had been printed with. It had been rebound, and quite clumsily. I will be lucky to get £20 for it, I think.

Book-dealing has a way of making you feel really stupid at times.

But there have been some lovely finds. I found a signed book by Andy Warhol in a bookshop in Scotland. It cost £10 – and I sold it at auction for £700. A first edition of G K Chesterton's newspaper went for £200 – another bargain find.



***The Bookworm* (c 1850) by Carl Spitzweg**

My best day was a mix of comedy, tragedy and triumph. I got a call from a house-clearer.

'Steve, get over here. I've got a house full of books for you – we only have an hour.'

I rushed over, had a very quick look and bought the lot for £500 plus a delivery fee of £200. Later that day, an old van arrived with the books, which were deposited on huge tarpaulins outside my garage.

I soon realised I had made a huge mistake. The books were filthy and unsellable. They smelled odd, like rat urine, and I could barely bring myself to touch them. The next day, I had a terrible tummy bug. Worst of all was dealing with the disapproving look of my lovely wife.

'Mmmm,' was what she said. It spoke volumes. She's experienced false dawns before.

Later in the day, I decided to take one more look, as I was feeling despondent. And there was treasure.

At the very bottom of a box were five posters from the Marquee Club in London in the 1960s.

They were signed by all the members of the original Fleetwood Mac, including Peter Green. Yes, I got my money back – no profit, but a huge relief.

I like booksellers. They are an interesting bunch – some tweedy, and most of them tough. There are philosophers, dreamers, the smart and the scruffy.

And they welcomed me into the family, after checking I wasn't going to be all holier-than-thou.

There is a pecking order, a food chain. So I sell mainly to other dealers, who sell on to other more established dealers.

The joke goes that if you had three booksellers marooned on a desert island and there were only a few books between them, they'd still be buying and selling years later.

I've been at it in earnest for three years. And, yes, I do make what I might have earned as a stipendiary priest. There are downsides – the house permanently full of boxes and books, the bad back from lifting and the early starts. I broke my toe dropping a heavy box of books on it.

And there are things you can rely on. Ned Fitzgerald, an expert at Hatchards, tells me. 'Tolkien is hot – so is Jane Austen.' It's the really timeless things that remain a good investment.

Rev Steve Morris is Associate Priest at St Bride's, Fleet Street

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

Julie Burchill's kiss of life

SIR: Peter York wrote in the November issue ('Lowbrow highbrows') that he agreed with 'right-wing propagandist' Toby Young in that early issues of the *Modern Review* will one day be seen as 'the gold standard' and that he didn't regret giving £35,000 to Young and Julie Burchill.

In 1992, Tom Hibbert interviewed Richard Ingrams for *Q* magazine. Ingrams told Hibbert the *Oldie* offices had just received a fax from Julie Burchill that had made his day. Burchill had written, 'Sir: Congratulations on producing the most pathetic magazine ever published.'

Ingrams explained he was delighted with her response because he felt if Julie hated the launch issue of *The Oldie* that much, then they must be on the right track.

I've always loved reading *The Oldie*. I'm so glad it still exists. Stay gold.

Kind regards,
Harry Pye, Ramsgate, Kent

'Darling, which bin does the council say we should use for our hopes and dreams?'

Long live facecloths

SIR: I was almost shocked by Mary Killen's denouncement of the humble facecloth (Mary Killen's Beauty Tips, October issue). She says these 'utterly disgusting' items are long forgotten.

Not so, Mary. I regard my arsenal of facecloths as an essential part of my toilette.

And judging from the tightly packed shelves of facecloths in every hue in the bathroom sections of large stores, I am not alone.
Linda Strange, Sutton Coldfield, West Midlands

RIP the Christmas pig

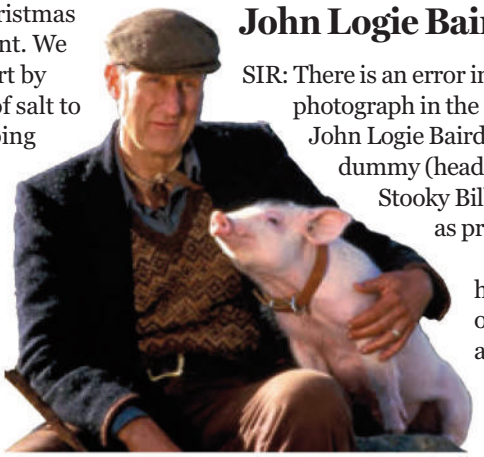
SIR: I enjoyed the December-issue Memory Lane by Steve Overbury, which brought back memories of our family preparations for Christmas almost 80 years ago.

My grandfather was a farmer, and one of the annual rituals on his farm was butchering the Christmas pig. It was a family event. We children played our part by reducing large blocks of salt to granules and then helping to drive the squealing pig from its sty to its execution.

We watched, enthralled, as it was upended onto a sturdy trestle, its throat cut and the spurting blood collected for black pudding. Its opened belly revealed steaming organs of deep reds and purples (the intestine was cleaned for the sausage skin).

We then set about salting down the hams and bacon which would be hung in the pantry.

It sounds pretty brutal now, but we all seemed to take it in our stride, and vegans were unknown.
Paul Elmhirst, Stillingfleet, York



Pigs are not just for Christmas: Hoggett and Babe in 1995

Class warfare

SIR: The amusing article by Alyson Elliott (November issue) did not mention that the demise of the traditional blackboard also led to the removal of the favourite weapon of many teachers, the wood-backed eraser.

The dexterity of many of our instructors, some seemingly mild people, was discussed – and almost made into league tables – by the many of us who had sustained bruises after some cheeky remark or behaviour.

One music teacher was renowned for his ability to pinpoint one malefactor in a class of 30 and send the missile with unerring accuracy on to the victim.

Yours,
Duncan Hume, Bournemouth

John Logie Baird's dummy

SIR: There is an error in the caption to a photograph in the December issue. John Logie Baird's ventriloquist's dummy (head) was named Stooky Bill, not Stocky Bill as printed.

The dummy head in the centre of the picture is actually James; Stooky is the partially-hidden head.

The strange word ‘stooky’ is Scots for stucco or plaster, of which Bill’s head consisted. James and Bill were two of the first faces to be televised, standing in for humans who would not have survived long under the fierce level of lighting required for JLB’s doomed mechanical scanning system.
Mike Nicholls, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire

‘It looks great but Psalms starts with a P’

Chaos of John Bayley

SIR: A N Wilson’s article on John Bayley and Iris Murdoch (Oldie Man of Letters, December issue) gives a very different impression of the English tutor John Bayley whom some of us (not his pupils) knew at New College in the mid- to late-1950s.

He was the epitome of the helpless absent-minded don who once posted a note in the college entrance lodge asking whether anyone had seen his car, having travelled to London in it, returned to Oxford by train, and forgotten the drive to London.

He also appeared in college on crutches and with a leg in plaster: it was rumoured that he had run himself over by exiting his car and stepping in front of it without leaving the handbrake on.

Having rooms in the New Buildings Quad overlooking Bayley’s rooms, I often saw a thick-socked and stout-shoed Iris Murdoch striding purposefully across the quad to call on him, and wondered at the nature of their relationship.

Yours etc,
(Sir) Brian Unwin, Dorking, Surrey

The two-bob pint

SIR: Christopher Howse’s commentary on ‘Great Bores of Today – The Good Old British Pub’ (The Old Un’s Notes, December issue) made me chuckle.

He says, ‘I remember the days when a pound note would buy you a pint AND a packet of crisps.’ Well, Mr Howse must be a relative youngster, because I (a mere 78) remember when a pint of King Lear cost two bob/ one florin (10p to young oldies). So £1 could buy you a staggering 10 pints.

The year was 1967 and I was in my first year at Cambridge. The amount I had to spend was £2 a week – £1 for beer and £1 for (other) necessaries. The pub we drank in was The Eagle in Benet Street, and our poison was Greene King draught bitter.

Beer and darts were the down-to-earth evening antidote to a spiritually and intellectually uplifting daily diet of Homer, Plato, Thucydides, Demosthenes, Virgil, J Caesar, Cicero et al. Just 10p a pint!

Nearly 60 years later, a pint sets me back the best part of seven quid. But as many of us oldies say, ‘Mustn’t grumble.’ I am infinitely better off (financially) than I was in 1967.
Geoffrey Williams, Crouch End, London

Feztive Tommy Cooper

SIR: The December issue’s Old Un’s Notes refer to a dinner being held at the Savile Club by the Honorable Society of the Fez, and states that the fez is ‘often associated with Tommy Cooper’. ‘Often’?! In fact the fez is almost inevitably associated with the great comedy magician by young, old and even royalty.

At the 2024 Convention of the Gilbert and Sullivan Society, when I was introduced to the President, HRH The Duke of Gloucester, he spotted my fez lapel badge and exclaimed, ‘Ah! Tommy Cooper. Just like that!’ – accompanied with the appropriate hand actions.

The Tommy Cooper Society has held a Tommy Cooper Birthday Lunch in Caerphilly (Tommy’s birthplace) annually for the past 20 years. In 2026, it will be held on 22nd March, when we will celebrate the 105th anniversary of his birth, and fezzes will certainly be worn.

Our patron, Sir Anthony Hopkins, unveiled our statue of Tommy in 2008; the ceremony can still be seen online, with our patron wearing what some Savile members might call a tarboosh!

Yours, with best wishes for the feztive season,
Tudor Jones, Pontcanna, Cardiff

Save Tracey Emin’s bed

SIR: Quentin Letts makes a good case against the overzealous cleaning of old-master paintings (Pet Hates, December issue).

But what lies ahead for the conservation departments in major art galleries when they have to deal with ageing modern art pieces?

You have Jackson Pollock using industrial enamel paints on canvas, David Hockney using collaged Polaroids and fax machines, at one point.

In the sculpture domain, there is Tracey Emin’s unmade bed and Damien Hirst’s animals suspended in formaldehyde. The former will be brittle or prone to fading in sunlight; the latter will be dust-gatherers, at best, or require hazmat suits to maintain.

The bigger question is whether many of these modern so-called masterpieces will be worth conserving.
John Rattigan, Doveridge, Derbyshire

Memo to self – pay attention in class

SOPHIA WAUGH

There is a school of thought, to which I often subscribe, that sometimes it is just better not to know.

That might sound odd coming from an 'educator' whose whole *raison d'être* is to banish the dark and lead children into the light. But we all know that sometimes the light can hurt our eyes.

Thomas Gray did not say, 'Ignorance is bliss'. He said that '*where* ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise', and there is a wealth of meaning added by those often deleted words.

I think particularly of teaching children about mental health. I am all for banishing the stigma previously felt by those suffering from depression or any other type of mental illness, but children can be over-informed.

And evidence is beginning to emerge that backs up my theory. In the olden days, children would feel anxious about their exams; now they 'have anxiety'.

If you are anxious, you power through, revise for the exams, sit them and hope for the best. But if you 'have anxiety', you stop coming to school – never mind sitting the exams.

I am not saying that if you have never heard of an illness, you cannot get it. But I am saying there is a huge power of suggestion over young minds and a natural youthful desire for drama, which sometimes work to their detriment.

Add to that parents who long for some sort of a diagnosis to explain their child, and you have what can be a toxic mix.

Now I realise it is not just the young who are affected adversely by knowledge – especially medical knowledge. The opening of *Three Men in a Boat* mocks exactly that suggestibility.

I remember, every Tuesday, thinking I had whatever disease the *Independent*'s medical page was covering that day – until one Wednesday, when it dawned on me there was no chance on earth I could have testicular cancer at all.

But it has happened again. After Sex Deb, our sexual-advice lecturer, our next inset training was on Inclusive Classrooms for Neurodiverse Learners.

Along with lots of tips on strategies to help the neurodiverse, there came a handout to help us understand the different types of neurodiversity we are likely to meet in the classroom.

They are mostly presented as acronyms: ASC (autism spectrum condition), SPD (sensory processing differences), ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) and – ironically the only one without an acronym – dyslexia.

And guess what: having read through them all, I have self-diagnosed with ADHD. After 63 years of pootling along, just being myself, it turns out I have a disorder.

Viz: task-switching (I stopped halfway through writing this to look up when Thomas Hardy married Florence); impulsivity – ask my children about how much I interrupt a conversation; rejection sensitivity – ditto how often they tell me off about a 'pity party'; lack of organisation; executive function; working memory ... the list goes on.

So what do I do? Do I curl up and weep, or run for medication and therapy? I suppose I could, and perhaps it would help calm me down and make me more organised, less irritating and less restless.

Perhaps it would have helped if I had been diagnosed years ago. But has it damaged or strengthened me? It's impossible to know. I might have been more successful, richer and more liked if I had tackled this 'disorder'.

But now? I'd be frightened to tackle it. Would I still be myself without ADHD?

I'm going to take the opposite approach. I'm going to glory in being modern enough to be 'diverse'. After all, isn't 'diversity' a glorious thing in whatever form it takes?

Ignorance *was* bliss – but now I'm wise, I'll just get on with life as I always have.

'I've been doing my own research, backed by what I already believe'

The Oldie

Travel Supplement

UNCLE SAM WANTS YOU

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The Oldie Travel Guide

January 2026

Among the contributors

HARRY EYRES has been a theatre critic, wine writer and poetry editor. For a decade, he wrote the 'Slow Lane' column for the *Financial Times*. His most recent book is *Horace and Me: Life Lessons from an Ancient Poet.*

JOHN GIMLETTE is a practising barrister and the author of six books. He won the 1997 Shiva Naipaul Prize for travel writing. In 2022, *Wild Coast* won the Dolman Travel Book Prize and was later named by the *Daily Telegraph* as 'one of the best 20 travel books of all time'.

MARK McCRUM has written numerous travel books and several best-sellers, including *Robbie Williams: Somebody Someday*. He is the author of the Francis Meadowes series of murder mysteries.

JONATHAN RAY is a journalist and the drinks editor of the *Spectator* and spent many years as the wine editor of The *Daily Telegraph.* He is the author of *Drink More Fizz!* and *That's the Spirit!*

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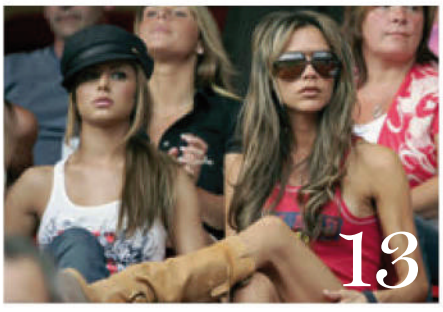
For editorial enquiries, call 020 7436 8801 or email editorial@theoldie.co.uk

Happy Birthday, USA! The Queen admires the Liberty Bell, 1976



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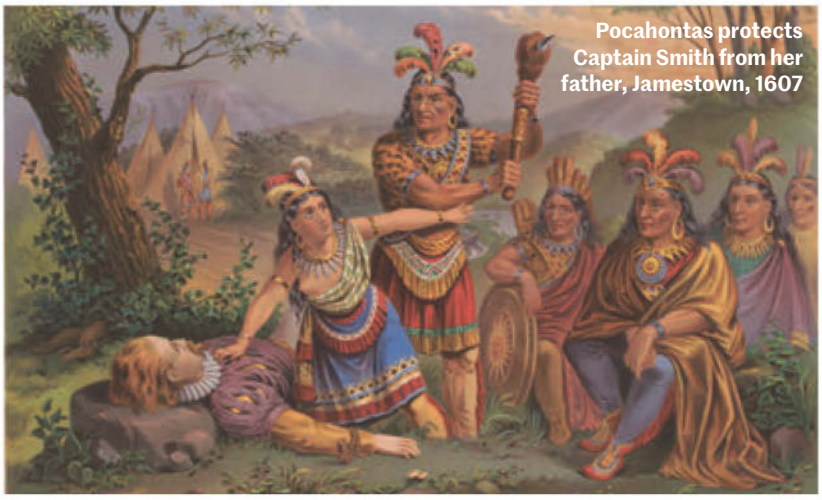
From a British colony...

Jonathan Ray visits Jamestown, Virginia, where the English first settled in 1607



Pocahontas protects Captain Smith from her father, Jamestown, 1607

If I had any hair on my shiny bald pate, it would have stood up on end. I certainly had goose pimples aplenty on my arms.

I was in Historic Jamestown, Virginia. I stood on the bank of the James River, totally alone, looking south-east to Newport News (the oldest English city name in the Americas), Chesapeake Bay and, ultimately, the open sea.

All I could see were sky, scrub, trees and deep grey waters. The view hasn't changed in centuries.

This is what Bartholomew Gosnold, Christopher Newport, John Rolfe and John Smith saw when they arrived here in May 1607.

After five months at sea aboard the *Susan Constant*, *Godspeed* and *Discovery*, they established the first permanent English settlement in the Americas. They called it Jamestown, after James I. Virginia was named after Elizabeth I, the Virgin Queen.

This is where America was born. But Jamestown is strangely understated for so important a spot. There's a small visitor centre, museum, a ruined 17th-century church and excavations.

An obelisk – the Jamestown Tercentennial Monument – was erected in 1907 to commemorate 'The Birthplace of Virginia and the United States'.

There are statues of John Smith and Pocahontas (1596-1617), the Native American girl who saved Smith's life and went on to marry John Rolfe, before dying in Gravesend, Kent, of all places.

Other than that, it's just forest, reedbeds, marsh and swamp. I had a mooch about and tried to imagine what it was like over 400 years ago.

English settlers, Powhatan Indians and African slaves came together in what was the colonial capital from 1616 until 1699 – when the capital moved to Williamsburg. By the 18th century, Jamestown was abandoned.

I threw a stone in the water for luck and headed off. As I wandered back to the car park, wondering where everyone was, a harassed looking family arrived.

'But there's nothing to see!' whined the smaller of two kids.

'But, look, there's Pocohontas,' said the mother in despeaation.

'The cartoon's nothing like her,' replied the brat, stomping off in a huff, arms tightly folded.

They should have joined me at nearby Jamestown Settlement, a bustling reproduction of how the original English colony and its fort are thought to have looked.

Here re-enactors dressed as Powhatans were splitting logs, preparing fishing tackle, cleaning animal skins and making dug-out canoes.

English colonists pottered about inside the replica fort, complete with armoury, church and half-timbered cottages. They occasionally set off their cacophonous matchlock muskets, much to visitors' and their own ashen-faced consternation, crying, 'Ooh-aah' in approximations of grizzled, 17th -century English.

A life-size replica of *Discovery* lay alongside the jetty, manned by a few swarthy-looking crew.

Goodness, at just 40 feet long, it was tiny. How the heck did 21 folk live – let alone survive – on board for 5 months? Remarkably, only one of the 104 souls who set off in the three ships failed to make it. Immigrants in small boats; some things never change...

Jamestown forms part of Virginia's so-called Historic Triangle, along with Colonial Williamsburg and Yorktown.

As I struggled in the breeze to flatten my road map on the bonnet – sorry, hood – of my rental car (who needs satnav when you've got a good map?), a kindly guy got out of his station wagon to ask if he could help.

I explained that I was heading back to my hotel in Williamsburg and was trying to get my bearings.

Hearing my accent, he grinned and said, 'So, you're missing out Yorktown? Don't blame you. You've seen where you guys started it all. Why bother seeing where you screwed it all up?'

Jonathan Ray is drinks editor at the Spectator

Virgin Queen's state: 1612 map of Virginia

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...to a free America

On the 250th anniversary of independence, *James Fletcher* tours the Revolutionary cities – Boston, New York and Philadelphia

As the momentous anniversary of the 1776 Declaration of Independence approaches, the America250 initiative is planning countless parades, celebrations and re-enactments.

No city embodies the Revolution's raw fury like Boston. The 'shot heard round the world', at the nearby battles of Lexington and Concord (1775), shattered imperial manacles.

Re-enactments of those battles are planned on April 29th, with musket volleys and fife-and-drum marches.

Visitors can explore the city's history along the Freedom Trail, a crimson-brick path through 16 hallowed sites.

The trail snakes two and a half miles from the Bunker Hill Monument in Charlestown, the site of the 1775 battle.

It goes via Boston Common, America's oldest public park (est. 1634), where British troops drilled and patriots plotted. Next is the Granary Burying Ground, where the tombstones of 'Sons of Liberty', Paul Revere, John Hancock and Samuel Adams, bear epitaphs like 'What we were, that we are; what we are, that we shall be'.

Next is Old North Church (1723), from whose steeple sexton Robert Newman hung lanterns, signalling 'one if by land, two if by sea' on 18th April 1775.

Nearby, the Paul Revere House (c. 1680) preserves the silversmith's modest abode. Costumed guides recount the story of his midnight ride. Revere galloped to warn American minutemen of the British approach on the eve of the Battles of Lexington and Concord.

Don't miss the Boston Tea Party Ships & Museum. An interactive voyage aboard has ship replicas. 'Sons of Liberty' actors hurl faux tea crates into the harbour to evoke the 1773 protest that lit the fuse of war.

Next summer, the Tall Ships Festival will jam the harbour, with a July 4th Boston Pops Fireworks Spectacular on the Esplanade.

The Queen and the Liberty Bell, Philadelphia, 1976

In New York, the Federal Hall National Memorial is where Washington took the presidential oath in 1789. The city wrestled with loyalty to the British, before embracing the American cause.

On Governors Island, Fort Jay will stage reenactments of the disastrous 1776 Brooklyn Heights rout, when Washington retreated, and 400 Americans fell.

Fraunces Tavern will host 'Liberty Dinners', featuring 18th-century food. Here George Washington bid an emotional farewell to his officers in 1783, just days after the British evacuated, as he resigned his military commission.

Further July celebrations include OpSail 2026's gathering of 60 tall ships from 30 nations with fireworks and naval salutes and the US Navy's International Fleet Review.

Philadelphia, America's capital from 1775 to 1776 and again from 1790 till 1800, was where the Declaration was adopted on 4th July 1776 at Independence Hall, with Jefferson's high-backed chair still in its Assembly Room.

The 250 Parade down Broad Street will culminate here. Next door, the Liberty Bell (*pictured*), inscribed with 'Proclaim Liberty', will ring out in support of abolition and suffrage.

Also on 4th July, a time capsule will be buried on Independence Mall, containing artefacts from all 50 states. Soldier drills at Valley Forge will revive the 1777–78 encampments.

The National Constitution Centre houses a holographic of the great polymath Benjamin Franklin. You can visit the Christ Church Burial Ground where he rests, and there will be kite demonstrations in his honour at Franklin Court.

You can also see George Washington's tent at the Museum of the American Revolution.

It's worth travelling the 100 miles or so to Virginia to visit Mount Vernon, his fine Palladian home (built 1743) in its 500-acre plantation. Tour the mansion, with its green-draped study, where Washington pored over battle maps. The Upper Garden blooms with heirloom roses, while the Distillery & Grist Mill reconstruct his whiskey empire.

In spring 2026, Mount Vernon unveils an exhibition chronicling the American hero's story.

Patriots Path, a new Revolutionary War encampment, allows visitors to drill with redcoats and Continentals.

4th July naturalisation ceremonies will swear in new citizens, while fireworks over the estate celebrate 1783.

Tours of the slave quarters are a reminder of the 577 poor souls who built this American Eden.

James Fletcher directed The Accidental President, *about Donald Trump's 2016 victory*

Vesuvius: 'one of Europe's deadliest volcanoes'

See Naples before you die

Vesuvius reminds *Harry Eyres* to enjoy the city's mortal pleasures

In Naples, as in Rome, the characteristic greeting is the Latin 'Salve', not 'Buongiorno' or the informal 'Ciao'.

There's a gravity about 'Salve'. This is no light or airy salutation, rather a word which, like Naples, has two and half thousand years of history.

Without the coercive optimism of 'Have a nice day!', 'Salve' suggests that today will not necessarily be a nice day. In Naples, it will undoubtedly include a fair measure of frustration – but it may turn out to be richer than you imagined.

The last time I arrived in Naples, I was not prepared for the chaos on the ground. There seemed no obvious way of getting into the city.

In warm October sunshine, I joined a long queue for a taxi, and got into conversation with Rita and Indya, two young Italian women involved in a tech start-up.

An announcement came, informing us there was a taxi strike. My two new acquaintances seemed unbothered. 'We'd better take the bus,' Rita offered.

We joined another, even longer queue. I resigned myself to an interminable wait, made more bearable by the presence of Indya and Rita. But the queue moved with astonishing rapidity, and we were in central Naples pronto.

Indya, Rita and I all got off. It seemed rather an abrupt ending to an enjoyable passing of the time.

I rummaged about for a business card but could only come up with a Daunt Books bookmark on which I scrawled my number.

I must have looked rather lost because Indya asked, 'Do know where you're going? Can I help you find the way?'

For some obscure reason, I declined the offer and set off with my wheelie bag into the desolate wastes of Piazza Garibaldi, searching for a metro station. There was no sign of one. So I entered a café and spoke to a friendly waiter ('Salve!'), who pointed me in the right direction and told me I needed Linea 1.

I see using metros in foreign cities as a rite of passage – descending into the Underworld and emerging, with luck, unscathed. Not just unscathed but feeling more like a native. It seemed appropriate that my stop was named Dante.

If that was the *Inferno* part, I seemed to reach *Paradiso* without the detour of *Purgatorio*.

My hotel, Relais Della Porta,on the via Toledo turned out to be part of a lovingly restored Renaissance palace, home of the great humanist Giambattista della Porta. In addition, there was a pretty decent Yamaha grand piano in the library on which to practise my Schubert impromptus.

It was time for lunch. Following my nose, I headed down Via della Sapienza, the street of wisdom, to the right of the National Archaeological Museum. There behind an inconspicuous doorway was La Cantina di Via Sapienza, somewhat dark and dingy, but with the quiet buzz that tells you an establishment is confident about its identity.

La Cantina turned out to be my ideal Italian restaurant, or anything restaurant. Not a tourist in sight; a clientele of professors and medical students; a lady on her own with a half-carafe of Falanghina. And the most perfect *salsicche e friarielli*, wild broccoli, which tastes much better than the domesticated kind.

I ordered a half-carafe of Taurasi, and thought of raising a glass to the Falanghina lady, but didn't.

Naples native: Giambattista della Porta (1535-1615)

Not everything in Naples is perfect. The Camorra has not joined forces with the Pio Monte della Misericordia. Rubbish collection seems to be an insoluble problem.

And over the teeming city looms Vesuvius, one of Europe's deadliest volcanoes. The ultimate not nice day will come.

To remind myself of that, after my perfect lunch, I revisited the Pompeii treasures in the National Archaeological Museum. For some reason, the everyday objects, the still usable pots and pans, moved me even more than the stately frescoes.

Later, I received a WhatsApp from Indya. 'Is Daunt Books a bookshop in London? I like bookshops.'

Harry Eyres is author of Horace and Me: Life Lessons from an Ancient Poet

GETTY

Inside Hitler's bunker

John Gimlette explores the Führer's Polish lair, where he survived Claus von Stauffenberg's Plot to blow him to smithereens

Mussolini and Hitler visit the Wolf's Lair after the bomb on 20th July 1944

Tyrants come and go but I'm always surprised at the stuff they leave behind.

I've visited Enver Hoxha's bunker (Tirana), the Sultan of Zanzibar's 'House of Wonders', and Colonel Gaddafi's onion-layered complex (Tripoli). But what about that super-tyrant, Hitler? What was his thing? Gold taps or blast doors?

Most of his haunts have disappeared but there is one in Poland, called the Wolf's Lair, or *Wolfsschanze*. I asked my friends at baltictravelcompany.com if they could fix up a trip.

Sure, they said, it's way out east, in one of the wildest, most mysterious corners of Europe. Oh, and go and see the bison while you're there.

Big beasts love eastern Poland: the deep woods, the bogs, the sedges and the dearth of humans.

I spent a few days in the Białowieża Forest which is roughly the size of Berkshire. Someone locally kept a wolf called Dina, which had a wonky ear, making her look slightly raffish.

I liked the idea all her relatives were out there, somewhere: I just didn't want to run into them. There were said to be five packs in our bit of forest. Even their droppings looked awesome – like giant hairballs mixed with Snickers.

Once in the forest, you soon forget about being eaten. It is, truly, a mystical place: eerie, beautiful and weird. Some of the oaks date from the Middle Ages and – even in winter – the fungi are bright orange, the size of footballs. Everywhere I went, there was a carnival of birds, with woodpeckers tapping out the beat. Ironically, it's only the big creatures that scarper at the first whiff of man.

Unlike an English forest, there are long, clear views through the trees. This is because, every now and then, a great woolly bulldozer comes huffing though, eating everything in reach.

Once, I saw one in close-up: a magnificent giant, shaggy-headed and skinny-arsed European bison.

Each morning, a few lumbered out of the trees to graze. It was a Stone Age scene. Locals loved reminding me this is Europe's last primeval forest and these are its largest land animals.

But the bison haven't always had it so easy. Over two world wars, much of the forest was destroyed.

Nowadays, peace has been restored, and the bison are back. That said, a mile down the road lies the Belarusian frontier. It's rumoured that bootleg goods used to come this way. So, if you hear a rumble in the night, it could be the beasts. Or it might just be a truck full of fags.

Four hours' drive to the north, these woods once held a dark secret.

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Eastern Poland

It's around 80 years since Hitler planted his headquarters up here, among the Great Masurian Lakes. Back then, this was East Prussia, and the landscape is still littered with castles and old German churches.

It was a memorable journey. One moment, my driver and I would be on the prairie. Then we'd be soaring through forest as black as bibles and brocaded with ice. At times, the pines gave way to sand, like some great inland beach.

I remember gigantic cowsheds, Hänsel-und-Gretel villages, and stork nests – the size of bonfires – up on the rooves. Then we were among the lakes, some of them big enough for ships and islands and enormous sunsets. It was here that Hitler hid.

It would be easy to miss the Wolf's Lair –or Wolfsschanze. Just beyond Gierłoż (or Görlitz), the road veers off into boggy forest. Suddenly, there were concrete blocks all around, up to three storeys high. Even with a guide, I found it hard to compute; this great, blind city, built like cellars but above the ground.

Inexplicable, overgrown and empty, it's like Machu Picchu for the criminally insane. I now wonder which was madder – this dank and ridiculous complex or the people inside. All the top brass were here: Bormann, Keitel and Speer. Hitler himself didn't just visit but made it his home. During the last three and a half years of the war, he was here for more than 800 days.

In the last three and a half years of the war, Hitler was here for over 800 days

In that time, he'd see little of the sun, the horizon or Eva Braun. Instead he worked up an extreme case of cabin fever. Witnesses say that, by the end, he was eating alone, accompanied only by his dog, Blondi.

There are still signs of insanity everywhere, in the secrecy and megalomaniac dimensions. At one point, I squeezed into Hitler's bunker (No 13) and through a warren of tiny, broken passages. Above me, the ceiling was 33 feet thick.

Ironically, the only attack came from within: Count von Stauffenberg's bomb plot in 1944. His conference hall – now squashed flat – is a shrine to the German resistance.

What makes Wolfsschanze so uniquely surreal is the damage done by those who built it. In January 1945, at the first sign of an enemy (the Russians), the Nazis blew it up.

TNT is an assiduous sculptor. Some bunkers were spattered across the complex or hollowed out like volcanic vents. Others lean over drunkenly or have collapsed in layers like cards. Speer's 'hotel' now has a weird pot-belly, and Bormann's bunker is cracking open like some gigantic prehistoric egg.

So, goodbye, Wolfsschanze. There's probably no better monument to tyranny than this ludicrous folly.

Take note, Mr Putin: your fate is written in the rubble.

John Gimlette is author of The Gardens of Mars: Madagascar, an Island Story

Hitler's bunker at the Wolf's Lair today

COURTESY OF JOHN GIMLETTE

▲ Red door is no.49, Blue door no. 51

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Aarhus (pronounced OAR-hoos) - Denmark's second city (pop. 350,000) - is a lively university city, with a 12th-century cathedral, a world-class art museum, an outstanding museum of Danish town houses, and a striking prehistory museum. It is a coastal city with white sandy beaches and wonderful forests to explore. The concert hall hosts a wide range of events, and the city offers excellent theatre and dining, including one 2-star and two 1-star Michelin restaurants plus several Bib Gourmands.

We rent two tiny houses on a very charming cobbled street in the heart of the city, within walking distance of most sights. Both houses have a ground-floor kitchen, sitting room and bathroom, a first-floor bedroom (fairly steep stairs), and a small south-facing garden. Ideal for one or two adults and up to two children.

Prices from £100 per house per night. Denmark is warm in summer and milder than expected in winter. Supermarket prices are similar to UK prices, and most Danes speak excellent English.

Getting here from the UK: Ryanair and Norwegian fly to Aarhus (AAR) and Billund (BLL) from Stansted and Gatwick; KLM offers connections to Billund via Amsterdam from all UK international airports. Buses run from both airports to central Aarhus; from there it's a short walk or a 5-minute taxi.

The guest houses are number 49 (red door) and 51 (blue door). Your hosts, who live next door in number 53, are Andrew (from Ilkley, Yorkshire) and Lissa (from Aarhus) – both professional musicians. Lissa is also an accomplished potter with a workshop and gallery on site. Of course they are Oldie readers.

The houses have been favourably featured in many publications including The Guardian, Vogue, The New York Times, and Lonely Planet.

We look forward to welcoming you to our pretty little city.

The Baden-Baden Baddie

Mark Palmer was disgraced in Germany's poshest town

You either like grand, old-fashioned hotels with a man in uniform waiting to open the door of a taxi with one hand while expecting a tip in the other – or you don't.

I love them. The deference laid on thicker than peanut butter on a sandwich; the assumption that you're loaded even if you're about to be taken to court for not paying your energy bill; your bags miraculously appearing in the room before you do.

And the bowl of fruit with a note from the general manager, saying how delighted he is you're staying and is there anything he can do to make your visit more comfortable?

Paying that gas bill would make life infinitely more comfortable but, for now, let's suspend reality and book in for a £120 massage in the new spa.

For nearly two decades, as Travel Editor of the *Daily Mail*, I was in the fortunate position of experiencing all of the above. Those invitations have somewhat dried up, but I've always got on well with travel PRs.

Julia Perowne is the biggest hitter in the business, with a client list that reads like a *Who's Who* of global five-star hotels. I've known her since she started out. A few weeks ago, she invited me to stay at Baden-Baden's Brenners Park Hotel.

The hotel was celebrating its 150th anniversary after a two-year renovation. It was where the WAGS stayed during the 2006 World Cup.

And the hotel has played host to everyone from Barack Obama and the Shah of Persia to Marlene Dietrich, Walt Disney and George Clooney.

The final night would comprise a gala dinner with members of the Oetker family, which owns the hotel (along with other hotels like the celebrated Hotel Du Cap). They were looking forward to meeting me. Problem was, I hadn't read the small print: strictly Black Tie.

I had no DJ, bow tie, black jacket, white shirt or black shoes. During a guided tour of Baden-Baden, arguably Germany's poshest town, I kept an eye out for a formal-wear shop, but none existed – and

Superstar spa: Baden-Baden

lederhosen wouldn't do.

Then I saw Nick, a fellow journalist, sporting a white shirt. Asking a stranger to give you the shirt off his back was daunting, but he kindly went along with it – and the advantage of grand hotels is that they can wash and iron a shirt within hours.

'I have a spare black jacket, too, if that helps,' said Nick, who stands at least 6ft tall (I am only 5ft 6½ins).

I confessed all this to Julia, who immediately instructed one of her team to fly out with a bow tie bought from Oliver Brown. That person was coming anyway – but still it was impressive.

I had some dark blue tracksuit bottoms and so I was all set: jacket three sizes too big, clean white shirt, trackies, bow tie – and some muddy Nike trainers.

'People only look at a man from the waist up,' reassured a member of our group, as we paraded into the dining room with a table similar to the one for state banquets at Windsor Castle.

My embarrassment reminded me of when I was asked to settle a bill of some £4,000 at a resort in the Maldives when I under-stood it was 'all taken care of'.

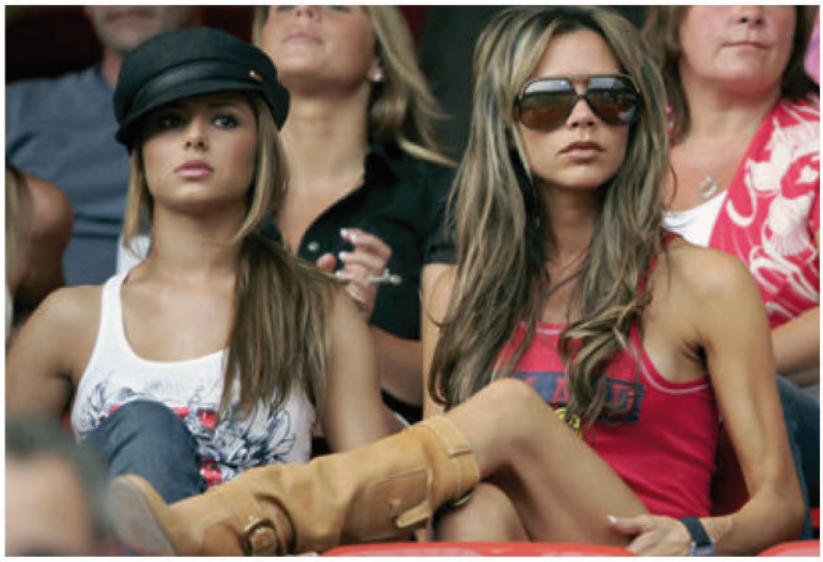
Then there was the Los Angeles debacle when, as a guest of a hotel on Sunset Boulevard, I failed to read a sign saying that the swimming pool would close at 6pm for a private party.

I slipped into the pool shortly before six and began my lengths. I then saw the pool area filling up with beautiful people in beautiful clothes. They clearly thought I was part of the décor, an Adonis of sorts, with ripped torso.

There were two choices: keep swimming until midnight or clamber out while holding in my paunch and apologising profusely for ruining the aesthetics.

I chose the latter – but somehow it got back to the PR. I've never been asked to stay in that group of hotels again.

Mark Palmer was Travel Editor of the Daily Mail*, 2008-25*



WAGS Cheryl Cole and Victoria Beckham, 2006 World Cup, Baden-Baden

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The Bruce Chatwin & Ronnie Biggs Guide to Latin America

An odd couple helped *Sara Stewart* on her youthful odyssey

Left: **Bruce Chatwin, 1984**
Above: **Great Train Robber Ronnie Biggs, Rio, 1977**

Christmas Eve 1974, San Salvador.

I had just stumbled off a bus with no plans other than to make my way south to visit Chilean friends. I'd shared a flat with them at university in Madrid.

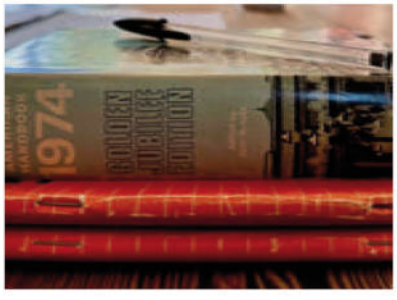
I was 22. There were no mobiles, or credit cards. Travellers' cheques, concealed under clothing, were exchanged furtively on the black market. There were very few Western travellers.

Travel was slow and considered. To buy a bus or train ticket, you queued for hours, waving arms to communicate. Contact details of distant friends of locals barely met were gratefully scribbled into notebooks.

The South American Handbook was the only guide, a chunky hardback useful for bashing cockroaches. I relied on a large paper map of the continent, worn through at the folds.

I originally arrived in Veracruz, Mexico, negotiating free passage on a cargo boat from Le Havre by posing as the niece of the boat's Mexican owner.

Some 400 miles on, I was welcomed to Mexico City by Patrick, an Irish friend of friends of my parents. He'd arrived in Mexico with several hunters and a pack of hounds, which he kept at a run-down estancia, along with a boar named Pig, which sat on the sofa. There Patrick hunted jackal around the cacti with farmers in hot pursuit on donkeys.



The South American Handbook: **'useful for bashing cockroaches'**

GETTY

At one of Patrick's parties, I was introduced to Federico from El Salvador, who was en route to New York to have his hair cut by Vidal Sassoon.

'If you come to El Salvador, please get in touch,' he purred, handsome face encircled by perfectly coiffed curls.

So, three months later, here I was, clutching his card and dialling from a kiosk in the filthy diesel-stinking bus station: 'Come and stay. It's almost Christmas.'

Moments later, Federico's sleek sports car cruised into the midst of belching buses and I was whisked away into a Christmas like no other.

Federico took me to parties with people who had known Cocteau and Sartre. They led rarified, privileged lives in otherwise impoverished, corrupt dictatorships. They generously, unconditionally invited me into their homes as an intriguing oddball. They would never have allowed their daughters to travel via local buses, staying in cheap rooms, showers often covered in faeces.

> Chatwin's hunt for stories was inspired by a piece of giant sloth skin in his grandmother's cabinet

In Managua, recently mangled by an earthquake, I had supper with a girl my age I'd met in El Salvador.

We went to a smart restaurant in her father's chauffeur-driven car and, over dinner, chaperoned by a maid, she was amazed to discover some women worked.

Peru was under military dictatorship when I arrived. The army had moved in to suppress a strike with brutality, tanks and curfews. There was looting destruction and hundreds killed.

Foreign journalists were exiled and banned but kind Anglo-Chileans had me to stay for weeks in their comfortable home – a sanctuary away from the violence in a residential area of Lima.

When I finally left, my hostess, Monica Barnett, told me to look out for her nephew Bruce if I went to Patagonia.

In Bolivia, the British Ambassador took me in his bullet-proof car up to Chacaltaya, then the world's highest ski resort at 17,785 ft. It closed when its glacier melted and by 2009 had disappeared.

At high altitude, we breathlessly ate a picnic off the car bonnet, as he puffed on a pipe and discussed the hazards of living in Bolivia.

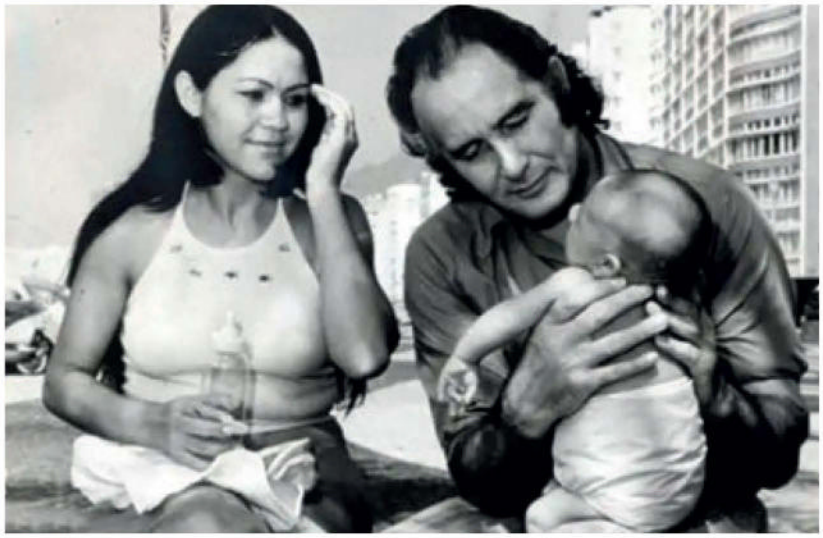
Though he'd never heard of me, he proffered the usual unconditional welcome, inspired by genuine curiosity about the tiny handful of young travelling through.

I made my way down to General Pinochet's Chile. In Patagonia, I was waiting for a cargo boat up the fjords when an unmistakably English voice behind me wondered, 'Do you think we can eat onboard?' I turned to face a blonde, blue-eyed Adonis.

'Hello, I'm Bruce Chatwin,' he said, proffering his hand.

He had just finished researching what he hoped would be his first book. He told me his hunt for stories was inspired by a piece of giant sloth skin in his grandmother's cabinet that had riveted him as a child. It was found in a Patagonian cave by his great uncle, who, it transpired, was my Lima hostess's father. 'Ah, so you're Monica's nephew!' I laughed.

During several days lurching around at sea, we fell into a camaraderie, full of stories, mutual friends and optimism. He was 34, already showing touches of the charismatic enigma he was to become. *In Patagonia* went on to change the genre of travel writing.



What easy-going, charming Ronnie Biggs missed most was fish 'n' chips and a misty morning

I went on to Brazil and rang Dolores, the mother of a Brazilian family I'd met sailing around the Galapagos Islands months earlier. She couldn't remember me but invited me to stay.

In Rio, an English acquaintance took me to a party full of Brits from a murky underworld, where I met the train robber Ronnie Biggs, who'd been on the run for ten years.

He was an easy-going, charming man and told me what he most missed were fish 'n' chips and a misty morning. He was carrying his nine-month-old son, with no sign of his much-photographed, often bare-breasted Brazilian girlfriend.

Above: **Ronnie Biggs, girlfriend Raimunda and son, Michael, Rio, 1975** ***Left:*** **Sara in 1975.** ***Below:*** **Bruce Chatwin and Sara, 'falling into a camaraderie' on a cargo boat**

Over nine months, I never thought of queuing at a phone booth to call my parents. Instead, I wrote to them on blue airmail paper every couple of weeks. Having said goodbye to family and friends, I was relishing another way of life, absorbing independence with everlasting gratitude for the kindness of strangers.

Today, when I travel and watch young people in gaggles snapping shots without seeing I know they are missing the beating heart of any journey – the people encountered along the way.

Sara Stewart wrote
A Long Way South *(Bradt)*

A.P., PERSONAL PICS COURTESY OF SARA STEWART

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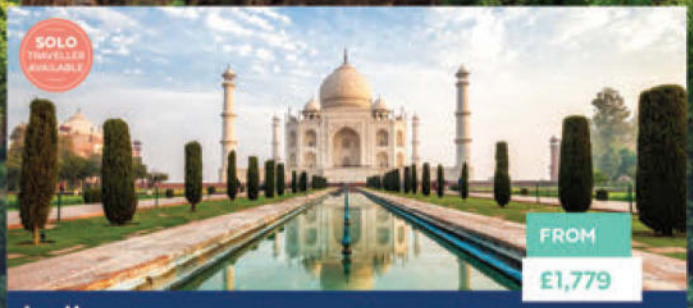

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Brits on the piste

In the Austrian Tyrol, *Hugh Thomson* finds our skiing habits have changed dramatically in the past 40 years

My 1988 *Good Skiing Guide* lists the essentials British skiers travelling to the Alps should pack: hip flask (in case the St Bernard doesn't find you), first-aid box, sewing kit and Swiss Army penknife. It suggests they are embarking on a survival mission from which they might never return.

How much has changed. Safety improvements abound and chair lifts have heated seats and tinted windscreen visors, with light installations to show you precisely where on the ground to put your feet before getting on.

After roaming the Alps, I've settled on a little-known Austrian resort, Sankt Johann im Pongau.

'Where?' you might ask. 'And that's the point.

You pay a lot more for a well-known resort. And yet Sankt Johann is just an hour by train from Salzburg. No bus connections are needed.

And it benefits from the Austrian overnight cross-Europe train initiatives if you want to travel from the UK by sleeper.

As an old market town rather than a tourist village, Sankt Johann has a life of its own, with normal prices. Unlike Zermatt, there are no sushi bars or jewellery shops for oligarchs.

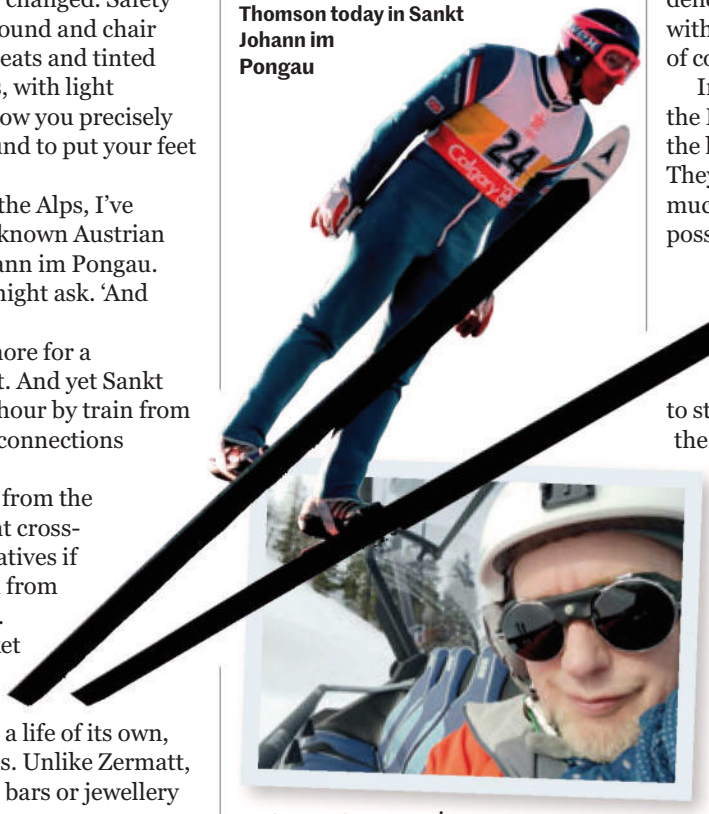
Instead, there's a farmers' market, with local cheese and ham and bio-yoghurt so fresh it could have skied down from a chalet.

There are old-fashioned clothing shops selling traditional *trachten* waistcoats with bone buttons; although even the promise that the lederhosen are 'butter-soft' should not stop you thinking carefully before wearing them down a British high street.

Once up on the mountains, the skiing is spectacular for beginners and intermediates: the average British skier will be well satisfied.

There are some wonderful long red pistes, with more challenging runs and off-piste opportunities for those who need that sort of thing. And there are often free lift passes for the over-60s.

This is the North Austrian Tyrol, and food in the mountain restaurants comes in farm-sized helpings, big enough to share.



Eddie the Eagle soars, 1988 *Below:* Hugh Thomson today in Sankt Johann im Pongau

Try the *Käsekrainer*, a sausage stuffed with cheese (not for the faint-hearted). Or *Käsenockerl*, a sort of macaroni cheese on a hot griddle pan.

Those with lighter appetites might prefer the excellent noodle soups. Desserts all come 'mit schlag' (whipped cream) as standard.

They say the only time you see anyone smile in Switzerland is when you've just arrived too late for their lift. There's something about skiing in Austria I've always liked – despite the occasional painful moments. Only the Austrians can wear lime-green salopettes with apricot jackets, and some of the music they play, for their largely German clientele from Munich, could drown out a Eurovision contest.

But where else do they hand out free schnapps to give added zip for that final run home? Or sell you delicious home-made *apfelstrudel* with wafer-thin pastry – 'mit schlag', of course – for three euros?

In the past, you could always tell the British skiers. They were first on the lifts and the last to descend. They were desperate to spend as much precious time on the slopes as possible – preferably without spending a fortune in the process.

The 'pique-nique interdit' signs in French ski restaurants were introduced to stop British families getting out the sandwiches they had made in their chalets.

So, if I were to do a to-take list for today's British skier, what would I include? Not M&S sandwiches.

My big discovery has been hypotonic fluids, like Dioralyte (other brands are obviously available). They are widely effective in the Alps, where sun, altitude, alcohol and walking around in heavy ski gear can lead to insidious dehydration without you noticing it.

And Brits rarely bring suncream, not realising that mountain sun burns – a blistered red nose is not a good look.

But most important – bring a laidback attitude. The Austrians have put red sofas and deckchairs at the top of many of their lifts. Use them to absorb the view.

And try to leave time for that extra portion of *apfelstrudel mit schlag* once you've worked up an appetite on the slopes.

Hugh Thomson's latest book is Viva Byron!

GETTY

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All at sea

Mark McCrum meets Copacabana Beach's friendly muggers

Mark McCrum off Copacabana Beach, just before he was mugged

COURTESY OF MARK McCRUM

It was my last day in Brazil and I was strolling by the surf on the long, beautiful curve of sand that is Rio's famous Copacabana Beach. It had started to rain, but I didn't mind. It was barely a drizzle and warm. I was wearing tatty clothes that didn't matter.

High up above me, atop Corcovado mountain, the huge, silhouetted statue of Christ emerged and vanished in the bright, racing low clouds…

Suddenly they were on me. Two strong, lean youths in T-shirts and baggy black running shorts, one with a fluorescent green flash and trim.

They had turned out my pockets before I'd even realised they were there. One was holding up a knife, dark against the sky. It was ten inches long, with what looked like rust stains on the blade. God help me, was that dried blood?

For one long terrifying moment I thought they would cut my face and kill me, as muggers from the favelas had done to tourists before. If you go out alone, I'd been warned, don't take your wallet; just whatever cash you need.

But they were already running off, taking everything I had on me: three crumpled five real notes from one pocket and a red Silvine notebook and throwaway black pen from the other.

> They had turned out my pockets before I'd even realised they were there. One was holding up a knife

I wouldn't have cared about any of it, but my notebook contained all my precious notes, not yet transcribed.

'Hey! Hey!' I shouted after them, not thinking straight. 'Please! My notebook. I need that.'

Perhaps they weren't used to their victims engaging with them, but they stopped and wheeled round. They stared at me wide-eyed as I stood in the drizzle, the white fabric pockets of my shorts outturned, one with a little ink stain.

'Please,' I repeated. 'The notebook. I need it. I am a writer,' I explained, with a scribbling gesture. 'A journalist.' Perhaps they would know that word. 'Writing' – I mimed a moving pen – 'about your country. Brazil. For a newspaper.'

Some of this must have been understood, as the first youth, the squat one without the knife, walked slowly back towards me with my battered red Silvine. He held it out.

'Thank you,' I said, smiling despite myself. The youth smiled back, a broad and surprising white-toothed grin.

Now the taller one approached, holding out my Uniball Eye.

'Please, no,' I said. 'Keep the pen.'

But my mugger was insistent. I wasn't going to argue with a man with a knife – so I took it.

He was terribly young, I saw now. Sixteen, if that, with the spidery beginnings of a moustache.

As I took the pen, the younger one looked across at his accomplice. Then he held out the three crumpled bank notes.

Now I was laughing. 'No, no,' I insisted. 'Please. Keep that. It's nothing.' Fifteen reals – two quid – just enough for a coffee or a *caipirinha*, at one of the drink stalls on the beach. 'You've mugged me,' I felt like adding. 'The least you can do is keep the loot.'

But my assailants wouldn't hear of it. Their incomprehensible words and gestures made it clear I should take the money back.

They stood in from of me, almost abjectly. The younger one was rubbing his stomach with a circular motion of his hand. '*Faminto, faminto*,' was what it sounded like.

'We are hungry,' the older one said. 'We are from the favelas.'

There were three notes and three of us. Obviously, the fair thing to do was split it between us. I held one out to the older youth.

He hesitated, looked over at his colleague and then took it. The younger boy copied his friend.

'And I will keep this one,' I said, waving it. 'We share. One each. OK?'

Now there were questions. Where was I from? Where was I staying? I explained that I was English, from London. I didn't think it wise to mention the nearby luxurious Copacabana Palace Hotel where the tourist board had placed me.

'Eeenglish, yes!' they cried. 'Manchester United.'

'Manchester United, yes. A great team.'

After three minutes of this mindless English-as-a-second-language banter they asked me to join them in their shabby off-white yurt at the far end of the beach.

Welcome to the muggers' tent, I thought. Perhaps not.

I made my apologies and paced away across the sand, waving, smiling, feeling like a bit of a coward. Surely a proper writer would have gone with them to the muggers' tent, and taken more notes in his reclaimed Silvine notebook.

But no. As I approached the busy Avenue Atlantica I broke into a trot. I dashed across the traffic and through the glass doors of the Copacabana Palace, past the armed security guard and into the gorgeous lobby.

Only then did I realise that I was trembling all over.

Anything could have happened. I could have been another of those grim stories in the newspapers – just one that I hadn't written.

They asked me to join them in their shabby off-white yurt at the far end of the beach. Welcome to the muggers' tent, I thought

Mark McCrum has written travel books and ghost-wrote Robbie Williams's Somebody Someday

Christ the Redeemer towers over Copacabana

GETTY

Wheels of fortune

Want to rush through airports? Borrow a relation in a wheelchair, says *Roger Lewis*

Though old ladies are immensely tiresome – complaining non-stop about foreigners and foreign food, vicars with moustaches, and policemen wearing glasses ('What chance would they have against a determined assailant?' as I once heard Patricia Routledge ask), here is a top tip.

If you want to whizz through an airport, find an old lady in a wheelchair and push her about.

This was my gambit the other day when, for reasons too boring to enumerate, I needed to travel from Birmingham to Amsterdam.

I'd rashly volunteered to look after Bobo, 93, a relative of my bride and an escapee from the twilight home. The consort she really wanted was Bear Grylls, with whom she is obsessed. She had a blue badge, needless to say, so we parked for free near the terminal.

People helped us with the lifts. People directed us in a friendly way to the 'Assisted Travel' desk, where tickets were checked with smiles, identities confirmed, and what sounded like important instructions muttered into walkie-talkies.

A little helper appeared – the first of many – who directed us along the complex of lanes, specially created for the wheelchair fraternity.

Like royalty, we were never to mix with the perspiring and knackered-looking members of the general public. Princess Margaret supposedly had a device in her limousine, which turned red traffic lights up ahead into green ones. She never needed to slow down. Similarly, Bobo and I had our own dedicated routes.

We shot to the front of the security queue, by-passing the morose thousands who were shuffling and zig-zagging towards the x-ray machines. Here, shall we say, the airport personnel were extremely thorough.

'What do you think you might find?' Bobo asked, being frisked from purple rinse to bunioned toe. The wheelchair was dismantled, the tubes and pipes examined for hard drugs and explosives.

The staff might well have turned up what they were trained to look for. Blue plastic gloves weren't going to save anybody from Bobo's supply of opioids, chemical wet wipes, and the incontinence pads capable of nuclear fission.

Matt Lucas and David Walliams in *Little Britain*

We were taken to a sort of paddock – a mustering point for invalids and ancients, hefty souls on mobility scooters, elderly parties in John Lewis Partnership blazers, everyone wobbling on sticks.

Our flight was called. A wagon that goes toot-toot-toot, like a lorry reversing, collected us.

We sailed past crying children and worn-out parents into an oblong box. This turned out to be a sort of minibus, which drove to the plane, then inched upwards a considerable distance, like a scenic effect in a West End musical.

At the door of the actual plane. Bobo was so excited, she hopped out of her wheelchair, which I was left to fold up. In two shakes of a lamb's tail she was in her seat, being plied with gin by the fawning stewardesses – I think perhaps they thought Bobo was Dame Edna Everage.

At Schiphol Airport, the whole process began again in reverse. I lost count of the little Dutch assistants who came to assist, as they were strict about vanishing the moment their shift was up, leaving Bobo and me in a labyrinth of glass partitions.

Again, we were segregated from the public, when going through passport control and other normally enervating steps and stages.

At one point, we were ushered through a door marked 'Diplomaten', for all the world as if Bobo was an ambassador at the Court of Queen Beatrix, a role she'd no doubt play very well.

Then it went wrong. All the time I'd saved, I lost. It took over two hours for our luggage to appear on the carousel. It was screamingly tedious. Also worrying, as my diabetic medication was in my suitcase, along with a masonic apron. Bobo started getting fretful about the fate of her après-beach cocktail frocks and disco pumps.

Anyway, the point of all this: for how much longer can the wheelchair-bound old folk be granted so many travel privileges?

The upshot of the government's welfare strategy is that everyone is going to want to be disabled, and claim the 'personal independence payments' – tax-free money to stop you bothering to cook, wash, go to the lavvy, get dressed, move around.

All this on top of existing housing benefits, reductions in the council tax and road tax, and other old folk discounts, like free bus rides.

It's the 'Assisted Travel' lanes which will be blocked, the aisles for normal people empty – as there won't be any normal people.

Roger Lewis wrote Erotic Vagrancy: Everything about Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor

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We will remember them: obelisk to the 24th Regiment of Foot and the 1849 Battle of Chillianwala, Royal Hospital Chelsea

The Forgotten Armies

Roger Bowdler salutes war memorials for those who died before 1914

The Western Front's war graves are firmly on the tourist map. Thousands visit Belgium and France to pay respect to those who gave their lives in World War One.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission, established in 1917, ensures the fallen are not forgotten. In 2023, burial sites were given UNESCO World Heritage status.

But the Commission only looks after memorials from 1914 onwards.

Algy Cluff, a former Grenadier officer and *Spectator* magazine-owner, and businessman in North Sea oilfields and African mines, became increasingly concerned about the difference in how the pre-1914 military dead were treated.

In 2005, he persuaded the Government to help with the upkeep of grave markers from the South African Anglo-Boer Wars. Neglected graves become illegible.

In 2017, Cluff founded The Remembrance Trust, with HRH Princess Anne as patron, to restore pre-1914 British military and naval monuments globally. Princess Anne recently launched my new book, charting the Trust's mission.

The Trust has recently restored the obelisk at Blingel, near Agincourt, to the hero of the 1811 Battle of Albuera, Captain Matthew Latham of The Buffs, who died in 1865.

Before 1914, things were very different. Britain's military dead of several centuries were strewn across the globe, from America to Africa, many unmarked.

In 1878, Robert Louis Stevenson described the sea as 'a sort of English cemetery, where the bones of our seafaring fathers take their rest'.

He continued, 'I suppose no other nation has lost as many ships, or sent as many brave fellows to the bottom'.

Meanhwhile, glory has gone to the commanders ever since antiquity. Marlborough was granted Blenheim Palace, enriched with a victory column and a soaring monument by Rysbrack. But the soldiers who died at the battles of Blenheim and Malplaquet were buried without ceremony or marker.

While St Paul's steadily filled with marble tributes to captains and generals of the Napoleonic Wars, the rank and file were rarely remembered. Fallen sailors were buried at sea, and soldiers on campaign rarely had time to raise permanent memorials.

Very rarely, a veteran might receive a tombstone, like the one in Brighton commemorating the warrior Phoebe Hessel, who fought at Fontenoy dressed as a man in 1745 and died in 1821.

Outside Bayonne, there is also a small cemetery with monuments to Guards Officers killed opposing the French break-out in April 1814.

Waterloo, a regular destination for visitors, had just one British memorial: a demi-column to Wellington's ADC, Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Alexander Gordon.

Thousands of other soldiers lay in unmarked graves: their bones later ground up for industrial use. Compare that with the reverence accorded to today's discoveries of war dead.

In Victoria's reign, memorials started listing the names of all ranks, not just those of officers – take the granite obelisk (*pictured*) to the 24th Foot at Royal Hospital Chelsea, raised after the costly 1849 Battle of Chillianwala in the Punjab.

Similar monuments were raised on Shirley Heights, Antigua to the fatalities of the 54th Foot. With the growth of the Territorial Army and imperial pride, a soldier's standing began to rise. How the dead were remembered began to matter.

These rare memorials stand proxy for the legions of dead who lie unremembered and nameless after fighting for their country in historic campaigns. They are worth seeking out and visiting, if only to remind ourselves of the sacrifices made – and forgotten by – so many.

Roger Bowdler is author of The Remembrance Trust – Tributes to Valour

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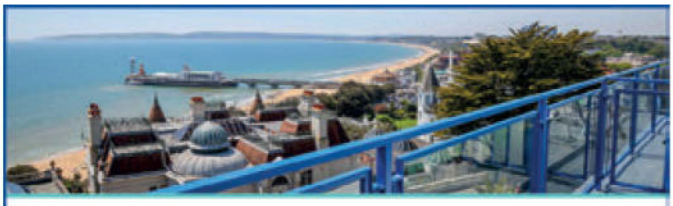

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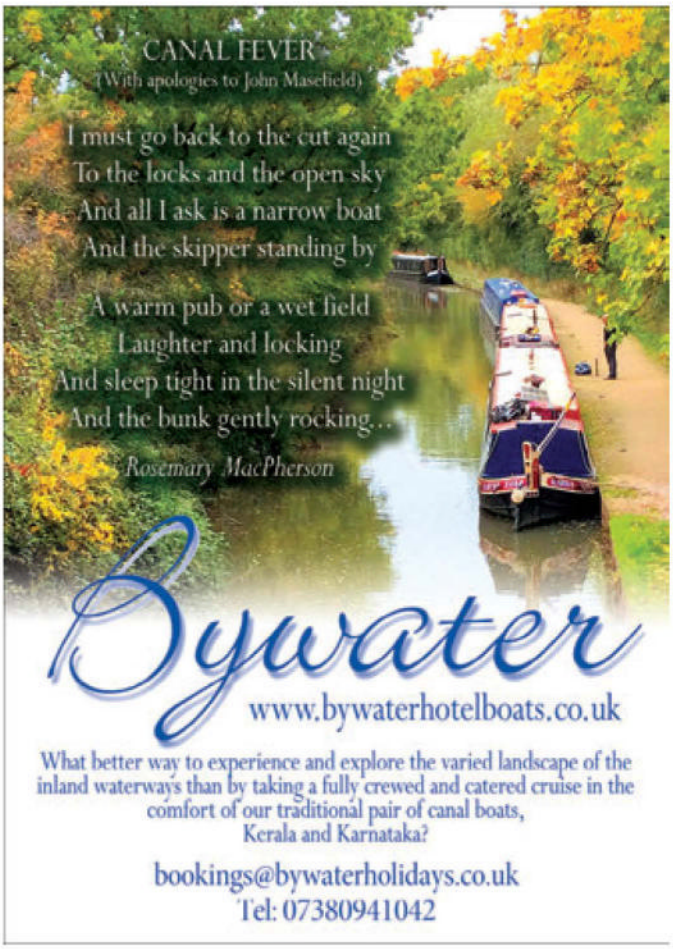

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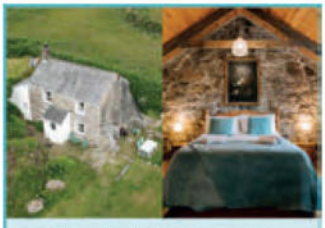

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Home from Homer

Harry Mount stays at Patrick Leigh Fermor's enchanted villa in the Mani and swims in the wine-dark sea

Not long before the writer John Julius Norwich died in 2018, aged 88, I interviewed him about his old friend, the writer Patrick Leigh Fermor (1915-2011) – and his enchanted home in Kardamyli in the Mani, in the Peloponnese.

Paddy told him about the house he built with his wife, Joan, in 1964, 'I want it to be part of outdoors, so that, if a chicken were found wandering through the library, no one would be a bit surprised.'

That is how their villa still feels today – in touch with Kardamyli's very ancient past. In *The Iliad*, Agamemnon offered the citadel of Kardamyli to Achilles.

And Kardamyli is the only place where, at dusk, I have seen the sea turn a claret colour, as in Homer's 'oinopontos' or wine-dark sea.

I first came to Kardamyli in 2013, two years after Leigh Fermor's death, aged 96. His housekeeper, Elpida Beloyannis, showed me round.

He'd left the house to Athens's Benaki Museum as a writers' retreat. Overlooking its own bay, the house was designed by Leigh Fermor, inspired by Vitruvius and Palladio.

The aged roof tiles were salvaged from neighbouring houses destroyed by earthquakes. The walls were built out of Cyclopean chunks of limestone, flecked with copper and gold. The stone came from the Taygetos mountains – where weak Spartan children were exposed and left to die.

Inside, the rooms were plain and whitewashed. For a man celebrated for his writing and World War II exploits in Crete, there was an absence of show-off material.

In the library, there was a small section marked with a handwritten sign saying 'Own Books' and a picture of him with his great friend, George Jellicoe, who won the DSO in 1942 for blowing up German planes on Crete's Heraklion airfield.

Paddy and Joan Leigh Fermor's new terrace, 1964. *Below:* their library

Down in the cellar, a plaque, celebrating Leigh Fermor's Cretan heroics – kidnapping General Kreipe, the German general in command of the island, in 1944 – gathered dust.

Leigh Fermor was determined the house should pass the Mitford test: 'All nice rooms are a bit shabby.'

Now the house is immaculate, with wi-fi, aircon and all the trimmings. Otherwise, it looks like Leigh Fermor has just stepped out for his daily swim in the wine-dark sea spreading to the horizon. High ceilings and those stone walls keep the house cool in summer. Ogive fireplaces warm it in winter.

In low season, the house is used for writers and scholars – but anyone can rent it, for a price, in high season.

What a thrill to walk, sleep, eat and swim in Leigh Fermor's footsteps! I slept in his writing annexe – or his 'powerhouse for prose', as he called it. I'm writing this at his handsome, leather-inlaid desk.

When I first visited, the Everyman Shakespeare lay by his day bed in the prose powerhouse. Now the Leigh Fermors' books are behind chicken wire – but you can borrow them. I read Paddy's *Mani*, his comprehensive book about this corner of Greece – still with his name and address stamped on page 1.

'He wrote here every day, all day,' said Elpida as we toured the annexe.

The first two books about his 1933 walk from the Hook of Holland to Constantinople took a while to appear. *A Time of Gifts* appeared in 1977, *Between the Woods and the Water* in 1986. But, for the next 25 years, nothing.

Day after day, he came into this enchanted room – but didn't get far.

In 2013, two years after his death, the last book in the trilogy, *The Broken Road: Travels from Bulgaria to Mount Athos*, came out, edited by Artemis Cooper (daughter of John Julius) and Colin Thubron.

'He swam round the island every day,' Elpida said, pointing to Merope, a small, Africa-shaped island, a few hundred yards beyond the beach below us. Leigh Fermor swum the Hellespont at 70, and managed this swim in his nineties.

The next day, aged 54, I made it to the southern tip of the island – about where Cape Town is on Africa – and turned around, defeated, exhausted, back to the beach.

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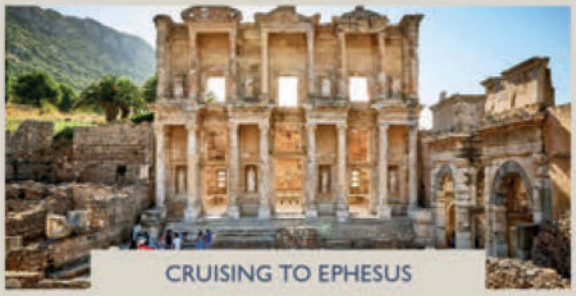
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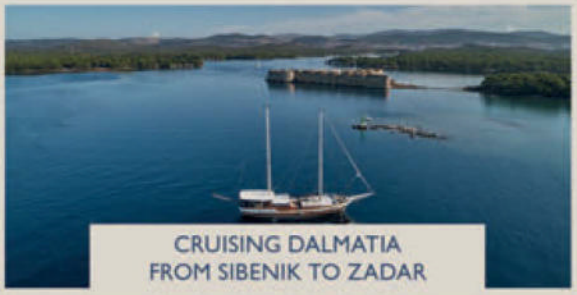
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Behind the scenes at your local museum

Across Britain, there are gold mines, crammed with neighbourhood history

DAVID HORSPOOL

Local museums are often pretty lonely places. If you visit one between school parties, you may have it to yourself.

And yet they regularly tell stories that you won't find anywhere else. Often, too, they throw together insights into a place or a part of history that larger institutions and narratives simply overlook.

Where I live in north London, I'm between three local museums, including those of Hackney and Islington.

The most intriguing is Haringey's museum, which occupies Bruce Castle in Tottenham, a building with an extraordinary history and connections across Britain's past.

Its name comes from the land on which it was built, once owned by the Bruce family. That's as in Robert the Bruce, reminding us that the inveterate enemy of the English – who tried, tried and tried again until he beat them at Bannockburn in 1314 – was a landowner in England. He had to give his estates up, but perhaps he stayed on this spot when he attended Parliament in 1302.

A house was built there in the early-16th century, of which traces survive, and remodelled in 1684, and again in the 18th and 19th centuries. Its buildings include a tower which Pevsner describes as 'a great puzzle ... of no known purpose'. Recently, it has been speculated that it was constructed not as a lookout for (or on) the people of Tottenham, but as a 'hawks' mews', to keep birds of prey.

The estate passed through a number of owners. Among the highlights was James Townsend (1737-87), an MP and Lord Mayor whose grandmother was a woman of mixed African descent, making James the first British MP of African heritage.

Later, Bruce Castle became a progressive boarding school, run by Rowland Hill, the man who invented the Penny Post. This accounts for a fine collection of pillar boxes on display there.

More recent objects include a speedway motorcycle which once roared round Harringay Arena (not to be confused with Harringay Stadium, close by, where cheetahs once ran, in an unsuccessful attempt to jazz up greyhound racing, in the 1930s).

That mix of the nationally significant and the locally curious is the signature of all the best local museums, which usually also hold local archives.

In Bridport in Dorset, the museum pays due attention to its fine collection of fossils from the Jurassic coast. They put it at the heart of the story of evolution, even if the area's most famous fossil-hunter, Mary Anning, lived up the coast in Lyme Regis (their museum has a collection of her finds).

Tottenham veteran: Bruce Castle, 1876

But Bridport is just as proud of its rope collection, and demonstrations of how rope is made. That might sound a little recondite but, after all, even the biggest museums in the world pride themselves on their collection of small, everyday objects. And the importance of rope to Britain's maritime history would be hard to overestimate.

If curios are what you are after, there are some very specialised places indeed.

How about the Dog-Collar Museum (hounds, not clergymen) at Leeds Castle in Kent? Or the Bakelite Museum for fans of early plastic, in East Dulwich.

At Boscastle in Cornwall, there is a Museum of Witchcraft. At Picton Castle, Pembrokeshire, you can see a fine collection of lawnmowers, including a horse-drawn version. The horses wore special shoes, like slippers, so as not to ruin their hard work.

At the Flintham Museum in Nottinghamshire, a two-room cottage contains the contents of a village shop built up over a century.

The wonderfully named Tyrwhitt-Drake Museum in Maidstone is the place to go for carriages, everything from the sort of barouche landau that made Austen's Mrs Elton green-eyed to a 'wagonette omnibus' of 1898.

So much of the talk about Britain's museums focuses on what they have taken from elsewhere and might give back. Local museums sometimes fall foul of this problem too, but the majority of museums in this country depend on things that have travelled only a few miles to be there, not crossed continents.

No one is asking for their lawnmowers to be returned.

Whenever the national curriculum is reviewed, as it was this November, an interest in history is shown that far exceeds the popularity of the subject in schools. Most journalists are far more comfortable debating whether tots should know the date of the Battle of Naseby than whether they should be taught circle theorems.

But the recent review did mention a push to teach children more of their local history. Considering that the other natural repositories of local knowledge, libraries, have been closed in their hundreds, the survival and flourishing of local museums becomes only more vital.

So whether you're visiting Tottenham or Totnes, do make time for their museums. Actually, Totnes Museum – like Bruce Castle, housed in a Tudor building – is closed until next April for refurbishment.

So instead try Torquay, whose museum contains one of the oldest human fossils in Britain.

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Commonplace Corner

Marriage should only be embarked upon where there is – as well as physical love – a complete conformity of outlook.
Nancy Mitford

Art consists of limitation. The most beautiful part of every picture is the frame.
G K Chesterton

I pray to God that I shall not live one hour after I have thought of using deception.
Elizabeth I

I turn over a new leaf every day. But the blots show through.
Keith Waterhouse

It is very hard to remember that events now long in the past were once in the future.
Historian F W Maitland

There is a fellowship more quiet even than solitude, and which, rightly understood, is solitude made perfect.
Robert Louis Stevenson

Despair is a narcotic. It lulls the mind into indifference.
Charlie Chaplin

You are changed by the people you are closest to, and this has allowed me to forgive myself for the person I once was.
Howard Jacobson

Michael Caine in *Get Carter* (1971)

I felt a tremendous sadness for men who can't deal with a woman of their own age.
Michael Caine

Once we are destined to live out our lives in the prison of our mind, our duty is to furnish it well.
Peter Ustinov

The various modes of worship which prevailed in the Roman world were all considered by the people as equally true; by the philosopher as equally false; and by the magistrate as equally useful.
Edward Gibbon

Sight gags had to be planned; they required timing and mechanics. Occasionally, spontaneity would arise in the shooting of the scenes.
Stan Laurel

People may flatter themselves just as much by thinking that their faults are always present to other people's minds, as if they believe that the world is always contemplating their individual charms and virtues.
Elizabeth Gaskell

The minute you start fiddling around outside the idea of monogamy, nothing satisfies any more.
Richard Burton

Ignorance is an evil weed, which dictators may cultivate among their dupes, but which no democracy can afford among its citizens.
William Beveridge

No man will be a sailor who has contrivance enough to get himself into a jail; for being in a ship is being in a jail, with the chance of being drowned. A man in a jail has more room, better food, and commonly better company.
Dr Johnson

A girl phoned me the other day and said, 'Come on over – there's nobody home.' I went over. Nobody was home.
Rodney Dangerfield

TOM PLANT

Modern technology

My dentist told me I needed a new rotary toothbrush. I brought the pretty box home and spread out its multiple components on the kitchen table, with the pamphlet written in Korean English.

The device had three different heads and seven settings, and the blurb recommended that it be controlled by an app on my mobile phone. An app! It's just a frigging toothbrush!

After some struggle, I managed to attach a brush head to the vibrator, found the hidden on/off switch and was rewarded by noise and whirring.

I needed to go out, but my wife was using my old Audi. I found her car keys and cautiously approached her new Volvo electric hybrid. Finding no keyhole, I realised the car had already unlocked itself on my approach. Inside the car, I looked for the slot to put the key in – but there wasn't one. I looked for any obvious control switches, but there weren't any.

Eventually, I pressed a random button and a huge screen lit up across the dashboard, with multiple icons – like a gigantic mobile phone. I surveyed these with dismay and then poked at the one that said 'car'.

Immediately the display changed and offered me a vast choice of options, such as changing the suspension firmness or the axle ratio, but nothing about how to start the engine.

After five minutes of frustrated poking, I got out, slammed the door and gave the Volvo the two-fingered gesture to ward off evil.

I walked to the local pub for a much-needed beer.

The barmaid pulled a pint of Stella and handed it to me with a big smile, and I reached for my wallet – which, of course, I had left in the kitchen. In the hidden depths of my back pocket, I found a rumpled £20 pound note, which I proffered.

Her smile collapsed. 'Oh dear,' she said. 'Sorry, love, but we don't take cash here any more.'
DR PAUL HAYCOCK

SMALL DELIGHTS

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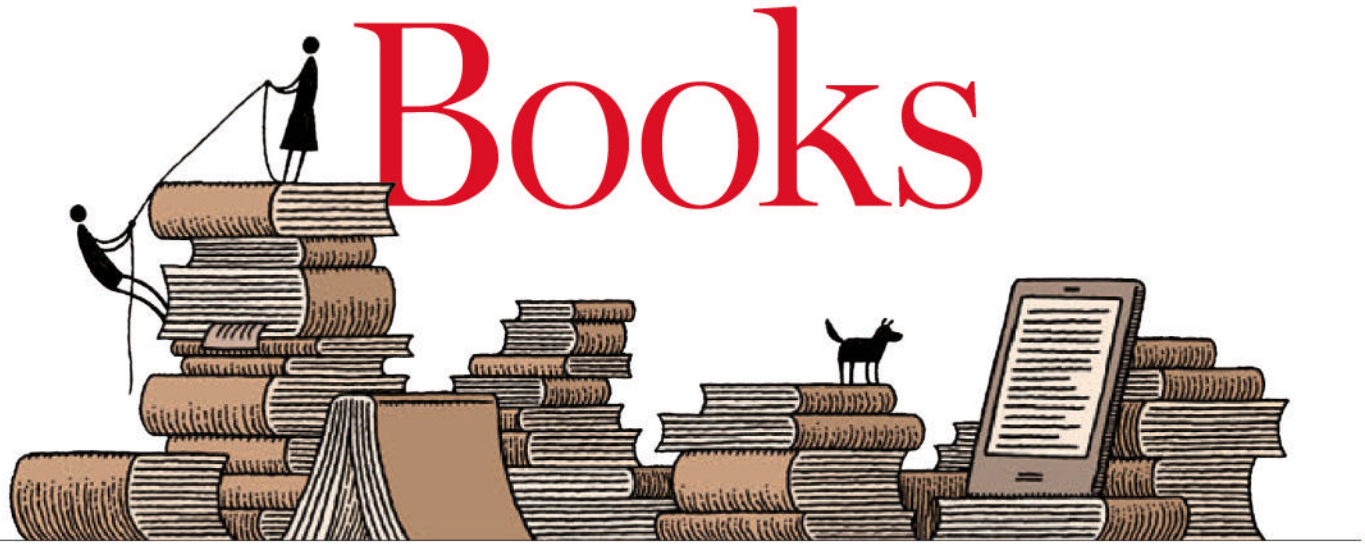

The full Monty

ROGER LEWIS

Seriously Silly: The Life of Terry Jones

By Robert Ross

Coronet £25

Of the four films banned in Ulster, Terry Jones directed three of them: *Life of Brian*, Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life* and *Personal Services*.

The other work deemed detrimental to public morals was Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*. *Life of Brian* was also banned in Aberystwyth until 2009.

Terry was the obese Mr Creosote, exploding after a wafer-thin mint. The vomit for the scene was concocted from Heinz vegetable soup and Russian coleslaw.

He's the naked organist, and one of the shrieking old ladies, a member of the Batley Townswomen's Guild, re-enacting Pearl Harbor.

Best of all, Terry is Brian's mother, the Virgin Mandy: 'He's not the Messiah – he's a very naughty boy.'

He was born in Colwyn Bay in 1942. Though he went on about his Welshness, his Welsh temperament and Welsh proneness to plumpness, in fact Terry lived in Surrey from the age of five.

He attended grammar school in Guildford, where 'he was exceptional at everything', academically and athletically.

At Oxford, he read English, becoming 'a seriously well-informed scholar', who'd later in life publish po-faced books on Chaucer and the Crusades.

His tutor was Reggie Alton, whose classes on the decipherment of Tudor calligraphy I was compelled to attend – when my subject was Ezra Pound. That's veritably Pythonesque.

At university, Terry discovered 'an insatiable passion for performing' – showing off – and he appeared in lots of student plays, which took him to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 1963.

He met Michael Palin, their friendship formed by a mutual appreciation of 'Sellers and Spike and all the Goon stuff'.

They began writing material together and performing, and on graduation carried on the collaboration. How effortless it seems, the acquisition of a London media life, quite impossible for youngsters today – flats in the centre of town, invitations to provide jokes for David Frost, the Two Ronnies, Des O'Connor, Ken Dodd and Dora Bryan. Fifty quid here, fifty quid there. A couple of hundred for a draft sketch.

Terry and Sir Michael (as he then wasn't) did a stint at Peter Cook's Establishment Club, which was a front for gangsters. They appeared at the Harrods Works Dinner Cabaret. Soon they were famous enough to be asked to open the new public toilets in Lambeth.

Terry Jones in character: (*left to right*) as himself; Brian's mother; Mrs Pinnet; Mr Creosote; and the Nude Organist

GARY WING

Terry was employed as a script editor at the BBC, under Frank Muir. He was championed by Marty Feldman. Robert Ross, in this fine biography, goes into considerable detail about early, lost or wiped television and radio works, with a view to explaining how it was Terry and Mike first encountered John Cleese and Graham Chapman, and then Eric Idle and Terry Gilliam. All of them 'had been swimming in the same comedy ken'.

Cleese, we are told, 'seems to remember disagreeing with whatever Terry said', which must have made for interesting creative discussions.

As much as Ross tries to present his ebullient subject as uniquely lovable, Terry 'would fly off the handle very easily'.

He was temperamental, 'swearing and shouting', stubborn to the point of egomania. Yet out of this, well, Welshness (I recognise the symptoms) came pioneering programmes.

They include *Do Not Adjust Your Set* and *The Complete and Utter History of Britain*, in which the Battle of Hastings is related like a post-soccer match interview in the communal bath – pre-Python Python.

In 1969, the group was told to go away and make 13 shows, which 'mucked about with the codes and conventions of broadcasting', incorporating parodies, skits, characters coming and going between sketches ('No one expects the Spanish Inquisition!').

It was a deliberate surrealism, which Milligan at once saw was derivative: 'They've stolen everything from me. It's daylight robbery!'

Monty Python's Flying Circus was a hit with sixth-formers and undergraduates, who relished jokes about dead parrots, lumberjacks and silly walks.

It was soon 'a profitable, self-aware comedy franchise', with spin-off books, records, live stage shows and reconfigured videos and latterly DVDs.

The Pythons made a series in Germany, in German. As recently as 2014, there were ten stage shows at the O2 Arena – though by then Graham Chapman was demised and Terry couldn't remember his lines.

Terry, insists Ross, was always the one who 'drove Python forward'.

He directed *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, 'very much his personal vision', shot in a rainy Scotland in 1974.

Ross, nevertheless, as a self-described 'comedy historian', is correct to remind us that the whacking-coconuts-together gag for horses' hooves was first essayed by Milligan as far back as 1956.

The film made a profit of $50 million. Idle's musical adaptation *Spamalot!* was a further smash on Broadway.

The biblical romp *Life of Brian*, released in 1979, despite the shrill controversy over heresy and blasphemy, immediately took $20 million at the box office, five times its budget.

It is useful to be reminded, in this biography, that Terry was more than a Python. There was, with Palin, *Ripping Yarns*, 'a gentle poke at old-fashioned, stiff upper lip British heroism', which used great actors such as Denholm Elliott and Roy Kinnear.

Terry published many fairy tales for children and was convinced he was 'instrumental in the success of *Harry Potter*'.

Erik the Viking, with lovely Imogen Stubbs, was 'a fun, silly film', and *Personal Services*, about brothel-keeper Cynthia Payne, was full of 'sauce and silliness'. The ghastly Paul Bailey, who'd written a typically dull account of Cynthia Payne, insisted on payment and a screen credit. 'We didn't use his book at all,' wailed Terry. 'I hadn't even read it.'

There were documentaries about the Middle Ages, scripts for Jim Henson, collaborations with Douglas Adams.

I particularly recall *The Wind in the Willows*, with Steve Coogan as Mole. 'There was a lot of Toad in Terry, and an awful lot of Terry in Toad', says Ross.

It was this bumptiousness that, from about 2005, became gradually more extreme. Always a philanderer, Terry suddenly decided to run off with a Swedish student, Anna Soderstrom, 40 years his junior.

The story I heard is that, owing perhaps to absent-mindedness, he'd bought his wife and his much-younger mistress the same style of red negligee for Christmas.

This all must have been devastating for his wife, Alison, to whom Terry had been married since 1970.

There was a big family home in Grove Park, Camberwell, the setting for long lunches and dinner parties, as well as Python script conferences.

At the age of 67, Terry fathered a child with Anna and moved with them to Highgate, with an interest-only mortgage of £700,000. I'm told visitors would always notice bras and high heels scattered about the place – left by Terry conspicuously and boastfully.

And, of course, Terry was matchlessly funny in drag. He became increasingly disinhibited and forgetful, as well as angry. There was a lot of walking out, storming out, and the slamming of doors.

Frontotemporal dementia was officially diagnosed in 2015. The disease robbed Terry of his ability to communicate and he was reduced to making 'heartbreaking grunts and moans'.

Barry Cryer went to visit and Terry ran away from him, abandoning Barry in a patch of mud on Hampstead Heath.

It was all immensely sad. Terry died in January 2020, aged 77.

What makes this biography outstanding is that Ross knew Terry personally and socialised with him often ('The British pub would quickly become God's gift to Terry').

And affection and respect permeate every page.

America express

IVO DAWNAY

A Short History of America: From Tea Party to Trump

By Simon Jenkins

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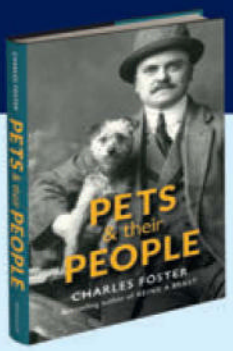
Pets & Their People

Charles Foster



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'It's a restraining order'

They make an excellent gift for an uneducated godchild about to go on a gap year to, say, Korea, or an alien planning to land his spaceship there. The best of them was *The Shortest History of Germany,* an award-winning summary which broke the objectivity rules by positing a fiercely contentious theory.

Its author, James Hawes, argued that everything bad that had come out of that country had come from East of the Elbe – the bit the Romans never reached. And everything good from Goethe to Beethoven came out of the West.

But this book was an outlier. For most of them, the aim is to deliver a scrupulously accurate account of what happened in that territory from the dawn of time to the present day – one that would not trouble the fact-checkers on the *New York Times*.

The polymathic Simon Jenkins sticks closely to the formula in a crisp but comprehensive account of the behemoth delivered, one has no doubt, on deadline and in rapid time. His racy narrative, scattered with interesting 'Did You Know?'s makes up in pace what it lacks in humour.

But something is missing, and after a while one realises that the fault lies not with the author, but with the brief itself. For asking someone – anyone – to write the history of the USA *now* (nearing the 250th anniversary of Independence) is madness.

It would be like commissioning one on France in 1788, Russia in 1916, or Germany in 1933. Or a news editor demanding a report of a school shooting before the SWAT team arrives.

For the one thing even dullards know about the USA is that Big History is happening right now in real time. As the ICE teams make their way through the back streets of Chevy Chase, 'lifting' gardeners and house-cleaners as suspicious aliens, as the judiciary appears to have merged with the executive as an arm of presidential revenge, as USAID, the universities and research powerhouses of the nation close for business, something big is clearly going on.

Even moderate MAGA sympathisers must concede that the Great Orange in the half-demolished White House has his eyes on not just Canada and Greenland, but a Constitution-defying third term.

For Jenkins, however, there is a deadline to meet, and no doubt two or three other books on the go, demanding his attention.

In consequence his 272-page canter can spare only 14 for the Trumpian finale. And as he has to leave the theatre before the Third Act, it has a dying fall. Rather than tell his readers, 'Don't look away now,' he ends with a somewhat limp-wristed 'It will probably be all right in the end.'

'If today's United States ceased to exist, it would be a global catastrophe,' he concludes. 'There is no other nation that could take its place.'

Well, up to a point. But isn't China auditioning for the job?

Surely the question we all want answered is: is the Manichaean America we see today – both technically brilliant and yet also totally insane – obsessed with violence and a total liability to the world at large?

Of course, we all know charming, tweedy Harvard professors with a homely love of medieval romance poetry, and kindly, apple-cheeked Midwesterners who will put you up for a month in Wichita after a chance meeting over a beer in a bar.

But what of the others: the school-shooting teen incels, the born-again militia men yearning to update the KKK, the billionaire tech bros funding Europe's far right while devising ways to live for ever?

It is surely indisputable that madness is deep in America's DNA. The Mayflower Pilgrims may have been yearning to be free, but they were soon burning Quakers at the stake and organising the Salem witch trials. In the land of the free and the home of the brave, President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act.

And it seems to be getting worse. In JFK's day, the US was deeply embarrassed by 6,500 annual deaths by gunfire. In 2024, that figure was 45,000, and it is no consolation to hear that 27,000 of those were suicides. By October 2025, the US was recording gunfire in schoolyards at a rate of two a week.

And meanwhile, the chief product of the Los Angeles dream factory that used to stage Fred Astaire and Rodgers & Hammerstein musicals, is a relentless torrent of realistic or fantasy violence, lightly leavened by a burgeoning porn industry in the suburbs.

The world's richest man, Elon Musk, fresh from abolishing US humanitarian aid, is urging civil unrest in the UK, France and Germany while negotiating a trillion-dollar pay package.

To use an appropriate, contemporary Americanism, you couldn't make it up. US history? It's not over yet, though we may sometimes wish that it were.

Ivo Dawnay was Washington Bureau Chief for the Sunday Telegraph

Hannibal's lecture

CHRISTOPHER SANDFORD

We Did OK, Kid: A Memoir

By Anthony Hopkins

Simon & Schuster £25

According to its publisher, this memoir is a 'raw, honest and moving account' by one of our foremost living actors.

It's certainly raw. Sir Anthony Hopkins lays out his early life in unsparing detail. Born and raised in Port Talbot, Hopkins seemed to be one of those sad souls, not uncommon in the urban Britain of the Great Depression, destined for a life of cultural and material poverty that could leave them looking haggard and washed up before their 30th birthday.

His father was a baker, a tough, practical man who just got on with life. There was also a dark side to the Hopkins household.

'My mother and father were both prone to depression and black moods,' we learn. 'They fought and wept. My father drank heavily, which only fuelled his heightened emotionality.'

Hopkins's schooldays were unproductive, to put it mildly. 'I grew up absolutely convinced I was thick,' he writes.

He drifted into acting after meeting the young Richard Burton and watching the effect he had on the female population of Port Talbot. But then came two years' National Service, by which time Hopkins was a drinker himself.

After he'd been charged with brawling, a sympathetic commanding officer asked him why he behaved as he did.

'I don't know, sir,' Hopkins replied. 'I just seem to cause trouble. I'm a bit stupid.'

The fractious reputation followed

A VOLATILE WORLD NEEDS A STEADY HAND ON THE TILLER

After a strong summer for global stock markets, conditions took a turn for the worse in November. The sudden falls brought back memories of the volatility that followed the "Liberation Day" tariffs earlier in the year. This time it started with concerns about stretched valuations, especially in the high-growth technology companies that led the charge in 2025.

At the same time, President Trump's threat to introduce an additional 100% tariff on China unnerved markets, even though he fairly quickly backtracked. Hopes for early interest rate cuts faded, while inflation data remained stubborn and global tensions continued to simmer. It was a complex backdrop, and one that tested even the most experienced investors.

It can be difficult to stay on course when sentiment shifts quickly and headlines cloud the bigger picture.

When markets are this unsettled, it is more important than ever to have accurate, up-to-date fund and sector performance data at your fingertips. At Saltydog Investor, we believe that staying passive when markets are volatile is not an option.

Saltydog was founded fifteen years ago by Douglas Chadwick, a flat-pack furniture manufacturer who had grown frustrated with the traditional financial industry. After selling his first business, he invested the proceeds into a couple of investment bonds through an independent financial adviser. Many years later, those investments had barely grown. Even worse, they had not been actively managed at all.

Rather than accept poor performance, Douglas took matters into his own hands. With a background in theoretical physics and a passion for numbers, he began analysing individual fund performance. He soon discovered that by tracking how different funds behaved over time, it was possible to see how funds within certain sectors tended to move in sync, and he was able to identify which ones were leading the charge.

That idea became the basis for Saltydog Investor. Each week we analyse thousands of UK-based investment funds, sorting them by sector and volatility, and identifying which ones are performing well right now. The aim is not to predict the future, but to react quickly to what the market is actually doing.

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Each group reflects a different level of risk. In calmer times, you might lean towards the faster lanes. But when the markets get choppy, as they are now, it makes sense to shift some of your portfolio into more stable waters.

We also run demonstration portfolios using our own money. These are not theoretical models; they show in real time how the system works. We regularly rebalance them, switching out of underperforming funds and into those with better recent returns.

The idea behind Saltydog is simple: be in the market when it is rising and get out or switch to something safer when it starts to fall.

Douglas Chadwick, founder of Saltydog Investor

You do not need to predict Trump's next move, or guess how China will react, or whether interest rates are about to pivot. You just need to follow the trends.

Our approach is not about gambling or speculation. It is about taking a pragmatic view of the markets, armed with data rather than gut feeling, and acting accordingly. After all, as Douglas often says, "It's your money, and no one should care about it more than you do."

There is an old nautical saying: you can't change the wind, but you can adjust your sails.

That pretty much sums up our approach at Saltydog Investor. We are not trying to predict what will happen next. We are simply responding to what is actually going on.

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him into civvy street, first in the world of semi-professional provincial theatre, and then in the more refined halls of RADA in London.

Hopkins assesses his talent in these early days modestly: 'I had the posture of a camel.' But he worked hard, and never turned down a job. In time, he came to the notice of Laurence Olivier, who made him his understudy in a production of Strindberg's *The Dance of Death*.

After standing in for the great man one night, Olivier complimented him for having 'walked away with the part like a cat with a mouse between his teeth'.

Even so, the young Hopkins was already bored by the repetition of the stage. 'I began to feel that acting was just a by-product,' he writes. 'I wanted to find value in the rest of my life.'

Self-criticism abounds in the first half of the book, as does the drink.

'I became one of those good old looking-for-trouble drunks,' Hopkins writes. 'I was loaded and ready to go, full steam ahead, *Tugboat Annie*. I'm Popeye the Sailor Man, and I am what I am what I am, and I'm Tony the Tiger Man, the tiger, the tiger, the tiger burning oh so bright in the Welsh forests of the night.'

There's quite a lot more like this in the book.

Eventually, Hopkins discovered Alcoholics Anonymous, settled down with a good woman and moved to a clifftop mansion in California. He still acts, of course, although, like many of his profession, he apparently longs to be acclaimed for something else. As a result, there's a good deal here about his passion for both painting and classical music, the latter seeing him release an album with the unambiguous title *Composer*.

As a screen actor, Hopkins has tackled everything from youthful adventure romps such as *When Eight Bells Toll* to his wonderfully contained character study in *The Remains of the Day*, with several impersonations – running the gamut from Hitler to Freud – along the way.

Of course, it's his *tour de force* as the flesh-stripping Dr Hannibal Lecter in 1991's *The Silence of the Lambs* and its various sequels for which he's best known.

Hopkins writes here that he was immediately aware of how to play the part. 'I have the devil in me. I know what scares people.'

The resulting performance not only won Hopkins an Oscar. It single-handedly changed the celluloid image of the serial killer from that of a rubber-masked bogeyman to a chillingly well-mannered academic who just happens to be a cannibalistic butcher.

Hopkins stresses how much of the character was a case of reaching down to find his own inner monster.

'I thought of how when I was a boy playing a lonely game of dumb insolence, I heard the cold, assessing inner voice of Lecter. Does that make me a psychopath? Probably.'

We learn that there was a touch of Stalin in the mix, too. 'When he lost his temper, you were OK. When he smiled at you, you were dead.'

This is a thoughtful, self-searching memoir with a good deal of reflection on the author's solitary upbringing and his consequent sense of being one of life's permanent outsiders. Anyone hoping for rollicking Hollywood scandal may be disappointed, although Hopkins does allow himself a few disobliging remarks about the late actor Paul Sorvino, with whom he worked unhappily on Oliver Stone's *Nixon*.

The takeaway message of the book is of the essential strangeness of the acting profession, which, like any intelligent observer, the author sometimes struggles to take entirely seriously.

For all the money and awards, I grew to feel quite sorry for Anthony Hopkins as I finished *We Did OK, Kid*. But that's because he knows how to tell a story.

Christopher Sandford is author of Keith Richards: Satisfaction

'My parents are divorced, so I live with my mum Monday to Friday and my dad at weekends'

Renaissance writers

CHRISTOPHER HOWSE

Remarkable Renaissance Books

By John Boardley

Bodleian Library Publishing £50

In 1665, the first reader of Robert Hooke's *Micrographia* found, opposite page 210, a fold-out illustration, an engraving 17 inches across – of a flea. No one had seen this monster before, as the microscope revealed it.

Hooke describes it as 'all over adorn'd with a curiously polish'd suit of Armour, neatly jointed, and beset with multitudes of sharp pinns, shap'd almost like Porcupine's Quills or bright conical Steel-bodkins'.

No wonder that, on a chill January night, Samuel Pepys recorded, 'Before I went to bed, I sat up till two o'clock in my chamber, reading of Mr Hooke's *Microscopicall Observations*, the most ingenious book that ever I read in my life.'

The flea appears, beautifully reproduced, as a double-page spread in John Boardley's *Remarkable Renaissance Books*.

It devoted six pages of print to Hooke's, among 18 early printed books – from Gutenberg's Bible of 1454 to an illustrated study of the metamorphosis of the insects of Suriname by Maria Sibylla Merian. In 1699, Merian had gone all the way to the Dutch colony in South America to look at its butterflies.

So Boardley's Renaissance is rather a late one. And it is quite scientific. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines the Renaissance as 'The revival of the arts and high culture under the influence of classical models'. It makes no mention of experimental science.

But, among the 18 books here, five are on animals and plants, two on measurement, three astronomical, with two Bibles and a book of hours – remarkable for their printing technology rather than their contents.

We're here because you were there

All photos from Boom Radio listeners

BOOMradio

DAB+ and 'Alexa, play Boom Radio'

I'm not complaining, as the stories of the books are fascinating, but the Renaissance was about rediscovering the classical world and its human values. There is nothing here about the translation of Plato into familiar Latin, or of the earlier rediscovery of Aristotle.

In fact, Aristotle was being decried and the logic and astronomy of the Middle Ages libelled by the time of Francis Bacon's *Instauratio Magna* in 1620. Its frontispiece, here finely reproduced ten inches high, shows a ship sailing out through the Pillars of Hercules for a brave new world of learning.

The motto beneath the ship is derived from the Bible: '*Multi pertransibunt & augebitur scientia*' – 'Many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased,' as the Authorised Version of the Bible (another of the 18 Remarkable Books) put it in 1611.

This was the quotation that Steven Runciman, that pre-Renaissance man, chose for the lift he donated in 1999 to the London Library, at the age of 96, perhaps feeling the need of it.

All I'm saying is that these Remarkable Books belong mostly to what we call by consensus the Early Modern Period. The difference is accidentally illustrated by the so-called Douce Pliny, like all these 18 books the property of the Bodleian Library.

Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, written in the first century, supplied the world with encyclopedic knowledge, repackaged by people such as Isidore of Seville in the seventh century, Bartholomew the Englishman in the 13th century and Stephen Batman, whose beguilingly titled *Batman uppon Bartholome* was published in 1582.

In the 1470s, a translation of Pliny into the Tuscan language was printed by a Frenchman in Venice in an edition of about 1,025 copies. The paper for the 826-page edition, we learn, cost 731 ducats, far more than the 400 ducats for the tremendously skilled work of printing it.

Its first page is reproduced here, and very beautiful it looks: the roman type rounded and set with few abbreviations.

But, in another illustration, we see the same page ornamented by hand in the Douce copy. It is to return from Early Modern black and white to the glorious crimson, blue and golden world of medieval manuscripts.

Francis Douce bequeathed this copy to the Bodleian in 1834 among 19,000 other volumes, 479 of them printed before 1500. It was printed on vellum, on which the hand-painted miniatures glow.

'Looks like the marriage was in trouble from the start'

The big initial D of the first page shows old Pliny himself, dressed as a Renaissance magus, in a red hat, at his desk studying an armillary sphere. The margins are solidly decorated with bright flowers, putti, gold strapwork and allegorical figures.

You could see the whole volume even more vividly online, were it not for digital disruption consequent on the cyber attack on the British Library in 2023.

A physical book about remarkable Renaissance books is a pleasing substitute – a picture book in essence – with words well chosen by John Boardley, who lives in Saigon.

It's a great appetiser.

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

The great noticer

CONSTANCE HIGGINS

Attention: Writing on Life, Art and the World

By Anne Enright

Penguin £20

In 1969, her pockets lined by Somerset Maugham Award winnings, Angela Carter descended on Japan.

Until then, her life had unfolded mostly in the cramped surrounds of south London; Tokyo astounded her as a newly discovered universe. In a letter to a friend, she deemed it 'probably the most absolutely non-boring city in the world'.

She even trained herself in a new way of seeing. An unskilled student of the Japanese language, she 'started trying to understand things by looking at them very, very carefully, in an involuntary apprenticeship in the language of signs'.

This is the tradition in which Anne Enright was schooled. I mean this literally: Carter was one of her tutors at the University of East Anglia, where, aged 24, she studied for an MA in creative writing.

In a 2011 essay for the *London Review of Books*, she explains what Carter had found so generative in her unfamiliar Japanese setting: 'she wanted to become strange'.

Carter's experience of cultural distance allowed her to notice things, and to do as the title of Enright's collection bids us: pay attention.

Enright is a great noticer of things. These 24 essays – previously published in the *London Review of Books*, the *New York Review of Books* and elsewhere – prove her a magpie of glittering details. Her characters are built, synecdochally, of several such details, and they shine accordingly.

Here's Enright on Maeve Brennan: 'She wore a fresh flower in her lapel and smelt of Cuir de Russie, a perfume designed by Chanel for women who dared to smoke in public. She worked all the time, produced very little, and ate boiled eggs to keep her figure neat.'

It's the same trick she pulls in her fiction; the precise assemblage of few well-observed particulars used to deliver something momentous.

'I think I would pass her in the street, if she ever bought a different coat,' says the narrator of her mother in *The Gathering*. Enright looks at people the way Carter looked at Tokyo: with enough distance to work out what exactly is exciting about them.

It keeps dullness at bay, helping even well-worn subjects gleam. An essay on James Joyce is studded with tales of his renegade family. His daughter 'lit a fire on the living-room floor'. His brother-in-law was such a shopaholic that Trieste's antique shops closed their doors on the day of his funeral.

Political topics are distilled with similar cleverness. 'The Monsters of #MeToo', written in October 2019, rotates round a simple statement: 'You were never allowed to manhandle the nurse: it was the transgression that made it seem funny.'

Once more, distance – Enright was writing two years after sexual-abuse allegations were made against Harvey Weinstein – allows her to pay attention to something important; to recognise that, despite discussions about permissive societies of old,

the invasion of someone's sexual space has never been a neutral act.

That's not to say that Enright is cold, though: these are not essays written in the Joan Didion school of glassy detachment. She may collect things from a distance, but her prose can read as if, having been commissioned to produce a polished essay on a topic, she's sat down with her reader to chat through her developing thoughts.

Helen Garner's diaries, she writes, filled her 'with a nostalgia for all the bollocks we had to listen to back in the day; the interminable wrangle about whether women could even do … um … art'.

If the book's subtitle is a grand one, promising 'Writing on Life, Art and the World', its tone is intimate. In the italicised paragraphs by which each essay is prefaced, Enright gives an insight into how she found the creation experience: 'This piece grew out of a talk I made to a roomful of medics…'

The title word *Attention* reads as both an imperative and a manifesto. It is a subject Enright writes about delightfully. When making a note about sitting down to read *Ulysses*, she says, 'I have felt it before, the same swooning sense of complexity, the same delicious struggle not to allow my thoughts in.'

As Carter taught her, she teaches us the value of looking very, very carefully.

Constance Higgins works at Literary Review

Diana's bloodhounds

A N WILSON

Dianarama: The Betrayal of Princess Diana

By Andy Webb

Michael Joseph (£22)

This book is painful to read.

It explains why Princess Diana, having been unwilling to give a TV interview about her life, marriage and position in the Royal Family, so swiftly changed her mind when she met Martin Bashir – later BBC Religious Affairs Correspondent.

Most of the reasons are now very well-known, thanks largely to Andy Webb. It's worth spelling them out, nonetheless. Bashir got a graphics designer, Matt Wiessler, to forge bank statements. These statements appeared to prove conclusively that Patrick Jephson (Diana's private secretary), Charles Spencer's PA, Diana's chauffeur and others were receiving payments to rat on her to the tabloids. She was also persuaded by Bashir that there was a plot to bump her off, and possibly to kill other members of the family. Also, possibly, to kill Camilla Parker Bowles.

This sounds nutty, and, of course, Prince Charles's cronies were happy to go on TV and say they thought Diana was a headcase. But, surely, ANY of us would go a bit mad if we were presented with what seemed like evidence like this.

The *coup de grâce* was that Bashir also forged a receipt from an abortion clinic, purporting to be the settlement of a bill, by Prince Charles. The made-up patient was Tiggy Legge-Bourke, now Mrs Pettifer, who received substantial damages from the BBC.

Bashir persuaded the Spencers that Legge-Bourke had become pregnant by the Prince and intended to marry him, displacing both his wife and his *maîtresse-en-titre*. All wicked lies, about a nice young woman who was helping with the two young princes at a difficult time in their lives.

This was the tipping point, which persuaded Diana to give the disastrous *Panorama* interview, after which everything unravelled. The Queen demanded that the Prince and Princess divorce (they might well not have done so but for Bashir's lies). Diana was cut loose from the Royal Family and from Jephson, a wise and kind counsellor. She fell into the hands of the Fayeds, and the rest is an utterly tragic history.

Yet Martin Bashir, who began this trail of utter destruction – both of lives and of reputations – has never been prosecuted.

Even the BBC's claim to have issued him with a reprimand is proven in this book to be untrue. A BBC exec, Tim Suter – former Eton beak – wrote a letter that was addressed to Bashir, but was really just sent to the Press Officer at the BBC. And so, were the matter ever to become public, they could produce this letter and make it appear that Bashir had been reprimanded.

All the high-ups – a succession of useless director-generals and BBC bigwigs – who have been involved with this murky matter emerge very badly.

What lengths they went to in order to resist Andy Webb's fight for the truth. The court proceedings cost you – the licence-payers – millions. Webb has withdrawn only for fear he'll get clobbered with costs he can't possibly afford.

Everyone involved has been damaged. The harmless graphic designer, who forged the bank statement in all innocence – not realising how the document would be used – had his flat burgled, with the disk containing the fake statement stolen. He has been blacklisted by the BBC and will never work again.

Lord Dyson, who was paid more than a quarter of a million to conduct an inquiry into the whole case, could find no evidence of wrongdoing, in spite of this evidence being presented by journalists who used to work for *Panorama* in the days when it was – in the words of one dear old BBC hand – 'the gold standard'.

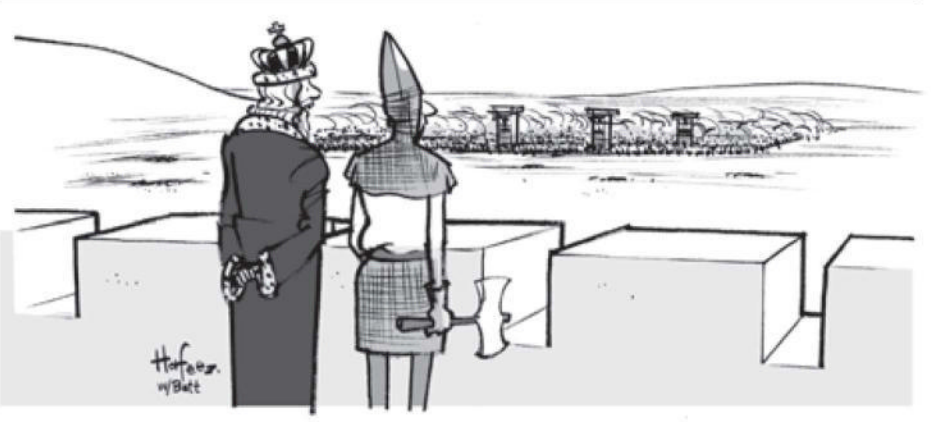
You close the book knowing that Diana Spencer would almost certainly still be alive were it not for the BBC's behaviour.

All the men-in-suits – nonentities such as Lord Birt, Tim Davie and Lord Dyson – who have collectively perpetrated this horror story have demeaned themselves and helped to spoil what was once one of the glories of the civilised world – the BBC. Yet another great institution, like the C of E, and the older universities has gone to the dogs.

If a member of the public like me feels, on reading this book, a fizzing rage and grief for poor Diana – what can her sons, brother and surviving sisters be feeling?

The book ends with the thought that Prince William has an endlessly open wound, and that he will be unlikely to leave the matter to rest until the BBC is brought to account.

A N Wilson wrote Victoria: A Life



'I hate working from home'

Arts

FILM

HARRY MOUNT

WAKE UP DEAD MAN (12A)

Agatha Christie died 50 years ago, on 12th January 1976, aged 85.

But her spirit still pervades *Wake Up Dead Man* – thank God. This delightful murder mystery has a deliciously pleasing plot – worthy of the Queen of Crime herself.

It's the third in the *Knives Out* series, directed and written by Rian Johnson. The plot is original, but Johnson was inspired by Agatha Christie in the classic whodunnit form of all three films – a murder or two and a mixed bag of goodies and baddies, all with a motive. Several of the characters are even avowed Agatha Christie addicts, too.

And there's an omniscient detective, heir to Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple. The detective throughout the series is Daniel Craig, playing Benoit Blanc, a Deep South dandy.

What a blinder Craig has played, getting out of James Bond just in time, before he got typecast. Blanc is an entirely different character from 007: louche, long hair, a slightly camp walk and – praise be! – a perfect southern American accent.

Craig manages to be flamboyant and understated at the same time – in other words, utterly convincing.

The murder victim is Monsignor Jefferson Wicks (a magnificently diabolical Josh Brolin), a brutal, swaggering bully of a priest in the pretty, rural backwater of Chimney Rock – the American equivalent of Miss Marple's St Mary Mead.

After the Monsignor leaves a service to take a breather in the vestry, he is found with a knife in his back by his second-in-command, Father Jud (Josh O'Connor, Larry Durrell in *The Durrells*, who also possesses the rare British ability to do a completely convincing American accent).

Father Jud – a rough diamond, who once killed an opponent in the boxing ring – is the number-one suspect after weeks of rows with the Monsignor. But it emerges that any of the congregation could have done it, because the Monsignor had victimised them all.

NETFLIX

Louche sleuth: Benoit Blanc (Daniel Craig)

Among the congregation are Dr Nat Sharp (Jeremy Renner), the local doctor exposed as a drunk by the Monsignor; Martha Delacroix (Glenn Close, on supreme form), the devoted and betrayed church assistant; and Lee Ross, a hit writer down on his luck – a fine comic turn by Andrew Scott.

The plot is so very complex that it would be boring to lay out all the many twists and turns here. But it's far from boring on screen. Like Agatha Christie, Rian Johnson has that god-like ability to keep you locked into the plot. With Christie, you keep turning the pages effortlessly. With Johnson, you keep watching, without looking at your watch and longing for it to end. And that's despite this film following the deadly trend for lasting more than two hours – it's 144 minutes.

There's never a dull moment. There is excellent vicar-on-vicar humour – if not on the sublime level of the high priests of religious comedy in *Father Ted*.

It also talks up to you, unlike so many patronising films today. Rather strangely for a Christmas film – not that it matters much – it's set at Easter, with one plotline that depends on the Monsignor's rising again on Easter Day.

But the Christian references aren't oversimplified – Glenn Close is particularly good at saying her prayers. And, in a subtle way, the film is ever so slightly pro-Christian – unfashionable in Hollywood these days – in the way it portrays the redemptive journey of Father Jud from thuggish boxer to altruistic priest.

Wake Up Dead Man has only a short cinema run before it transfers to Netflix on 12th December. That's another reason it's so good. TV audiences are much quicker to turn off than the literally captive audience who've made the effort of going out to the cinema. And so TV directors can't afford to film the humourless, dull, lazy stories that so many self-indulgent movie directors fall prey to.

This film is old-fashioned in its Agatha Christie-style plot. But it's utterly modern in its ability to keep the ADD generation gripped. Hallelujah!

THEATRE

WILLIAM COOK

THE SPY WHO CAME IN FROM THE COLD

Soho Place, London, until 21st February 2026

Graham Greene, a man not given to superlatives, called *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* 'the best spy story I have ever read'. What makes John le Carré's Cold War novel so good? And how well does it work onstage?

Le Carré wrote this haunting, understated thriller at the age of 30, while working as a 'junior diplomat' (as he put it) at the British Embassy in Bonn. In reality, he was working for MI6 – Britain's Secret Intelligence Service.

This inside knowledge gave le Carré what all writers crave – the ring of truth. He'd found that literary sweet spot, 'where reality goes through the secret door to fiction'. This, his third novel, was his first bestseller – and the last book he wrote while working as a spy. Written 'under intense, unshared personal stress, and in extreme privacy', it has a clandestine, undercover flavour, as if the very act of writing it was a form of espionage.

For the benefit of anyone who hasn't read the book or seen the 1965 film (and if you don't know either, you're in for two terrific treats), this is the story of a spy at the end of his tether – the opposite of James Bond.

Alec Leamas has returned to Britain under a cloud, after the eradication of his Berlin network. His East German nemesis, a man called Mundt, has killed all his secret agents. Relegated to a dead-end desk job, he turns to drink and ends up in prison after assaulting a shopkeeper in a drunken rage.

Yet this descent into the gutter is really an elaborate charade, a ruse to trick Soviet agents into thinking he's ripe for recruiting. Sure enough, Leamas ends up behind the Iron Curtain, having supposedly defected to East Germany, where he can take his revenge on Mundt – this time from the inside. However, as this mendacious plan unravels, Leamas begins to wonder – are his British handlers also deceiving him? Is there anyone he can trust at all?

GARY SMITH

The Spy who Came in from the Cold: **Alec Leamas (Rory Keenan)**

The book was published in 1963, to great acclaim, and filmed two years later, with Richard Burton giving a mesmeric performance as Leamas. There have been numerous movies of le Carré's other novels, and various TV series, most notably starring Alec Guinness as the gnomic spymaster George Smiley. So why is this the first time his work has been adapted for the stage?

Le Carré's son Simon Cornwell provides an illuminating answer to that question. It's partly, he says, because le Carré's own attempts at playwriting met with painful rejection, and also because 'Theatre, particularly in the chattering England of the Home Counties, was I think in our father's eyes almost the perfect embodiment for the class distinction he so abhorred.'

Happily, towards the end of his life, le Carré gave award-winning playwright David Eldridge the go-ahead to write this powerful adaptation. Although I should declare an interest (it turns out we share the same agent), I'm sure I won't be the only one to say he's done a very good job indeed.

Eldridge's staging remains faithful to le Carré's story, and it also draws out the drama – no mean feat in a tale with a complex, perplexing plot, in which much of the action consists of cryptic, enigmatic conversation. His script is brought alive by Jeremy Herrin's bold, balletic direction. Played in the round (which invariably makes a play feel much more intimate), it's an intense and claustrophobic spectacle, and just as enjoyable as the book.

There are many fine performances, especially John Ramm's; he doubles up as the genial, elusive Smiley and his jovial, malevolent East German counterpart. But the show belongs to Rory Keenan, as the embittered, beleaguered Leamas. Burton's performance casts a long shadow, yet Keenan escapes it.

Rugged and dishevelled, he's driven to the edge of insanity by a life of duplicity and subterfuge. His constricted, volatile portrayal is entirely his own.

'What do you think spies are – priests, saints and martyrs?' asks Leamas. 'They're a squalid procession of vain fools; traitors too, yes. Pansies, sadists and drunkards; people who play Cowboys and Indians to brighten their rotten lives.'

What makes *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* such a great story is that, to his own surprise, Leamas turns out to be quite the opposite. No saint, to be sure, but a martyr to love – the only true cause.

RADIO

VALERIE GROVE

Trump's threatened $5 billion lawsuit over *Panorama*'s brazen splice was a diversion that got everyone agonising about the BBC – again.

'I urge Brits of every stripe to repudiate the monstering of the BBC,' cried Tina Brown in her Substack diary, *Fresh Hell*, 'and defend its enduring values to the death!'

The BBC was already desperately parading not its enduring values, but its inclusivity: 'It's our BBC!'

The slogan grates on everyone. It's the airwaves' version of 'See it, say it, sorted.'

Andrew Neil told Kate McCann on Times Radio, 'When the BBC licence fee was introduced, Lenin was still in the Kremlin.' True – but that was just wireless. There was no TV licence until 1946, when it cost £2. Radio, hurray, has been free since 1971.

The BBC might fear for its future, but they can't blame oldies. We pay the licence fee out of habit – a habit most younger people will never acquire. £174.50 – why would they?

Like John Humphrys on page 22, I remain a Radio 4 devotee – one whose patience is constantly tried (and he'd agree) by anyone saying 'like' between every word, or even a single 'drawring'.

I do look forward to his *Oldie* podcast with Matthew Norman. Miles Jupp has one too, called *The Moment*, 'dropping – if that's the verb; it sounds revolting – on Thursdays,' he told Times Radio. 'I will read out some jokes implying that various public figures are basically pricks. Like a panel game, but with all the panel bits taken out.'

When Emma Barnett of *Today* plugged her new podcast on Radio 4, proclaiming loudly that she was 'Ready to Talk', I feared it would be switch-off time – witterings about the peri-menopause. But it was more of a 'deep dive' than that. The guest was a Canadian stand-up comic, Katherine Ryan, who told Emma about how her horrible ex-husband used to pleasure himself over her and photograph the procedure for Insta. Emma was thrilled by this candour.

Much effing for amusement in *Call Jonathan Pie* at 6.30pm on Radio 4; more unrepeatable words from loathsome social-media trolls towards the author Kate Clanchy in Katie Razzall's *Cancelled*. Now it's Lord Reith who's cancelled. The 2025 Reith lecturer, Rutger Bregman, a 37-year-old Dutchman, 'exploring the moral decay of today's elites', was instantly censored for calling Trump 'openly corrupt'.

How hard it is to be a broadcaster today. So plaudits to Sarah Montague and Evan Davis, in whom I trust. More accolades next time. *Slightly Foxed* magazine calls *The Oldie* 'one of the most cheering magazines around today' – so there's some cheer here, too.

On Christmas Eve and Boxing Day, look out for a new Martin Jarvis show on Radio 4: P G Wodehouse's *Joy in the Morning*. Trust Jeeves to know the source of the title, Psalm 50:1-5: 'Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.'

Jeeves, peerlessly played by Martin Jarvis, is effortlessly omniscient as always. When Bertie (Freddie Fox) quotes a line adding, 'As Tennyson had it,' Jeeves glides in to murmur, 'Longfellow, sir.'

Remember when Ask Jeeves was a search engine in the nineties? Now it's been stupidly renamed Ask. Dear Jeeves would be amused by AI. He would scorn AI versions of familiar names.

In a recent AI effort, I found the quizmaster Bamberg Askoin.

TELEVISION

FRANCES WILSON

For *EastEnders* fans, this year's festive treat is the return, in a one-hour special, of Pat Butcher, 14 years after she was killed off on New Year's Day 2012.

Pat will reappear as an apparition in the mind of the lovable loser Nigel Bates (Paul Bradley), who has dementia.

It's not the first time since her death the hatchet-faced *femme fatale* (played by Pam St Clement) has been seen in Albert Square.

She also reappeared as a hallucination the night Peggy 'Get Out of My Pub' Mitchell (Barbara Windsor) killed herself in 2016 after her cancer returned.

Let us go back, like the Ghost of

BBC

Christmas Past, to that unforgettable night. Peggy, having had her last ever drink at the Queen Vic, is in her dressing gown and slippers. Her hair is lank and colourless, her face shorn of make-up.

She guesses that her former frenemy is paying her a visit because of the ciggie smoke emanating from the hall; and lo, there is Pat, plonked on the stairs, puffing away on a Regal King Size.

'I might have known it was you,' Peggy cackles. 'Your earrings are rattling like Marley's bleeding chains.'

Pat is resplendent in blue eyeshadow and a highly flammable pink satin jacket. 'I think I look smashing,' she says.

'Shift yourself, you mad old tart,' Peggy teases, 'I've got stuff to do.'

Up in her bedroom, Peggy puts on her blonde wig and red lippy. 'How do I look?' she asks. She looks smashing too, and she knows it.

'I will go as I have lived: straight back, head high, like a queen', she tells Pat, pouring the pills onto her dressing table.

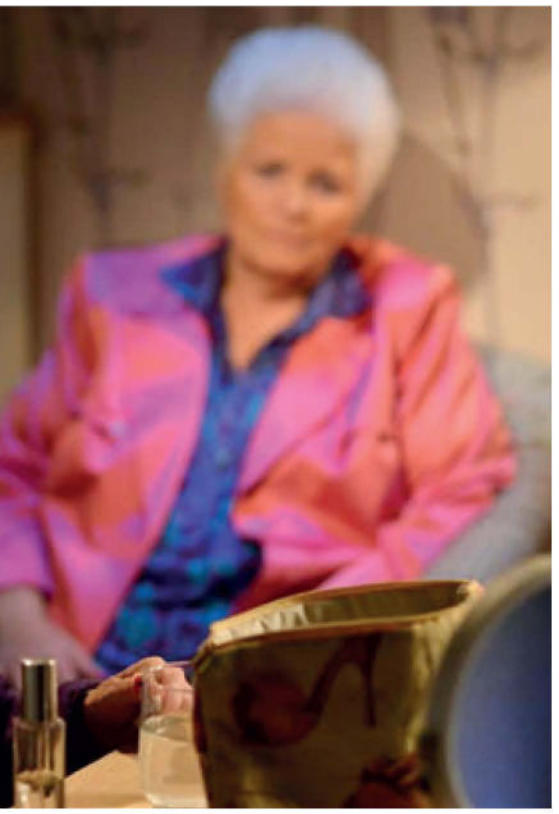
Pat looks as enigmatic as ever.

'You bitch,' says Peggy, her voice full of love.

'You cow,' Pat fondly replies.

They remember getting pissed together in the ice-cream van – but they are also remembering, surely, the time Pat called Peggy (who had been shagging Pat's man, Frank) 'a cow, a gossip and a slapper'.

What a couple of battle-axes they were: I'm tearing up even thinking about it. Pat and Peggy's last ride was great, great, end-of-an-era television.



Ghosts of Christmas past: Peggy (Barbara Windsor) and Pat (Pam St Clement), *EastEnders*, 2016

Apparently, when Nigel conjures her up again, Pat will be back in the Queen Vic, wearing the same pink satin jacket. I'd like to have a miniature of her, with lampshade earrings, huge, sequinned wings, and a fag hanging out of her mouth, sitting on top of my Christmas tree.

The most enjoyable thriller this winter is *All Her Fault* (Sky), a tight and twisty eight-parter based on the bestselling novel by Andrea Mara. The mighty Sarah Snook plays Marissa Irvine, a hassled wealth manager in a plush suburb, juggling work and motherhood with marriage to a monster (Jake Lacy).

We first meet Marissa when she arrives to collect her five-year-old, Milo, from a playdate, only to discover that he has not in fact been on a playdate. Instead, he was picked up from school by the au pair of another school mum, Jenny (Dakota Fanning). Oh, and his online tracker has been found smashed in the school car park.

The search for Milo involves dissecting the marriages of both Jenny and Marissa, whose loyalty to each other – on a par with that of Pat and Peggy – is the only thing to survive in the mayhem that follows. It is a story about money, friendship and the black hole that is family life.

This is Snook's first significant television role since *Succession*, where she dazzled as Shiv Roy. Will she break free from the curse of playing one unforgettable character? Jennifer Aniston found life after *Friends* as Alex Levy in *The Morning Show*, while Jon Hamm, mesmerising as Don Draper in *Mad Men*, has been an embarrassing mess in everything he's done since.

From the moment she stands on the doorstep asking for Milo, Snook is in full command of Marissa Irvine, a woman about to see that having it all effectively means having nothing at all.

PÁDRAIG GRANT

MUSIC

RICHARD OSBORNE

HANDEL, VERDI AND DELIUS AT THE WEXFORD FESTIVAL

It's not for nothing that Wexico is the name sometimes given to Wexford, the friendly fishing port that sits in Ireland's sheltered south-east corner.

It certainly lived up to the compliment during this year's October festival, with the sets for Handel's *Deidamia*, set on Skyros, mirroring the calm seas and cerulean skies visitors were enjoying.

Given the opera's three-hour length, there was no chance of post-performance browsing and sluicing. So a morning visit to Johnstown Castle and lunch at Mary Barry's Kilmore seafood bar proved to be wise investments.

Deidamia is about the young Achilles. Alarmed by prophecies of the boy warrior's likely demise at the hands of the Greeks, the Trojans have hidden him on Skyros, disguised as a girl.

Wexford's first masterstroke was to overrule the original 1741 casting of Achilles as a soprano confronted by a powerhouse castrato playing the wily Ulysses, who's been sent to track him down. Here we had two high tenors. And what tenors! The Ulysses of rising star Nicolò Balducci was locked in vocal combat with the Achilles of Brazilian sopranist sensation Bruno De Sá. Try De Sá's 2022 Erato CD *Roma Travestita* to sample the sensation.

Baroque treatments of the story generally involved parody and sexual innuendo – unsurprising when the boy-girl Achilles is courted by Deidamia, the local princess. It was a dimension brilliantly realised by De Sá and his director. Here, clearly, was a young Achilles aching to 'come out' to those gorgeous Greek 'emissaries'.

The parody element was further enhanced by the use of two time zones – the Greeks and Trojans doing their thing, while modern tourists rummaged around Skyros's historic remains.

The production – an artistic triumph as well as a popular one – was the work of its conductor, the Greek-born, London-educated, German-based specialist in Baroque opera, George Petrou.

Conductors who double as stage directors are a rarity. And that brings me to *Le Trouvère* – Wexford's cheeky dip into the mainstream repertory with a staging of the 1857 Paris version of *Il trovatore*, that most elemental of Verdi operas.

I first saw *Il trovatore* in Salzburg

Handel's *Deidamia*, Wexford Festival Opera

in 1963, conducted and staged by Karajan, with a cast that included Leontyne Price and the great Giulietta Simionato in the pivotal role of the Gypsy mother Azucena.

Caruso's claim that *Il trovatore* requires the world's four finest singers was again disproved by the kind of superb young cast that's become a hallmark of artistic director Rosetta Cucchi's time in Wexford.

This perhaps wasn't quite a match for Karajan's cast, but the Azucena of Ukrainian mezzo-soprano Kseniia Nikolaieva had something of Simionato's vocal magnetism.

It was George Bernard Shaw who argued that *Il trovatore*, this 'perfect work of instinct', should be defended from 'the restless encroachments of intelligence'. Respect its atmosphere; keep it moving; keep it simple.

This is exactly what former Abbey Theatre director and all-round man of theatre Ben Barnes triumphantly did. Not everyone approved of his solution to the problem of the Paris Opéra's requiring a 25-minute ballet in Act 3.

That said, a few exiguous dance steps, overhung by film footage of the Spanish Civil War, worked well enough – the opera's 15th-century tribal wars reflected in their 20th-century sequel.

Director Christopher Luscombe showed a similarly sure touch with a simply staged realisation of the season's true rarity, Delius's *The Magic Fountain*. Completed in 1895, it was not performed until Radio 3 commissioned a studio recording in 1977.

The opera concerns the ill-fated journey of a Spanish nobleman who's sailed to the Americas in search of gold and a magic fountain that's said to confer eternal youth. What he actually encounters is hostility, unexpected passion and a Tristanesque death.

The young Delius had himself decamped to a Florida orange plantation to escape the family's Bradford wool business. Despite fathering a child there, he was brazen enough to contemplate a set of operas on the wrongs visited by Europeans on Florida's American Indians.

While the first hour merely sets the scene, the final 25 minutes is a *Liebestod* of extraordinary beauty for the doomed Spaniard and his Seminole princess.

This was a long overdue revival, memorably served by Simon Higlett's ravishing designs.

Next year's 75th anniversary will revisit three operas that won golden opinions in an earlier Wexford era.

They're Mascagni's Japanese melodrama, *Iris*, Prokofiev's *The Gambler* and – voted for by 1,100 Wexford regulars from around the world – Rossini's transvestite jest *L'equivoco stravagante*. Banned by Bologna's city fathers in 1811 for alleged obscenity, it was the star of the 1968 festival.

General booking opens on 6th May.

GOLDEN OLDIES

MARK ELLEN

CHRISTMAS CLASSICS

Old habits die hard but, in our house, one's finally bitten the dust.

Every December, in a flush of kitsch enthusiasm, 'A Christmas Gift for You' was ceremonially slapped on the turntable. The room was filled with tinkling bells and slightly over-eager seasonal songs, from Phil Spector's sixties roster. 'Winter Wonderland' by Darlene Love. 'Sleigh Ride' by the Ronettes. Memories of kind aunts and record tokens.

Christmas special: Nick Lowe (*left*) and his album *Quality Street*

But what felt nostalgic and dependably joyful eventually seemed grating and sugary.

We still had a yearning for a festive record. And, if you know the feeling, you'll be cheered to discover this grand tradition is still firmly up and running. Boundless options await.

One such is *The John Fahey Christmas Album* (1991) by the dazzling American acoustic guitarist who gives 'Little Drummer Boy' and 'Angels from the Realms of Glory' a chiming reboot.

Another is *Light of the Stable* (1979), similar old-school fare with some gold-tonsilled seraphim on backing vocals (Neil Young, Dolly Parton, Linda Ronstadt) by the country siren Emmylou Harris. She's so brimful of yuletide spirit that she appears to be dressed as the Virgin Mary.

The third great trad album is *The McGarrigle Christmas Hour* (2005) by the divine Canadian folk sisters Kate and Anna and family, Rufus and Martha Wainwright among them.

Burnished chestnuts such as 'Seven Joys of Mary' rub shoulders with Jackson Browne's selfless 'The Rebel Jesus' and the splendidly secular 'What Are You Doing New Year's Eve?' ('Maybe it's much too early in the game/ But I thought I'd ask you just the same').

One More Drifter in the Snow (2006) by the steely, mesmerising Aimee Mann is another scenic sledge-ride. She steers towards what she calls 'a Mel Tormé, Dean Martin, Frank Sinatra, lounge-y sort of Julie London record'. There are songs such as 'You're A Mean One, Mr Grinch' and 'Whatever Happened To Christmas?' by a softly reflective Jimmy 'Wichita Lineman' Webb, wondering, 'When did it disappear from view/ Where was I and whatever happened to you?'

Tracey Thorn's *Tinsel and Lights* (2012) is even more charming. It's a crisp, spare selection by the torch singer from Everything But The Girl. It sustains a mood for the magnetic pull of flake-filled childhood winters with, mostly, covers of recent songs by the White Stripes, Sufjan Stevens and Ron Sexsmith.

And, if you want to skate away from the merriment, 'River' by Joni Mitchell.

But the modern Christmas masterpiece (well, 2013) is *Quality Street* by the hallowed British singer-songwriter Nick Lowe. It's a coal-fired, fortifying brew of stuffed-stocking memories ('Old Toy Trains') and stained-glass canticles ('Children, Go Where I Send Thee').

In the hysterically funny 'Christmas at the Airport', listless, bored and trapped in a fog-bound terminal, he phones home to report he's 'doing Santa's sleigh ride on the baggage carousel' and 'Don't save me any turkey – I found a burger in a bin'. Strangely, he sounds happier where he is.

Crank up the sound system. And, in the glass-chinking words of the Beatles, 'Garry Crimble and a gear New Year!'

***Left: Armistice Night, 1918*, by William Nicholson. *Below: Vivienne Westwood*, by Jane Bown, 1999**

EXHIBITIONS

HUON MALLALIEU

WILLIAM NICHOLSON

PALLANT HOUSE, CHICHESTER, to 10th May 2026

JANE BOWN

NEWLAND GALLERY, PETWORTH, to 15th February 2026

It is hard to love the work of Ben Nicholson (1894-1982) and very easy to love that of his father, William (1872-1949). For several decades, that view has been out of step with art-world opinion – but not the opinion of the wider public.

After the 1930s, when Ben's art became fully abstract and geometric, he seems to have avoided any hint of emotion. William could not paint any subject, however mundane, without touching the feelings of his audience.

His daughter-in-law Winifred described his enjoyment of still lifes and how 'his pencil would skip and laugh with delight' when he was illustrating children's books. I am rarely moved by a piece of silver, however beautifully made, but a Nicholson silver jug is a different matter.

William Nicholson, knighted in 1936, was in many ways as much a modernist in his generation as his son. Like many a late Victorian, he was trained at Herkomer's Art School and in Paris at the Académie Julian. Many regarded his artistic persona as more French than English.

However, he made his own way. Winifred again, after his death: 'He became as English as Hogarth and reaches as high a point of excellence. The doors are shut on Cubism, on Guernica, on Post-Impressionism even.'

This show covers the varied career, from the Beggarstaff prints to the lovely downland views, the latter showing that near-abstraction can express reality.

Another painting to demonstrate that is *Armistice Night, 1918* (*pictured*). He sketched the revels from the Café Royal, but the canvas is full of sadness and foreboding. His wife had died of the Spanish flu in July and their second son, Tony, of wounds in October.

In 1969, I worked as a dresser, spear-carrier and barman at the Mermaid Theatre. Connie's Bar was not just for audiences and the casts, but attracted regulars from nearby offices, particularly those of the *Times* and the *Observer*.

Among the journalists there was a friendly and empathetic but self-contained woman, respected by her colleagues. This was Jane Bown (1925-2014), a notable photojournalist and superb portrait photographer.

She used a painterly repertoire of natural, north-facing light and chiaroscuro to capture the humanity and vulnerability of her sitters and the essence of her subjects.

The Petworth show does her career full justice.

JANE BROWN/NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY; THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

Pursuits

GARDENING

DAVID WHEELER

BLOOMING PRESENTS

It's Christmas Eve. The afternoon light begins to fade. The doorbell rings. You're not expecting anyone.

You open the door shyly. There appears before you, wreathed in beaming smiles, a familiar face.

You're presented with a small bowl. Unwrapped. The contents plain to see.

It's a medley of flowering cyclamen, snowy white and Santa-red. Between the half-dozen small plants lies a buff and lovat duvet of damp moss, soft as newly washed Scottish tweed, gilded with a modest sprinkling of cheery glitter.

Cyclamen

Honestly. Is there a better present? I've been the recipient of such a delight on many a Christmas. And I've frequently been the doorbell-ringer myself.

It's a double pleasure – the giving and the receiving. The giving emanates from choosing the right bowl – nothing too decorative to upstage its contents; nothing too big to dominate its eventual place of pride. The receiving fills you with joy. If the recipient lives alone and has no garden, the pleasure magnifies tenfold.

Throughout October and November, I was busy planting bulbs (and corms too, if you want to be pernickety), preparing bowls of beauty for us and a few special friends no longer able to wield a trowel, or get themselves to a garden centre.

Remember that, should you fail to assemble such gifts yourself, there are several cut-flower farms that will send stems of scented blooms to arrive by post a few days before Christmas. For many years – but sadly no more, for the kind friend who sent them has now died – we received bunches of small-flowered, fragrant daffodils from the Scilly Isles.

The plop of the long, slim cardboard box on the doormat foretold the familiar and always welcome gift.

Bulbs that haven't yet reached flowering stage make no less welcome presents – they hold promise, green shoots signalling forthcoming New Year and early-spring enchantments.

I'm slowly rebuilding my daffodil library – a fancy term for a collection of narcissi, providing floral interest from December until Easter and beyond.

My preference is for short-growing (because they don't flop) daffodils of a pure white complexion, with touches of cream, the palest yellow or a suggestion of green. Nothing with a hint of blood or egg yolk in the corolla (unless it's the highly covetable late-flowering Pheasant's Eye). Definitely no pink. Seldom any doubles. With daffs, it's simplicity that wins my heart.

On the bench are other bulbous glories: crocuses, hyacinths, scillas, snowdrops, bluebells, erythroniums, an array of *Iris reticulata*, species (ie wild) tulips and muscari.

Those who know me know my preference for plain terracotta pots. The older, the better – cracked, mottled with age, broken and wired back together again, enriched with a patina that only time can convincingly bestow.

I keep potted bulbs outdoors for as long as possible to prevent their becoming leggy; warm rooms will force and weaken them. I'm watchful, though, of frost, careful to shelter vulnerable pots from sub-zero nights.

Among my prized terracottas are eight very large pieces bought as long ago as 1979. They've spent every year outside – bravo Wrecclesham Pottery, whose presumed firing at exceedingly high temperatures has ensured such remarkable durability.

Now it's Santa time. Who's getting what? Green seasonal gifts needn't be bulbous. I mentioned cyclamen. Other goodies abound: jasmine, cinerarias, colourful felty-leafed coleus, amaryllis, knock-out-scented stephanotis … and if you've the strength, and the recipient has the space, richly-scented sarcococca, camellias, a full-berried topiary holly. The choice is endless.

But, please, no poinsettias.

David's Instagram account is @hortusjournal

KITCHEN GARDEN

SIMON COURTAULD

NUTS

Like most small gardeners, in the past few months we have enjoyed a record crop of fruit from our trees: apples, plums, including the wild bullaces, figs (for the first time in 20 years) and hundreds of quinces.

We don't have any walnut trees, but they too have yielded a rich harvest this year, reportedly three times larger than usual in Somerset. However, the walnut crop in California has also shown a significant increase, and it is those nuts that most of us will be buying and eating at Christmas.

For home-growing, Broadview is the most popular variety. Two-year-old trees, about four feet tall, can be bought now from Pomona Fruits in Essex and should start cropping in three years. The tree is self-fertile; if more than one is grown, they should be planted some 40 feet apart.

If you're pickling walnuts in

midsummer before the nuts have formed, the green husks should be pricked with a silver fork, says Mrs Beeton. The best time to eat the nuts is October, when the husk begins to split and the skin of the nut is wet.

There have been plenty of sweet chestnuts falling from the trees recently, and I read that it may be possible to grow sweet almonds if the delightful pink blossom is not damaged by frost.

The one nut that seems to appear only at Christmas is the Brazil, which is never grown in our climate. 'Brazil, where the nuts come from' is the line I remember from *Charley's Aunt*, a comedy popular in my childhood – though these days most Brazil nuts come from Bolivia.

I read that hazelnut numbers are down, owing to late frosts last April and prolonged summer drought in Kent, where most of them are grown commercially. The Kentish Cob – cobnuts and filberts are types of hazelnut – is the heaviest cropper.

In the lane near our house, there were fewer hazelnuts to pick but that may have been because the squirrels got them all first. Surprisingly, the catkins were showing before the end of October.

COOKERY

ELISABETH LUARD

ST LUCY'S FEAST

It's not only the pudding that has to be stirred early for Christmas – this year's Stir-up Sunday was on 23rd November.

Advent starts a week later. Twelve days of abstinence – fast before feast – in the run-up to the midwinter feast allowed prudent housewives in the northern hemisphere to restock the larder ahead of the Christmas festivities.

St Lucy's Day, 13th December, salutes the last days of the farming year before the cows run out of milk and the hens stop laying. It's when Scandinavian housewives start their Christmas baking.

St Lucy of Syracuse was a Sicilian virgin martyred for her faith by rejecting an unchristian suitor c 300 AD. Her feast day now marks the first of the 12 days that precede Christmas, just as Epiphany marks the end of the 12 days that follow.

Among Norsemen, the origins of St Lucy's celebrations can be found in the rowdy, men-only, virgin-chasing candlelit feasts that were held on what, in the medieval calendar, was the longest and darkest night of the year.

That explains Sweden's Festival of Lights, a relatively new tradition at a mere three centuries old. On St Lucy's name day, a troupe of young girls (in theory, everyone's unmarried daughters), dressed in white and wearing crowns of lighted candles (electric these days), carry good things to the table for a pre-Christmas feast.

The usual accompaniment is a tureenful of *jul glögg*, a lethal Swedish beverage: imported red wine spiced with cardamom, cloves, cinnamon and orange zest, with a handful of blanched almonds, dried figs and raisins – rounded off with a generous shot of aquavit.

Blame the Vikings for the hangover.

ELISABETH LUARD

Luciapepparbröd

A crown-shaped gingerbread spiced – as is proper for a northern midwinter where the sun won't be seen for months – with the warmth of Mediterranean sunshine.

Make two – one for now and another to save for Christmas. Nothing so comforting as a well stocked cake tin. Serves a dozen.

100g butter, softened
250g soft dark brown sugar
3 medium eggs, separated
250g self-raising flour
1 tsp ground cinnamon
1 tsp ground ginger
½ tsp ground cloves
½ tsp grated nutmeg
About 150ml soured cream or thick yoghurt
Butter and breadcrumbs for dusting the baking ring

To finish

Icing sugar and (maybe) cake candles

Beat the butter and the sugar together until light and fluffy. Beat in the egg yolks. Whisk the egg whites and fold them in. Sieve the flour with the spices and fold in lightly with a metal spoon, adding the soured cream alternately to keep the mixture soft and light.

Heat the oven to 325°F/Gas 3.

Butter a 10-in diameter ring or kugelhopf tin and sprinkle with breadcrumbs. Drop in the mixture, spreading it evenly.

Transfer to the oven and bake for 15 minutes, then lower the temperature to 275°F/Gas 1 and leave for another 30 minutes. Check for doneness with a skewer pushed into the heart – it's ready when it comes out clean. Allow to cool for a few minutes, then loosen the sides with a knife before tipping it out onto a baking rack. Store when cool in an airtight tin – all spice cakes improve with the keeping.

Finish with a snow shower of icing sugar and, failing your own troupe of maidens, decorate with lighted candles.

RESTAURANTS

JAMES PEMBROKE

MY LUNCH OF THE YEAR

Let's be honest. London's restaurants are, for the most part, noisy, busy affairs – not least because of the loud music and the open kitchens where manic chefs flip rib-eye steaks 'on the embers'. It's all too *Beowulf* – especially for lunch.

So if you want some serenity, head to King's Cross to The Yellow Bittern, named after an 18th-century Irish poem about a bird who couldn't crack the ice with his beak to get a drink.

It is situated just 30 yards from Keystone Crescent, the smallest crescent in Europe, built in 1848 by Robert Stuckey. The crescent is always said to be the location of Mrs 'Lopsided' Wilberforce's house in *The Ladykillers* (1955), but they actually built a properly skewed house on a vacant lot nearby.

There's nothing lopsided about The Yellow Bittern. Well, besides its being open only for lunch, taking only cash, serving only a £50 set menu, having only three staff, having only 20 covers, having one ring to heat the soup and a Baby Belling to heat the pies and locking the front door.

And who are the unknowingly (or knowingly?) eccentric proprietors? Hugh Corcoran is a committed Irish Leninist (he dubs Lenin 'the liberator of the slaves'). His partner (in both senses) is Lady Frances von Hofmannsthal, the benevolent daughter of the late Lord Snowdon who likes to wear ankle-length aprons and sports a man's tie. Yes, this could be the setting for an Ealing comedy.

The Editor and I took Simon Berry, the former head of Berry Bros & Rudd, who is decidedly not a wine bore. He's far too polite and charming. But we knew that, as a playwright and doyen of amateur dramatics, he would love the *mise-en-scène*. He was already halfway through his proffered glass of sherry when we rang the bell and peered through the huge shop window.

Bearded Hugh pointed to the menu on the blackboard: wheaten bread and butter (all made by Frances), monkfish carpaccio (precisely sliced to order at the counter by Hugh), (enormous) pheasant pie ('Sure you don't want two?') and

leaf salad, followed by rice pudding (from a huge oven dish, large enough to feed an entire primary school). And the £20 supplements? Half a dozen Irish oysters and a selection of Irish cheeses. We had the lot.

Needless to say, there isn't a wine list. Hugh reeled off his recommendations/instructions, and we obeyed. Simon was thrilled with the £70 Saint-Joseph, a region he says is ripe to become very fashionable (and expensive). It was my favourite lunch of 2025.

I also think I've just had the best pub meal of the 2020s: at the Jolly Fisherman in Craster, Northumberland, after a walk to the romantic ruins of 13th-century Dunstanburgh Castle. I had the most delicious crab soup ever – not a bisque. It was rich, creamy and chowder-like with thick clumps of white crab meat. Just £11 for such a treat. Then a very generous fish pie, stuffed with prawns, accompanied by a bottle of Pinot Grigio Chardonnay for £27.

The next morning, we loaded up with kippers from L Robson & Sons, opposite the pub, whose smokery gives the whole village a glorious smog of kipper fumes. It was founded in 1906, the same year the harbour was built by the Craster family.

And their motto, cleverly employing the family surname? *Hodie felix cras ter* ('Happy today; tomorrow three times as happy') – which I hope is how we all feel as we approach 2026.

SPORT

JIM WHITE

ANYONE FOR RACKETS?

Dig into the history of most of the sports we enjoy in this country and you will encounter wealth.

Cricket, tennis, badminton and rowing were initially the privilege of those endowed with leisure and cash, not to mention access to enough acres to play in. Even sports with more democratic genesis, such as horse-racing, football and golf, were ultimately codified and colonised by those with deep pockets.

There is one sport that was definitively not born of money. When the British Open Championship begins on 15th January on the court at the Queen's Club in west London, nobody could suggest the sport of rackets owed its birth to a little toff picking up the ball and running with it across a public-school field.

This game was first invented by reprobates and rascals, blaggards and bankrupts. Its beginnings lie in London's two notorious debtors' prisons: King's Bench in Southwark and the Fleet in Farringdon. People suffering from financial embarrassment used to be incarcerated until they paid off their owings.

By the late-18th century, the inmates took to throwing balls constructed of scraps of material against the giant walls of the prison courtyard. Soon, smuggling in real-tennis rackets (in those days, it didn't require a drone to fly in contraband; prisoners could just go and pick up stuff left at the front gate) they invented their own sport.

And so rackets began. It was a ferocious way of letting off steam, a game of flying balls and airborne elbows. The debtors became adept at the whack and thrash, a certain Major Campbell renowned across the land for his prowess. Given that he was in King's Bench for 14 years, he had plenty of time to practise.

By the mid-19th century, the game was so associated with a stretch for financial chicanery that when the eponymous hero of *The Pickwick Papers* is locked up for his hapless monetary mismanagement, Charles Dickens sets the scene of his arrival at the Fleet by describing a game of rackets going on in the courtyard.

And so entranced did those locked up become with the game that on their release, many set up courts on which to play. These were usually in grotty inner-city taverns – the kind of places where towering brick walls were available to hit balls against.

From there the game took off. By the end of the 19th century, when Muscular Christianity was at its zenith, indoor rackets courts had been built in public schools, universities and members clubs across the land. Rackets became so widespread that it featured in the 1908 London Olympics.

That, sadly, was its high point. Largely because the courts had to be sizeable, echoing the prison walls where it all began, its appeal began to wane.

Ultimately squash, the sport that refined its processes and reduced the scale of the court, eclipsed rackets in popularity, in much the same way as padel is now overtaking tennis.

But those who are lucky enough to attend the British Open will see that, despite the centuries' passing, some of the game's origins are more than evident in its play. Unlike real-tennis courts, with their decorative reminders of palatial conception, all galleries, penthouses and regal motifs, a rackets court is no more than an intimidating slab of dark wall.

And, with none of the sportsmanlike refinement of squash, players can get in each other's way and engage in push and shove. The ball is hit so ferociously that everyone these days wears eye guards.

They need to: Prince Alfred, one of Queen Victoria's children, lost the sight in one eye when he was hit by a rackets ball. This never was a game for softies.

'Anything you say can and will be used in a true-crime documentary or podcast'

MOTORING

ALAN JUDD

RAISE THE ROOF!

A friend wants a convertible.

The time to buy is now, rather than spring or summer, when prices go up because a dash of sunlight tempts people to think they want blue-sky, wind-in-your-hair motoring.

Come dark days and rain, many leave their convertibles in the garage or sell them.

My friend is looking for a 10- to 15-year-old Golf, a good choice. It'll have the usual Golf virtues and he'll use it not only for local fine-weather pottering but for bucolic excursions to France. Golfs are comfortable and reliable, with plentiful spares in the event of breakdown – albeit limited rear legroom for taller passengers.

For the same reasons, he could step up in class and image and consider Audi A3 cabriolets – and pay more.

There are plenty of other choices; as always with car-buying, it depends on what you want your car for. If two seats are enough, the obvious choice is a Mazda MX-5, the sports car that conquered the world after MG decided there was no market. They're a bit cramped but well-priced, well-made and fun to drive; just beware of rust in older ones.

If he wanted to splash out and stand out, he could go for a Lotus or a Morgan, not to mention the awesome Bentley Continental. Or he could take a chance on a rebuilt MGB roadster, enduringly popular and surprisingly practical, with parts provision that puts many moderns to shame.

If four seats are essential, there are plenty of smallish, reasonably priced breeds to choose from. The Fiat 500C squashes you in the rear, but brings a

smile to the face of any driver. The Mini drives and handles beautifully – but again you're squashed in the back with the hood down. The nippy Peugeot 207 CC does everything well, but it's little.

Stepping up in size there's VW's Eos (2006-15), a nice driver with more room but iffy hoods and prone to leaks, which wreck the hydraulics.

The various BMW convertibles all drive well and are rightly popular, but are hard-riding when fitted with bigger wheels. Petrol engines of the 2005-12 3 series have a dodgy reputation, so best go diesel – or maybe opt for an Audi A5. If you don't mind paying for the badge, you get style, performance and luxury with the 2016-24 Mercedes C-Class cabriolet – but yet again a somewhat cramped rear.

For proper four-seat comfort, provided you aren't worried about age (you needn't be, if the car's been well kept), look at the 2006-13 Volvo C70. It's no beauty and never caught on but it has all the Volvo virtues, with 2010-on models the best.

Or take the left-field option of the 2003-11 Saab 9-3 – again no beauty, but safe, comfortable and reliable, as long as you change the oil every 5,000 miles.

If it were me, I'd go for a classic, such as the 1940/'50s Jaguar XK 120, 140 or 150, groundbreaking cars with perfect lines. Most would add the E-Type, but I prefer the more curvaceous XKs.

A more esoteric choice would be a Bristol 402. They made 23, of which 13 are currently known. Otherwise, going down the scale, an MGA (whose lines echo the XK), Morris Minor, VW Beetle or – sweetest and cheapest of all – a pre-war second-generation Morris 8E.

That said, I've only ever owned one convertible, a 1954 Daimler Conquest Century, white with a red hood and an endless thirst for oil. The hood seized, of course, and I sold it to a commune.

Truth is, convertibles don't really appeal – wind in the hair is OK for a while, but on modern roads you can't hear yourself speak. And then the sun goes in.

DRINK

BILL KNOTT

CHRISTMAS SPIRITS

'Kill the turkeys, ducks and chickens/
Mix the punch, drag out the Dickens/
Even though the prospect sickens/
Brother, here we go again.'

A Christmas Carol was penned by the great American satirical songwriter Tom Lehrer, who died earlier this year, aged 97. The song rails against seasonal sentimentality, rampant commercialism, familial ill will and overindulgence. If you agree with Lehrer, you might prefer a remote, uninhabited island to the enforced jollity of another Christmas in the company of Perry Como et al.

But there are strategies for coping, not least of which is making sure everyone has something nice to drink. To this end, as you might expect, I have a few suggestions.

The first is rum, for which I have two purposes in mind.

First, Cumberland rum butter: equal parts softened butter and sugar – icing or soft brown – beaten together, laced with a judicious slug of rum, beaten again and chilled. Its name apparently comes from the happy arrival on the West Coast of spirits from the Caribbean in the 18th century.

It is very good with both Christmas pudding and warm mince pies.

The second is hot buttered rum, which might sound odd, but goes very well with a roaring fire.

Mix sugar and butter as before, adding a pinch of mixed spice. Warm some sturdy glasses, put a dessertspoonful of the butter in each, topping up with hot water (even better, hot cider), add a double measure of rum to each glass and stir. It is guaranteed to warm the cockles.

A Caribbean golden rum is ideal: Appleton Estate from Jamaica or Doorly's from Barbados would fit the bill.

I also recommend buying a bottle of crème de mûre, blackberry liqueur: Giffard's version, widely available for around £16, is pleasingly brambly.

Add a dash to a glass of sparkling wine (a crémant from the Loire or Burgundy, perhaps) for an instantly Christmassy cocktail that makes a pleasant change from a Kir royale. Crème de mûre is also excellent poured over vanilla ice cream.

My final recommendation is green Chartreuse. Made by monks in the Alps, it has a smooth, sweet and herbal character which belies its hefty 55% ABV.

I like it served over crushed ice in a rocks glass, and it also makes excellent cocktails: diffordsguide.com has recipes for hundreds of them.

One of these is the Last Word, a heady blend of gin, Chartreuse, maraschino liqueur and lime juice, originally served at the Detroit Athletic Club around 1916.

It was presumably enjoyed by its members *after* strenuous physical exercise, not before.

You can make it with mezcal instead of gin, in which case it is not a Last Word, but a Closing Argument.

Have yourselves a boozy little Christmas.

Matthew Webster: Digital Life

New digital sensation? Bin lorries

Our digital mobile-phone networks are far from perfect, despite the claims of Ofcom and the network-providers that there is national coverage.

If a company draws your attention to its excellent performance, always look for what it is not telling you. Assume it is using the same technique that conjurors employ to avoid being found out: misdirection.

So Royal Mail claims it has improved delivery times. But it doesn't mention that most letter boxes are now emptied at 9am, rather than at the end of the day. That's misdirection.

Look at the claims of mobile-phone companies for their digital networks. O2 boasts 99-per-cent coverage of the UK, which sounds great. And it is endorsed by Ofcom, which also sounds good.

Let's look at what they don't say.

Webwatch

For my latest tips and free newsletter, go to www.askwebster.co.uk

https://tinyurl.com/oldie460
First World War: the Christmas truce. A poignant exhibit from Google Arts.

askwebster.co.uk/white-christmas
An annual treat – the best version of an old chestnut.

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

Ofcom reports only what the network companies say; there is no independent verification. While there may be 'coverage' throughout the country, that's not what matters. It's capacity that's important.

In other words, how many calls or internet-users can the network handle at the same time? You might have three or four bars of signal on your phone, but if too many people are trying to use it simultaneously, it just doesn't work.

The contrast between coverage and capacity can be very marked. I conducted a test. At 10.30am in the middle of Cambridge, I could use YouTube and Google Maps on my phone. But at teatime, when the networks were busier, they both ground to a halt, although my phone was registering the same signal strength.

This is becoming much more of an issue as digitisation spreads. Many mobile care services provided by local councils use mobile internet to update case files and submit reports throughout the day. There are many vulnerable people who have emergency contact buttons that rely on mobile-phone networks.

Likewise, the police and emergency services have a rapidly increasing need for similar mobile digital connections. But they are not getting it – even in urban areas, at peak times.

Companies such as Inkalum and Streetwave contract with some local councils to fit their bin lorries with equipment that measures not just the availability of a mobile signal, but also how much data it can carry.

Bin lorries are perfect for this job, because they trundle slowly through almost every street in the area, throughout the day, allowing the collection of a tremendous amount of information. The results are demonstrating a huge, intermittent lack of network capacity.

The councils and other public services used to think the information was no use to them, as they didn't control the networks. But they have finally woken up and realised they are very big customers of these networks. Now they can get the information independently, they can use it to confront the network-providers.

It also allows everyone to see the pinch points – or 'not-spots', as they are known – where small booster units might be useful, on lampposts, say, or traffic lights.

This sort of surveying should be done on a national basis by Ofcom, so they can expose the weasel words of the network-operators. They are meant to be the regulators, after all. In the meantime, full marks to the councils.

I especially enjoy the use of bin lorries to establish that the networks are rubbish. It has a charming symmetry.

Neil Collins: Money Matters

Unilever fever

Unilever is the original Marmite stock.

Not only does the company make the stuff – it's a share you either love or hate. You love it because it should be a solid performer in a standard portfolio, and you hate it for not being one.

The share price is the same today as it was five years ago, and even Nelson Peltz, the activist investor who liked it so much that he joined the board, has sold part of his holding.

You may be sharing his frustration, and we shareholders have had to exercise more patience than Mr Peltz has shown. It's a big company, not used to moving fast. It is years since analysts first suggested spinning off the Magnum ice-cream business, and only now is it actually happening – or it would be if the civil-service shutdown in the US wasn't in the way.

In a passing kick to London's Stock Exchange, Magnum will be listed there – so if you want to buy the shares, you would save the stamp duty if you bought them in New York.

In an elegant sleight of hand, shrunken Unilever is keeping 20 per cent of Magnum, which it will sell down to cover the costs of the de-merger and subsequent reorganisation, and to pay down debt. That's a £2-billion kitty, which shows how lucrative these deals are for the advisers, if not for shareholders.

In the meantime, there have been two changes of CEO. The last one was ejected after just 18 months and the latest, another finance expert, Fernando Fernández, is making all the right noises about cleaning out 'pockets of mediocrity'. The new boss of Magnum promises much the same, by escaping from the Unilever freezer.

Raising efficiency is harder work than splitting bits off, and less exciting; so already some analysts are encouraging another split – the beauty business from foods – which would produce a second pay day for advisers.

It is arguable whether Dove soap and Hellmann's mayonnaise benefit from being owned by the same company. Much more concerning is whether both beauty and food industries are becoming more fragmented, with newer, nimbler companies eating away at the market share of the giants, helped by the magic of the internet.

The conventional TV advertising market, which has been their mainstay, is struggling to reach a social-media generation who have stopped watching.

To be fair, Unilever has tried to get down with the kids, buying up rapidly-growing brands you've never heard of, albeit often at heroic prices.

Mr Fernández will doubtless shake up the simpler business he inherits, but smaller may not be more beautiful – nor more appealing to fussy eaters.

Neil Collins was City Editor of the Daily Telegraph

Exploring Corfu in the footsteps of the Durrells

The Oldie

With Kirsty Fergusson 17th to 24th October 2026

Corfu is blessed with fertile, green landscapes, a turquoise-blue sea and a UNESCO-listed historic town centre, featuring Venetian architecture and fortifications.

No wonder the British have been enchanted by the northernmost Ionian island for over a century – and who has captured the magic of the island in prose better than the Durrell brothers, Gerald and Lawrence? Join our garden-tour expert, Kirsty Fergusson, to follow in their footsteps, discovering the lush north-east of the island in warm October sunshine.

We will stay at the luxurious Rodostamo Hotel & Spa, dining on the shores of Gouvia Bay. We'll experience a fabulous Greek feast – with music and dancing – at Danila village on the film set of the BBC series *The Durrells*. It will be an unforgettable *Oldie* holiday.

Above: **Corfu town**
Right: **the Durrells' White House in Kalami**

ITINERARY

Saturday 17th October – Arrival Depart Heathrow on BA at 11.50, arriving at 17.05 at Corfu. Welcome drinks and dinner at the hotel pool restaurant.

Sunday 18th October – Corfu town and Danila Walking tour of Corfu town, lunch, return to hotel for afternoon swim. In the evening, dinner in Danila, the village where *The Durrells* was filmed.

Monday 19th October – the White House Morning visit to Lawrence and Nancy Durrell's White House by the sea at Kalami, followed by lunch and a nature walking trail: www.thewhitehouse.

Tuesday 20th October – Perithia and Elaion Morning tour of Old Perithia with its Venetian architecture and stunning mountain views. Then, after lunch, a visit to the Olive farm Elaion, which Kirsty describes as 'utterly original and brilliant'.

Wednesday 21st October – Kapodistrias museum We visit the museum dedicated to Ioannis Kapodistrias, the first governor of Greece. It has the most beautiful garden and butterfly-conservation centre. Lunch by the harbour and free afternoon.

Thursday, 22nd October – Sto Dasos Morning visit to Sto Dasos, the contemporary villa and garden designed by Jennie Gay. Lunch by the sea on the north coast. We hope to be able to visit a very famous estate that afternoon.

Friday 23rd October – Theotoky winery and Mon Repos Morning tour of the historic Theotoky winery, which is set in the middle of the island. After lunch, a tour of the Museum of Palaiopolis-Mon Repos, which is set in the neoclassical Regency villa of Mon Repos, the former residence of the High Commissioner Frederick Adam, near Kerkyra.

Saturday, 24th October – The Achilleion Morning tour of the Achilleion Palace, near Gastouri, which was built for Empress Elizabeth of Austria in the late-19th century and then used by Kaiser Wilhelm II as a summer residence. Our BA flight departs at 18.10, landing at Heathrow at 19.30.

HOW TO BOOK: Call 01225 427311 or please email Katherine at reservations@theoldie.co.uk. Price per person sharing a double/twin room: £2,895, including 7 nights' accommodation and all transport. Single supplement £300. Flights not included. You need to pay for drinks outside of meals. Deposit £750 per person; balance due 1st July 2026.

BIRD OF THE MONTH

Firecrest

BY JOHN McEWEN * ILLUSTRATED BY CARRY AKROYD

Christmas means presents, but birds can provide presents any time.

In April, I visited one of the growing number of sporting estates whose owners see the privilege of ownership inseparable from targeted conservation, with gamekeepers as conservation managers.

In the case of my Hampshire host – who, aside from public duties, is a consummate naturalist, exemplified by his wildlife photographs (Instagram: c.a.h.w) – stone curlews have been enabled to breed through an agricultural policy bolstered by predator control.

The invitation to view this rare bird (365 UK pairs) was my visit's purpose. That things did not turn out as expected proved spectacularly beneficial.

The first surprise was when we arrived from the station. A glance at the side mirror found a one-legged jackdaw perched there. Having been nursed through injury, it continues to roost in the porch. Its name was Ray. When I opened the door, Ray settled on its master's shoulder, then flew to a branch high in a tree.

Search for a nesting stone curlew was delayed by the call of a hardly less rare (2,000 breeding territories, 2025) firecrest (*Regulus ignicapilla*). The remarkable success story of the firecrest is indicated by its first recorded breeding in the UK – in Hampshire, in 1962.

David Armitage Bannerman's opening words of the firecrest chapter in his *The Birds of the British Isles* emphasise the point: 'An annual visitor in small numbers to England and Scilly Isles, rare in Wales and not recorded from Scotland or Ireland. Once said to have bred in Lancashire.'

A smattering of winter firecrest sightings now include a few in Scotland and even south-coast Ireland, but its resident stronghold remains Hampshire and environs. Wendover Woods in Buckinghamshire has a Firecrest Trail and Wendover has a pub renamed Firecrest.

The stone curlew has a lesser story.

Formerly a UK table bird, it was rendered extinct and is now recovering.

No further firecrests appeared during the tour of the estate, friendly to hare, songbird, butterfly and – glimpsed – stone curlew. Before my departure, a gadget for calling birds delivered a firecrest's song – and the firecrest soon reappeared.

As before, fumbled binoculars proved unhelpful; but suddenly in a bush there was a light as bright as a struck match. It was a sunbeam flaring the firecrest's orange crest. The most marked difference between firecrest and goldcrest is a white streak below the firecrest's eye – that is, until a sunbeam reveals the reason for its name.

Lit candles symbolise Christ's birth; presents recall the wise men's gifts. One hopes the sunbeam-flared crest of a firecrest is someone's present this Christmas.

As a book present for bird enthusiasts, the eminent scientist, writer and sporting-estate owner Matt Ridley's *Birds, Sex and Beauty* shows, among much else, the egalitarian folly of total predator protection on most nature reserves – particularly regarding the blackcock, our 'bird of paradise'.

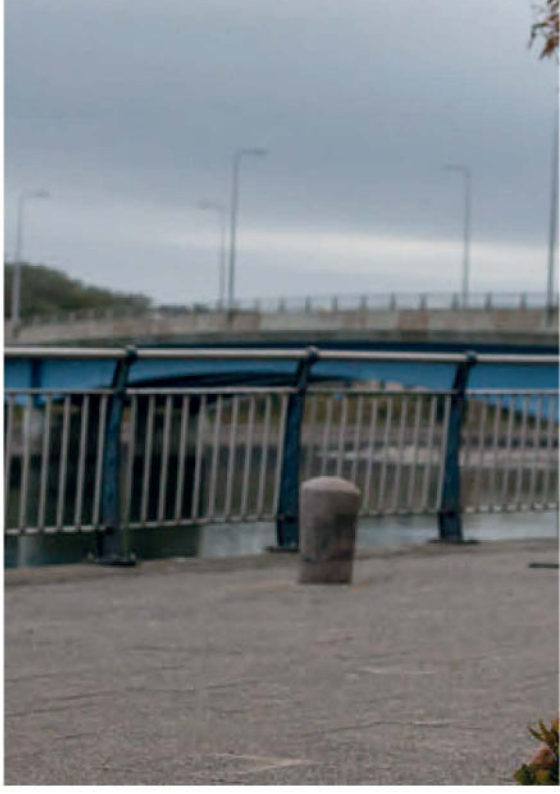
Oldie Bird of the Month 2026 calendars are available from carryakroyd.co.uk. The compendium Swoop, Sing, Perch, Paddle *was shortlisted for the 2025 Wainwright Prize for Illustrative Books*

Bamse, a great dog of war

All hail Montrose's magnificent canine statue

LUCINDA LAMBTON

Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor unveils the Bamse memorial, 2006



MARINEMUSEET; ALAMY

Bamse is the Norwegian name for 'Big', 'Boy' or 'Bear'.

All the meanings apply to the vast, 14-stone St Bernard who became the heroic mascot of the Free Norwegian forces in Sweden during the Second World War.

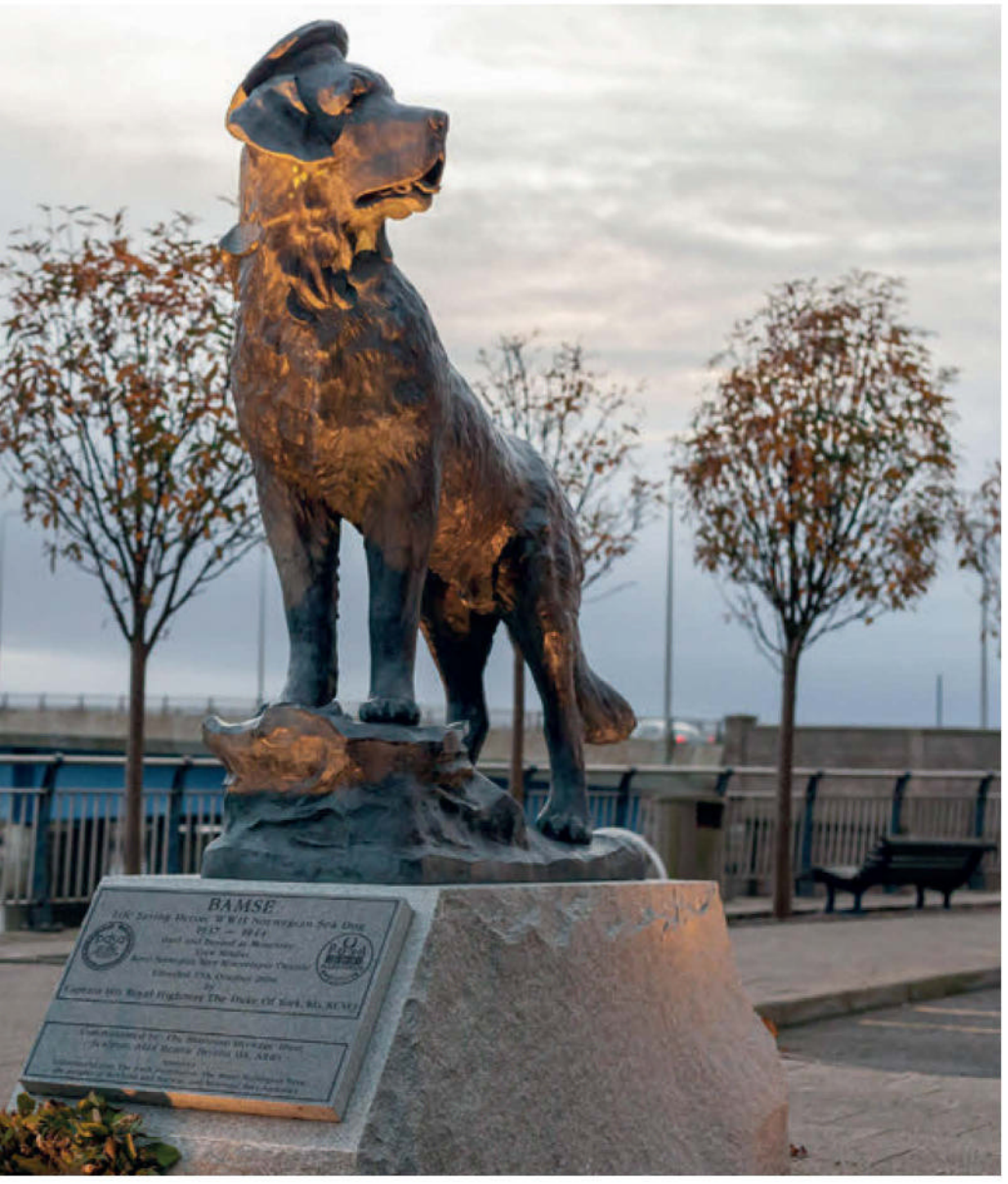
The breed are also most pleasingly known as Saint Dogs or Noble Steeds. They came from the Italian Alps. They're famed for their gentle temperament, with a reputation for a most particular kindness.

***Above:* Norwegian sailors give Bamse his bath. *Right:* Bamse is buried by his crew in the Montrose dunes, 1944**

One saved the life of a sailor by leaping a full ten feet into the sea.

Bamse (1937-44) was bought by Captain Erling Hafto, master of the *Thorodd*, a whale-catching ship.

At the outbreak of war, the ship was drafted into the Royal Norwegian Navy as a coastal patrol vessel. Bamse became an official crew



He saved a young lieutenant who had been attacked by a man wielding a knife

member on 9th February 1940. Weeks later, on 9th April, the Nazis invaded Norway. The *Thorodd* was at war. Bamse had the important and permanent position of standing on the front gun.

He was described by his owner's daughter as 'a kind dog, who was considered a hero, with a metal helmet made by the sailors to do honour to his important position, with tales of his courage'.

The dog enjoyed doing 'the Bamse Trail' with troops of those sailors. He followed his best-loved walks, picking up his owner's favourite beer along the way.

And his owner's daughter Vigdis particularly remembers his gentleness when he was looking after children.

At the beginning of the war, Bamse was particularly good at lifting the morale of the ship's crew.

Many were his acts of heroism. He saved a young lieutenant who had been attacked by a man wielding a knife: Bamse picked up the assailant with his teeth and dropped him into the sea. He saved another sailor from drowning and would stop fights by gently resting his paws on the fighters' soldiers.

From being the ship's mascot, Bamse became the mascot of the Royal Norwegian Navy and then of all the Free Norwegian forces. An iconic photograph was distributed with him wearing a Norwegian sailor's hat.

Bamse was awarded the great Dickin Medal – the equivalent of the George Cross for dogs – and is still richly appreciated today.

Left: **the bronze statue**
Below: **Bamse the life-saver (1937-44)**

Prince Andrew – before his current public collapse – was in charge of unveiling the life-size bronze statue in Montrose in 2006. A fine book praising Bamse was published to great applause.

Bamse died of heart failure on the dockside in Montrose on 2nd July 1944 and, I am delighted to write, was buried there with full military honours.

Hundreds of Norwegian sailors, Allied servicemen, schoolchildren, townsfolk and local people of every description went to his funeral.

His grave, emblazoned with the Swedish flag and the words 'BAMSE St Bernard of the *Thorodd*', is continually visited. The Annual Bamse Cup Regatta is held yearly in his honour at the Dartmouth Yacht Club.

Where else can you find such a vast commemorative canine statue, standing bold, proud and true in the midst of a town? It was and still is revered by all. HURRAY! What a sight and a half it is to be sure. There are annual pilgrimages organised to Bamse's statue and grave.

Boadicea's Guide to North Norfolk

PATRICK BARKHAM

GARY WING

In very particular places, taking a walk can be to step into another time or another state of consciousness. When I require mind-bending time travel, I head to Warham Camp.

It was a dank November day when I set out south on a long straight lane from tiny, pretty, flinty Warham village, tucked inland from the coast. This part of north Norfolk is an open, gently rolling and lightly populated landscape.

The road sloped down to the Stiffkey, one of the region's finest chalk streams. Recently, thanks to the Norfolk Rivers Trust and others, the canalised stream has been rewiggled; the valley here is wilder and rushier than it's been for millennia.

The water ran delightfully clear under the little humpbacked bridge and I continued up the lane, following linnets dancing along a hedge line still blackened by the smudged cores of a billion blackberries.

As I turned right, a short green track between two hedges led to a small, circular Iron Age fort.

Some 2,800 years ago, the Iceni picked this U-shaped bend in the river as a safe spot for an encampment. The valley-side camp commands sweeping views of the surrounding landscape and would've had water on almost three sides. They dug steep ditches and chalk banks, topped with high wooden palisades.

There is no trace of the wooden fencing, but the double ring of ditches and banks is still remarkably steep.

This is a beautiful walk in summer, when the chalk grassland is filled with flowers and chalkhill blue butterflies, covertly reintroduced and thriving here. And in winter it is a transcendental experience at dusk, when the sun sets in the west as a propitious moon rises in the east.

There was no sign of either on this grey late afternoon, and time turned fuzzy as I climbed over the stile into the field. There was no trace of house, farm, tractor or human-made sound. I walked straight to the camp and risked my ankles by letting momentum and gravity hurl me into the first ditch. I attempted to run up the first bank, imagining I was a Roman soldier, arriving here to repress the Iceni uprising. Scrambling on my hands and knees, I would've been arrow/axe/stave fodder.

But the Romans were irresistible; numerous and relentless. They would have laid siege to Warham Camp, and easily starved out its residents in time.

I imagine this could have been rebel Queen Boadicea's final refuge, out here on the edge of the known world.

I admired the view across the Stiffkey valley. Three red kites circled a spinney. They would have flown here in 61 AD too, picking over the corpses of fallen Iceni after the Romans crushed Boadicea's uprising.

I walked clockwise round the bank, which is unfortunately no longer a pure circle: 18th-century landscaping straightened the river and removed a chunk of camp, to improve the vista for the local manor house.

Despite its being November, the dying time, I found several rogue scabious still flowering mauve. The grass beneath my feet smelt of thyme, and a small patch was still in flower – the perfect addition to an Iceni broth.

Beyond the northern corner, I dropped off the bank to inspect an old, rotten ash tree. I reached into the dark hollows of its half-open trunk and my fingers touched the softest of fur.

I pulled out a small owl pellet: three fifths silky grey vole fur, one fifth vole femur and one fifth dor beetle. When I was here last, I accidentally disturbed a roosting barn owl, and it flew from this tree, low across the camp.

As I departed, I could just picture Boadicea, sporting a necklace of white owl feathers, silhouetted and defiant on the chalk bank, before darkness descended.

Like all the best walks, this easy stroll starts and finishes at a pub. Park opposite the Three Horseshoes at What3Words: plump.september.hobbit. Follow the lane south towards Wighton; turn right into Warham Camp

Genius crossword 460

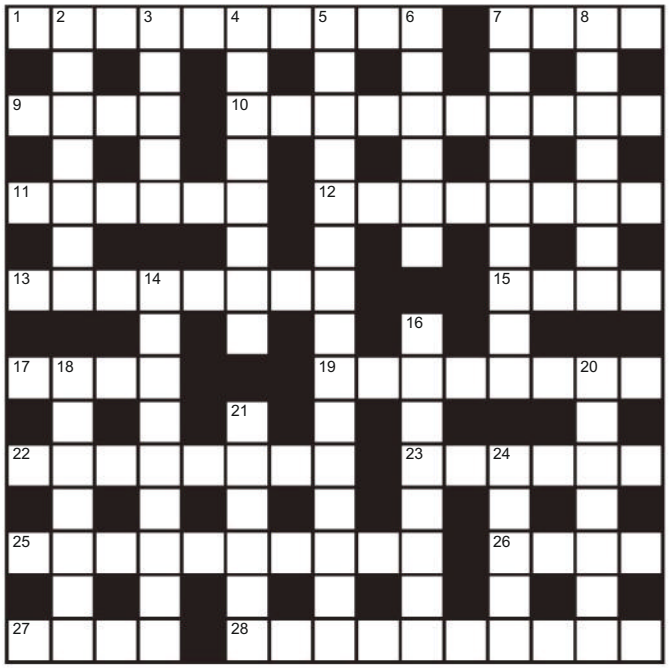
EL SERENO

Across

1 Characteristic of a man to be very quiet in water (5,5)
7 Liverpool music venue lacking boundaries, say (4)
9 Keen singer needing backing (4)
10 What's needed for clearing up in sweepstake? (10)
11 Assault making fool suffer (6)
12 Reform star found in tree, drunk (8)
13 Thieves on land and in ships (8)
15 Bread and water (4)
17 Mail shot must produce capital (4)
19 Independent politician roots out fraud (8)
22 Outfit desperately bored by conflict (8)
23 Retreat that's a pretence, welcoming resistance (6)
25 Palpitations may see visitor ban in place (10)
26 Opposing sides will accept first class transport (4)
27 Cat seen by golf course reportedly (4)
28 Food causing divorce in hotheads? (5,5)

Down

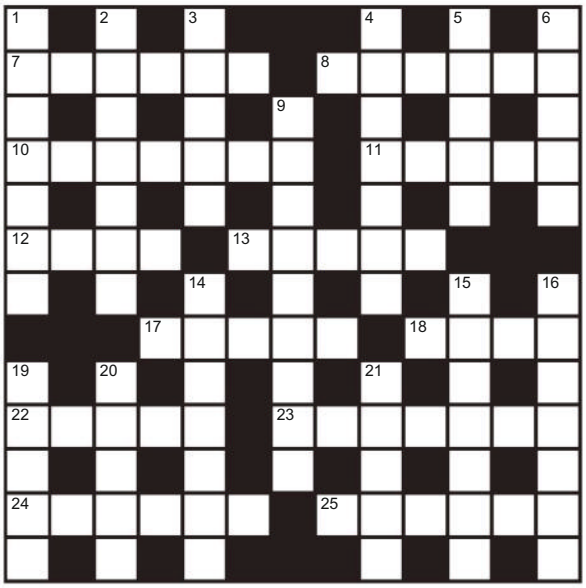
2 Number under line face protection, supporting detective (7)
3 Communication channels raising target to incorporate education (5)
4 Union leader after a doctor left worker able to walk (8)
5 A Rolling Stone's sort of music? (11,4)
6 Animal's show of hesitation confronting pit (6)
7 Militants' part of bible covering planned visits (9)
8 Thrilled to be quoted by old flame (7)
14 Great photos covering Republican race (5,4)
16 Exalted leading role's beginning with new ideas (8)
18 One refusal incorporates idiot's folly (7)
20 Distribute under old address (7)
21 Bath is popular with Trade Union brothers at first (3,3)
24 Nag's voice sounding rough (5)



How to enter Please scan or otherwise copy this page and email it to **comps@theoldie.co.uk**. **Deadline: 9th January 2026**.
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 460



Across

7 Passion (6)
8 Gastropods (6)
10 Profitable (7)
11 Adios to Paris (5)
12 Yonks (4)
13 Beer (5)
17 Lawful (5)
18 Viva voce exam (4)
22 Boredom (5)
23 Desert train (7)
24 Out of the country (6)
25 Dive (6)

Down

1 Aisle (7)
2 Looked up to (7)
3 Swig (5)
4 Furious (7)
5 Polite (5)
6 Bone of contention (5)
9 Authorisation (9)
14 Health check (7)
15 Motoring (7)
16 Stupid error (7)
19 Commenced (5)
20 Sleep noisily (5)
21 Whale food (5)

Genius 458 solution

Winner: Steve Harrison, Nailsea, Somerset

Runners-up: Geoff Lee, London N1; Hilarie Bowman, Tewkesbury, Gloucestershire

Moron 458 answers: Across: 1 Elfin, 4 Spectre (Health inspector), 8 Eat, 9 Eager, 10 Rhizome, 11 Nurseryman, 14 Tundra, 16 Phrase, 18 Objets d'art, 22 Rescind, 23 U-boat, 24 Ebb, 25 Earthen, 26 Skill. **Down:** 1 Eternity, 2 Figurine, 3 Nerve, 4 Strays, 5 Epitaph, 6 Took, 7 Ewes, 12 Macaroni, 13 Teetotal, 15 Rubbish, 17 Redden, 19 Snubs, 20 True, 21 Tsar.

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Back in 1977, the redoubtable English women's international player Rixi Markus (who died in 1992) wrote her classic, *Bid Boldly, Play Safe*. Pundits quipped (for Rixi loved to bid) that 'Rixi bid boldly to (say) 4♠, and played safely for three down'.

Dealer South Both Vulnerable

North
♠ Q 7 6 4
♥ J 10 9
♦ K J 2
♣ K 10 7

West
♠ K J 10 8 5
♥ Q 8 5 2
♦ 9
♣ J 9 8

East
♠ A 9 3
♥ K 7 6 3
♦ 10 7
♣ Q 4 3 2

South
♠ 2
♥ A 4
♦ A Q 8 6 5 4 3
♣ A 6 5

The bidding

South	West	North	East
1♦	1♠	2♦ (1)	2♠
4♦ (2)	Pass	5♦	end

(1) Perhaps (probably) I should have bid 1NT. But I didn't want to 'wrong-side' Notrumps if my partner held, say, ♠Kx.
(2) An asking bid of 3♠ is indicated – I'll now bid bid 3NT with, say ♠QJx and ♦K – nine easy tricks.

Let's now travel to Bristol for the most prestigious British bridge event in the calendar, the Spring Foursomes. We'll see North (your columnist) and partner Alex Allfrey 'bid poorly, play well'.

West led the knave of spades, East winning the ace and switching at trick two to a heart. Declarer, Allfrey, ducked this to West's queen, winning the second heart with the ace (East sensibly refraining from playing the king).

It appears declarer has only ten tricks – but watch. He crossed to a top diamond and ruffed a second spade, then crossed to a third diamond to ruff a third spade (these plays were not strictly necessary, but would have been if the queen of spades had been a low spade). He then ran all his diamonds.

On the last diamond, West had to discard down to two clubs to retain the master spade. Declarer's queen of spades was now discarded, having served its purpose. It was East's turn to come down to two clubs so as to keep the master heart. Declarer won the last three tricks with the king of clubs, the ace of clubs (felling the queen and knave) and the promoted ten of clubs.

Eleven tricks made – leaving both defenders to wish they'd switched to clubs earlier, to break up the double squeeze.
ANDREW ROBSON

Competition

TESSA CASTRO

IN COMPETITION No 326 you were invited to write a poem called *Wrapping*. It wasn't all Christmas, although Caroline Wilson summed up the seasonal chore: 'Having wrapped up our presents which look rather shabby/ We pour a stiff sherry which leaves us less crabby.'

Veronica Colin, seeing her Christmas wrapping discarded, mused, 'Next year I'll use newspaper, rough garden twine./ If challenged, I'll say it's postmodern design.' Claudette Evans, wrapping up warm, found that 'By November I'm half insulation, half optimist,/ By January I'm practically upholstered!'

John McTavish celebrated a New Zealand Christmas by the sea. Anthony Young's wrapper was the artist Christo. Jayne Osborn considered swaddling babies, and Ted Lane pharaohs. Sylvia Fairley unwisely vinyl-wrapped her car. Basil Ransome-Davies even stretched the title to rapping.

Commiserations to them and to Russell Sims, John Robinson, Frank McDonald, Judith Green, Con Connell, Bob Morrow, Bill Holloway, David Thompson, Martin Elster and Joe Cushnan, and congratulations to those printed below, each of whom wins £25, with the bonus prize of *The Chambers Dictionary* going to Peter Jarvis.

Silk whispers draw the daylight thin,
A hush of thread, a tender spin.
The caterpillar curls in silent prayer,
And folds itself within its lair,
A quiet cradle, leaf-lit, small.
It dreams of wings before the fall.
Inside, its body melts to thought,
And from that stillness, form is wrought.
Time hums, the shell grows pale and slight,
A seam of gold begins to light.
The wrapping splits – soft breath, release,
The air receives a fragile piece.
From silk to sky, the newborn tries,
And learns the freedom of open skies.
Peter Jarvis

Gloved, scarfed, we watch two patient gardeners wrap
Green oilskin covers on the minor gods.
Grey statues vanish, muffled against cold;
Diana's sheathed and even Homer nods.

A practised art this winter closing down,
Protecting stone from penetrating frost.
One lichened arm still reaches for the sky,
Desperate for daylight and the freedoms lost.
King Louis would have seen it much the same,
When Versailles packed its summery dress away:
Chilled orange trees retreating behind glass,
That past still present in our cold today.
D A Prince

For days on end we extras wait,
Keeping warm the best we can
With crosswords, cards and knitting,
Sitting huddled round the van…

But now, in these damp autumn fields,
This movie's end's in sight;
No more dawn drives to God knows where –
That is the extra's plight…

For once this errant cloud drifts off
To free the fading sun,
With fingers crossed, we're on our marks
To start the final run…

This time it's *got* to be a wrap – no fluffing, stumbling
Talent-wise, no noise from passing plane –
Until the cry 'Hair in the gate!'
We'll have to go again…
David Dixon

Content sealed,
Bond firm, clasp tight.
You, drawing near him,
Silently weighing matters,
Special moment, this.
How strange, shedding tears,
Wrapping gift as well as card!
Even so, you have.
Shouldn't you wow him?
Him: 'Wow! You shouldn't have!'
You, so even: 'Card as well!'
As gift wrapping tears, shedding,
Strange how this moment, special,
matters, weighing silently!
Him, near, drawing you,
Tight clasp, firm bond sealed,
Content.
Helene Parry

COMPETITION No 328 Listening to some Bach played on a harpsichord, I wondered whether I didn't prefer it on the piano. A poem, please, called *The Instrument*, in any sense. Maximum 16 lines. We cannot accept any entries by post, I'm afraid, but do send them by e-mail (comps@theoldie.co.uk – don't forget to include your postal address), marked 'Competition No 328', by Thursday 8th January.

Two original reader trips

Come and stay at Il Trappeto for a tour of central Puglia

4th to 11th July 2026

LIMITED TO 12 READERS – JUST TWO BEDROOMS LEFT

Il Trappeto, a former olive mill set among ancient olive groves

The Oldie has hosted several tours of Puglia, based at the publisher's *masseria* near Ostuni. James Pembroke writes, 'This October, I hosted 12 readers for "an unforgettable week" – "the best so far".

So I've plotted a fresh itinerary for July, with Lucy Ogilvie-Grant as your hostess. I'll be joining on the Tuesday. Lucy is the perfect hostess and knows the house and area well. Dinner will be out in a favourite restaurant, or by the pool or in the *limonetto*. Breakfast will be served by the pool.

The new itinerary includes – of course – Lecce, the great city of the warm South, and the lovely lesser-known Locorotondo and Martina Franca.

ITINERARY

Saturday 4th July – Depart on BA 2606 at 1.40pm; arrive Bari 5.30pm. Minibus to Il Trappeto. 8pm drinks and welcome talk, by local historian Ferdinando Sallustio, about Puglia; 8.30pm dinner at Il Trappeto.
Sunday 5th July – lunch and Ostuni Full day of relaxing at Il Trappeto, with sumptuous lunch by the pool. Evening *tuk-tuk* tour round Ostuni; dinner at Taverna della Gelosia.
Monday 6th July – Conversano Tour of castle and church; seaside lunch near Savelletri. 5pm cookery class with house cook Mimma. Dinner at home.
Tuesday 7th July – Taranto Guided tour of archaeological museum of Taranto; lunch at seaside restaurant La Barca. 7pm wine-tasting with Donato. Dinner in the *limonetto*.
Wednesday 8th July – Martina Franca and Locorotondo Market day, followed by lunch and wine-tasting. Dinner in Carovigno at Michelin-starred restaurant Già Sotto L'Arco.
Thursday 9th July – Gioia del Colle and Noci Morning tours; barbecue dinner at Arrostuni.
Friday 10th July – Lecce and Otranto Dep 9am for Lecce; lunch by sea followed by visit to Otranto cathedral. Evening quiz and dinner at home.
Saturday 11th July – Depart house 9.30am for 12.25 BA flight from Bari, landing at Gatwick at 2.25pm.

Join Simon Berry for a tour of the Bordeaux region's Right Bank

1st to 6th October 2026

The medieval city of Saint-Émilion in Bordeaux

After giving us a unique tour of Oporto and the Douro Valley, Simon Berry, former Chairman of Berry Bros & Rudd, is opening more closed doors on the Right Bank in Bordeaux. We'll be staying at the smart Château Grand Barrail, set in parkland just outside Saint-Émilion. Simon will be hand-picking the restaurants.

He says, 'Bordeaux is still the greatest wine region in the world. This trip concentrates on the lesser-known regions of Pomerol, Saint-Émilion and Sauternes, which produce some of the finest (and most expensive) of the region's wines. We'll be staying in the heart of the vineyards, and visiting some of the most iconic properties (often meeting the proprietors themselves).'

ITINERARY

Thursday 1st October – arrival and Château Haut-Bailly Depart 08.25 Gatwick on easyJet, arriving Merignac 11am. Transfer to Hôtel Grand Barrail; lunch. Then tasting at Haut Bailly; dinner nearby.
Friday 2nd October – Pomerol Morning visit to Château La Conseillante; lunch at La Table de Catusseau. Afternoon visit to Vieux Château Certan and Le Pin. Dinner at l'Envers du Décor.
Saturday 3rd October – Sauternes Tour of the magnificent Abbaye de la Sauve-Majeure, followed by a visit to the limestone cliffs of Sainte-Croix-du-Mont, made up of fossilised oyster shells. Lunch, visit to Château d'Yquem. Dinner at Château Gruaud.
Sunday 4th October – Bordeaux Morning tour of the Cité du Vin; lunch at Le 7 Restaurant in the museum; afternoon tour of Bordeaux; dinner at La Tupina.
Monday 5th October – Saint-Émilion Morning visit to Château Ausone; lunch at Château Figeac, then tour and tasting. Walking tour of Saint-Émilion; quiz and dinner at the hotel.
Tuesday 6th October – home Depart at 11.20 on BA2571 from Merignac, arriving back at Gatwick at 11.55.

HOW TO BOOK: Call 01225 427311 or please email Katherine at reservations@theoldie.co.uk. The price per person is based on sharing a double/twin room, and includeds all meals, wine with meals and all transport. Flights not included. Deposit £750 per person; balance due 1st July 2026. PRICES: PUGLIA: £2,795 (en suite); £2,295 (shared bathroom); BORDEAUX: £2,995; single supplement: £400

From *EastEnders* to *Rivals*

Maggie Steed loved acting with Kenneth Cranham in *Shine on Harvey Moon* – and hated being the world's worst secretary. By *Louise Flind*

Is there something you really miss when abroad?
My dog, Lolly, a lurcher.

What's your favourite destination?
Anywhere fascinating that has sun – but I really love Suffolk.

I came from Devon and we used to have a house in Corfu up in the hills, away from the beaches in the north. I had a wonderful trip to Mexico to see a friend about 18 months ago and also went to Argentina. But I'm slightly less up for it now because of the air travel and everything that that means.

I've just read Ian McEwan's new book *What We Can Know*, to do with life a century from now and how they look back on us as totally irresponsible and the cause of all their woes.

What are your earliest childhood holiday memories?
Padstow in Cornwall. I was an only child and my parents and I used to go and stay with Mrs Tab at 20 High Street, Padstow. She used to do bed, breakfast and an evening meal.

Did you act at school?
I was at an all-girls grammar school. I played only men because I was quite tall and had a deep voice. I hadn't played a woman till I went to drama school…

I played Romeo and Toad in *Wind and the Willows* – that was my triumph. Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and Richard II in a very old-fashioned play called *Richard of Bordeaux*.

We all wore felt shoes that turned up in the front in great big twirls. That's why I wanted to be an actor – because of those experiences.

Why didn't you continue acting after being at the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School?
Because I couldn't get any work. I was very tall with gappy teeth. I wasn't a dolly bird in the sixties at all. And I remember the principal saying, 'Maggie, you'll never work till you're over 30.' So I went off and became the worst secretary in the world.

What was your first big break?
In the seventies, I worked at the Half Moon Theatre, run by Rob Walker. It was in an old synagogue in Whitechapel, and we shared the dressing room with the mice, and we did three or four productions that became the toast of the town.

Do you prefer TV to theatre?
It's the process of filming I like. But once you've learnt your way around a play with a good company, giving people that sort of pleasure is fantastic.

What was your favourite role?
Adelaide in *Guys and Dolls* at the Half Moon because I was so new, and being allowed to dance and sing was the bees' knees.

What's the most exotic place you've filmed in?
Australia in the bush. It was like a Western town, except there were kangaroos wandering around the streets. Also Hong Kong and Shanghai.

And the least exotic?
Sitting in caravans in the rain, in car parks. Once, another actor and I were so desperately bored that we found a little bottle and we wrote a note, saying, 'Help, help, we're two actors and we're isolated in the caravan over there. Please come and rescue us.'

And we threw it out into the car park.

With *Shine on Harvey Moon*, how did you get on with Laurence Marks, Maurice Gran and Kenneth Cranham?
Ken was my rock, and Laurence and Maurice allowed us a lot of leeway.

Did you know it would be a hit when you were filming?
Not at all – it was just this little comedy series about the war and life in prefabs and things.

Was *EastEnders* very arduous? Enjoyable?
I had a small flirtation with *EastEnders*. Very, very nice people.

What was Richard Griffiths like in *Pie in the Sky*?
Richard was terrific. He had that wonderful light touch.

Are you in the next *Rivals*?
For a bit.

What keeps you going?
I'll carry on until they stop asking for me.

Silent Witness *with Maggie Steed returns to BBC 1 on 29th December*

'My rock' … Maggie Steed and Kenneth Cranham in *Shine on Harvey Moon*

ITV; GETTY

New Year's Resolutions by Charlotte Metcalf

January is the traditional month for a reset, when we hope to become a little healthier, wealthier and wiser after our seasonal excesses.

Oldies are experienced enough to know how short-lived New Year's resolutions can be... Here are some tips that might just help our health, pockets and brains.

Gyms can be sweaty and intimidating for oldies – so instead book into a spa or a wellness retreat, even if just for the day, or a treatment.

It might give you the boost to start taking those extra daily steps.

Explore the numerous alcohol-free tipples now available, from wines and beers to delicious concoctions involving ginger and other spices to perk you up.

Make dry January less dismal – and less expensive.

Next, rev up the brain. Invest in a good light to help you read, or subscribe to an audio-book app.

Start practising a daily brainteaser, or download a language app – many are free – or sign up to a part-time educational course.

You might reach mid-January that little bit fitter, more buoyant and more knowledgeable.

Wanted

Gifts

Personal

Gifts

Music

Clothes & Bedding

Accessibility

Private Personal Assistant

Health

Health

Motoring

Genealogy

Management Consultancy

Health

Wanted

Video

Cleanliness is next to tastelessness

The clean, mean elite hate my shabby chic décor

JAMES PEMBROKE

'People are saying your house in Dorset is DIRTY,' *The Oldie*'s Town Mouse told me with compassionate joy. 'Sophia told me.'

He's helpful like that is Tom Hodgkinson, ever on the lookout for an opportunity to indulge in mischief. Sophia has never been to my house – but her pristine chums, Jemima and Louisa, have.

Being criticised by the *grandes dames* of Notting Hill is something of a badge of honour but, given I have a cleaner, what was the origin of these accusations?

My fridge must shoulder some of the blame. I have no truck with sell-by dates. I subscribe to the smell-test theory, whereas the contents of the mighty double-doored American fridges of W11 are daily scanned by Filipino slaves for any proximity to their day of destruction. This must be why their dinner-party food tastes of packaging. It has never been allowed to gain flavour through over-exposure to oxygen.

I inherited a low bar of fridge hygiene from my mother, who never threw away anything. The besieged inhabitants of Paris in 1870 or Leningrad from 1941 could have learned a few tricks from her. In 1979, my brother and I made a clean sweep of the entire kitchen and realised we were throwing away kitchen history.

There were tins of 1969 Sainsbury's soup and Mac Fisheries pilchards from 1971. Food archaeologists would not just have had a field day; they could have opened an entire Field Studies Centre with the exhibits. The real horror story was the fridge. A frogman's suit would have been insufficient armoury for the opening of the fridge door.

On the rare occasions when my mother's sister came by, we took great delight in watching her snap open the fridge for some milk. She would recoil, clutching her illuminated face, with a horror unmatched by Janet Leigh when Norman Bates offered to scrub her back.

Dismembered bodies would have been light relief compared with the furry cheeses and mould-engulfed takeaways.

The fridge door was the engine room of the smell, holding four or five bottles of milk, which contained a transparent greyish liquid up to the nape and had a cottage-cheese culture bursting through the top. So old were some of these bottles that they were in the advanced stages of their own parallel evolutionary process.

Had we never disturbed them, we might have witnessed a new form of life, with its own laws and literature. As it was, none of us dared to throw the bottles away.

'Don't touch them. I am going to make scones,' my mother would say.

I remember Jemima complaining of spiders, but I think that was largely a catch-all condemnation of my entire home in Dorset, with its occasional peeling wallpaper and paint, chipped mugs and old magazines.

The homes of my childhood were knee-deep in spiders and the flitting movements of daddy-long-legs. Everyone's curtains were faded, and huge cauldrons of bones boiled away on Agas for an eternity. Yet I never saw any soup actually being made. Mouse droppings were a familiar sight in larders until the rats took up occupancy.

But, Louisa, we all not only survived but rarely caught colds – not only because draughts pierced us nightly but because our immune systems could withstand anthrax. The rich live in IKEA sterility: everything is brand-new and they absolutely adore tech – especially massive TVs, which they mount above their fireplaces. One plutocrat once bet me I couldn't find the speakers whence his muzak blasted. I gave up.

'They're in the ceiling!' he bellowed and pointed to a spotless white roof, above which he must have installed all sorts of cabling at considerable expense.

In rich, spotless houses, there are always far too many family photos on every possible surface, which act as boasting devices. Super-white teeth gurn atop ski suits in St Moritz or bikinis in Mustique. None is ever sepia or unframed. And they love carpets – never Indian rugs – almost daring you to spill your cup of tea, for which there are umpteen coasters. All my side tables are adorned with white rings.

Even their art is chosen by interior designers to match their greige walls. My walls are filled with finds – mainly stained prints – from cheap auction houses. They are decidedly dirty and I love them for it.

Barbara took violent umbrage at the wooden floor in my kitchen. 'James, you can't live like this,' she wailed. So I did as I was told and painted the floor in RAF blue, and now it shows every nutshell, cake crumb and harmless splash of gravy. I have to sweep it constantly when I would far rather be making stock.

My solace? I pray Nicky Haslam dubs cleanliness as 'common' on next year's tea towel.

Virginia Ironside is away

The Oldie

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