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TERRY JONES BY MICHAEL PALIN

The Oldie

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Bond, Uncle Bond

Ian Fleming by his niece Kate Grimond

The death of Wilfred De'Ath – Melvyn Bragg

Maureen Lipman loses her bag

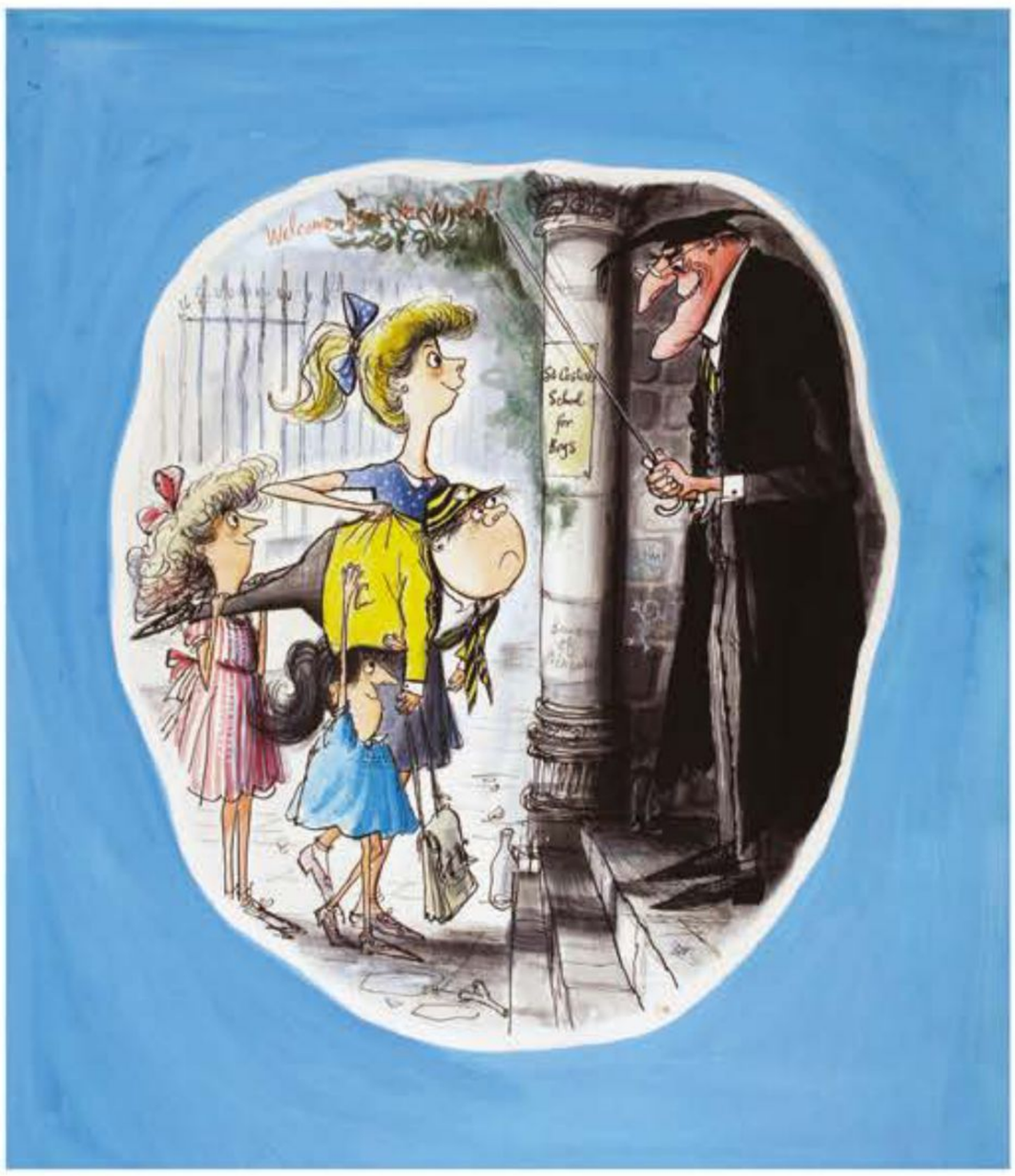
Letters from a prisoner of war – Roger Mortimer

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3 – 21 March 2020



Ronald Searle, *Welcome Back Molesworth!* 1956

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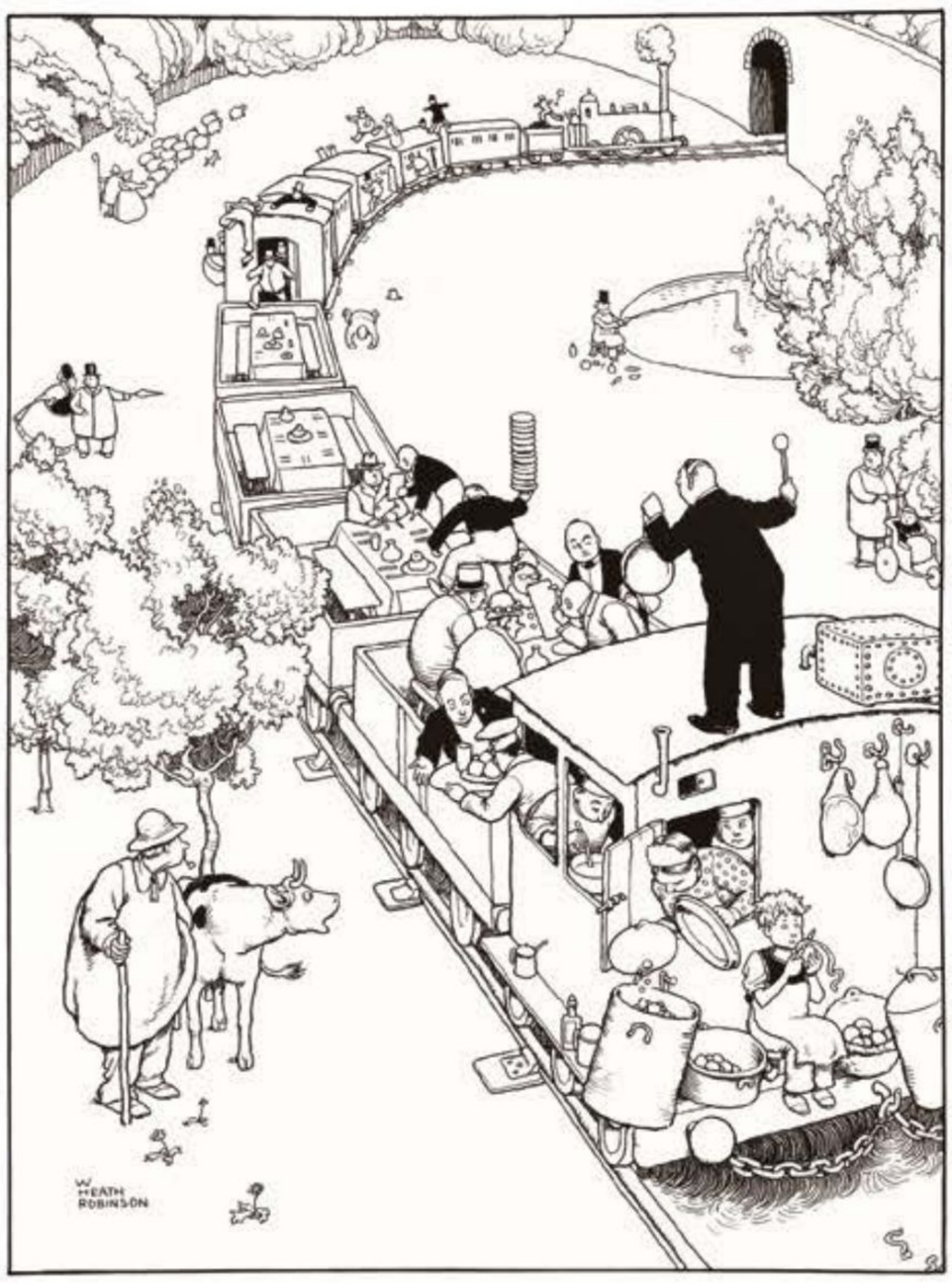
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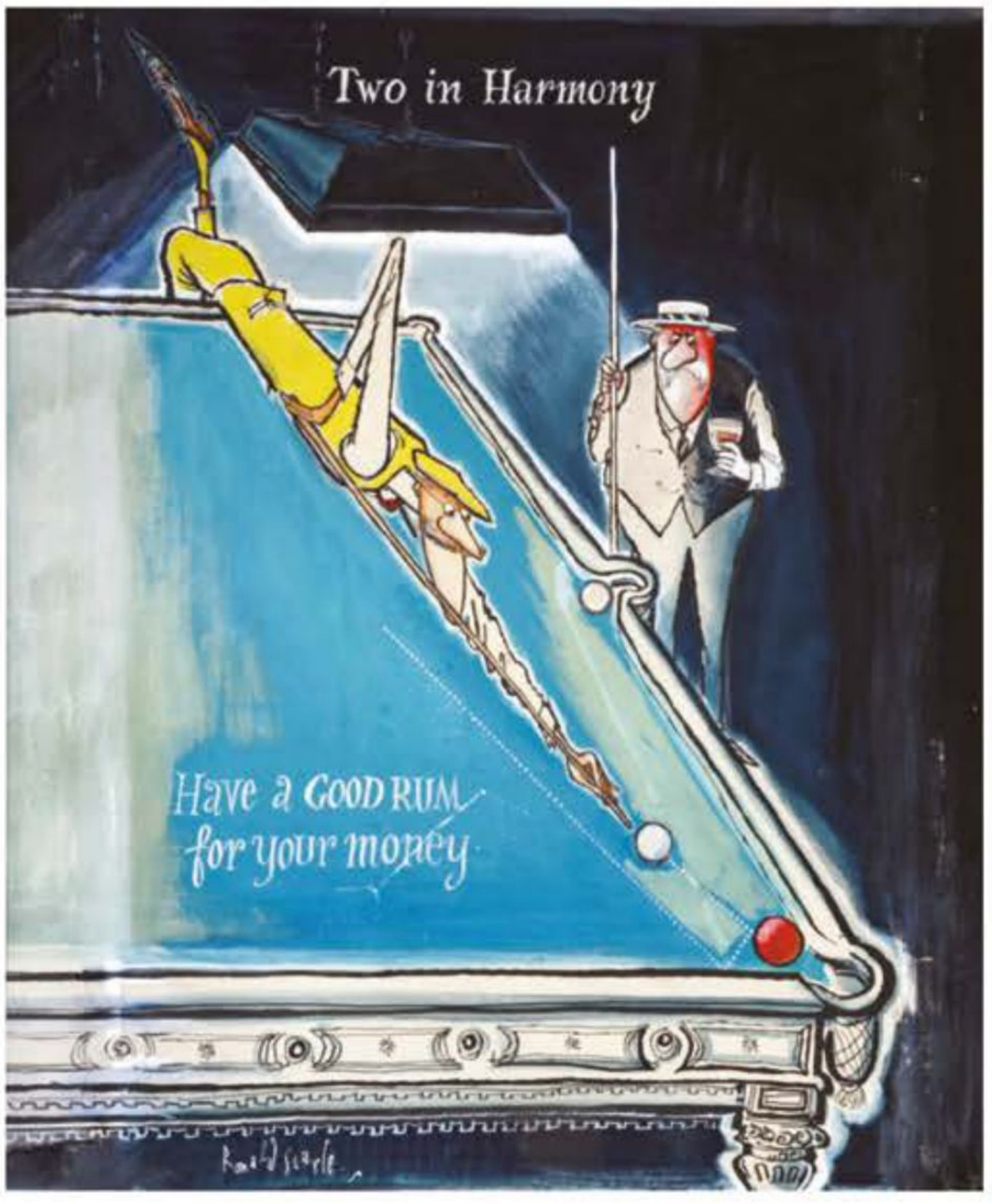
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William Heath Robinson, *Taking Seats for Lunch on one of the First Trains to be Equipped with Restaurant Cars*, 1935



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The Oldie



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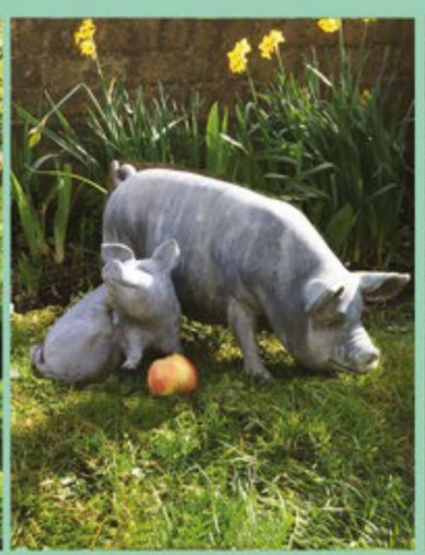



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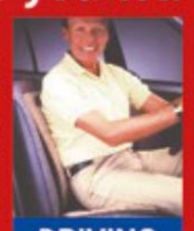



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The Old Un's Notes

The Old Un was so sad to hear of the death of Wilfred De'Ath, aged 82.

As well as being a star *Oldie* columnist, Wilfred had a glittering early career. The youngest producer at the BBC at 23, he was a fine broadcaster, as his 1971 profile of Daphne du Maurier shows.

After grammar school and Oxford, he married his secretary and had Charles, an actor, and Emma, a senior BBC executive. *The Oldie* sends them our condolences.

Why did it all go wrong? As William Cook wrote in his *Oldie* 80th-birthday interview with Wilfred, 'He used to be the blond Melvyn Bragg – now he's the picture in Melvyn's attic.' (Melvyn writes fondly of Wilfred on page 23.)

Well, Wilfred wasn't always nice. Ferdie Rous, *The Oldie*'s digital editor, says, 'He was rude beyond imagining. And he was pretty well every -ist under the sun. Rotund as I was, he dubbed me *The Oldie*'s Billy Bunter. After a while, he was very anxious about it; genuinely concerned.

'Transcribing his uncensored, handwritten copy every month was often an unpleasant experience. But he wrote brilliantly. Revolting but completely compelling.'

William Cook writes, 'Why did his life unravel? It began with the breakdown of his marriage, which he regretted. But why did he persist with this way of life until the end?

'First, because his traumatic early life [as the child of an Englishman and a German during the war] created an enduring sense of separation from respectable society.

'Secondly, because, like all great writers, he was searching for something he could write about better than anyone – and, as a literary, cultured tramp, he found it. A devout Christian, he told the truth about a netherworld the rest of us are too scared to scrutinise. In doing so, he broke free from the bourgeois lifestyle he despised.'

RIP dear Wilfred.

Remember Lewis Gilbert? You will know the films he directed: *Reach for the Sky*, *Sink the Bismarck!*, *The Admirable Crichton*, *Alfie*, *Educating Rita* and three Bond films – *You Only Live Twice*, *The Spy Who Loved Me* and *Moonraker*.

Gilbert was born 100 years ago, on 6th March 1920, into a family of Hackney music-hall performers.

After working as a child actor and serving in the RAF's PR unit, he got his first directing job with 1945's *The Ten Year Plan*, a documentary about building pre-fabricated houses. Thirty-eight more films followed before his death in 2018, aged 97.

Unlike most directors, Gilbert was happiest talking about his flops – such as *The Adventurers* (1970), adapted from a Harold Robbins novel: 'A bullshit story which I made instead of *The Godfather*,' Gilbert said, laughing. He worked with Orson Welles on *Ferry to Hong Kong* (1959), which Gilbert described as a 'total white elephant'.

'Do you mean the film or Welles?' he was asked.

'Both of them, I'm afraid,' Gilbert said, sighing.

The Old Un was much moved by a new book about bereavement by Juliet Rosenfeld, *The State of Disbelief: A Story of Death, Love and Forgetting*.

Rosenfeld, a psychotherapist, writes about the death in 2015 of her husband, Andrew Rosenfeld, at the age of only 52, from lung cancer. She draws a subtle line between the agony of grief and the longer period of mourning.

She writes particularly well about the worship of objects belonging to the dead; in her case, two unwashed, white shirts of her husband's.

'I rotated the two of them strictly, so as to not run out of the smell in either of them,' she writes. 'I would strip off my pyjama top to put the shirt on and pull the collar up, so it touched the base of my skull, rubbing my head on it. Did I lick them? I know I often kissed the fabric.'

Among this month's contributors



Mary Clive (1907-2010) (p15) was a writer. Her books include *Brought Up and Brought Out* (1938) and *Christmas with the Savages* (1955). Her memories of Ian Fleming haven't been published before.



Kate Grimond (p14) writes for the *Spectator* and the *Economist*. She is author of a biography of her mother, the actress Celia Johnson, and is a former chairman of Ian Fleming Publications.



Ivo Dawnay (p90) was Foreign Editor and Washington Bureau Chief at the *Sunday Telegraph* and the National Trust Communications Director. He writes about the *Mayflower*'s 400th anniversary.



Maureen Lipman (p19) acted at the National Theatre (1971-73) and the RSC (1973). She played Joyce Grenfell in *Re: Joyce!* and Beattie in the BT ads. She's now Evelyn Plummer in *Coronation Street*.

DAFYDD JONES/JAMES FLETCHER

NOT MANY DEAD

Important stories you may have missed

Cameras are investigating burst pipe
East Kent Mercury



49-year-old set fire to cat flap
***Daily Post* (North Wales)**

Driver with legs out of bus charged
***Stabroek News* (Guyana)**

£15 for published contributions

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KATHRYN LAMB



'For our next number, you'll be getting a zesty hint of Cole Porter, with the sumptuous essence of Prokofiev, underpinned by the delicate and persistent, velvety notes of Scott Joplin and Mozart with the well-rounded and refreshing finish of Purcell and the bright, crisp tones of Wagner'

In 2018, three years after his death, she writes, 'I have all but forgotten my crazed love affair with these two cotton garments. I grab them both and smell them quickly everywhere, everywhere I used to: the wrists, under the arms, the collar, the chest.

'There is nothing.'

Rarely has the physical nature of memory of the dead been so well written about.

✻ When it comes to getting on in American elections, what's in a name?

Pronouncing Pete Buttigeig (Boot-edge-edge), the Democrats' boy wonder from South Bend, Indiana, is simple compared with the struggle the Old Un recalls with Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Jimmy Carter's National Security Advisor from 1977 to 1981.

✻ It seems that relations between England and Scotland have been a little fraught lately.

So it's good to know that a great unheralded feat of engineering – a bridge, no less – is bringing the two countries together.

The Union Chain Bridge,



Scotland meets England. The Union Chain Bridge turns 200

which spans the River Tweed five miles upstream from Berwick-upon-Tweed, is the oldest vehicular suspension bridge in the world and was the longest such bridge when constructed in 1820. That means it's right up there with Brooklyn Bridge, Golden Gate Bridge and the Akashi Kaikyō in Japan.

Now, as it celebrates its 200th anniversary, it's being dismantled and rebuilt, thanks to locals on both sides of the border, who, having formed the Friends of the Union Bridge, were awarded



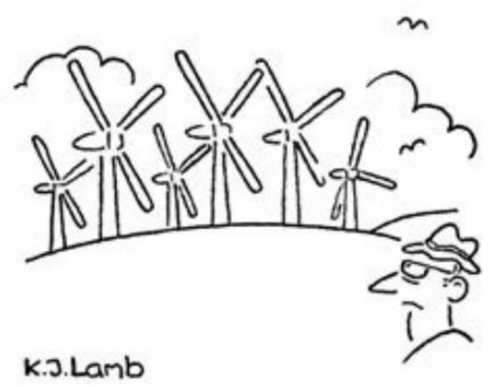
'I'll take the non-vegan option'

£3.5 million by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Such was its fame that Isambard Kingdom Brunel came to admire it.

When the bridge was constructed, it was painted black because its completion coincided with the death of George III, but latterly it took on a green hue. Cars can cross only one at a time, passing a plaque that says in Latin 'Unity Is Our Strength'.

Oldie contributor Mark Palmer, who grew up in the area, remembers his grandmother making pilgrimages to the bridge in the 1960s and stopping in the middle to admire the view. On one occasion, one other car was waiting to cross. 'My dear, the crowds were simply awful,' she said later over a pot of tea.

The Old Un laments the passing of the census after the 2021 survey, which



'I wandered lonely as a cloud, when all at once I saw...'

might be the last one, according tothe UK's National Statistician, Professor Sir Ian Diamond.

Sociological patterns can be revealed in census returns, as we saw from David Olusoga's excellent BBC2 series *A House Through Time* last year. But they can also reflect social stasis in some areas. One *Oldie* reader in north London bought his Canonbury house in 1975, and looked it up: he discovered that in 1831 it was home to a family of four: George Holman, solicitor aged 40, from Sussex; Emily Margaret, his wife aged 36, from Middlesex; two daughters, Margaret aged three and Helen aged two; and their unmarried 'nurse/domestic servant' aged 30, from Bedfordshire. She was delightfully named Lucy Giggle. A hundred and forty years later, the house held exactly the same family configuration: London-born father and mother in their late 30s, two small daughters, Lucy and Emily, and a 30-year-old unmarried nanny named Annie, from Essex. He longs to know what 2021 reveals.

Teddy bears were once big business in Britain, the Old Un was told by a friend after *The Oldie*'s Rupert Bear centenary article by Gyles Brandreth.

But of all the 30 or so traditional British teddy factories, only one remains.

Nestled in the Shropshire countryside, Merrythought has been making stuffed toys for 90 years. A dozen or so highly skilled seamstresses hand-stitch each teddy.

The Ironbridge factory is now run by Sarah Holmes, great-granddaughter of Merrythought founder, Gordon Holmes.

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Merrythought has, over the years, produced a huge bear menagerie, including the Punkie Bear and the Cheeky Bear – named by the Queen when she saw him at the British Industries Fair and pronounced him 'a cheeky little bear'.

The Queen herself had a Merrythought bear made to celebrate her 90th birthday in 2016. The regal bear wears a fine lilac silk overcoat and matching hat – the perfect outfit for a teddy bears' picnic at Buckingham Palace.



Fontastic! St Cassian's

The Old Un has adored fonts ever since he was dunked in one as a baby. So he's delighted with *Church Fonts*, a new book by Matthew Byrne (Shire Books, £8.99).

Pictured left is the Old Un's favourite, the Norman font at St Cassian's, Chaddesley Corbett, Worcestershire – a classic example of the Herefordshire School of Romanesque Sculpture, which also extended to neighbouring counties. The Herefordshire School drew from as far afield as Italy and the Middle East. Ah, the wisdom of all fonts!

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Supermac was a super diarist

Like Harold Macmillan, my hero, I go to bed with a Trollope

All my life, I have been making friends with characters I have met in books.

When I was very small, I spent hours chatting with the Saucepan Man from Enid Blyton's *The Magic Faraway Tree*. As a teenager, I read Henry Fielding's great picaresque novel *Joseph Andrews*, and came to regard Joseph's good-hearted travelling companion, Parson Adams, almost as a father.

And now, embarking on my eighth decade and finding myself reading his diaries for the first time, I have made a new best friend – and quite an unlikely one: the former prime minister Harold Macmillan.

I met him once. In the late 1960s, when I was an undergraduate at Oxford (I know I should say, 'When I was a student at uni', but I am trying to use the language of the period), I was invited to a tea party at which Supermac (then the University's Chancellor) was guest of honour. When I arrived, the great man was already there, seated by the fireplace. Our host instructed me to go over and introduce myself. I did as I was told and found the 75-year-old elder statesman with his eyes closed, fast asleep.

After 20 minutes, Macmillan stirred, smiled at me endearingly, allowed me to help him to his feet and tottered on his way, saying no more to me then than 'Hello' and 'Goodbye'.

Now, 50 years on, I am getting to know the man and I am loving him. I am discovering him through Volume One of his diaries, *The Cabinet Years 1950-1957*. He is my kind of political hero: ambitious, pragmatic, liberal-minded and generous-hearted. He works hard and he plays hard. He finds all the time he needs for shooting and even more for reading. He can gobble up three or four major works of history in a weekend. When exhausted – which is quite often – he retreats to bed with a Trollope. (*Doctor Thorne* is his favourite – mine now, too.)

Because he is so much my senior, I don't expect any personal gossip. He does not mention his wife Dorothy's long affair with his parliamentary colleague Bob Boothby, but his many grandchildren are clearly the delight of his life. He gives me exactly what I want in the friendship of an older man of distinction: he treats me as if I were his equal and opens the window onto a world I wish I'd known.

He has just been telling me about the day he had lunch at Buck's Club with Winston Churchill, still Prime Minister, aged 80, in 1954: 'A dozen oysters; cream soup; chicken pie; vanilla and strawberry ice. Moselle and brandy washed this down. I'm afraid I could not manage the soup or the ice-cream.'

The other day, for the first time in years, I went to the Royal Court Theatre in London's Sloane Square.

It was a good experience. There's a large, inviting bar in the basement; a small theatre bookshop on the first floor; and upstairs, in the studio space, I saw three young actresses (no, I'm not going to say 'three female actors') in a dazzling piece of new writing by Miriam Battye called *Scenes with girls*. It has all the fizz and contemporaneity of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, the play that in 1956 made the Royal Court famous.

Battye's play is a well-constructed post-coming-of-age drama about a trio of 24-year-olds, so there is plenty of talk of sex and much bad language. It's thought-provoking, but not disturbing. The only disturbing element of the whole experience was the email from the theatre that arrived on the morning of my visit. Under the heading 'Emotive Content', I was advised, 'We generally avoid giving too much away before you see the performance. However, if there are certain themes that you know would cause you extreme distress and you'd like to speak to one of the Royal Court team to find out more before your visit, you can call us.' Well-intentioned, I know, but a tad worrying, too. If you are going to avoid extreme distress you are never going to be able to see *King Lear*.

Quite a few funerals so far this year (that's life), and doubtless there are more to come, but for funeral arrival of the year the palm already goes to the actor, director, raconteur and motorbike enthusiast Nicky Henson. At his own request, his coffin arrived at Mortlake Crematorium in a motorcycle sidecar. We cheered so loudly that the sidecar was obliged to take a second lap of honour before the funeral could begin. Nicky could lift your spirits right to the end.

Gyles is touring his Break a Leg! *one-man show until July. Details at www.gylesbrandreth.net/2020-tour*





A Greek tragedy! Oxford dumbs down

Homer is crucial – even if he's responsible for Boris Johnson's mind

MATTHEW NORMAN

The University of Oxford, the *Daily Mail* website relates, is contemplating a syllabus tweak that has 'shocked classics students'.

Eager to tailor its classics degree for state-educated pupils less *au fait* with dead languages than their public-school brethren, it is proposing to make Homer's *Iliad* and Virgil's *Aeneid*, those epic cornerstones of the classical canon, optional rather than mandatory texts.

In strictest sooth, 'shocked' doesn't begin to capture the reaction of this former classics student (though not, as will be explained, at Oxford).

If I had a tent, I'd already have retired within it to sulk in the style of Achilles (*Iliad*, Book IX). In the absence of camping equipment, I write from the bed to which this outrage has sent me with a grievous fit of the ague.

Yet one should have been prepared. On these pages only last month, Oxford don John Davie eloquently regretted the decline of linguistic teaching of the classics.

It is perhaps inevitable that John and I would be of one mind here, both of us being Trinity men. Admittedly, his career at that Oxford college, where he has taught for a decade, is marginally the more impressive.

My tenure as a Trinity classicist endured for ten minutes. Under the sort of sustained and intense pressure more familiar at the time in a Lubyanka interrogation cell, I cracked and confessed to the following.

The source material drawn on for a 1,500-word entrance-exam essay about Euripides's *Alcestis* had, in its entirety, been the ten-line blurb on the back of the Penguin translation.

That episode came in 1981, years before *The Fast Show*'s Mark Williams introduced the phrase 'I'll get me coat' into common parlance. But the sentiment was identical, as was the deed. Mumbling incomprehensibly, I collected the garment and bade that bemused trio of dons a jaunty good day.

For almost 40 years, the memory has had a berth on the endlessly rotating roster of self-inflicted gigahumiliations that wake me at 3.43am with a yelp of anguish.

And for what? Nowadays, the essayist who admitted to not having read a syllable of a text in the original tongue wouldn't feel compelled to take the early bath. She or he would be awarded an exhibition on the spot.

The battle between elitism and inclusivity has raged in academia, as elsewhere in a country where social mobility has been in more precipitous decline than classics for so long.

There are potent arguments either side of the chasm between traditional standards and attempts to extend the Oxbridge talent pool.

As someone to whom 'Oxford Mods' means a Paul Weller tribute night in a Headington pub, I may not be best qualified to adjudicate between them.

This is not wholly to dismiss the lasting worth of a redbrick degree. I retain a recollection from reading the *Iliad* (in the Loeb edition, with the translation on the facing page) about a cleaning product going berserk and slaughtering its flock of sheep.

I also recall – John will correct me if this stems from a misreading – the equally anachronistic segment of the *Aeneid*, in which Virgil's eponymous hero falls for a Carthaginian sex toy.

Yet when it comes to gauging the timeless value of traditional teaching, there are better exemplars than a half-witted idler.

Here, we look for guidance to more scholarly types who not only reached the scheduled end of an Oxford interview, but enjoyed a mastery of Greek and Roman literature that won them a place.

These are the living proofs of the faith that studying the classics in the formal manner imbues the student with such priceless qualities as unremitting respect for the truth; an innate sense of personal honour; the ability to speak English with crystal clarity; and corresponding disdain for incomprehensible waffling.

Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the Prime Minister. Could there be a finer standard-bearer for the unflinchingly old-school classical education than Boris Johnson himself?

Johnson got into Oxford on the strength of the classical learning he wears – not so lightly – to this day.

Would he be capable of the spellbinding forensic *tours de force* at the despatch box had he not lavished his Etonian attentions on Cicero and Demosthenes?

Is it conceivable that his ungodly genius for long-term political strategising would have been born without his intensively studying the wily Odysseus in the original?

A danger of not reading the *Iliad* in Greek is that you risk missing the nuances. Even the better translations can misrepresent what the poet had in mind.

The right-hand side of the Loeb, for instance, describes the ungodly raw courage of Hector as he faced down the Achaean armies almost alone at the gates of ravaged Troy.

But, having consulted my trusty Liddell & Scott Greek-English dictionary, I find that the literal translation of the passage actually concerns the son of Priam taking fright when a Greek warrior asks him a harmless question, and hiding in a fridge.

> 'My tenure as a Trinity classicist endured for ten minutes'

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OLDEN LIFE

WHAT WAS AN anchorite?

Imagine being walled up in a narrow cell measuring no more than 12ft square (and often less).

Imagine being unable to dine at a table with a companion or take a walk in the open air. Imagine your only view of the outside world being glimpsed via a narrow window, through which you receive your food and pass your chamber pot. Imagine choosing this way of life over any other.

For the anchorites of medieval England, walled into an anchorhold (a cell) attached to the chancel of a church, their 'living sacrifice' was definitely a choice. It reflected their belief in the superiority of the confined life devoted to Christ and spiritual development, divorced from the temptations of worldly pleasure.

Both men and women could become anchorites, with women outnumbering men four to one in the 13th century and two to one in the 15th. Men were usually monks or priests who took time out and were walled up temporarily. Women were often nuns or prosperous widows, more likely to remain in their cells for life.

An anchorite held a position of prestige and the demand for an anchorhold was competitive. Prospective candidates had to obtain a licence from the bishop and have sufficient funds to support themselves. Records exist of endowments, inheritances and gifts from kings towards their upkeep.

At the start of an anchorite's 'immurement', he or she was delivered to the anchorhold by an officiating priest, accompanied by chants and psalms taken from the Office of the Dead. Once smeared with oil in the sacrament of Extreme Unction, the newly fledged recluse would step into their cell while the remaining stones were wedged in place. Henceforth, the anchorite watched mass and the Eucharist through a window into the chancel called the 'squint'.

What did an anchorite do all day? Apart from prayer, study and contemplation, an anchorite gave advice and spiritual guidance to people through their window. In this sense, they weren't as isolated as hermits.



Julian of Norwich in her anchorhold, by Stephen Reid (1912)

The *Ancrene Wisse*, a guidance manual written for three sisters in the early 13th century, gives the anchorite advice ranging from the sensible (wear warm, well-made clothes and keep no animals, except perhaps a cat) and the useful (repair church vestments and garments for the poor) to the absurd (scrape up earth every day for your own grave using the fingernails lest your hands become too soft and supple).

Celebrated anchorites include Simon the Anker (d. 1537), who lived for 20 years in All Hallows, London, and published *The Fruit of Redemption*; John Murymouth of Westminster Abbey, who took the confession of King Richard II during the Peasants' Revolt in 1381; and Margaret Kirkby (1322–c1391) in North Yorkshire, for whom mystic hermit Richard Rolle wrote *The Form of Living* to help her attain spiritual ecstasy.

The best-known was Julian of Norwich (c1342–c1416), who lived 22 years in the anchorhold of St Julian's Church. Here she wrote her *Revelations of Divine Love*, describing Christ's invitation to her to creep into his wounded side. She described her anchorhold as a sanctuary within the divine wound.

St Julian's Church in Norwich, destroyed during the Second World War, has since been rebuilt as a shrine for the faithful in search of spiritual solace.

Deborah Nash

MODERN LIFE

WHAT IS A gravity blanket?

A gravity blanket is a weighted quilt, filled with glass or plastic beads, generally weighing anything from five to 25 pounds. Retailers recommend you buy one that's about ten per cent of your body weight.

I've just bought one for my long-suffering, sleep-deprived wife. Before I bought her a gravity blanket, she was up all night while I slept like a baby. Now it's the other way round.

I paid £100 for ours, which appears to be about average (prices range from around half of what I spent to almost twice as much).

Until my wife asked me to buy one, I'd never heard of them, but they're actually very popular. You can find a wide range of brands in department stores and also online, where they're advertised as a cure-all for everything from insomnia to ADHD. Most people use them to help them sleep, but they're also supposed to relieve stress and anxiety, and even alleviate panic attacks. So how do they work?

It seems the idea started about 20 years ago, with therapists treating autism. They noticed their patients were often comforted by lying beneath weighted blankets – or, in extreme cases, wearing specially adapted, weighted clothes.

It turns out that it isn't just autistic people who find this sensation comforting (maybe we're all a bit autistic, to some extent). Apparently, the extra weight applies something called 'deep-pressure stimulation' to your prostrate body, which increases your serotonin levels and decreases cortisol levels.

CHRONICLE/ALAMY

It sounded like mumbo-jumbo to me. So I contacted Oldie Towers, keen to write a ruthless hatchet job about this newfangled fad. It turns out the Editor is a fan, and now my wife has become a convert too. She's always been a fitful sleeper, but now she's out like a light within minutes. She says it makes her feel secure and cosy, and stops her tossing and turning. I suppose it could be a placebo, but who cares? Either way, it does the trick.

Unfortunately, it's had the opposite effect on me. I find it intensely claustrophobic lying underneath something that weighs as much as a small dog or a large baby. I hate the way it pins me down in one position. It makes me feel hot and bothered. It contributes to duvet creep. If only one of you is under the pesky thing, you might as well be sleeping in separate beds.

So are gravity blankets worth the money? It does seem a lot to pay for what is, effectively, merely an extremely heavy eiderdown – but my wife swears it's worth every penny.

In a way, it's nothing new. A lot of us had comfort blankets when we were kids, like Linus in Peanuts. Like Linus, I loved my comfort blanket, and my life has never been quite the same since my mother decided I was too old to have one and destroyed it. Maybe that's why gravity blankets are so desirable – they're merely grown-up comfort blankets, something reassuring to cling onto to protect us from the cold and lonely adult world.

William Cook



EVERETT COLLECTION/ALAMY

Comfort blanket: Linus van Pelt snuggles up in *Peanuts*

Dear Papa – cook, musician, *Oldie* editor

My father, Alexander Chancellor, former editor of *The Oldie*, would have turned 80 this year.

His birthday used to be spent very quietly at Stoke Park, his home in Northamptonshire. Straight after school, my mother and I would drive to Stoke Park to be greeted by my father, standing over the stove, cooking lunch. I told him he ought to be a chef as he was such a brilliant cook. This ridiculous idea was more sensible than my other belief: he should be a gardener because of the broad beans he grew in a vegetable patch.

At Stoke Park there were also hens, which lived in a small enclosure with a rather beautiful old wooden door. I called it the Secret Garden (not that it was remotely secret – I told everyone about it although I was sure to do so in a hushed tone). I named one hen Sweetie because of her amicable nature. Her feathers were a lovely golden colour and she was my favourite.

One day, Papa and I found Sweetie lying on the ground, unable to move. We carried her inside and laid her in a box with some straw. We cared for her in this box for a couple of hours until she died. We carried her outside and buried her in the orchard. I covered the spot with a stone and planted a stick in the ground. As Papa and I walked back to the house hand in hand, we agreed to get another hen with the same golden feathers.

'What should we call it?' Papa asked.

'How about Demerara? Sweetie's feathers were the same colour as demerara sugar.'

'That's a bit long and complicated, don't you think?' he said. 'Why don't we just call it Sugar?'

What a splendid idea. Our plan was agreed. It was never fulfilled as Papa died in 2017 before we got the chance.

In the sitting room of Stoke Park, there was a piano, on which Papa would play the music of his childhood. *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Oklahoma!* and the songs of the Second World War – *We'll Meet Again* and *The White Cliffs of Dover* – became the music of my childhood, too. It was my job to turn the pages. Papa was always very musical and considered becoming a concert pianist. As a child, he also played the violin. When he was seven, his mother asked him to play for their guests. He declared, 'I am too old to be an infant prodigy!'

Papa was a very pretty child. At the end of the war, he and his siblings liked to ask American soldiers for chewing gum. When it came to deciding which one of them would approach the soldiers, Papa said, 'I should ask, for I have the longest eyelashes.' The soldiers never turned him down.

When I was little, Papa would come into my bedroom in the evenings to wish me goodnight. He would read me a story and sing me a song his mother had sung to him:

'Goodnight, goodnight.
Papa will sing a song to Freya.
Goodnight, goodnight.
Freya will go to sleep.'

Freya Bearn, aged 14



JOHN BOWLING

Freya in the *Oldie* office with Nicholas Garland's portrait of Alexander Chancellor

As the 25th Bond film comes out, *Kate Grimond* remembers Ian Fleming – her prescient, funny, diffident uncle

Bond, Uncle Bond

I last saw my uncle, Ian Fleming, in church at his mother's funeral in 1964. He was in the pew opposite, supporting himself with a stick and with that grey-white visage of the very ill. Less than a fortnight later, he too was dead, at the age of 56.

For the previous few weeks, he and his mother (my grandmother) had been in nursing homes – he in Hove and she nearby in Brighton – which was distressing but, it has to be said, made visiting easier for members of the family. My father, Peter Fleming, drove there with his half-sister, Amaryllis, who, always more straight-talking, said on the way back, 'You realise that Ian is dying'. My father refused to countenance this and said, 'Nonsense' – or some such.

Ian died on 12th August 1964, poignantly on the 12th birthday of his son, Caspar. It was also the day that the first copies of his only children's book, *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, were sent out.

For our side of the family – well, for my father – the Glorious Twelfth, the opening of the grouse-shooting season, was always a red-letter day. And there we were that day, on a moor in southern Scotland (Sister Teresa of these pages among our number). During a damp, tweedy picnic – tartan rugs, steaming dogs, tin thermoses – I noticed my father sitting a little away from the group and not joining in. He had heard the news of his brother's death that morning – but told us only when we returned to the house. He then left for the south. Tributes to the creator of James Bond poured in.

Only two years had passed since Ursula Andress in a white bikini had stepped out of the sea holding a conch in the first Bond film, *Dr No*.

That was followed a year later by *From Russia with Love*, for the première of which Ian's formidably social wife, Ann, threw a party at their house in Victoria Square, to which I went with my father.

I remember sitting on an upstairs landing at a round table in the middle of which was a large bowl of caviar (something I had never seen before), accompanied by chopped eggs and raw onion. On dainty chairs in the elegant drawing room off that landing perched corpulent men such as Evelyn Waugh, Cyril Connolly and Arnold Goodman. They were Ann's – not Ian's – friends, and he soon sloped off to bed.

The films brought untold success and celebrity to Ian in those last couple of years, but genetic heart disease, made many times worse by years of heavy drinking and smoking, had taken its toll. Roll back to the healthier years and you find an attractive, interesting, complicated man; a clubman, never happier than when playing golf or bridge with undemanding companions; a loner *au fond*; a pursuer of women – and also pursued by them; a cruel tease and a kind friend; someone with a keen visual sense and an unusual gift of prescience.

For my sister, my brother and me, living deep in the country in the drab austerity of the 1950s with dark boxy cars, tinned fruit, corned beef and liquorice sticks, a visit from Ian was a tonic. Long before James Bond had caught the public's attention, he would arrive in a car that had an extra purr to the engine, and he would make us all laugh, tell us interesting facts and bring tales of foreign places. A bore he was not.

My father, Peter (1907-71), was a writer all his life, much lauded for his travel writing in the 1930s. He won the prizes; he occupied that ground.

Ian (1908-64) was the second of four brothers. After a mixed career – Sandhurst, Reuters, the City and then, unexpectedly but crucially, five years' war service at the heart of naval intelligence – he did not put pen to paper seriously until he was in his 40s, and then only with diffidence and embarrassment.

> 'A pursuer of women – and pursued by them; a cruel tease and a kind friend'

In 1953, Coronation year, with encouragement and help from his friend the poet William Plomer (pronounced Ploomer), *Casino Royale* was published and James Bond came into existence.

A book a year followed – 12 novels and two collections of short stories – all written in the two months he spent in Jamaica. 'Not a patch on his brother, but very readable' was the thrust of many of the early reviews.

His style of short sentences and expressions such as 'Bond's gun spoke once' was mocked, only to be widely emulated, and his genius for names and titles has ensured that many are now part of the lexicon; barely a day goes by when you don't come across a pun or a play on those titles.

To a journalist who visited him in Jamaica in his last year, Ian Fleming said, 'One can only be grateful to the talent that came out of the air, and to one's capacity for hard, concentrated effort. I am perhaps the smallest and most profitable one-man factory in the world. I don't want yachts, racehorses or a Rolls-Royce. I want my family and friends and good health and to have a small treadmill, with a temperature of 80 degrees in the shade and in the sea, to come to every year for two months. And to be able to work there and look at the flowers and fish, and somehow to give pleasure, whether innocent or illicit, to people in their millions. Well, you can't ask for more.'

There is no question that, as the Broccoli family's 25th Bond film, *No Time to Die*, opens, pleasure indeed has been given worldwide, and for those of us who have been associated with the 'factory' it has been, above all, fun.

Even Her Majesty recognised that for the opening of the 2012 Olympic Games in London.



EVERETT COLLECTION INC/ALAMY

Shaken, not stirred, by 007

And *Mary Clive* recalls a disastrous 1938 holiday in Capri with a sunburnt Fleming

From autumn 1937 to May 1938, I dined with Ian once a week, and was absolutely fascinated by him.

Every time he was different and every time one said, 'This is the real Ian.'

It was like peeling an onion. You peeled off layer after layer, and in the middle there was nothing. He was an enormously difficult crossword puzzle. He was glittering but had no heat; he was elusive; he was lovely but useless, like a Christmas-tree ornament.

Ian was the best-looking man I have ever seen, with a broken nose and a damned soul/fallen angel expression. He was slightly round-shouldered but with marvellous legs – appreciated only in bathing dress.

I had a walk-out with him – although throughout our acquaintance sex never did rear its ugly head. He turned his best side up when talking to me, but he found it a strain and could not keep it up for very long.

By the time I got to know him in the 1930s, he had become a stockbroker in Rowe & Pitman. Ian was thoroughly ashamed of being a stockbroker as he thought it a ghastly profession.

He would tell me stories — nearly always stories about himself and a girl, and they were so vividly told that one could *see* everything happening.

His attitude to his affairs was ingenuous excitement during the pursuit, naughty triumph and then contempt and repulsion. Like many Don Juans, Ian did not like women, and they brought out the worst in him. He wanted women to behave badly – to punch his nose in a masculine way and to be slippery as he was. He was very feminine and needed a masculine-style partner.

In spring 1938, we had a row. I told him I liked him only as a substitute for the man I was really in love with (Meysey Clive, later my husband). It was typical that he enjoyed this row – indeed any row – and he never asked the name of my real passion nor anything about him.

He wasn't interested in people or in my private life. After the war, when I mentioned that the novelist Anthony Powell was my brother-in-law, he was very surprised, having never heard of my sister Violet. He never asked how many children I had, nor did he enquire about them. Ian liked odd, impersonal facts.

He corrected the proofs of *Brought Up and Brought Out* [Mary Clive's 1938 memoir]. This he was quite excellent at, being very quick to detect lapses into whimsy, misspellings, grammar mistakes and errors of fact. He knew that the right name for the people who inquire into the occult was the Society for Psychical Research. He would have appreciated it if I had dedicated the book to him, but his reputation was so bad that I did not want my name connected with his and no one knew we were having a walk-out.

In spring 1938, he went to Capri to recuperate after appendicitis. I had been planning to go on a Nazi 'Strength Through Joy' cruise (of all things!) as a journalist, but it fell through – mercifully, it seems now – so I went to Capri instead.

When I was getting into Ian's wagon-lit, looking at the placards for Hitler and Mussolini, I knew the expedition was a failure. I had a headache after sitting up all night. When I took a couple of aspirin, Ian made a fuss. It amused him to play at pretending aspirin was a sinister drug, but it struck me as too stupid.

Our respective attitudes to abroad were poles apart – mine taking it as bathing, to float in and enjoy; his as a game of Red Indians.

On Capri, there were two places to have dinner. In two days, one had exhausted all the possibilities. The company was dingy in the extreme. A frozen calm descended.

Besides being intensely bored, I found my position made difficult by Ian's being insanely jealous and possessive. Though I gave him complete freedom, Ian resented my talking to anyone or even going sightseeing or appearing to enjoy myself.

Particularly disagreeable was an expedition to Vesuvius, chiefly owing to Ian's behaving as though he were climbing Everest or crossing the Sahara.

The only compensation for the boredom of the month was looking at Ian in a black-and-white dressing gown with a wide red sash, against the blue sea, his face more fallen angel than ever, burnt nearly black.

The war began and Ian, with that instinct for self-preservation which ran parallel with that instinct for burning his fingers, got attached to the Navy.

By this time, we had very much drifted apart. I went round to his flat once. Ian seemed very excited and was apparently enjoying himself and amused to know a lot of secrets. I did not see him again until long after the war, but I heard he was much appreciated in wartime by his chief, being able, according to custom, to fascinate middle-aged men. He also had quite a lot of naval characteristics, being punctual, tidy and accurate.

During his Jamaica honeymoon in 1952, he wrote *Casino Royale* – an idea that had been swimming in his head before the war. It was published the following spring.

The last time I saw Ian, he was very excited about it. He had made himself into a company in anticipation of enormous sales (I pityingly thought such success unlikely). He said 'It's heady stuff,' referring to this literary enterprise, making no attempt to conceal his delight.

I have just read the bed scene in *The Spy Who Loved Me*. The differences that strike one between Bond and Ian are (a) when Ian went to bed with a girl only once, it was because he was disgusted by sex and despised the girl he slept with; (b) his forte was entangling women emotionally, quite apart from bed, so that they were fond of him for 20 to 30 years.





Below: Ian and Peter Fleming building sandcastles in the early 1910s

> 'He was the natural prey of tigresses but cherished dreams of dollies'

Bond is a daydream of absolute irresponsibility. A world where nobody civilises you. None of the girls is annoyed; none of the girls has a baby. Bond can even get married without having to get married. There are no repercussions. It's a dream of power without responsibility. Everything, anything, you do is perfectly *splendid*, just because of you. How could I be friends with a man who wrote such an absurd book?

When one of Ian's films was shown at the cinema at Piccadilly Circus, I congratulated him on having his name in lights and he said I must come and see him and Ann, his wife. But the invitation wasn't on, really; warm but vague, leaving me to take the initiative. And, after that, he died.

Apart from being ill and quarrelling with his wife, Ian must have hated the prospect of growing old. We all do, but to a ladykiller and man vain of his appearance it must have been especially bitter. Till he was 40, he was a live wire stirring up the old fogies. And to be an old fogy himself!

Ian was not a snob but couldn't resist the advances of the rich and the grand. If you wanted to interest him in a girl, you wouldn't say she was a duchess in her own right, or a millionairess. You'd say she was the niece of Stalin's mistress.

He was a life-enhancer at one moment, a killjoy at another; a romantic who wanted life to be a fairy story. Generally ultra-conservative, he could do enterprising things. Generally parsimonious, he could be generous. If he had married a nice girl, he might have settled down to humdrum domesticity – but he would never have married a nice girl.

Ian's great attraction (besides being *exigeant*) was his super-cosiness. You felt you had met a soulmate, a twin stolen from the cradle, someone with whom you could really relax, be natural and tell all.

The next time you met, he would be so aloof that you would have to search for topics of conversation. It was infuriating – he understood one completely, but knew nothing about one.

He liked being top dog but wasn't really a leader, or even bossy. He was the natural prey of tigresses but cherished dreams of dollies – the girls in his books are all adoring slaves. Sex nauseated him – other people's affairs shocked and disgusted him. Girls who didn't fall for him felt antagonistic.

The best side of him was idealistic and unworldly, but it was too small a side to build his life around.

He could not resist the world when it came after him. He was sucked into *Vanity Fair* though he despised it. He was false to his better self, which doubtless is what made him unhappy when success came.

No Time to Die *is released on 3rd April*

IAN FLEMING IMAGES/COPYRIGHT FLEMING FAMILY-BFA/ALAMY

When a care home's not on your 'to-do' list

"Moving into a care home". What were your first thoughts on reading those words? Resignation, inevitability, dread, the worry that it would mean you having to sell your home?

Chances are, if you're reading The Oldie, you want to live well in your own home for as long as possible. And you're not alone - research shows that nearly three-quarters of us feel like that.

But what if illness, dementia or a condition like Parkinson's means living life your way isn't easy? Perhaps you're wondering whether a care home might be a good idea after all.

There is another way, and it's called live-in care

Live-in care from a trusted independent care provider like Agincare gives you one-to-one support, 24 hours a day. You live at home, alongside any family or pets, and keep your independence. A carefully-matched care worker comes to live with you.

It's an affordable alternative to moving into a care home. And because you're still living there, your home's value isn't taken into account as an asset.

Living in your own home means you're still part of your local community, with your social life and timetable. And your family and friends have peace of mind, knowing help is on hand 24/7.

Care tailored to you

It could be simple companionship, so you don't feel isolated or lonely. Or if housework is getting too much for you, your care worker can take care of cooking, cleaning and laundry.



If you need support with medication, eating and drinking, your care worker is there to help. And experienced in supporting people with more complex conditions, such as dementia, MS and cerebral palsy, or providing reassuring and sensitive palliative and end-of-life care.

Caring for someone with dementia

Many of the 850,000 people in the UK living with dementia are cared for at home by their families. Live-in respite care can minimise disruption to their routine and lifestyle at home, while their regular carer takes a well-deserved break. Live-in care can also become a full-time solution.

When Agincare starts supporting someone living with dementia, they work with the family to compile a personal life story, understanding their history, likes and dislikes.

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Bag-lady blues

When *Maureen Lipman* lost her bag, she lost everything – from her paintings to her pills. Then Manchester's Good Samaritan stepped in

Everyone has a backpack. As a species, we beetle about, humpbacked under the burden of our worldly goods.

Some of us have cross-body bags slung over the backpack straps *and* a scarf trendily knotted over it all, so that we must writhe and squirm our way around, hot-faced, like hypermobile gymnasts auditioning for Cirque du Soleil.

A couple of Sundays ago, I left my backpack in a black cab; destination Media City, Salford, to film *Coronation Street*. I'd taken the train from Euston with my Manchester flatmate, flame-haired temptress Rula Lenska, who treads the *Corrie* cobbles alongside me. We'd stopped at Sainsbury's in the station, and then hailed a cab home. Somewhere between these destinations, my back became packless.

I called the number on my taxi receipt and left three plaintive messages for the driver, a tiny gentleman with a long white beard in an ancient cab. I phoned lost-property departments, only to be fended off by robots. I filled in an online form describing the shape and texture of the bag, the contents that mattered most (iPad containing seven years of paintings; red prescription sunglasses – my most admired possession) and least (blood-pressure pills; eye-bag cream; scripts; my ITV Maureen Lipman lanyard).

'I can't believe you're taking this so *calmly*,' marvelled Rula, as I looked up the number for Sainsbury's, Manchester Piccadilly. 'I'd be *hysterical* if it were me!' I do, it's true, get a bit *Ice Cold in Alex* in a crisis.

I began to think laterally: we'd paid for our smoked-haddock fishcakes and the large vodka at the baffling Sainsbury's self-service till. Maybe I'd removed the pack from my back to help me relax while addressing a speaking barcode?

'Hello, Sainsbury's,' I piped pleasantly. 'I was in your shop this evening and a kind gentleman helped me with the self-service checkout…'

'Oh yes. Were you the lady in the hat?' asked a cheery voice.

'Yes! And I may have put my bag down…'

'Oh yes,' he continued blithely, 'and you were with your daughter, with the red hair?'

Pause. 'My daughter?'

'Yes, with the red–'

'Yes, I got you, YES.' My 70-year-old daughter, Rula Lenska.

The backpack wasn't in Sainsbury's. Neither was I or I'd have filleted the cheeky man. Inevitably, the *Coronation Street* Green Room got wind of the whole thing and *wasn't* it a source of amusement? 'Hey, Rula! Has your mum got her backpack back?' echoed merrily across the cobbles all week.

Ange on reception said she'd have a word with St Anthony, patron saint of lost things. I left a voicemail at Salford police station and a cry for help with 1,700 black cabs around Manchester. The cops never called back and the cabbies expressed their regrets. On Friday, I returned to London, certain I'd lost it.



MARTIN LEE/ALAMY

On Sunday, I received a message from Boots pharmacy in Bayswater: 'A woman has called to report that she's found your backpack in a park in Stockport.' She'd brilliantly used the pharmacy number on my prescription pills. The Boots assistant (less brilliantly) gave her *my* number rather than taking hers. I had to wait for her call. It didn't come – for seven interminable days.

The following Friday, once again on a train – such is my peripatetic life – I typed 'Karen' into my messages, searching for a friend's number. Up came a text: 'My name is Karen and I am the woman who found your bag in Stockport Park. Please get in touch.'

I got in touch. Karen told me that the backpack contained no iPad or – gulp – glasses. Also it smelled of dog pee, but she hadn't washed it because of possible DNA traces. Full marks, Karen! We arranged to meet by Accessorize at Piccadilly Station at 9.30am. I would recognise her by the fact that she recognised me.

Back home, my assistant Natalie intoned dire warnings about meeting strangers in stations. 'She could be anybody. Take someone with you.'

'Who would I take – Viggo Mortensen? Anyway, she sounds lovely…'

'Of course she *sounds* lovely, but what if she's a nutjob? Ask your cousin to come with.'

'My cousin has an abscess in his bum… It'll be fine. I'm a big girl. Bye.'

But she'd spooked me, and as I stood waiting by Accessorize I could feel my breathing accelerating.

So when two 14-year-old police officers strolled past I buttonholed them, asking for protection, saying, 'This is going to sound a bit strange but…'

In fact, Karen and I had a terrific meet-up, with laughter and appreciation. And we barely noticed the overly casual policewoman who sauntered past four times.

I have rejoined the ranks of the backpackers and my faith in human nature is restored.

I miss my gorgeous red glasses and the hundreds of iPad paintings I fussed over night and day. But I am grateful. And tomorrow my backpack and I will pop into the nearest church to thank St Anthony, even if he only did one half of his saintly job.

As *Belgravia* begins on TV, *Simon Williams* recalls the London of *Upstairs, Downstairs*

From the '20s smart set...

These memories of filming *Upstairs, Downstairs* at 165 Eaton Place in the heart of Belgravia are dedicated to the residents of that address.

These people were plagued for years by tourists eager to glimpse the Bellamys' fictional home. Their hall was piled with fan mail from around the world. None of the poor suckers had any idea that the house we used was down the street at number 65. The set designers simply added a '1' in front of it.

'Resting' is the euphemism for unemployment we actors have to live with; there's even a gravestone in Highgate that reads 'Actor Resting'. In one of my resting periods, I enrolled as a freelance cleaner with Pimlico Domestics. They would dispatch me to muck out the homes of Belgravia's gentlefolk; hawk-eyed women in housecoats would put me to work.

As an Old Harrovian who had survived the fagging system, I was used to degradation. One measly slave-driver even made me bring my own Marigolds. Still, bless her, in Eaton Place an old sweetie volunteered to hear my lines for an audition. As I scoured her grease-encrusted oven, she'd prompt my lines from *Richard II*: 'Come let us sit upon the ground and tell sad stories of the…' she'd recite. 'You've missed a bit in the corner, dear.'

Four years later, in 1971, I was in *Upstairs, Downstairs*, filming outside Eaton Place: Captain Bellamy has to drive an omnibus (pictured), to help break the 1926 General Strike, and he takes a detour via home for tea. As I tried to park the damn thing (without my specs), I hoped the slave-driving old biddy was watching from her balcony.

Before filming could begin, cars were removed and the yellow lines carefully camouflaged. Horse-drawn carriages



Captain Bellamy (Simon Williams) in his bus during the General Strike, Belgravia

were positioned in the background and supernumeraries in Edwardian clobber would stroll by.

Belgravia was a good choice of location for the Bellamy family – posh but not too posh; a modest household with just five or six resident staff (nothing compared with Downton Abbey). The House of Commons was close by for Lord Bellamy, and his home was deemed good enough for a visit by Edward VII in 1909.

In the programme, we made lofty pronouncements about every corner of the city: Shoreditch dangerous; Bloomsbury scandalous; Chelsea bohemian; Putney, my dear, positively rural; Soho out of bounds.

'Belgravia was a good location for the Bellamys – posh but not too posh'

Belgravia remains constantly fascinating, even as it changes over the decades. It's no wonder Julian Fellowes's new series is set in early-19th-century Belgravia. He knows that, behind its demure façade, there's always more to the place than meets the eye.

How Belgravia has changed now, as Eleanor Doughty writes on the opposite page. According to Google, it's been home to a host of glittering riff-raff – footballers, superstars, prime ministers, composers and potentates. At weekends it's a desert – the residents flee to the country in their 4x4s. As one woman once told me, 'It's worth keeping our pied-à-terre just for the parking permit.'

In the Bellamys' day, the elegant, Grade II-listed houses were single households; not divided into flats. In the basement were the kitchen and scullery, the fiefdom of Mrs Bridges and Hudson; now maybe a garden apartment. Up above, through the hallowed green baize door (the glass ceiling for staff), would be five floors. They comprised the reception rooms, (morning room, drawing room, dining room and study) and six bedrooms. In the attic, there would be the dingy servants' quarters; now possibly a terraced jacuzzi area for an oligarch, his wife and baby garchs.

Bathrooms were scarce; en suites were a long way off in the Bellamys' time. In the morning, chambermaids would bring hot water to fill the washbasin and would empty the commode.

We actually filmed all the interior scenes in the studio, with every room on one level. The eponymous stairs didn't exist. Reader, we had to fake them.

My most daunting stair-work was a scene in the basement. Sarah the maid – played by Pauline Collins (shamefully not yet a Dame) – and I were planning to elope. With gusto, I was supposed to scoop her up and run up the rickety stairs with her in my arms. As we waited for 'Action', she whispered, 'Guess what? I'm three months pregnant.' Suddenly my gusto was all gone.

I find it hard to revisit the memory of those rooms in 165 Eaton Place without sadness. They are full of ghosts from 50 years ago. I think of the nerves we shared, the jokes and the accolades.

So many old friends are gone now (Upstairs, let's hope) – most recently the ever sunny Christopher Beeny, who died in January, aged 78. He played Edward, the cheeky-chappie footman, who brought us to tears as he relived the horror of the trenches.

RIP, old friend.

Belgravia *is on ITV in March*

While *Eleanor Doughty* tours modern Belgravia, home to international plutocrats

...to the private jet set

The universe according to Bubbles Rothermere was simple: 'The world ends at Eaton Square on the east, west and south – and goes to Wilton Crescent on the north.'

So recalls lawyer David Cooper of his late friend, wife of the late Viscount Rothermere, owner of the *Daily Mail* – whose house in Eaton Square, Belgravia, was once described as a 'Mecca for fun-lovers'. Asked about neighbouring Chester Square, Bubbles said, 'Oh yes, that's staff accommodation.'

Today, Belgrave Square is a busy roundabout, the meeting point of Pont Street, Belgrave Place and Grosvenor Crescent. Embassies inhabit many of the stucco-fronted houses, once the London homes of aristocrats. In the distance, the roar of a dozen Lamborghinis can be heard. The handsome streets remain popular – though you'd be hard-pressed to find any full-time residents.

Cooper is one last surviving resident. He bought his house in Wilton Crescent in 1988. 'The last [person with a] UK domicile to have done so,' he says. 'It's become a dormitory.'

It's the eerie calm of Belgravia that attracts legions of international buyers. 'My Russian clients say [they choose Belgravia] because there's no state school, no bus, no tube,' says Cooper.

Once there were fewer Russians, Greeks and Chinese, and more English – with titles such as Burlington and Bathurst. Rose Laycock spent part of her childhood at 1A Belgrave Square, the house of her American grandmother, Mary Mirrielees.

Mirrielees moved to Belgravia after the Second World War, and 'certainly did things in the old way', says Laycock. 'A maid would stand in the dining room while we were having lunch.'

Laycock practised on her grandmother's grand piano 'in her drawing room, which was full of French gilt furniture, like a museum. I don't remember there ever being any traffic in Belgravia,' says Laycock. 'You could park where you liked.'

Long-time Belgravia resident Angela Hay also had a Belgravian grandmother, interior decorator Eily Donald, who lived at 76 Eaton Terrace, with a pair of maids.

'She was friends with Edwina Mountbatten – they emigrated from Mayfair to Belgravia after the war,' says Hay. 'Back then, you could shop for your Sunday lunch along Elizabeth Street.'

Hay remains a local resident. 'I still love Belgravia – it was built to be smart, but it used to have much more of a community feel.'

Annabel Heseltine, elder daughter of the former Deputy Prime Minister Michael Heseltine, spent a 'considerable part' of her childhood in Belgravia, living first in Wilton Crescent and then at 30 Chapel Street. Theirs wasn't the only political family nearby: following the Brighton bombing in 1984, the Duke of Westminster gave the Tebbits a house in Chapel Street, and in 1990 the Thatchers bought 73 Chester Square.



MARTIN NORRIS/ALAMY

Gilt-edged square: Belgravia today

'When we had an influx of Arabs, it changed,' notes Annabel Heseltine. 'But it's always had flats owned by people who aren't in London that often. [International buyers] dive for Belgravia because everyone has heard of Belgrave Square and Eaton Square.'

The English have been almost squeezed out. 'There's the posh and not-posh side of Eaton Square,' says Heseltine. 'The English live on the south side, and the foreigners have the apartments facing south.'

David Cooper has observed the same mix: 'When I lived in Eaton Square I lived next to Andrew Lloyd Webber, and Sir Christopher Lee,' says Cooper. 'Christina Onassis was in the block [next door].'

Belgravia, much of it built by Thomas Cubitt, was developed by Richard Grosvenor, 2nd Marquess of Westminster, in the 1820s. His descendant the Duke of Westminster, 29, still owns much of the area.

A century later, the 7th Earl Beauchamp and his family lived at 13 Belgrave Square. One night, two of Lord Beauchamp's daughters, Mary and Sibell, were stranded outside the house, the footman having fallen asleep. So they wandered around to their friends the Baldwins – at Downing Street. The scene is parodied in Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies* (1930), where Agatha Runcible finds herself at a party in a random house, only to discover it's Number 10.

Later, in 1936, Waugh's contemporary Ian Fleming took a lease at 22B Ebury Street, former home of Sir Oswald Mosley.

In 1919, Lady Diana Manners, daughter of the 8th Duke of Rutland, married Duff Cooper. Her mother, 'who had visions of Belgravia or Mayfair, was appalled when they settled at No. 90 Gower Street, Bloomsbury,' recalled her son, John Julius Norwich.

A few pockets of 'old Belgravia' remain. *Oldie* contributor Drusilla Beyfus lives in Eaton Square, where she and her late husband, Milton Shulman, brought up their children, including former *Vogue* editor Alexandra Shulman and writer Nicola Shulman. A branch of the upmarket bank C Hoare & Co survives in Lowndes Street.

But the old-fashioned British tribe don't potter around Belgravia today. You're more likely to see a convoy of supercars than a dowager duchess. 'The mega-rich don't potter; they're scared of security,' says Cooper, who goes everywhere in one of his 54 cars. 'No one can afford to be in Belgravia other than the ultra-rich – unless you've been there an awfully long time.'

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Le Café de nuit, 1888
Vincent van Gogh

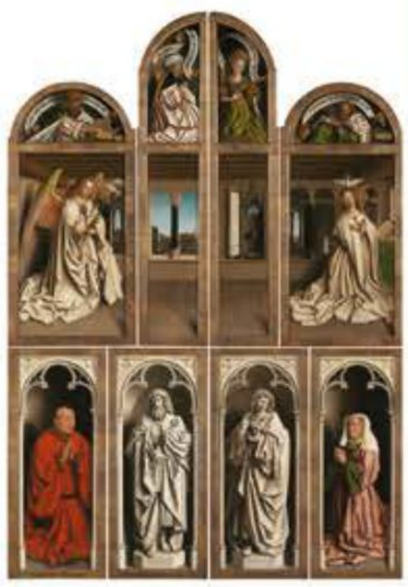
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Death of De'Ath

Melvyn Bragg, who worked at the BBC with Wilfred in the '60s, was saddened by his fall from grace – and kept him solvent in later years

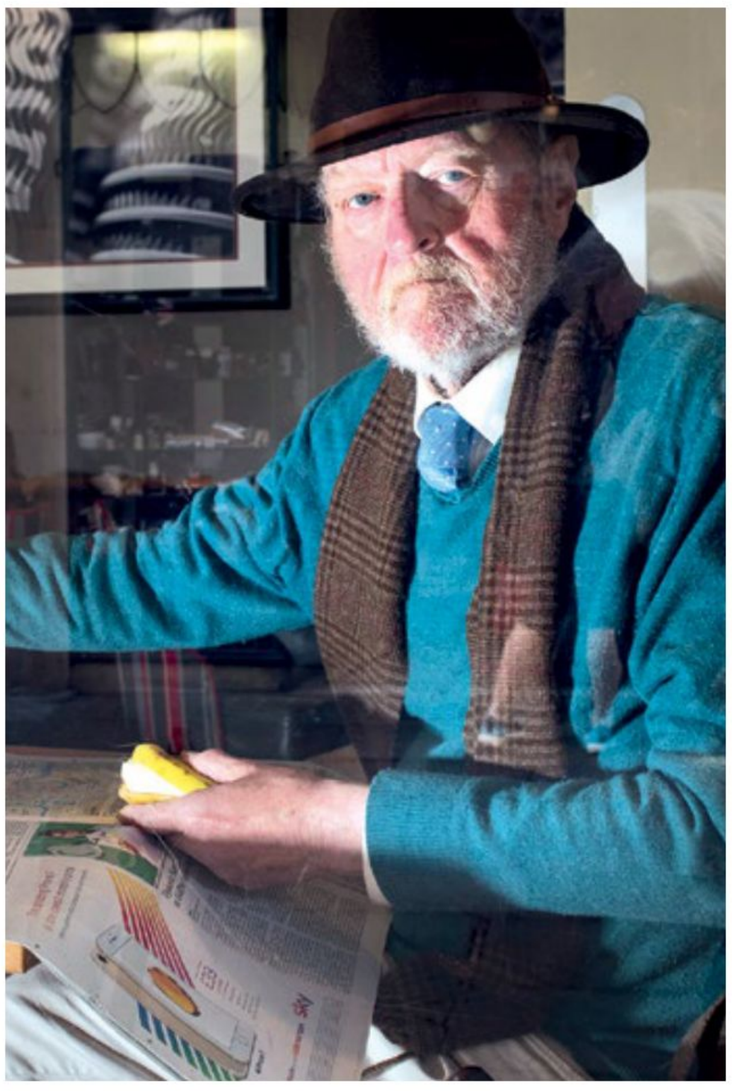
I met Wilfred De'Ath at the beginning of the 1960s, when he and I were both working in the Features Department at BBC Radio. He'd been at Oxford, as I had, but we never met there.

We benefited from the loose rein of Laurence Gilliam, a large, amiable figure, who had, like many others in that department, been involved in some of the best BBC programmes in the war years, when BBC Radio was formidable and globally acclaimed.

Gilliam's ramshackle but productive empire included Douglas Cleverdon, who nursed to life *Under Milk Wood*; Rayner Heppenstall, an experimental novelist; Louis MacNeice and others who found in Gilliam a perfect patron for their idiosyncrasies and bohemianism.

Wilfred fitted well into that atmosphere. And so many ambitious producers were fleeing to television that someone as young as Wilfred was a very welcome voice. He was intrigued by his own generation and interviewed John Wells, John Lennon and a young Judi Dench, as well as convincingly claiming to have discovered and pushed the career of Kenny Everett. He went to San Francisco to bring back news of the hippies. He seemed well settled.

Then, in the 1970s, the roof fell in. His marriage (1963-67) came to an end. He lost his job at the BBC, when nine of his colleagues threatened him with a libel suit. From then on, he struggled.



Wilfred, photographed through the window of Costa Coffee, Cambridge

I would see him fairly regularly for a drink, knowing that he would declare himself desperately broke and ask for a loan – and that I would invariably give in. This relationship continued for 40 years.

I'm sure I was not the only one helping him out. There were a couple of others I know of who contributed to the De'Ath fund and we would compare notes from time to time.

He managed to turn what would have been, for many, a hopeless and even stigmatised life into columns for *The Oldie* which, rightly, had a following.

Wilfred presented himself with some accuracy as a hopeless character but somehow redeemable. He would have fitted very well into Anthony Powell's *A Dance to the Music of Time*, drifting through the decades, just holding on to the circle of which he had been part, but inexorably fading away.

His letters were regular and directly to the point – he was broke, homeless, about to go to court or prison, or to be kicked out of hotels. He was in trouble; could I send something to bail him out?

There was something wistful, even forlorn, about him. His mother was a fierce German puritan, not an easy parent for a child in England in the Second World War and the 1940s. He stayed in various religious houses and found consolation in faith.

From the mid-'70s onwards, he emanated a terrible sadness, a feeling of being outside all the things that mattered to him. This must have been hard for him to bear.

But the columns were collected, there were two or three other books, and there were those who were pleased to try to help him.

DAFYDD JONES

Harry Mount, *Oldie* editor, writes:
In many ways, it's remarkable that Wilfred, our very own Gentleman of the Road, lived to the age of 82. He clocked up over 300 *Oldie* pieces since he was recruited by his old Oxford friend Richard Ingrams in 1997.

For decades, he slept on the streets and on church floors, and in homeless shelters, occasional hotels – and prisons. And he recently had a toe amputated.

Despite all that, he was at the last *Oldie* Christmas party at the Garrick Club, supersmart in tweed jacket and Indiana Jones hat. His immaculate, handwritten copy was always on time.

De mortuis nihil nisi bonum isn't a principle Wilfred subscribed to. He could be rude – to *Oldie* staff and to the hoteliers he fled without paying. He shoplifted and stole from church collection boxes.

While many readers adored Wilfred, plenty couldn't stand him – letters from both camps poured in. But that's the sign of a great columnist – to be loved and hated in equal measure.

With his intelligence and forensic self-examination, he knew exactly how he came across. Another sign of a great columnist is honesty – a quality he showed in his last letter to *The Oldie*, sent on 12th February 2020 from his ward:

'I am in hospital, having had a heart attack on 17/12/19. I want to die but seem unable to. I sent April copy last week – hope it arrives safely. Please put another payment through.'

He died a week later. That April copy is on page 43. How sad it is to run the last column by a journalist of extreme talent, honesty, wit – and mischief. He will be deeply missed at Oldie Towers.

Roger Mortimer (1909-91), later the *Sunday Times* racing correspondent and author of the *Dear Lupin* letters, was captured by the Germans in Belgium in 1940. For five years, he was incarcerated in four different prisoner-of-war camps. There he wrote a series of charming letters to Peggy Dunne, an old friend

War correspondence



Roger Mortimer, serving with the 3rd Battalion, Coldstream Guards, Palestine, 1938. The local headmaster, left, led a terrorist cell

OFLAG VI/B, Warburg, north-west Germany
12th June 1942

My dear Peggy,

We had the first radishes from our room garden today: the lettuce is rather backward but the spinach is full of promise. I'm ashamed to say we have been too materialistic to indulge in flowers and quite rightly I expect you'll think the worse of us for it. Actually, we have planted a few rows of marigolds on the grave of our cat.

I've been interested in Irish history ever since I used to spend the summer there nearly 20 years ago. My uncle lives in Co. Wicklow and quietly loses money at farming, breeding horses and being an MFH. I am very fond of him and his entire family and have spent a good deal of my leave there and been far happier there than anywhere else. I like the informality and the leisured pace of life there: the country is lovely and I am very fond of the people. I was very touched that the village burnt candles for me, a Protestant Englishman, when they thought I was killed!

I'm afraid it will never seem quite the same again as my cousin, David Mitchell, the only son, was killed aged 20 a year ago.

Love,
Roger

PS: I have no moustache.

24th August 1942

The flower garden outside our hut has been most successful. The ground was completely bare to start with, but two large triangles of grass were planted, the sides being from 25 to 50 yards long.

With some difficulty, people were induced not to walk on it in the spring, and the results have repaid the inconvenience. The triangles are edged with long beds of massed cornflower, poppies, marigolds, zinnias and clarkia – the cornflowers being particularly effective in a place so singularly lacking any colours but grey and brown.

I had no share in this, but have had much pleasure and good results from a small vegetable patch, the young carrots and onions being a pleasant change.

I've been resting for a bit. I read some extremely good books during that time – Rosebery's *Pitt,* Trevelyan's *History 1780-1920*, Henri Barbusse's *Under Fire*, and *Dusty Answer* [by Rosamond Lehmann]. In one book, I read the following and it has stuck in my mind: 'Once youth has gone, the best one can hope for is that age will blunt one's perception to the miseries of life.' You asked me why I worry about my health. I suppose because I'm introspective. Anyway, I don't worry anyone else about it.

OFLAG VII B Block II, Eichstätt, Bavaria
8th November 1942

I'm so sorry not to have written for so long but I'm now allowed to write considerably less than formerly.

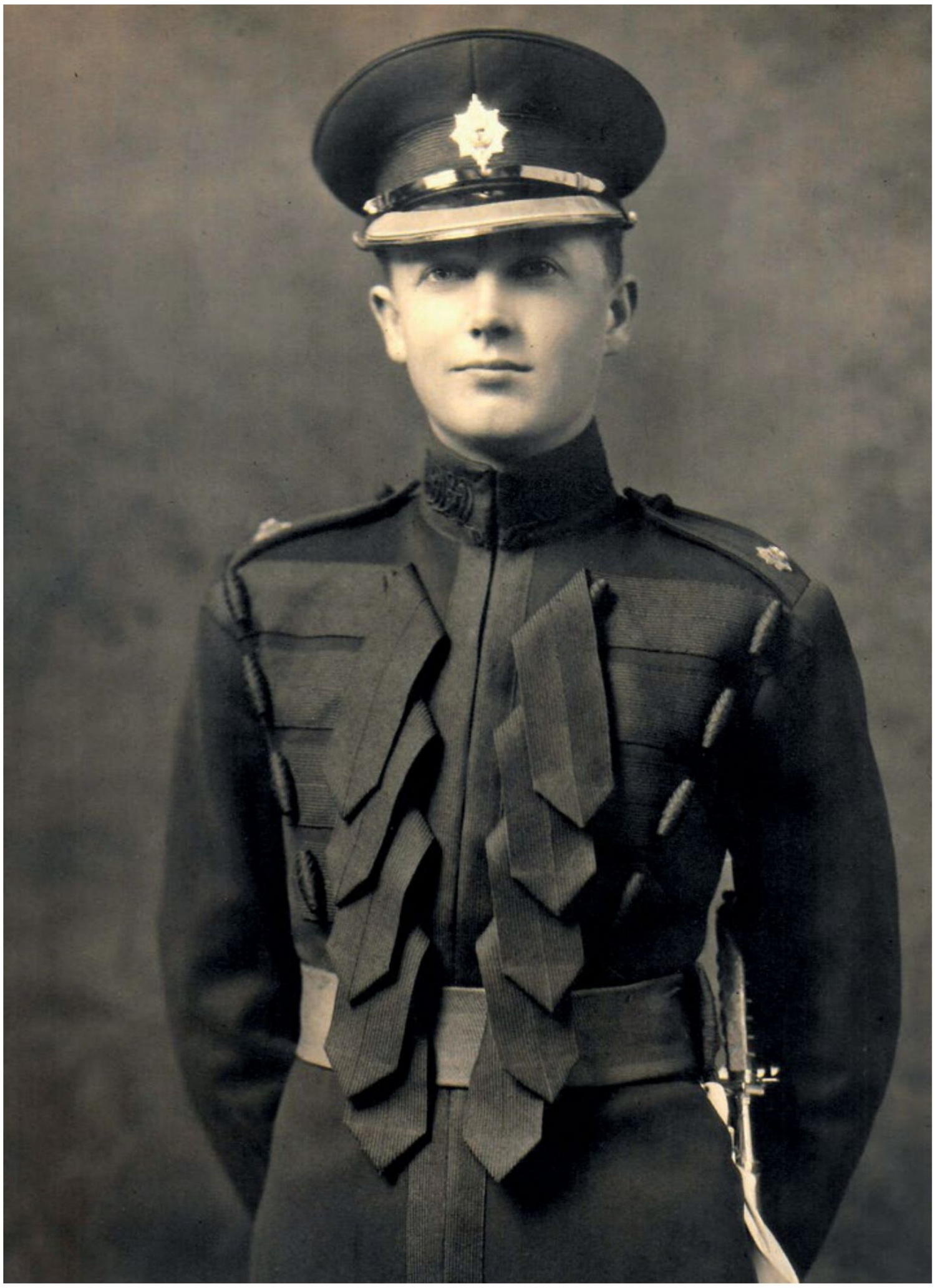
I have only received seven letters since 1st September, and I usually used to get about six a week. Life here is rather unsettled as a number of officers and

other ranks are segregated and in handcuffs. However, it's no earthly use worrying or thinking ahead: after all, the final result of the war is not in the least affected by what they choose to do to us here and that is the only thing that matters.

What dreary bores we shall be if and when we ever emerge from this life of seclusion – all speaking a horrible prison argot, totally ignorant of world affairs, and full of dreary little eccentricities too dull even to come under the heading of Vice. All of us very repressed and looking extraordinarily shifty. I may have been odd before the war, but I intend to be considerably odder after it and make prison the excuse. Most prisoners' faces have altered a lot, and almost everyone has a really depressing expression now.

We all look as if we'd been kept too long in a damp cellar (I don't infer that we have been kept in any cellar, damp or otherwise) but we do look as if toadstools could grow on us anywhere.

Lack of sexual outlet was not really very worrying after the first six months, except in one or two exceptional cases, who found a substitute in what are known as perfect prison friendships – foolish but quite harmless!



JARROLDS OF SLOANE STREET

Second Lieutenant Roger Mortimer in his Coldstream Guards dress uniform, 1930

10th November 1943

I can tell from your letter that you're in better form than you've been for years.

I'm living in a pleasant room for ten – almost all of us are dreary old things between the ages of 30 and 34, all of us captured three and a half years ago.

We get on extraordinarily well together, having learnt by experience the art of communal living – we all have our peculiarities and danger points – Lee Windsor gets furious if any remark is made about big heads or premature baldness, Micky Smiley doesn't like losing at piquet (who does, for that matter?), Parky Goucus is driven frantic by the Church of England, and surplus optimism makes me see red.

Of course it isn't so much fun as the last room I was in where life was a cross between a Marx Brothers film and a Nervo and Knox act: but non-stop buffoonery might have become tiring after a year, although it sharpened one's wits, because if you ever let up for a moment and said anything foolish, smug, or patently untrue, it was brought home to you in a most wounding fashion.

We're much more sedate here, and on the whole behave more in accordance with our age. There are a lot of people in this camp who are extraordinarily nice, and the tendency is, strangely enough, to like people very much more nowadays than one did a year or so ago. This is the pleasantest camp I've yet been in for many reasons and I keep reasonably happy with spells of depression.

2nd January 1944

I've had a busy and comparatively enjoyable week – a visit to the local cinema where I saw a German film in colour – *Baron Munchausen* – which was remarkably good.

Last night, I went to our own pantomime which always makes me sick with laughter. I'm afraid some of the 'girls' are getting a bit part-worn after four years 'inside'. Best of all, I had a two-hour walk in the woods on my own and felt almost human once more. Unfortunately, I'm incurably introspective, as I believe you are too, and that inevitably leads to long periods of doubt, mistrust and ultimate unhappiness. I think it's partly a physical condition, but then one's whole outlook on life is dictated by the state of one's stomach. I went to church last week, the first time for two years – I had the greatest difficulty in not letting my thoughts wander on to every kind of improbable and undesirable topic.

How bloody for you having insomnia – I had it for a short time some years ago and more or less overcame it by having a really stodgy meal late in the evening, swilled down with Guinness and port. I then went to bed at once in a warm room with the windows shut and usually passed out fairly quickly, and remained out till the next morning.

Best love,
Roger

Vintage Roger: Letters from the POW Years *(Constable, £16.99) is out now*



Cash is king **Residents of Battle, East Sussex, celebrate the return of their only cash machine, removed in 2018. Mayor Glenna**



Favell wears her chain; behind her, MP Huw Merriman; Diljit Brar of Costa Coffee in front of cash machine. 31st January 2020

Letter from America



I'm a heat-seeking snowbird – and I love it

After a lifetime in Manhattan, Florida is warm, friendly and cheap

EDWARD KOSNER

Sixteen years ago, when I was elderly but not yet old, I left my job in New York editing the New York *Daily News* – then the largest tabloid newspaper in America – and drove down the Atlantic coast with my wife to Amelia Island, just off north-eastern Florida. Once under British rule, the island is named for Amelia, the beautiful but doomed daughter of George III, and it radiates calm.

Here we were strangers. We weren't moving into a friendly colony of ex-pats hoisting gin-and-tonics as the sun set over the palm trees. On our own. No maître d' showing us to our table; no long-familiar faces at dinners, book parties – or funerals, for that matter. We were turning away from all the goings-on in New York, some of which we'd created in long careers – I as a magazine and newspaper editor; my wife, Julie Baumgold, as a novelist and magazine writer.

When we told our New York friends we'd be splitting our time between the city and our new place in Florida, they confidently predicted we'd come crawling back in a few months, chastened by our foolhardy desertion of the capital of the world. Yet we're still here, although hardly a day goes by when it doesn't feel odd.

Older northerners heading south for good or just for the colder months – snowbirds! – is an old story. But the pace has quickened lately. Income and real-estate taxes are lower or non-existent in Florida and the Sun Belt. So they've become newly appealing to people in high-tax northern states thanks to Donald Trump's 2018 tax 'reform' that made it impossible to deduct most of these taxes on Federal returns. (Younger Americans, less tax-oppressed, tend to head west.)

Manhattan can be punishing for many of its oldies, no matter how hardy or well-off. The streets, especially on the Upper East Side, where we live spring and fall, have been ceded to noisy, dusty construction sites of yet more luxury condominiums. The traffic, clogged with Ubers and Lyfts, is nightmarish.

Everything is ever more expensive, from the opera (more than $300 for better seats) to a plate of pasta (up to $40) at a neighbourhood restaurant. With shop rents surging, it seems every other boutique on Madison Avenue is vacant. When the winter winds lash you and your poor little old dachshund in her red puffy coat, a sunlit, deserted beach is irresistible.

Adjusting to life in Old Florida is self-reinvention. The 20,000 or so people here are a mix of natives and retirees from Georgia, the Midwest and the north-east. They are so polite and friendly that a New Yorker's first instinct is that they're smiling aliens or androids. 'Mornin'' and 'Have a blessed day' here are the equivalent of averted eyes and a snort in New York. It can be hard to decipher the slightly slurred Southern patois. When some friendly oldie mumbles a greeting on a path under the live-oak canopy, I reply with a genial wave and then worry that he's actually said, 'I've gone dopey-dope' (the novelist Elizabeth Strout's non-PC diagnostic term).

Still, there are many benefits. We've swapped mind games in Manhattan for daily exercise in the pool and on the clay tennis court. The old boys I play doubles with are congenial about iffy line-calls and court etiquette. Their counterparts on the Central Park tennis courts in New York can be cantankerous. I was playing there once when my tennis partner stopped his serve to complain that I was standing in the wrong place. I replied that I'd been standing in the same place near the net for 40 years, but would be happy to stand anywhere he'd like if he'd just start the point.

> 'Try chatting to Make America Great Again disciples without ever mentioning Donald Trump'

For people who have spent their adult lives among journalists, writers and assorted New York stars, dinner conversation on Amelia Island can be an acquired skill. Among our Amelia friends are a couple of retired FBI special agents; a Persian surgeon and his wife, a nurse; one of the founders of Fidelity investments and his wife, a former colleague; and a one-time Broadway dancer. They're all accomplished in their own way, but it's like being in the real America, not the Gotham media hive. There's a downside, too, though. Try getting through dinner with Make America Great Again disciples without ever mentioning Donald Trump.

Working, Julie and I were immersed in the world. That was then; this is now. But the new digital technology enables our kind of bifurcated, para-coastal life. With children and grandchildren scattered around the country, we can keep in touch with them and friends wherever we and they are by iPhone, email, text and FaceTime. Our favourite papers and magazines – including *The Oldie* – are available online or on paper wherever we are. Any book instantly materialises on our Kindles; nearly any movie on streaming TV. And there are the mixed blessings of social media.

We're well out of it, summer and winter – but still it always feels like home when we hit the cruel, vibrant pavement of East 79th Street.

Edward Kosner was editor of Newsweek, New York *magazine,* Esquire *and the New York* Daily News

Cub reporters

School magazines trained writers – from Philip Larkin to Harold Pinter – since 1786 but they're now in decline, says *Arnold Harvey*

Robert Graves, Kingsley Amis and Ted Hughes all had their first poems printed in their school magazines.

Philip Larkin wrote comic sketches, in the manner of Tony Hancock's soliloquies, for the magazine of King Henry VIII's School, Coventry.

The *Review*, the magazine of Hackney Downs School, tells us that the 20 runs achieved by Harold Pinter, Vice-Captain of Cricket, against Recent Departures was the third-best score of the 1948 season. A couple of years previously, the *Review* had printed an essay by Pinter on James Joyce: 'As a very sensitive young man, James Joyce experienced seething discontent with his life in Dublin. All his work was about Dublin – a great Irish Catholic shadow that for ever lay over him.'

Politicians often make their debut in school magazines. In January 1981, Boris Johnson contributed to the *Eton College Chronicle* a short story about an Old Etonian having a heart attack while dreaming he has scored (illegally) in the Wall Game: 'Exposed, his chest contrasted with the sheets like a toad on marble. "No use arguing with the Umpire," he murmured as his heart gave away [sic].'

The first school magazine was the *Microcosm*, which appeared weekly at Eton between November 1786 and July 1787, and so predates the first undergraduate magazines such as the *Loiterer* (1789-90), published at Oxford by Jane Austen's brothers, James and Henry, while they were undergraduates. Each issue of the *Microcosm* consisted of a literary essay in the style of Addison and Steele's *Spectator* magazine. A similar work, called the *Trifler*, began appearing at Westminster School in 1788.

With a couple of exceptions, mainly from Westminster, school magazines remained essentially an Eton phenomenon until the 1830s and were primarily literary ventures. As boys at other schools began to take up the idea of a school magazine, the school-life element came increasingly to the fore. Such magazines lasted only as long as their founders remained at school. The modern type of school magazine, though produced largely by pupils, is under the control of the teachers. It is passed on from one generation of pupils to the next, and functions as a more or less official record of school life. This model dates from the late 1850s.

The 1850s saw important developments in the institutional life of Britain's public schools. Regular and frequent sporting matches against other schools (with the results printed in the school magazine), the formalisation of the house system and the popularity of schoolboy fiction all date from the decade.

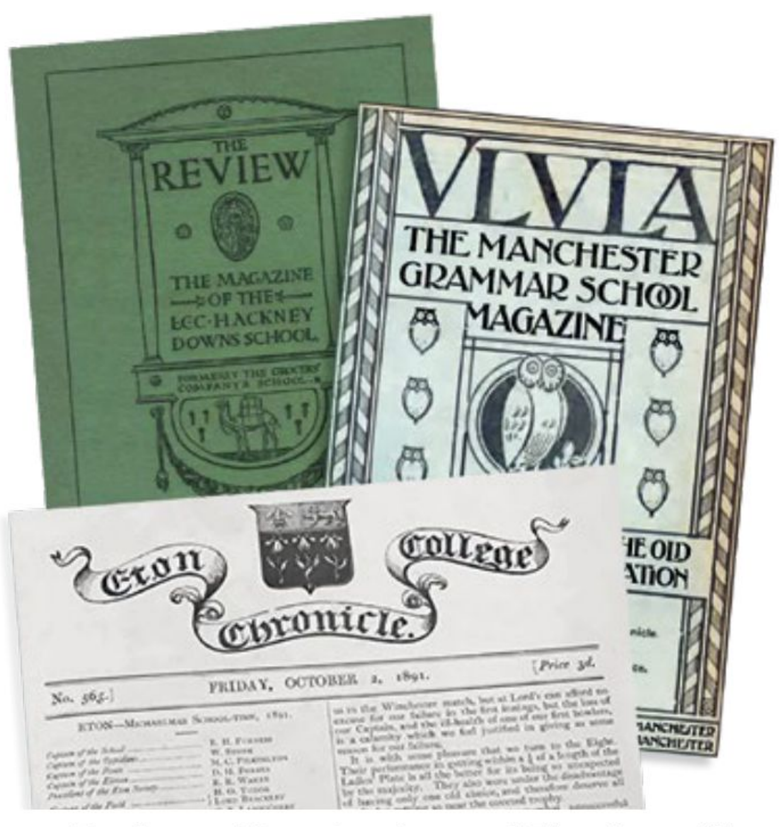
By the 1860s, school magazines were appearing that were almost indistinguishable from those of the 1950s. Almost, but not quite. In later generations, teachers, sensitive to the nervousness of fee-paying parents, might have suppressed a letter to the editor printed in the *Radleian* for October 1866, calling attention 'to the want of any means of escape in case of fire in a part of the building which is entirely composed of woodwork'. And then there's the two-part prose poem *Hasheesh*, beginning, 'Did you ever taste hasheesh – the magic drug that translates us to Paradise? No? then you shall now.' That appeared in the April and May 1876 issues of *Ulula*, the Manchester Grammar School magazine.

Girls' schools – and their magazines – were less obsessed with sport. For much of the 19th century, the only exercise permitted at girls' schools was walking or, in rainy weather, going up and down stairs ten times without talking. The first women's hockey club was founded in 1887, and the first women's hockey match between Oxford and Cambridge was played in March 1894. But girls' schools weren't quick to take up the sport. As late as 1906, Cheltenham Ladies' College, though having an inter-house hockey competition, did not play other schools – because, the *Cheltenham Ladies' College Magazine* explained, 'Strain and excitement are guarded against.'

Many school magazines of the 1914-18 era printed letters and diaries sent from the front line by former pupils. Hackney Downs School's evacuation to King's Lynn during the early part of the Second World War was the subject of a ten-page article in the *Review*. North London Collegiate School's *NLCS Magazine* produced a 1942-6 special number describing the functioning of the school in wartime in systematic detail.

Attempts by comprehensive schools to establish magazines have generally been unsuccessful. The demise of the majority of local-authority grammar schools (many of which published magazines) has meant that school magazines in recent years have become what they were in the early days: essentially a public-school phenomenon.

If you drew up a list of periodicals printed in the 1870s that are still around today, you would find that the majority are school magazines. Still, they are survivors of a threatened species. You can't help but wonder how many will make it through the next 30 years.



Hackney, Manchester and Eton juvenilia

Michael Palin mourns Terry Jones, his fellow Python, and tells *Harry Mount* about his own brush with the Grim Reaper

Farewell to the full Monty

Michael Palin is still mourning his late fellow Python – and old university friend – Terry Jones.

Sir Michael – as he doesn't ask to be called – saw Jones just before he died in January, suffering from dementia, aged 77.

'He clearly was very unwell,' says Palin. 'But I talked to him as I always did. I wouldn't accept the dementia had shut his understanding up. It had shut his communication up.'

And so Palin suggested to Alison, Jones's first wife, who was by his side, that they should sing one of the songs he'd written with Jones, to get some reaction.

'We sang *Every Sperm Is Sacred* from *The Meaning of Life*,' he says. 'Unfortunately we couldn't remember all the words. So if Terry was hearing me at all then, he just heard what a complete shower we were.'

Jones was asleep at the time but he did have flashes of memory a year ago, when Palin read to him from a book they'd written together, *Dr Fegg's Encyclopedia of All World Knowledge*.

'Rather like when you listen to a piece of music you know, he immediately reacted and laughed at two or three points,' says Palin. 'I hadn't heard him laugh for such a long time. The great thing was he laughed only at the bits he'd written. He's truly defeated the dementia there.'

Palin, 76, first met Jones more than 50 years ago at Oxford, where Jones was in the year above him.

'He was quite a charismatic figure – very dark and rather brooding,' he says. 'I was slightly in awe of him. I then found this dark, intense, brooding Welshman actually had a terrific sense of humour.

'He would use Welshness as an excuse when he got into strong, passionate arguments and went slightly ballistic. He'd say, "That's because I'm Welsh and the Welsh have been ignored for centuries." Cleese loved that – a red rag to a bull.'

When Monty Python began in 1969, Palin forged an alliance with his old Oxford friend Jones, while the former Cambridge undergraduates, John Cleese and Graham Chapman, banded together.

'It was quite a significant difference, oddly,' says Palin. 'I don't know why there should've been. They were more interested in words than ideas. Whereas Terry and I – and Terry Gilliam, when he joined – were more interested in abstract ideas, surrealism, images, John and Graham were the consummate sketch-writers – brilliant work like the Dead Parrot and the Cheese Shop.

'They weren't so interested in how things looked and how ideas developed – which was very much Terry's thing. He was very keen on film.'

The differences between the Oxford duo and the Cambridge duo produced some tension. 'Generally it was creative tension. John would tease the Oxford group and we'd retort that he had no soul. It was very silly – but very much part of why Python worked. It all came from different directions.'

It helped, too, that the Pythons came from different parts of Britain. Jones was born in Colwyn Bay. Palin, born in Sheffield, thinks of himself as a Yorkshireman, despite having lived in north London for half a century.

In his admiring introduction to Leeds-born Barry Cryer's *Comedy Scrapbook*, Palin writes, 'In case you think that money might have passed hands to get me to write this, I must of course remind you that Barry and I are both Yorkshiremen and fully aware that flattery is not tax-deductible.'

He first met Cryer in a rehearsal room in 1965, when they were working together on *The Frost Report*, David Frost's satirical TV show. In January, they met again at an *Oldie* lunch (pictured).

Palin likes the insight by TV presenter and writer Barry Took. 'Python was all provincials,' Took told Palin. 'None of you were metropolitans.'

This meant, Palin thinks, that they had something to prove. Monty Python weren't quite fighting against the Establishment. But because they came from outside London, Palin says, 'You had to work a bit harder. And you had that feeling that London had to be fought against – there was a certain smugness and complacency there. We were lads from Weston-super-Mare [Cleese] and Sheffield and Esher [where Jones grew up].'

Palin is also mourning the death of the musician Neil Innes, who died in December, aged 75. Innes, who wrote songs and sketches for – and acted with – Monty Python, was often described as the seventh Python.



NEIL SPENCE

With Barry Cryer at the *Oldie* lunch



ROLF ADLERCREUTZ/ALAMY

When they were very young: Graham Chapman, Eric Idle, Terry Jones, John Cleese and Michael Palin, London, 1970

'I saw him as the first Neil Innes,' Palin says. 'He had a quicksilver brilliance, playing comedy and writing comedy and writing music. He could turn his hand to anything.

'Neil got on with us all; got on with everybody. He had no great ego.'

Innes was, then, like Palin, a nice man. That 'nice' label is an albatross round Palin's neck.

'I slightly object to the "nice" tag,' he says. ' "Nice" is such a wet word, really. I was in a way the most conciliatory Python. I brought people together, settled arguments sometimes.

'Maggie Smith once described me as a saint, the sort of good person who, if he went and strangled a baby in the street, people would say the baby attacked him first.

'Still, I love playing nasty characters.'

Palin is now working on a fourth volume of his diaries, covering the years 1999 to 2009. His last globetrotting tour, to North Korea, was the subject of a Channel 5 series and his new book, *North Korea Journal*.

'North Korea was much less menacing than you'd expect,' he says. 'But, still, North Koreans come from a controlled country. They can't talk about much that we could share together. They don't know much about the rest of the world and they're not allowed to talk about the rest of the world.'

To Palin, the people's devotion to the ruling Kim dynasty seemed genuine.

'Their statues looked like the people you see in Waitrose on Saturday morning. And yet they inspire enormous devotion. I think largely it is a real devotion. The regime isn't shaky. It's quite solid.'

Palin looks in rude health. He has, though, just recovered from a heart operation.

'You realise you're vulnerable,' he says. 'In some arrogant way, I thought, I'm fine. I run and I take exercise and I have a good diet. I'm going to live to 150.

'And then suddenly you look under the bonnet and there are things not quite attached to other things. Someone's been in there after 76 years and had a look round and put in various repaired valves.

'My father used to do repairs to the car. Within a couple of weeks, they'd fall apart. So never say everything's all right.'

Palin had been breathless and tired. His heart was working at 70 per cent rather than 100 per cent before the operation at St Bartholomew's Hospital, Smithfield. By coincidence, while he was there, his son Will Palin (Michael has three children by his wife of 54 years, Helen) was running the £22m restoration of St Bartholomew's to celebrate its 900th birthday – including the marvellous murals by William Hogarth.

'Will had just started,' he says. 'I was taken out to see the Hogarths by one of the nurses, with all my tubes and so on, to see this hall that Will is helping to restore.'

Fit and well once more, Palin is now embarking on another TV tour of a top-secret exotic destination. The nice workaholic isn't going to retire any time soon.

Michael Palin's North Korea Journal *(Hutchinson, £14.99) is on sale now*



Let's not do lunch – the joy of cancellation

TOM HODGKINSON

While country mice stay at home and tend to their nut store, we town mice find ourselves engaged in a non-stop round of inviting people to lunch and dinner … and being invited to lunch and dinner … and attending parties and drinks and launches.

I tend to say yes with great enthusiasm to every opportunity that presents itself. Six weeks before the event, it is easy to concur with the adventurous late Knight of Glin who advised, 'Always say yes to a party. You never know what might happen.'

However, as the day of the festivity approaches, you begin to feel less keen. It's a bit like going swimming in Cornwall. The sun is out and beats warm on your browning skin. Just the day for a bracing dip. You run down to the sea, ready to plunge in. But as you get nearer the water, the idea of hurling yourself into the waves becomes progressively less appealing. It's cold. And once your toes are wet, you *really* feel like heading back to the house for some backgammon in a warm room in front of the wood-burning stove.

And sometimes you won't get even as far as wet toes before turning back.

A couple of years ago, I was on my way to Christmas's scariest party. It is the kind of do where the hostess pulls you away from the old friend you were having a perfectly nice chat with and introduces you to an unsmiling gentleman – who turns out to be a billionaire hedge-fund investor or owner of a well-known media conglomerate and has no interest in you whatsoever.

As I cycled up to the house and glanced at the various black limos parked outside, with chauffeurs sitting in them, I decided to keep on cycling. I arrived home, opened a bottle of real ale, on my own, in the kitchen – and what joy I felt.



Maybe I had missed out on something. But who cares?

For there is something liberating in the act of cancelling. Cancelling serves the quiet monk lurking in all of us, the meditative soul who wants to retreat from the vanity and competition of city life. Cancelling can feel like an act of self-preservation.

It's the same with lunches. They seem eminently cancellable these days. But with lunches, it is usually I who get cancelled on. I can think of three friends and acquaintances who have cancelled on me three times over the last year.

'The act of cancelling serves the quiet monk lurking in all of us, who wants to retreat'

When they cancel, I suffer a moment of disappointment. And then I feel a sense of relief. Great! I can just stay in my office. I don't need to get on my bike after all.

But be careful. I'd had so many lunches cancelled that I was beginning to think that maybe, these days, lunches were always cancelled. No one ever seriously thought that lunch appointments would be kept. I was taking an *Idler* contributor friend out for lunch to say thank you. As the hour approached, my day started to fill up with deadlines – and I emailed my friend to ask whether we could postpone.

This did not go down well. He replied to my email with a seriously aggrieved tone. So I uncancelled and jumped on my bicycle and rode into Soho. It took a good half-hour and plenty of beer to persuade my friend to accept my apology.

Sometimes I have just plain forgotten a lunch arrangement, and that is profoundly embarrassing. I blame technology. In the old days, I would write the appointment down in my Smythson Featherweight diary, an item of great beauty and utility. I would keep the diary on my person and refer to it constantly. I would never forget an appointment. That would be simply impossible.

But nowadays the evil iCal has taken over from the Smythson. In case you still have one foot sensibly planted in the old world and have no idea what I'm talking about, I'll explain. The iCal is a computerised calendar that can be shared with others. But it is not infallible. Sometimes the appointments simply vanish from it, because you have not updated it or connected in the right way, or because someone else has changed a blimming password.

As a result of the ubiquity of mobile phones, appointments are more fluid than they were in the old days. Before mobile phones, once you made an arrangement, you stuck with it. Now, because it's easier to cancel, postpone or arrive late, people do. And unless an appointment is confirmed half a dozen times, it seems somehow not to be quite real – and that is because it has not been consigned to paper with a pen.

Having said all this, I don't think you should ever cancel an invitation to stay with friends for a weekend. I would advise sticking to arrangements that you have made, because it is rude not to.

But once in a while, just keep on cycling. Stay at home. There will be another party.

Tom Hodgkinson is editor of the Idler *(www.idler.co.uk)*

Country Mouse



The night sky's ruined. I blame *Crimewatch*

GILES WOOD

No offence to old women but, being a bit of an old woman myself, I insisted on leaving much more time than we needed before heading for a minibreak with successful friends in 'Housman Country'.

We arrived a good half-hour earlier than scheduled and, since we all know it's a cardinal sin to turn up early, I left Mary typing away on her tablet in the car and began creeping round the garden with our Tibetan spaniel. Excited by this new territory, he left more than his usual number of 'pee-mails' to alert other dogs to his presence.

At the top of the drive stood the Victorian Tudorbethan vicarage, perched like a giant butter dish on the side of the Long Mynd, its smoking chimneys indicating that the cavernous interior would be pleasantly overheated as usual.

Gravel's normally a giveaway for intruders, but there was a howling gale which must have masked the crunch of my tread as I approached the drawing-room window. Spying through it, I observed mine host reading in a high-backed chair, his table lamp illuminating him from above as if in a drawing by Honoré Daumier. He hadn't bothered to close the curtains – many in the country do not have an exaggerated fear of fiends – and I resisted the temptation to tap on the windowpane and caper like a gibbon lest he have a stroke. Moreover, I wanted to reward his trust in not having installed vulgar security lights.

I descended to his ornamental duck-pond, around which mallard were noisily stacking, prior to landing on the jet-black surface enamelled by the reflected crescent of the moon. Caer Caradoc loomed in the distance, and below it sheep were crossing and recrossing the strips of moon-blanched green.

This is the bit of Shropshire in which this Old Salopian would like to put down roots. By day, it is still Merrie England. Cold Comfort Farms abound, along with burst-veined butchers throwing sawdust and selling the sort of bacon with white knuckly bits that I haven't seen since childhood.

And, by night, the only distraction from the glorious star-studded firmament comes from the county town 14 miles away – a mere sliver of light, within a giant loop of the River Severn.

And then it was time to make our presence felt.

We were shown to two bedrooms – not one, by special request. We had asked for two rooms so that Mary could capitalise to the max on the 'surface opportunities' to lay out the contents of her multiple bags and make some sense of them. Mary was ecstatically happy, as she always is from the moment she crosses the threshold of an upmarket house. She often reminds me of Winston Churchill's aphorism 'We shape our buildings; thereafter, they shape us.'

'Of course I'm going to be happy,' she exulted, 'whenever I can walk freely through rooms without having to weave or duck my head and when every room is filled with light rather than the occasional shaft of it one hour per day, as is the case with the light that comes through the cottage windows. Light makes all the difference to a human being's mood.'

Don't I know it?

But I am concerned with a different type of light. Coming back to the reduced circumstances of our normal life a few days later, I was informed by a sympathetic neighbour that our campaign to have the hellish sodium streetlights in our village turned off had failed.

Moreover, that Wiltshire Council has proudly announced a £12-million LED street-lighting programme to be rolled out so that dark skies will be banished throughout the county.

The council must have its reasons for wanting to subject our confused birds to the exhaustion of performing a perpetual dawn chorus, for wanting to further exacerbate the insect apocalypse and the epidemic of disordered sleep in humans – for millennia, we slept in pitch-black conditions – and for wanting to add to the general stress that artificial light has been proven to impose on all organisms, not just humans. (The only good thing, from an overpopulation point of view, is that it also affects human reproductive ability.)

The council website explains that fear of crime is one of the reasons for the 'initiative'. This fear of crime is not based on facts. Long-term meta-analysis by a team from London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine found in 2015 that there is no link between reduced lighting and increased crime or car crashes. But my years of village campaigning have taught me that it's harder to win over hearts than minds.

Personally, I blame Nick Ross's successful TV show *Crimewatch* for upping Britons' fear index. Ross, whose TV persona was celebrated for his coming across like a 'normal bloke', has a lot to answer for.

The programme was axed in 2017, but the damage had been done. At the end of a harrowing, hour-long catalogue of savage crimes committed by real people like the sort apparently living down anybody's road, Ross gave his glib weekly pay-off – 'Don't have nightmares; do sleep well.'

Allegedly, 40 per cent of our newly infantilised adults are now fearful of the dark. I concede that in the past there was a good reason to take precautions against wolves and highwaymen. But unless George Monbiot gets his way, wolves will not be a hazard to livestock or parishioners in tiny hamlets in southern lowland shires any time soon.



Don’t be grumpy – be happy

As we get older, it’s easy to whinge and scowl, says *Lucy Deedes*. Much better to avoid confrontation, smile and accept life’s little let-downs

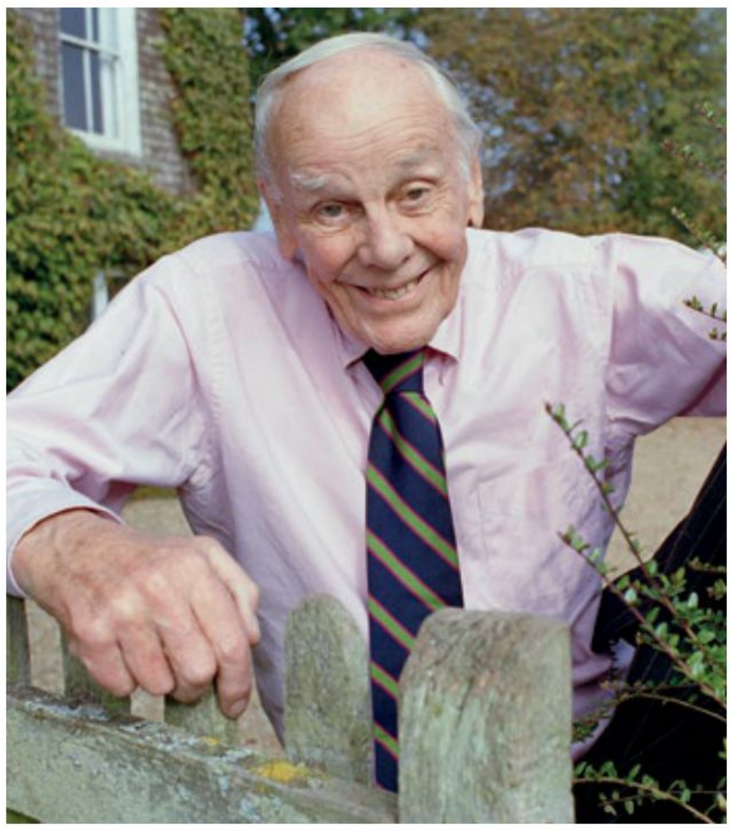
When we were small children, the things that made us angry were predictable: the wrong jam on our toast; being teased; toys that wouldn’t work, however hard we bashed them; not being allowed to wear a ballet dress to church.

As we age, any of these can still be problematical, but there will be other Red Alert areas, around which our nearest and dearest learn to tread on eggshells, as with Mrs Bennet and her nerves in *Pride and Prejudice*. We bemoan the things we can no longer buy (yes, you, Pentel 1.3 Italic pen) but we need to get over it and stop being grumpy.

A brief surge of anger at our own stupidity can be healthy and make us strive to do better, but a constant state of grumpiness is wearing, bad for our health and dangerously habit-forming. In P G Wodehouse’s *Jill the Reckless*, Wally urges Jill to ditch her frowning fiancé. ‘Scowling is the civilised man’s substitute for wife-beating,’ he tells her, not entirely altruistically. But he has a point – a state of simmering fury is, intentionally or not, intimidating.

We all have our private whinges – which we nurture like guinea pigs – and the danger is that they become entrenched. I spend a lot of time shouting at printers: at their eager thirst for ink and their refusal to recognise a laptop, sitting just three feet away, to which they have been regularly and pleasantly introduced. And I don’t think I’m revealing any secrets to say that my brother’s tipping point is small children in proximity on an aircraft.

Of course, there are times when we are justified in losing the plot (injustice, bullying, a crime against a child) but all too often it stems from a sense of entitlement, our conviction that we are in the right. The no-platforming of provocative speakers by university student unions suggests they have no intention of listening to an argument and



Good deeds: W F Deedes, 1997

ELEANOR BENTALL/GETTY

learning to accept their differences. I don’t recall my father (the journalist W F Deedes, ‘Dear Bill’ in the *Private Eye* letters, supposedly from Denis Thatcher, in fact written by Richard Ingrams and John Wells) ever expressing more than weary disappointment in a tense situation because he never *did* feel entitled: his survivor’s guilt from the war and his belief that he was undereducated meant he was content to defer to others and avoid any sort of confrontation.

Viktor E Frankl writes, in *Man’s Search for Meaning*, ‘When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.’ We must try to know ourselves and our weaknesses, and if we have trouble identifying our own shortcomings our grown-up children are sure to assist.

Nobody likes sitting in a traffic jam. You are not alone in your impotent rage – so assume that there will be traffic and

> ‘Would the Queen barge into your parking space or be rude to a waiter?’

listen to a talking book or a David Sedaris podcast. If it’s shouty children on aircraft, pay extra for Smuggie Boarding and get yourself into the front seats with the oligarchs and a bottle of wine. Instead of darting resentful looks at the mother with the crying baby, ask if she’d like some help. In our family, we accept that noise is a major irritant; so we travel with our own bodyweight in earplugs.

I find the cinema depressing, and refuse an invitation that involves a film. Bliss. As for bridge – if you’re not competitive and don’t enjoy gossip, then just say ‘No, thank you’ and enjoy the free time you’ve saved. Christmas shopping (and the vicious parking that goes with it) is bad for everyone’s blood pressure. Do a Secret Squirrel with the family, buy a present for just one person and get it online. Bingo!

We can’t always avoid the people we don’t like. So instead of dodging them at a party, go up to them, smile and properly engage with them – even for just a few minutes. ‘Old Squiffington is quite a jolly fellow,’ you may or may not remark to your partner on the way home. At the very least, smiling will give your immune system a boost, release dopamine and serotonin and quite possibly extend your life.

If someone sensationally offends you, you may feel a strong letter coming on. Stop! Stand away from the laptop and resist the lure of Twitter. Sleep on it; mow the lawn; go for a run; or do some strenuous housework before you write. Better still, don’t write at all because it fosters the negative feelings and prolongs the argument. Go and see the offending party – it’s disarming – or try dignified silence. (The blush of shame mantles my cheeks as I write, remembering bitter post-divorce insults and counter-insults in dealings with my ex-husband.)

If all else fails, think to yourself, as a friend of mine does, *What would the Queen do?* Would she barge into your parking space, be rude to a waiter, or ride by on her bicycle, flicking V-signs and swearing? I don’t think so.

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The Douro is not the longest, grandest or most historic of Europe's rivers, but it certainly is one of the most untouched and beautiful. From its meagre beginnings in the hills north of Madrid it makes its way through Northern Portugal in a meandering flourish to the ocean and the endlessly fascinating city of Oporto. Our cruise aboard the delightful MS Gil Eanes offers the opportunity to sail this delightful river and experience some of the local flavour. Where vessels once laden with barrels of port drifted to Oporto, we will cruise along this lovely river, relaxing on board whilst admiring the beautiful passing scenery and stopping each day for fascinating excursions.

Our navigation of the Douro will take us from Oporto on a wonderfully scenic path, past sleepy villages and a tranquil countryside of almond and citrus trees to just before the Spanish border. From here we will visit Spain's ancient seat of learning, Salamanca with its grand buildings in rich copper hues and the country's most magnificent square, Plaza Mayor. Along the way we will visit the world renowned port wine region, restored palaces, places of pilgrimage and cultural centres. Small towns and settlements perched on the sloping hillsides of the region have retained an aura of Medieval simplicity, its many tiny communities, largely agricultural, clustering round historic churches, monasteries and castles.

MS Gil Eanes

For our cruises along the Douro we have chartered the elegant MS Gil Eanes, a well-designed vessel with a modern feel and offers a tranquil atmosphere on which to relax and enjoy the picturesque panoramas of the region. There are 62 cabins and four suites on board which are located over three decks, and have a bright airy feel. Cabins on the Main Deck feature two windows, and those on the Middle and Upper Decks boast French balconies and sliding floor to ceiling windows. Public areas include the lounge bar with floor to ceiling windows, and the Sun Deck with comfortable loungers and some tables and chairs under a shaded area. Breakfast, lunch, afternoon tea and dinner are served in the stylish restaurant which seats all passengers in one sitting. The excellent cuisine features delicious local and international dishes. Breakfast and lunch are buffet style with hot and cold items, and dinners are a served set menu. Drinks are included during meal times, and are also available until late in the Lounge Bar. In addition to our Cruise Director and Tour Manager, you will also be joined by a Guest Speaker who will deliver informative and interesting lectures on board, adding to your enjoyment of the cruise and interest of the area.







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The Itinerary in Brief

Day 1 London to Oporto, Portugal. Fly by scheduled flight. Upon arrival transfer to the MS Gil Eanes and embark. This evening meet your fellow travellers at the welcome dinner.

Day 2 Oporto. This morning there will be a guided tour of Oporto, Portugal's second largest city and a World Heritage Site. This attractive city was originally a Celtic-Iberian settlement and became a prosperous Roman village thanks to its natural harbour. During our tour we will drive through its narrow streets to find 16th century arcaded buildings, Baroque churches and chapels, as well as the city's iconic 19th century iron bridge, built by the school of Gustav Eiffel. Our final visit will be to the city's cathedral, located on the top of the Penaventosa Hill. The tour will conclude with a visit to a port wine lodge where we will see the old casks full of port and enjoy a sample of this delicious world famous wine. Return to the ship for lunch and enjoy a relaxing afternoon on board.

Day 3 Regua. From our mooring at Regua we will visit the unique 18th century Mateus Manor House and its gardens. This fine looking palace and gardens is still owned by the Count of Vila Real and is one of the best examples of Baroque architecture in Portugal. On our guided tour of the Palace we will see the "rare books" library, as well as vestments and religious icons and view the remarkable chestnut wood crafting on the ceilings, as well as some beautiful paintings from the 17th and 18th centuries. Stroll around the romantic gardens which feature a unique 100 foot long cedar tunnel and formal garden and visit the villa's pretty chapel. Return to the vessel which will have sailed to Tavora to meet us. Enjoy lunch on board and continue cruising towards the Spanish border.

Day 4 Salamanca, Spain. Today we will enjoy a full day tour to Salamanca, a Spanish city rich in culture and tradition. Salamanca has been famous as a seat of learning since the early 13th century and has an impressive history, with many fine monuments and architecture. The city attracts around 40,000 international students each year, giving it a cosmopolitan and modern feel. Our guided tour will include the University, House of Shells and the classic Plaza Mayor, formally a bullfighting site. We will also visit the Gothic "New Cathedral" which was actually constructed in the 16th century, replacing the original 12th century Salamanca Cathedral. After lunch in a local restaurant, enjoy some free time to explore independently. Maybe visit the Casa Lis (the Museum of Art Nouveau and Art Deco), or simply stroll through the plazas and side streets of this delightful city. Return later to the vessel for dinner.

Day 5 Figueira de Castelo Rodrigo, Portugal. This morning depart for an excursion to the picturesque Medieval town of Figueira de Castelo Rodrigo, known as the white village because of its surrounding almond trees. Located at about 2200 feet above sea level, and one of Portugal's 12 historical parishes, its streets are typically narrow and steep with 16th century facades and Manuelino style windows. The Romans were the first to build a fortress here, then in 1209 Alfonso IX built the fortress wall. During the centuries Jews, Christians and Arabs lived peacefully here, and evidence of this can be seen on Sinagoga (Synagogue Street). However, the once large Jewish community fled during the Inquisition.

Day 6 Quinta do Seixo. Enjoy a leisurely morning on board as we cruise to Pinhao. After lunch we will depart for our visit to Quinta do Seixo, an ancient property with 99 hectares of vineyards and a modern winery. The drive takes us through steep terraced vineyards which boast breathtaking views. On a guided tour we will learn about the production methods, and we will have the chance to sample some of the local wines.

Day 7 Lamego. Sail early this morning towards Folgosa where we will disembark and enjoy a half day excursion to the historical and charming town of Lamego. This city houses one of the most important places of pilgrimage in Portugal - the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Remedies. Built in the second half of the 18th century over the remains of a 14th century chapel, it is an excellent example of Portuguese Baroque style. It is wonderfully decorated with enormous panels of blue and white tiles, with an impressive staircase of nearly 700 steps. During lunch on board we sail back to Oporto crossing the Crestuma-Lever dam. On our final evening we will be entertained by a Portuguese folklore show on board.

Day 8 Oporto to London. Disembark after breakfast and transfer to the airport for the return scheduled flight to London.

Portugal extension

If you would like to spend some more time in Portugal we are offering a five night extension with the chance to tour Lisbon, Sintra, Coimbra, Tomar, Guimaraes, and Braga. Full details can be viewed online at www.noble-caledonia.co.uk

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Tilting earth means spring is in the air

JAMES LE FANU

For all its predictability, spring always comes as a most welcome surprise.

Almost overnight, it seems, the earth is reanimated and suffused with colour; with ranks of golden daffodils, cherry trees blossoming pink and white and the freshly minted greenery of beech and oak unfolding.

So much happens in so short a time, assiduously recorded for more than 60 years by Norfolk landowner Robert Marsham as 'The Indications of Spring'.

We learn that in 1755 the leaves of both hawthorn and horse chestnut budded on 31st March. A day later, 'the frogs and toads croaked'. Within a week – on 6th April – the swallows returned. Next it was the turn of the ash, sycamore and elm to bud simultaneously. Then, on consecutive days – 13th and 14th April – he heard first the song of the cuckoo and then the nightingale.

The leafing of the oak – on 10th May – coincided with his first sighting of young rooks, promptly followed by the flowering of the hawthorn. And so on.

The precise timing of this pageant of new beginnings varies a bit from year to year. It was delayed for almost a month by a bitterly cold winter in 1740, when Marsham records that his chamber pot would freeze overnight. In other years, it was advanced. But the sequential pattern remains pretty much the same. That requires explanation.

The rhythmical cycle of the seasons inevitably turns out to be a fascinatingly complex matter. It is predicated, however, on two very different if equally extraordinary phenomena: a fortuitous, catastrophic, astronomical event four billion years ago; and the ability – relatively recently discovered – of plants and animals to measure the passage of time with great precision.

First, that astronomical event. Not long after the formation of our solar system all those billions of years ago, a massive asteroid, it is hypothesised, collided with the young Earth,



In the pink: a cup-and-saucer magnolia

DAVID CHAPMAN/ALAMY

knocking it off its kilter. Ever since, our world, rather than spinning round a vertical axis through its poles, has tilted. In the third century BC, the Greek astronomer Eratosthenes – besides calculating the circumference of the Earth – estimated that axial tilt to be 23.4 degrees, equivalent apparently to the angle at which a double-decker bus would topple.

The implications of that tilt for the cycle of the seasons is as follows. Imagine the Earth to be orbiting anticlockwise around the Sun, transposed on to a clockface.

At 9am, with the axis tilted, the Sun's radiation is oriented preferentially towards the northern hemisphere, whose longest day, the summer solstice, falls on 21st June. Six months later – at 3pm, as it were – the Sun is now oriented towards the southern hemisphere, shining less directly on the northern hemisphere, whose days have shortened, culminating in the winter solstice on 21st December.

> 'The surprise of spring turns out to be very surprising indeed'

Put another way, without that axial tilt, everywhere on Earth would receive the same 12 hours of light and darkness throughout the year – and there would be no seasons.

Next, the biological contribution to spring's awakening. The first hint that trees and flowers might calibrate the passage of time emerged in the early decades of the 20th century. That's when plant physiologists Henry Allard and Wightman Garner demonstrated that flowering could be advanced or delayed by an experimental manipulation of the amount of light to which plants are exposed.

Broadly speaking, they identified two main categories of what they called photoperiodism: short-day plants, which flowered in autumn when the daylight is shortening; and long-day plants, which flowered in the spring and summer when it is lengthening.

From this, they inferred that there had to be some unknown 'signal molecule' in the leaves. This molecule must be responsive to the duration of the hours of daylight. When transported to the tips of buds, it initiated flowering. Just over ten years ago, a Swedish scientist identified that molecule as a tiny piece of genetic material, known as messenger RNA.

Similar experiments have revealed the photoperiodic response in animals and birds. It initiates the many hormonal and reproductive changes that ensure – depending on the length of their gestation period – that their offspring are born at the time of year most conducive to their survival.

The 'surprise of spring' turns out to be very surprising indeed. It is lucidly explored by Oxford neuroscientists Russell Foster and Leon Kreitzman in their *Seasons of Life* (Profile Books, 2009).



New French diplomatic war: roast venison v kale salad

Mary Kenny bids a sad farewell to the feasts adored by Henry VIII

Now that we're urged to embark on 'ethical eating' by going vegetarian, or vegan, I wonder how the French will exercise their gastronomic influence over the world of diplomacy and international relations.

The French claim to have invented the 'diplomatic meal', which brings nations together, makes summits successful and sends messages via superb food and wine.

Some historic menus have been gathered together in an archive, published as *À la table des diplomates* (edited by Laurent Stefanini), tracing what the big cheeses have been eating since 1520.

When Henry VIII and Francis I broke bread at the Field of the Cloth of Gold, the menu offered beef, mutton, capons, chickens, pigs, rabbits, peacocks, venison, hares, goats, herons, woodcock, pigeons, plovers, larks, blackbirds and 'the most noble dish of all', partridge.

Things did trim down by 1869, at the inauguration of the Suez Canal dinner, but the menu still included roast beef, fish, turkey, ham, pheasant, game, tongue, venison and capons.

Meals again grew less sumptuous in the 20th century, but there was always meat, fowl, fish, sauces and sometimes a political message – be tough on the Germans (a Versailles menu of 1919 emphasised the afflicted French provinces). Later, Franco-German alliances would be assisted by a menu that highlighted reconciliation.

De Gaulle and Adenauer bonded over a simple lobster thermidor, saddle of veal, vegetables, salad and fruit in 1963. From the 1960s, 'gigantic' meals were out, but elaborate dishes were still needed to boost prestige, with China, Russia and the G7 –which Giscard d'Estaing claims to have brought together most successfully over great French grub.

For the Paris Agreement of 2015, Paris provided a simple, very French lunch of Normandy coquilles Saint Jacques, poultry from northern France, a Savoy soft cheese and a dessert of Corsican clementines.

TOBY MORISON



Will we see French diplomacy offering cashew cheese, quinoa stir-fry and kale salad in the future? It may come to that!

The longest bridge in Ireland was opened in January: the Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Bridge, of nine spans and 970 yards long, across the River Barrow near New Ross, County Wexford, hereditary homeplace of the Kennedy political dynasty.

Ireland is an emphatically 'woke' society these days. So I'm mildly surprised that a deeply Catholic, Irish-American matriarch (ennobled as a Papal Countess by Pope Pius XII), who extolled the vocation of homemaker, was chosen as a symbol by the political establishment.

The Irish Constitution of 1937 has a clause that honours the work of 'the woman in the home' – ie the housewife – without which 'the common good cannot be achieved'. Progressive 'woke' politicians – such as deposed Taoiseach Leo Varadkar – have vowed to expunge this totally outdated anachronism.

And yet there they were, elevating Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy, stalwart of home and hearth, to preside over Ireland's grandest bridge!

Ah, but ... tribal loyalties often trump progressive 'wokery', and the links to JFK and the Kennedy dynasty run a lot deeper than political correctness.

Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy (1890-1995) endured marriage to old Joe Kennedy, cruelly faithless husband and veteran bootlegger, for over 50 years. Personally, I think she deserves a martyr's crown, let alone a 970-yard bridge.

The first book review I ever wrote was of Nicolette Devas's memoir *Two Flamboyant Fathers*, published in 1966.

Nicolette grew up among Bohemian artists and writers – one of her father figures was Augustus John, while her sister Caitlin married Dylan Thomas. Nicolette married Anthony Devas, a portrait painter whose subjects included Dylan, Laurie Lee and the Queen, who allowed him 12 sittings back in 1957.

So it was a small-world moment for me when their son, Prosper Devas, came to live, part-time, in Deal, where his daughter Molly has made her home. Prosper was a successful designer and a lovely cartographer, composing engaging, narrative maps of Kent and elsewhere. He also found personal happiness with Frances Fyfield, Deal's renowned thriller-writer.

Prosper Devas was a sunny-natured man who spoke, he said, 1950s French, since he had attended the London lycée as a child. He was popular in our Channel town and when at the age of 73 he died, shockingly swiftly from cancer, in January 2020, there was a packed funeral and much sadness at his passing.

When a contemporary dies, I often realise how much more I wanted to ask the dear departed.

'Brits' as a plural noun is often used in a friendly way – including by 'Brits' themselves, as in 'Brits Abroad' – although I believe it originated as a hostile term, coined by the IRA in the 1970s.

But now that Sinn Fein has emerged victorious in the Irish election, singing *Come Out, Ye Black and Tans*, I suspect that the more pejorative element of 'Brits' is returning.

Advertisement

Taking on a tablet is easy

Tablets like the iPad, Galaxy Tab or Kindle Fire are everywhere nowadays. And they can be great. For a start they make it easy to stay in touch with family and friends.

You can use Skype to make video calls, you can send emails, even including photos you've taken. Or you can use services like Facebook to easily stay in touch with many friends and family all at once – sharing photos and comments on what each other are up to.

All from the comfort of your sofa, armchair or even sat in the garden. And all at the tap of the screen.

Tablets can be great for entertainment too. Whether you want to read the news online, watch TV that you missed when it was broadcast or listen to music, you can do it all.

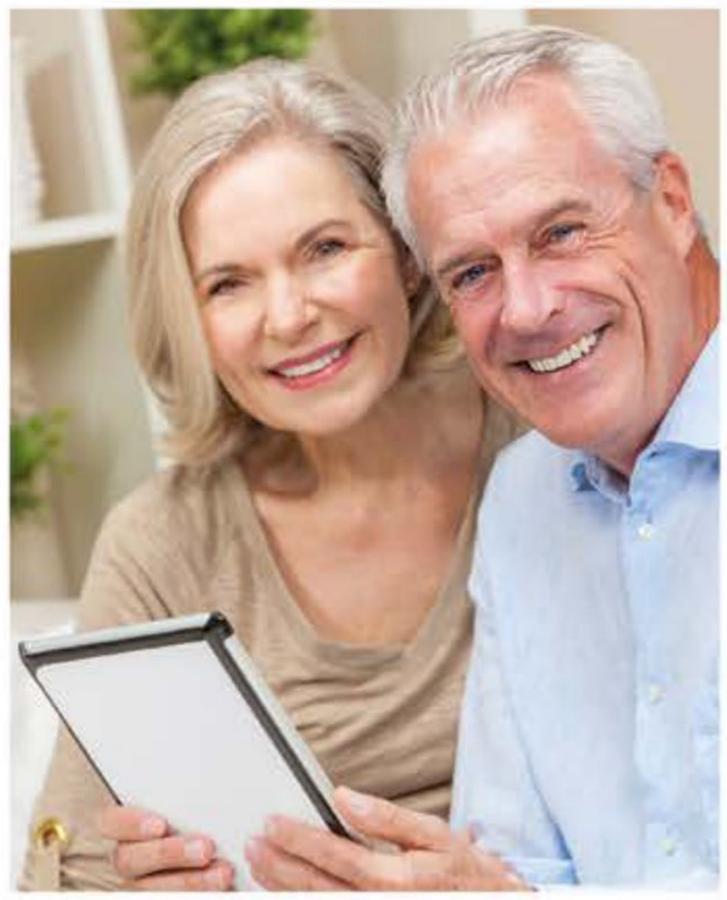
But there's a flip side. If you're not sure how to use a tablet, you can feel left behind or confused. Even frustrated when you try to get it to work. Partly it's because the tablets hardly ever come with a manual... and partly it's because it isn't always easy to work out what you need to do. It's one of those things that can seem easy and obvious once you know... but until someone tells you, how could you possibly know?

That's where a guide published by The Helpful Book Company comes in. It doesn't assume you're an expert or a "techie" – it's written for beginners or people who have used the tablet a bit but wish it was easier!

Over the last fourteen years The Helpful Book Company has helped thousands get to grips with their touchscreen tablets (and before that with PCs).

They explain everything in plain simple language, not assuming you already know how to do everything. The guide includes plenty of pictures of the screen, showing you exactly what it'll look like and where to tap on the screen.

There are separate books for the iPad and for tablets running Google's Android such as the Samsung Galaxy Tab and Sony Xperia – but even if you're not sure what you have, there's a free information pack that tells you all about them – and how to check which tablet you have.



Using a tablet <u>can</u> be easy...
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Not in shops or on Amazon, call 01229 777606 and ask for a free info pack now.

Calling all iPad or Android Tablet owners

If you ever find your tablet frustrating, aren't quite sure how to do things or just think you might not be getting all you should from it, read on...

Tablets are becoming hugely popular. And no wonder – they're lighter and easier to carry around than a PC. You can sit in a comfy armchair and browse the web or even video call your family around the world.

They're easier to use than PCs in lots of ways, too.
But there's a catch. In fact, two

Catch number 1:

They're different from PCs. So if you already know how to use a PC, you have to start again.

Catch number 2 (the big one!):

There are lots of important features that are "hidden". There's no button for them saying "click here". And you simply can't work it out. You need to know to slide the screen from the left, or drag the thingy-me-bob to the right.

Someone needs to tell you these things – it's just not possible to work it out as you wouldn't even know they're there!

If I ran the world...

If I ran the world, these devices would come with a proper manual. But when they do come with a manual, it's on the device, so you can only get at it if you already know how to use the thing! And when you do get at it, it's usually written assuming you already know how to use it – which makes it a bit pointless.

That's why we've written two books: *iPads One Step at a Time* and *Android Tablets One Step at a Time* (ideal for all Android tablets).

Plain English - that's not all...

They explain how to use the device, in plain simple language, with pictures of the screen showing exactly where to tap or slide your fingers. No jargon!

Only Half the Story...

That's only half the story, but I don't have room to explain what I mean by that here. So I've put together full information on the books – who they're for, what they cover and so on.

What's more, the books also come with a small free gift – no room to explain that here, either!

"Better than WHSmith's Best"?

As soon as these books came out, I started getting comments like... *"Thank you for producing such a superb book – it is really helping me. I had bought one (a book) in W H Smiths a short while ago and couldn't get on with it at all!"* - J.S.

and *"I am delighted with the new book on tablets, so many things I didn't understand before, being of the 'retired brigade' it's a great help."* – Doreen Wadsworth

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Anyway, don't buy now. Instead, you can find out the full details about what's covered, who they're ideal for and what you might be missing out on, then decide. Just ask for a free information pack.

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Sophia Waugh: School Days



My best pupils are Poles apart

It's funny, the things that cause racism to rear its ugly head.

County Hall wants all incidents of racism to be declared by schools. If none is declared, it is assumed that the staff is either incompetent or intrinsically racist. It does not seem to occur to anyone that there just might be no racism.

I live in a very white area of the country. Indeed, when I first began teaching there was only one non-white child in the school. Whenever he was told off for not doing his homework, he would cry 'Is it 'cos I'm black? You're racist!'

Now we are much more diverse. We have South-East Asians and black Africans, South Americans and Eastern Europeans. We have girls in hijabs and no one turns a hair. We seem to coexist in glorious harmony.

Or do we? It takes only a little thing to upset the equilibrium.

Hearing two boys argue bitterly about the merits and demerits of Bangladesh and India (coming from each of those countries themselves), I prepared to jump into the fray, tear apart the racist anger and reunite the boys in a friendly, loving way. Until I realised they were talking cricket, and their argument was entirely friendly.

While sporting competition is entirely friendly, not all such discussions are. Coronavirus has brought back a hideous rise in racist taunts – anyone remotely Asian (not just Chinese) is now avoided, with shrieks of 'Stay away, you'll catch the virus!' Ugh, the stupidity!

Meanwhile, I have been teaching persuasive writing, using political speeches as the examples. It's good fun, particularly because some of my most disengaged boys have admitted to enjoying the breadth of topics we can take in. Pankhurst, Obama (any excuse), Shaftesbury ... you get the picture.

And all was fine and dandy until we came to Wilberforce. I had thought the students would get overexcited by discussing child labour, but that didn't seem to concern them at all. Slavery, on the other hand, really drew them in. There were some interesting conversations – about the use of the word 'Negro', for instance, which some children would not even say for fear of sounding racist. The descriptions of the slave ships fascinated them, and the whole idea of shipping goods round the world and back again warmed their little mercantile souls. It turns out Napoleon was spot-on with his definition of us as 'a nation of shopkeepers'.

But it was the discussion of racism itself that opened my eyes. While not one of them would admit to (or I hope even have) any feelings of racism towards black or Asian people, one group was still nominated as likely to be victimised because of their race: the Poles. Even above any other Eastern European group, in this neck of the woods the Poles are those most reviled. The children were careful not to express any racism themselves but just to report what they had seen, which mirrors pretty much what I witness as I go about my business in both the town where I teach and that in which I live.

Why? It's back to Brexit, isn't it? Those racists who feel overwhelmed by BAME neighbours have learned that they can't articulate their senseless resentment publicly. But somehow the Poles, because of the European Union, because their shops have sprung up on the streets of all our towns, because they work hard and their children mostly behave well, and because you can't tell a person is Polish until you hear them speak – the Poles are to blame for everything.

But I had to point something out to my class. When our school was recently successful in a competition for girls run by the National Cyber Security Centre, I couldn't help but notice that every one of the girls in the team that went off to the final had a Polish surname.

When are the small-minded bigots going to realise that many of the best, boldest and brightest Poles came to the UK, and that their children might well be at the forefront of our future successes?

Alice Pitman: Home Front

Confessions of a Roly Poly dwarf

'Am I overweight?' I asked daughter Betty after finding I couldn't do up my jeans. I sucked in my stomach as she gave me a cursory inspection.

'You could do with losing two stone,' she concluded, before returning to the Kardashians on her laptop.

I was prepared to lose half a stone. Or one, at a push. But *two*? A tall order.

So I googled, 'Am I fat?' An austere-looking NHS chart showed my body index nestling in the overweight curve. A few more cakes and I'd be teetering on the edge of obese. Annoyingly, Betty was right. I am exactly two stone overweight.

Another dismaying revelation: I used to be 5ft 4 until a nurse at Guy's hospital recently informed me I had shrunk to 5ft 3. Not only am I morphing into one of Les Dawson's Roly Polys; I'll soon be the ideal height for the killer dwarf in the TV adaptation of *Don't Look Now*.

I have found myself making old-person 'Oof' noises when sitting and 'Aaaghhh' sounds when standing up. My children think it's an attention-seeking ploy. I'm also not allowed to rest my cup of tea on my stomach when watching TV any more.

It's all very unfair. I take the dog for a long walk every day. I often give myself

Weightwatcher portions of potatoes and rice. Apart from red wine at the weekend, and the occasional Wispa I try to avoid sugary drinks and puddings.

As if in sympathy, Mr Home Front has developed an Oliver Hardy paunch. It's his own fault: my spy Betty, who occasionally commutes with him, has revealed he eats crisps on the train home, as well as Milky Bars ('You're not seven!' she told him). He also gets driven around a lot.

If it's not his colleague Ben chauffeuring him to and from work as if he's Alan Sugar, Betty or I will give him lifts to the station (a brisk 12-minute walk). Then there is Hassan round the corner, the taxi driver Mr Home Front has single-handedly kept in business since 2006.

Appalled by their parents' expanding waistlines, the children ordered us to do something about it – 'before Channel 5 put you in a documentary'.

So I started driving us to Leatherhead Leisure Centre once a week. Mr HF goes to the gym; I swim. I said it was the only time we ever went anywhere together.

'That's not true,' said Mr HF. 'We go to the Esher Everyman.' He sighed.

Our leisure-centre trips lasted a month. I can't say I miss going. If it wasn't Speedo-clad 20-somethings swimming in the fast lane as if they were in the Olympics, it was human turtles clogging up the slow lane.

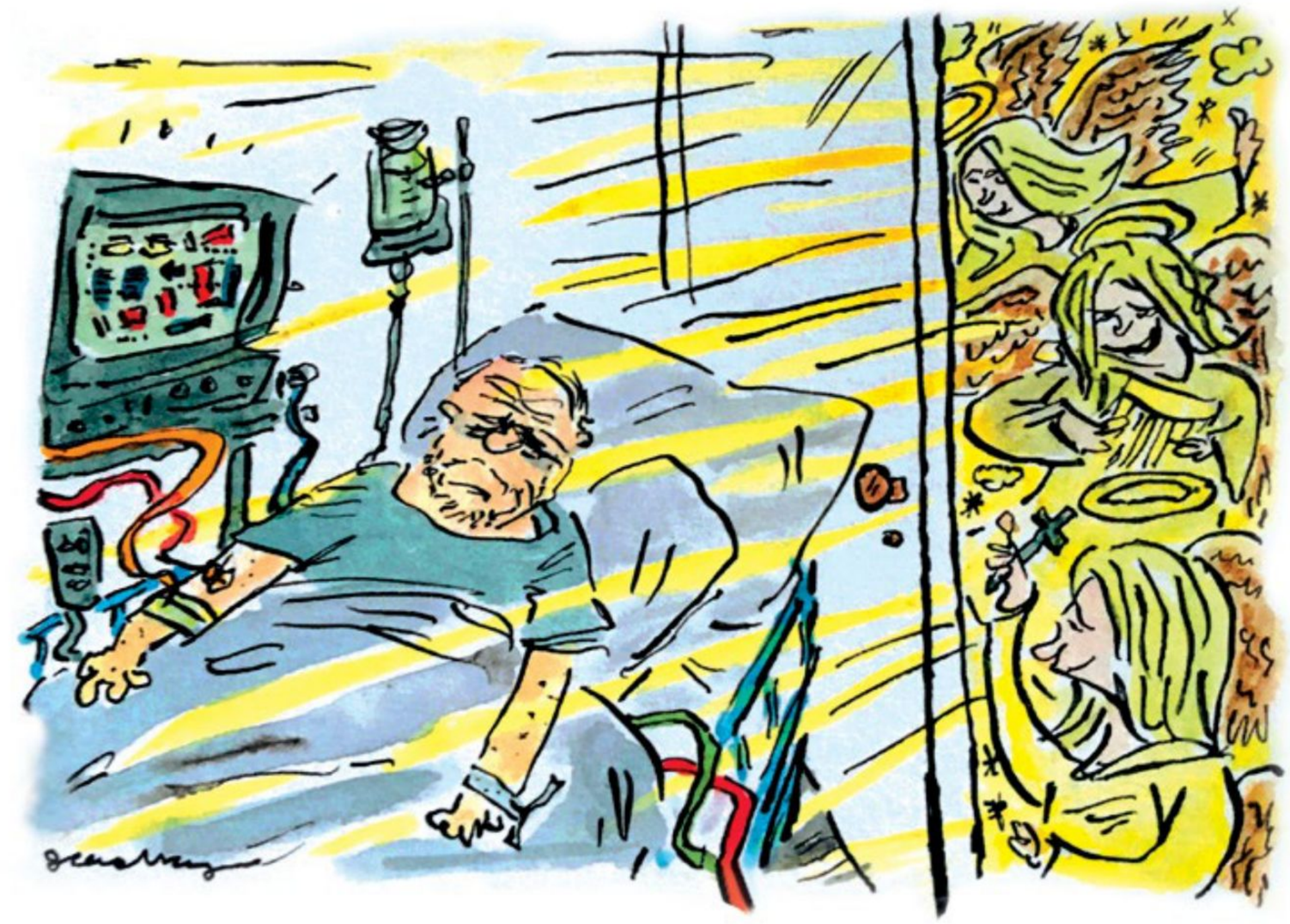
What really did it for me was getting cramp during my last ignominious visit. It was so acutely painful I couldn't move. A teenage lifeguard spotted me flailing about in the deep end and frantically blew her whistle. As children dispersed in terror, another lifeguard pulled me out with a long noodle-shaped float. 'Cramp!' I gasped. 'Oh right,' she said. 'My nan gets that.'

As for Mr HF, lifting weights turned out not to be as enjoyable as playing online chess with Lars in Stockholm.

But he's right. We do go regularly to the Everyman in Esher. Watching the big screen while lovely young bar staff bring food and drink to your armchair is delightful. My guilty pleasure is their hamburger and chips (the best in Surrey). Mr HF always has a fresh banana milkshake and a slice of Bakewell tart. He thinks eating lunch there is common and is rather sniffy when mine arrives. Although I'm infuriated by rustling sweet wrappers, I confess that eating a hamburger in the semi-darkness of the cinema is one of life's pleasures.

And because the Everyman has a hint of a private members' club about it, with its armchair seating and dividing tables, it is somehow not objectionable.

Mr HF and I have made a pact not to tell Betty about our Everyman diet. We'd never hear the last of it.



Wilfred De'Ath

I'm in heaven's waiting room

On 17th December 2019, I had a heart attack while sleeping on the floor of St Mary's Church in Cambridge.

I was taken by ambulance to Addenbrooke's Hospital. I asked not to be resuscitated. The very nice doctor preferred to discuss his boyhood caravanning holiday with the patient instead of diagnosing him. But I was told that, as well as a heart attack, I was suffering from a) kidney failure; b) an ulcerated left leg; c) anaemia. I might have had a stroke, too.

As I write this, I have been in hospital for six weeks and I am feeling no better – worse, if anything. I long to die. I cannot commit suicide because it is considered a great sin in the Roman Catholic Church to which I belong. So I shall just have to battle on. The doctors think I will get better (slowly). I don't. But who knows?

I have been happy only once since I've been in Addenbrooke's and that was on Christmas morning when Rev Jon Canessa, Chairman of the Cambridge Church Homeless Project, brought me the Holy Sacrament. The sun was shining and, for a moment, all seemed well.

Then it was back to misery. I can't walk. I can scarcely eat or drink. I breathe with difficulty. My poor left leg is getting better, but the rest of me isn't.

In the old days, the nurses would put on caps and sing us patients Christmas carols. Now they are too busy trying to work the computers. Here in hospital, we are all victims of the technology that is keeping us alive.

I hope not to die, but I am ready to.

In years to come, that technology will become so extreme that robotic tentacles will roam round your body, checking out every organ: your blood pressure, your blood sugar level and so on.

After a few seconds of whirring and clicking, a small card will be delivered through a slot by your left elbow. It will tell you how many years, months and weeks you have left to live.

It will be adjacent to another slot, through which, when you first arrive, another disembodied voice will ask you to insert your credit card.

The amount of time left to you will not change. No human being will visit you. You will have become the victim of British medical engineering. There will be no holistic help of any kind.

Good luck, mate. See you in heaven.

Sadly, this was Wilfred's last column. He died on 19th February 2020, aged 82



*'I bet Greta eats **her** broccoli'*

STEVE WAY

God

SISTER TERESA

Venerable Bede's Geordie manuscript

I once heard a sermon that began 'Saint Jerome was a crusty old bachelor'. There is rather more to him than that: he was one of the greatest of all biblical scholars and the range of his erudition is breathtaking.

He is now remembered chiefly for his Latin translation of the Bible – usually called the Vulgate – commissioned by Pope Damasus I in 382, which ensured that Scripture was available in the vernacular throughout the Western Roman Empire for anyone who could read. This version of the Bible held sway in the Roman church throughout the centuries and remains in use to this day.

Christopher de Hamel's *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts* is a must for anyone who likes abundant colour illustrations combined with a wealth of fascinating information. He writes about antique manuscripts – fragile and beyond price. His book is gloriously full of jokes, not a few at the expense of some of the grandest libraries in the world.

One chapter deals with the Codex Amiatinus: the oldest and most complete version of St Jerome's translation of the



Codex Amiatinus: lost for 1,000 years

Bible. Its survival is a miracle, not least because its whereabouts was unknown for more than 1,000 years.

It was written at the end of the seventh century in what were the adjacent monasteries of Wearmouth and Jarrow – now reduced to almost invisible ruins because of the Reformation.

I find it extraordinarily moving that one of the most precious books in the world should have been beautifully handwritten over 1,300 years ago in what is now Tyne and Wear. The clarity of the script makes for easy reading, even for those with no Latin.

One of its nicest features is a correction which some might call vandalism. There is a tiny NON above a line in Genesis, in letters that look as though they might have been inked in by you or me: not calligraphic at all.

It is likely that they were written by the Venerable Bede – then a monk at Wearmouth – the only Englishman to be mentioned in Dante's *Divine Comedy* and to this day the only Englishman to have been declared a Doctor of the Church. He knew a mistake when he saw one.

St Teresa of Ávila (1515-82) was far less fortunate, in that she had no access to a complete version of the Bible, having to make do with mere snippets of Scripture. Nonetheless, she too became a Doctor of the Church – but she would have loved to have at her disposal the whole Bible translated into Spanish, and would have greatly benefited from it. The Reformation caused her great agony; and one of its highly desirable by-products – that complete version of the Bible – could never be hers.

Funeral Service

Sir Roger Scruton (1944-2020)

The funeral of Sir Roger Scruton, philosopher, writer, aesthetician, composer, novelist, oenophile and rider to hounds, took place at Malmesbury Abbey on 24th January 2020.

Michael Gove represented the Government. The Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán, attended in a personal capacity and Lord Chartres, the former Bishop of London, also came.

After the welcome by Rev Oliver Ross, Scruton's son, Sam Scruton, read from John 1:1-5 and 9-14. Following the opening prayer by the Rev Steve Wilkinson, the congregation sang *Angel Voices Ever Singing*. Scruton's daughter,



CHRISTOPHER JONES/ DESIGN PICS INC/ALAMY

Lucy Scruton, and Professor Robert Grant read Hardy's poem *The Darkling Thrush*.

Professor Grant's tribute covered their 40 years of friendship. He remembered how they had both attended an auction of farm equipment, where they overheard a man say of an old tractor, 'I don't think much of he!' That led, as Grant said, 'to a typically Scrutonian disquisition on the local dialect'. On another occasion, Scruton was visiting Grant by the coast and swam so far out to sea that he became a mere dot. When he returned, Grant expressed surprise. 'One must practise one's strokes,' Scruton explained. 'It had never occurred to the rest of us to practise swimming much after learning it,' said Grant.

Music included a song by Janáček – *Láska* from *Moravian Folk Poetry in Songs* – and Schubert's *Ave Maria*. Hymns were *Come Down, O Love Divine*, Psalm 23 and *All Creatures of Our God and King*. Samuel Hughes read from T S Eliot's *Little Gidding*. Dr Jane Briggs gave an address as vicar of All Saints, Garsdon, where Scruton was organist.

DAVID OLDROYD-BOLT

Hercules's 13th labour – seeing a GP

Cerberus, the dog of Hades, tried to prevent souls from leaving the establishment. The receptionists of the general practice in which I am registered try to prevent souls from entering theirs. Even Hercules could never overcome them; they would defeat him by pressing delete.

Getting to see a GP – I can't say *my* GP, because there are 12 in the practice – is another labour of Hercules.

First, the receptionist demands to know what is wrong with me; why I want to see the doctor. Is that not between him and me? No; without telling the receptionist, no appointment can be made. And it is up to her whether or not she considers me worthy of the doctor's attention. Compared with Ms Cerberus, the average doorman of a club of ill-repute is the embodiment of flexibility.

The fact that I am a doctor myself cuts no ice with her; rather the reverse. Evidently she considers the old tradition of professional courtesy to be obsolete; indeed a manifestation of social injustice in the form of privilege. My attempt to play the doctor card meets with her disapproval. I go to the back of the queue.

Neither does the fact that I attend the doctor only every other year mean anything to her. She is not there to ease my path to the doctor. She is there to prevent him as far as possible from seeing patients. That, at any rate, is the patient's-eye view of the situation.

In these circumstances, the patient has to lie or exaggerate. He must become expert at doing so. Too gross an exaggeration of symptoms will lead the receptionist to recommend that the patient bypass the doctor altogether and call an ambulance. Too slight an exaggeration will lead to a recommendation that he take an aspirin or see the nurse. A patient has to be skilled these days to see a doctor.

An alternative to lying is to threaten to complain. Though this works in the short term, it is a weapon of declining power the more it is used. It also has the drawback that the complainant, or the person who threatens to complain, might be labelled a troublemaker or difficult patient.

When, finally, you get an appointment (for three weeks' time), it is awarded as if it were a minor decoration – an OBE, say, awarded for exceptional persistence. You have joined the privileged few. You should be proud and grateful but, on the contrary, you are cross and resentful, if not outright angry. You begin to think, 'I've paid my taxes…' and then are ashamed of even thinking this cliché. It is all very humiliating – but at least it is equally humiliating for everyone else.

There is only one solution, of course, and that is to go private. In many places, that is not easy: for example, the nearest private GP to me is 25 miles away.

But, for a relatively small fee, patients in big cities can use services such as DocTap (there are others) to see a doctor the same day, without having to defeat Ms Cerberus.

Of course, such services are not for masochists, determined to get their ounce of flesh from the NHS.



Taste the wines of northern Spain at a (long) lunch at Boisdale

Wednesday 3rd June 2020

Boisdale, in the heart of the City (202 Bishopsgate, London EC2M 4NR), is the leader of the pack when it comes to British food. Following the huge success of the Puglia lunch in February, they have come up with another gastronomic treat.

This exclusive event includes six fine northern-Spanish wines throughout a three-course lunch, tutored and supplied by Francis Flavin, the head of wholesale at Davy's wines.

The menu

Potted Inverawe smoked mackerel, sour cream and lemon, pickled cucumbers, sourdough from the St John bakery
Mytilus Albariño 2017, Rías Baixas vs
Savia Viva Clasico Blanco 2018, Penedès

Roast sirloin of Gloucestershire Old Spot pork, chorizo, peas, new potatoes
Billo Blai Ferre Just 2017, Priorat vs Vitola Reserva 13, Miguel Merino, Rioja vs Ochoa Reserva 2010 Navarra DO

Eton mess, Kentish strawberries, meringue, whipped cream
Moscato de Ochoa 2018, Navarra DO

Tea and coffee

Price £69.50 per person (inc VAT). To book a place, email reservations@boisdale.co.uk or call 020 7730 6922

READERS' LETTERS

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It's a Lom story

SIR: You ignored my letter stating Herbert Lom (not Yul Brynner) was the king in *The King and I* from 1953 to 1955 at Drury Lane.

Now Kirk Douglas has died, can you acknowledge that the *deus ex machina* in *Spartacus* was Herbert Lom?
Mike Bor, son-in-law of Herbert Lom, London W2

Swastika goes up in flames

SIR: The Swastika Laundry, Ireland (Postcards from the Edge, March issue), was not the only organisation to steal a march on Herr Hitler's marketing effort. Thirty years ago, I visited an aged friend of my parents and was invited to look through a shoebox crammed full of cigarette cards collected between the wars. One in particular, referencing BFPO Mesopotamia, caught my eye.
Richard Algar, Luton



Beating Hitler to it: the Mesopotamia cigarette card

Kissing the shuttle

SIR: The Old Un's Notes (March issue) included a reference to the Blessing of the Throats at St Etheldreda's in Holborn, London, every 3rd February.

As a teenager, living in East Lancashire, I visited my GP with a swollen uvula, probably caused by a fishbone injury. Fortunately, bloody surgery was avoided once the wound healed. In conversation, my doctor informed me that, for him, uvula problems were not uncommon; a local occupational hazard.

The cotton towns were full of weavers in the habit of 'kissing the shuttle': the quickest way to replace the weft in the shuttle when it ran out. They placed a loop of thread next to the eye and sucked it through. The thread would sometimes break and be drawn to the back of the throat and twist and knot around the uvula. Local GPs were practised at removal of either the thread or in the worst cases the uvula.

No protection by St Blaise west of the Pennines!
Kind regards,
Ron Tate, Havant, Hampshire



'He didn't wake up this morning'

Latin joke No. 4

SIR: Re Latin jokes (qv February and March issues):

Diner to waiter: 'A glass of hock, please – y'know, *hic, haec, hoc*.'

Long delay ensues.

Diner to waiter: 'Where's my hock?'

Waiter to diner: 'But, sir, you declined it.'
John Samson, Edinburgh

Anglo-Saxon attitude

SIR: In the February issue, the Old Un requested information on the use of the heading 'Anglo-Saxons' in a Parisian bookshop. The French use this phrase to denote anything related to British civilisation, in this case the English language. It is a phrase that is not always used positively, as the French hate the idea that their language and culture might be diluted by the Anglo-Saxons!
Christine Gerrard, France



'Narcissus feels outnumbered'

Smoking hot lunch

SIR: Liz Treacher's article (February issue) brought back happy memories of the mid '60s, when a café near my office would accept luncheon vouchers for cigarettes, and thus I could buy 40 Gold Leaf for nine shillings, spending three LVs.

Additionally I was able to demonstrate my affluence when taking my now wife on our first date to an Indian restaurant for a meal. Because I had just received my monthly supply of LVs, my largesse was unbounded.
Howard Dawson, Chalfont St Peter, Buckinghamshire

Can men still 'do it' at 75?

SIR: Liz Hodgkinson (Rant, February issue) sounds so lovely that I should think she is beating admirers away from her door with a big stick. The derision of her two sons is caused by their embarrassment that somebody of Liz's age (my age, too!) might be indulging in sex (how dare she? Surely it is *their* domain?). Her sons need to turn the essence of her article on its head; ie, would *they* still be capable of sex at Liz's age? No, because they are men and men can't 'do it' at 75!!! More importantly, would they actually attract anybody of the opposite sex at 75 anyway? Not with their sarcasm, they won't! Go for it, Liz!!
Mary Baker, Brentwood, Essex

Yes to Catholic priestesses

SIR: Yes, I agree: priests who are married with a family make good parish priests. But so do women – and Benedict King's father is a Catholic priest only because he disagrees with women being ordained.
Marcia Thompson, Formby, Merseyside

Maxwell's council house

SIR: I much enjoyed Alice Pitman's account of her aged mother's reminiscences (Home Front, March issue), particularly about Robert Maxwell. The Aged P refers to Maxwell's country pile, Headington Hall, near Oxford, from which he would commmute to his *Daily Mirror* office by helicopter.



'Isn't it great? I found a little "Classroom Mode" switch behind their ears'



However, I understand that he didn't actually own the house, but leased it from the local authority. So it was in fact a council house. Little was straightforward about the bouncing Czech.
Steve Short, Loughton, Essex

Clarity begins at home

SIR: David Oldroyd-Bolt's Rant (March issue) prompts me to extend some of his thinking to Radio 4, BBC news and other outlets; and air my wonder at the diction – or lack of it – displayed by so many individual announcers, presenters and other participants.

I suppose to exclude from broadcasting those who have strong regional accents (genuine and to be valued, I know, but often difficult to comprehend for the 'outsider') might be seen as prejudice. But, surely, clear speech (I hesitate to say the Queen's English) is a not unreasonable skill to demand, at least of those presenting information, if not of those employed as entertainers?

And, as for those afflicted with so called vocal fry, best that they be put in isolation until their throat complaint receives suitable medical attention!
Malcolm Mitchell, Kent

Larking with Larkin

SIR: If oldies are going to exercise their hard-won right to grumble about the slipshod ways of the young, they'd better make sure they get it right themselves. Charles Keen, in his review of Nigel Andrews's book on church monuments (March issue), misquotes Philip Larkin. It's not 'What shall survive of us is love' but 'What will survive of us is love.' There is a big difference. (And don't get me started on the ways in which T S Eliot gets mangled by misquotation, though not necessarily in *The Oldie*!)
Brigid Purcell, Norwich

More letters on the **Oldie App**
See page 6

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I Once Met

Paul Daniels

'Don't tell anyone how it's done.' It was said so sweetly but with a touch of malice as I left the stage and he was shaking my hand.

Paul Daniels (1938-2016) had just told me how he did his best, most influential magic routine – the Electric Chairs.

It was 20 years ago and I was living part-time in Brighton. Thirty steps from my house was a tiny comedy venue. For one night only, it was hosting Paul Daniels.

The place wasn't exactly heaving. Daniels was well past his glory days.

The first part of the show was question-and-answer. Paul explained that his wife, Debbie McGee, wasn't well – so he had driven himself to do the show and was feeling a bit lonely.

At the interval, Paul joined the audience in the bar and asked me what I did for a living. I explained that I was a writer. It was all part of the master magician doing his homework and preparing to ask me up on stage in the second half for Electric Chairs.

His strength wasn't just the magic. It was the patter and rapport he built – effortless and genuine. You genuinely fell under his spell.

I won't tell you how Electric Chairs works. But it is brilliant. Watch it on the internet and try to work it out – you won't. It is a masterclass in magic. My wife of 25 years, who was sitting in the audience in the front row, still asks me if Paul hypnotised me. In a way, he did.

Electric Chairs starts with two guests picked 'at random' from the audience to go on stage. The chairs then proceed to give the participants electric shocks. I was leaping around, mystified by my 'demonic' chair, scared of sitting down.

Once home, I emailed him to say thank you and I got a polite email back; again with the line, 'Don't tell anyone how it's done.'

In the question-and answer-session, Paul said, 'What I do is not magic. Don't believe the people who say it is.' He was a scholar of magic; a kind of tiny magical professor. He knew that magic is really that great morale-builder – entertainment.

There were no frills; no disappearing Taj Mahals; no starving yourself for days suspended above the Thames. He was the last great link to the old music-hall days – of approachable magic done by approachable normal people.

Before I headed off, I popped my head back into the auditorium. All the lights were on and a theatre-cleaner was picking up beer mugs and crisp packets. With the lights on you realised what a small hall it was – around 150 in capacity. Paul was still there. Maybe he was checking he hadn't forgotten anything. He didn't hear me coming in and so I just watched for a while.

Eventually he saw me. 'Oh, hello,' he said.

'Have you got a long journey home?' I asked.

'No. It's not too bad,' he answered.

'Can I help you with your stuff – to the car?'

'It's OK,' he said. 'I can get it there. It isn't too heavy.'

Paul Daniels was magic, even on a wet and miserable night in Brighton – and that's something.

Rev Steve Morris



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Man with the magic touch

I remember the original Twenties

MEMORY LANE

I was born in 1927. My first vivid memory is of lying in my cot in the early summer of 1929, listening to the incessant rhythm of waves gently breaking on the shore of Queenscliff beach in Manly, Australia. Every night I was put into my tall wooden prison, my cot, and there I reluctantly stayed until sleep overcame me.

There was a chubby young girl called Jean Bull who was hired to take me for walks along the Manly ocean front. Along this walk was an avenue of enormous Norfolk pine trees with fronds. Jean took delight in belting me across my calves with a frond when I was naughty – which was constantly. I would scream with pain. One day, during one of these walks, she took an enormous swipe and whacked me.



Trader, aged two, with a blind First World War veteran, 1929

Just at that moment a powerful voice behind us shouted, 'Stop that, you bloody bitch!' It was my silent-screen actor father, a confirmed alcoholic, returning home semi-sober from the nearby Pacific Hotel, his booze haven. Jean was sacked on the spot and Dad continued to take me for walks.

Another vivid memory is five words: 'Wall Street Crash', and 'The Depression'. I heard them while eating my porridge – which my father called pappy. I remember my mother at the stove, stirring my pappy. This and sago were my meals at the beginning of the Great Depression in 1929.

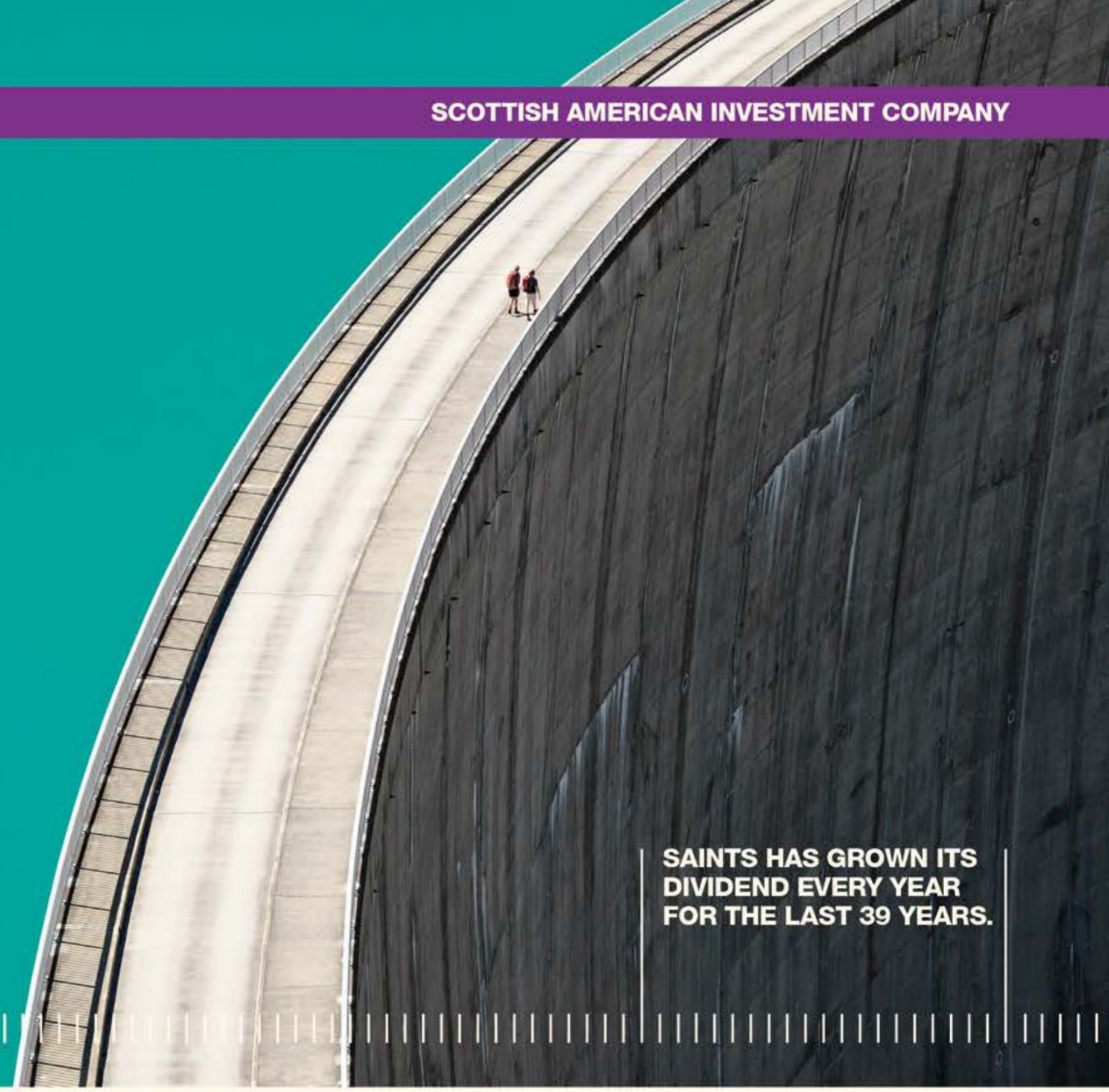
I also remember my grandfather, Ganfy, taking me for a tram ride from Narrabeen to Manly wharf on a 'jumping jack' – an ancient, very well-sprung tram that bounced up and down on the tramlines as we made our way to Manly wharf, where we caught a ferry, the *Barrenjoey*, to Circular Quay in Sydney.

One last 1920s memory is of going on the Manly ferry to see the arches of the Sydney Harbour Bridge being built. The bridge was opened three years later, in 1932.

By Trader Faulkner, London, who receives £50. Readers are invited to send in their own 400-word submissions about the past

More Memory Lanes on the ***Oldie App*** *See page 6*

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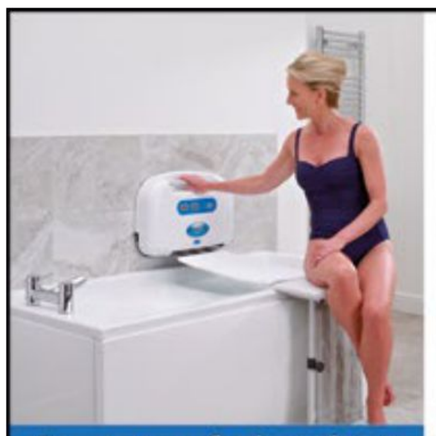
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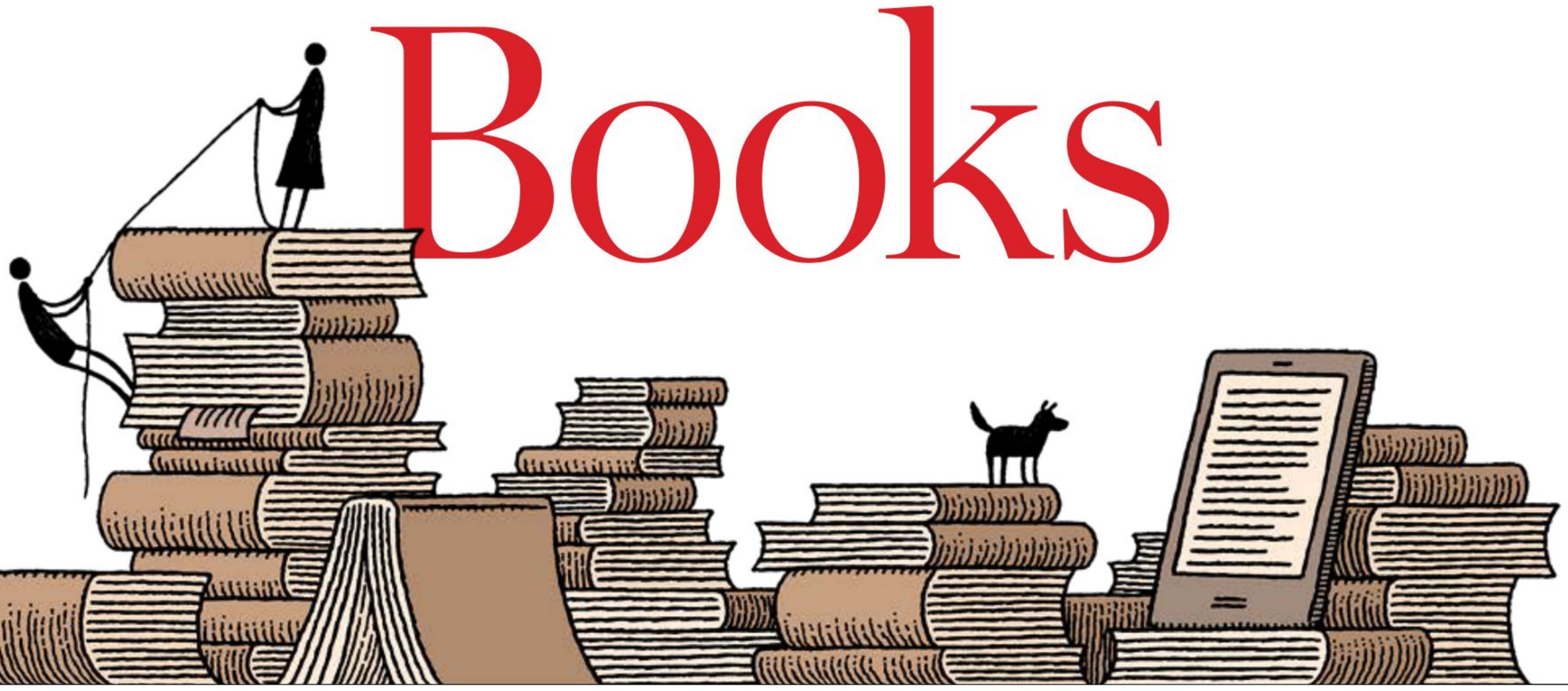
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Books



Cromwell on the block

LUCY HUGHES-HALLETT

The Mirror and the Light

By Hilary Mantel

4th Estate £16.99

Canterbury Cathedral. The dead of night. A few flickering lights. People huddled around an opened vault. In the dark immensity of the building, dogs are loose. The tomb of Thomas à Becket, murdered on this spot 400 years previously, is being opened on the orders of Thomas Cromwell.

The dogs are to oblige the assembled monks to stay put and witness the desecration. And, because this is fiction, they are also there to frighten the reader, to remind us of Cromwell's rough manners and his ruthlessness, and to introduce a note of brutish comedy to this Gothic scene.

A workman levers open the coffin. Someone says, 'Up there!' and, for a moment, everybody present sees a winged, black creature – a gigantic bird, bat or demon – swoop and flicker. It is the shadow of a labourer's coat, left hanging from scaffolding.

We are in Hilary Mantel's imagined Tudor world, where inanimate things – clothes, especially – shudder with significance. Readers will remember the scene, early in *Wolf Hall*, when the King's agents arrive at the disgraced Cardinal Wolsey's house to confiscate his goods. Wolsey's robes, stiff with golden embroidery, stand upright unsupported. They look like headless bodies, ready to be carted off.

This final novel in Mantel's superb trilogy begins and ends with a beheading. The first is Anne Boleyn's. The last is Cromwell's own. On the scaffold, he is momentarily moved to help the executioner – to 'take the axe from the man's fumbling grip: say patiently, "This is how"' – because Cromwell, who has risen from abused urchin to the man who runs England, knows how everything should be done.

This novel-sequence offers many pleasures, and one of the greatest of them is the contemplation of two prodigious intelligences at work. There is the cleverness of Cromwell. His watchfulness and caution, his coded conversation and adroit diplomacy, make him, for all his small piggy eyes and brusque manners, a compelling hero.

And there is the cleverness of Mantel, whose prose moves easily from florid splendour to vernacular punch; whose interweaving of past and present is as intricate as any knot garden; who can conjure up a character in all his slipperiness or her intransigence in half a dozen lines of dialogue; who has a dizzying way of using lacunae to open loopholes into the uncanny; and whose narrative, now complete, has a majestic sturdiness.

Mantel shows again (as she did in her earlier novel *Beyond Black*) how economically she can create menace. She introduces animals whose wildness and distress form a counterpoint to civilised cruelty – a striped cat from Damascus; a brood of beavers. They act as tapestried beasts do, making the physical world strange. There are dreams and pictures, conduits through which the emotion that Cromwell represses bubbles up. Mostly, though, Mantel works through solid things. She and her protagonist are shrewdly observant of the material world.

Cromwell, a smith's son, appreciates blades and jewels. An ex-cook, he savours food. A former cloth merchant, he can price damask. Seen through his eyes, palaces are full of gorgeous colour, and also of the evidence of meticulous work. He values skill (such as Hans Holbein's or Thomas Wyatt's) as wholeheartedly as he despises inherited privilege. These novels give us the luxury and glamour of court life and ancient ritual, but they are profoundly anti-ecclesiastical and



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anti-aristocratic. Cromwell is a Protestant and a commoner. His happiest conversations are with his servants.

As the action moves forward, the narrative repeatedly loops back. Readers anxious that they might have forgotten the first two novels need not worry. Themes are reprised, motifs re-introduced and clues glimpsed long ago flashed back to. As Cromwell's end approaches, we are taken ever further back into his origins, to his near-death in Italy and his near-marriage in Antwerp, and to the time when he was a kitchen boy in Lambeth Palace, and Thomas More was a scholar.

In *Wolf Hall*, Mantel never named Cromwell. Why not? Perhaps because it exhilarated her to do something difficult, her virtuosity as an author matching his as an administrator and manipulator of minds. *Bring Up the Bodies* was less exuberant, a tightly structured revenger's tragedy. *The Mirror and the Light* is a long-drawn-out lamentation.

Cromwell 'comes down' (to use Mantel's insistent phrase) not just because of his rivals' machinations, and because fortune's wheel always eventually dumps its favourites in the mud, but because time weakens and diminishes him.

It is painful to watch a character, whom we have known inscrutable and invulnerable, speak unguardedly to people he still trusts, but whom we readers have begun to suspect. Cromwell gets tired. He doesn't immediately realise, when the King turns his back on him, as though suddenly fascinated by the linenfold panelling, that he is done for.

There are delays – one in the form of a garrulous Shakespearean gaoler. But when the crisis comes, it is very fast – a gust of wind, a hat, a child and suddenly, like a scene from *The Godfather*, Cromwell realises, a beat after we do, that the men walking beside him are no longer his fellow *consiglieri*: they have become his captors.

Emotionally devastating, formally triumphant, this trilogy ends as powerfully as it began.

Marlborough woman

NICOLA SHULMAN

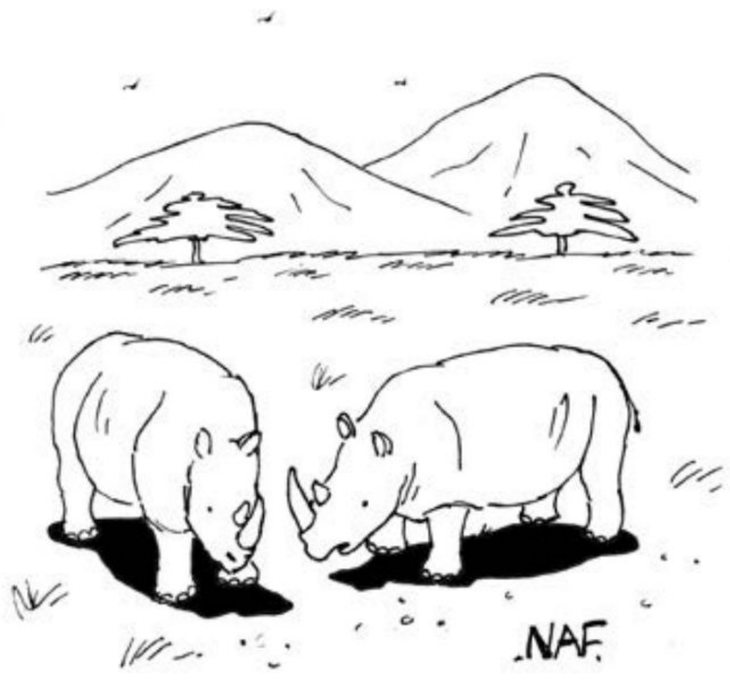
The Sphinx: The Life of Gladys Deacon, Duchess of Marlborough

By Hugo Vickers

Hodder & Stoughton £25

Summer, 1968, and the youth is up.

In London, students storm the offices of the *Daily Mirror* to protest against the killing of German political activist Rudi Dutschke. Across the US, civil-rights protestors link arms in pride and fury, engulfing the city streets like rivers of lava. In Paris, the Union of High School students have joined the riots and are marching on the Sorbonne howling, '*Égalité! Liberté! Sexualité!*'



'Why don't we just sell our horns and move to Florida?'

And in Windsor, a fervent 16-year-old called Hugo Vickers is in the Eton College Library, heatedly researching the life of an elderly English duchess he's read about in Chips Channon's diaries.

Vickers eventually found her in a Northamptonshire nursing home, where she passed the time in baiting the nursing staff, pretending to be senile and, when Vickers arrived to pay suit for her past, batting him off like the old hand she was at rejecting suitors. She'd been the second wife of Charles 'Sunny' Spencer-Churchill, 9th Duke of Marlborough; and, before that, the society phenomenon called Gladys (first syllable pronounced 'glade') Deacon – a rich American girl in Europe, whose lovely face, startling intelligence and magnetic presence made everyone wonder what, or who, she would become.

The environment in which Gladys and her sisters were brought up is most succinctly illustrated by an incident in her early life. After her father shot her mother's lover dead in the Hotel Windsor in Cannes, her mother cancelled a luncheon appointment with the Princesse de Sagan. 'She was generally criticised for this,' reports Vickers. It's a typical, deadpan Vickers touch. He's rewritten this book (first published in 1979) from top to bottom, and on every page you sense his accomplished ease with these types of people, acquired in a 40-year career of writing about them.

When he follows the now-detached Mrs Deacon, dragging her girls through their restless, relentlessly social itinerary – Florence, Paris, the Italian lakes, Cowes, Rome and the Engadine – he understands the nuances of each place, parses each degree of social distinction and never gets a name wrong.

Gladys knew what her part was in all of this. She was to marry a European princeling, according to the usual arrangement of cash down and no questions asked about sexual inclination or personal hygiene. Perhaps recognising that all the excitements of life and her sole opportunity for agency rested in the drama of choosing a husband, she eked it out for years, semi-engaging herself to a number of titled prospects while expressing revulsion for the whole idea of marriage. In one of the many Jamesian touches in this story, a chorus to her evasive nuptial progress is supplied by the art historian Bernard Berenson and his wife, Mary, watching with fascination from front-row seats.

As time went on, their tune changed from 'G is a radiant, wonderful creature, so amusing, so entertaining' to 'A lot of poisonous and innocent things mixed up... I never knew of a person who told so many lies'; and then 'She pays no heed to her future and is spoiling all her chances... Her universal reputation is just as bad as it can be.'

You can only sympathise with Gladys's reluctance to marry. Less so with the exception she was prepared to make. While still at school, she had formed an ambition to marry the Duke of Marlborough. Why? Impossible to fathom, and in no way explained when she does, at 40, eventually get her wish and marry what turns out to be – surprise! – a very large, cold house with one bathroom and many disagreeable incumbents, sited in 'an intellectual wilderness'. After miscarrying three unwanted babies, she left an equally disappointed Marlborough to embark on a career of textbook battiness, with all the trimmings: filthy ballgowns, midnight wanderings, slammed doors, acquisitive nephews and dead cats.

Gladys's prospects and conquests, her brilliant conversation, her mesmeric charm and her beauty – which she ruined by injecting paraffin wax, an unstable material, into the small depression between her nose and her brow – brought nothing but discontent. Today, there might have been a diagnosis, possibly of the same affliction her father had. Vickers doesn't engage with that. The picture he leaves is of a woman – they still exist – who 'could have done anything' with her gifts, but lacked the circumstances and temperament for application.

It is telling that the one piece of published writing she left behind – an article about predatory females, or 'Vampires' – has none of the dandyish skill of her letters.



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Chinatown whispers

LEWIS JONES

The Big Goodbye: Chinatown and the Last Years of Hollywood

By Sam Wasson

Faber £18.99

As its subtitle promises, *The Big Goodbye* celebrates the last glory years of Hollywood – the decade or so after 1967 – and in particular *Chinatown* (1974), which Sam Wasson views as its crowning achievement.

The film was made by Hollywood's ruling coterie under the aegis of Robert 'The Kid' Evans, the head of Paramount, who also produced it. Robert Towne wrote the screenplay with his friend Jack Nicholson in mind to star, and it was directed by Roman Polanski, fresh from his *succès de scandale* with *Rosemary's Baby*.

An exquisite homage to the dark glamour of 1930s Los Angeles, *Chinatown* is a perverse mix of the swooningly romantic and the brutally cynical.

In the grand tradition of *noir*, it orchestrates intricately related stories with economy and pace, but its ironies are distinctly modern, and it subverts the conventions of the genre. Unlike Philip Marlowe, Nicholson's J J Giddes does do divorce work, and Evelyn Mulwray, Faye Dunaway's blonde femme fatale, turns out to be an innocent sacrificial victim. The film seduces its audience with expert audacity and then betrays it with the cool nihilism of its ending, as Giddes loses everything: 'Forget it, Jake. It's Chinatown.'

The great director John Huston, who made his debut with *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), took up acting quite late in life, and was proud of his performance as the affable monster Noah Cross. Addressing Giddes ('Mr Gitts') at the Albacore Club, he delivers, with gentle menace and a faint slur, the line that sums up the film: 'You may think you know what you're dealing with but, believe me, you don't.'

Chinatown, Wasson argues, is a state of mind, a condition of helplessness in the face of horror. 'Dreaming you're in paradise,' he writes, 'and waking up in the dark – that's Chinatown. Thinking you've got it figured and realizing you're dead – that's Chinatown.'

Wasson looks minutely at every aspect of the film, from Richard Sylbert's immaculate art direction to Jerry Goldsmith's moody score, with its haunting trumpet ('Play it sexy, but like it's not good sex'). He tells us that Huston was invariably drunk (which would explain the slur in his voice), that the Albacore Club is based on the Tuna Club, and that Cross's financial crimes are closely based on the Owens Valley water scandal, whereby a group of oligarchs cheated LA out of an estimated $100 million.

His main focus, though, is the personal Chinatowns of the main players, as they negotiated the transition from the mellow, pot-wreathed 1960s to the harsh, cocaine-edged 1970s. He looks at Evans, holed up in Beverly Hills, obsessing over his hero Irving Thalberg, 'The Boy Wonder', who became head of MGM at the age of 26.

He recounts the agonies of Robert Towne in writing the screenplay, and his devastation when Polanksi dispensed with his happy ending. And he tells us that, soon after *Chinatown*, in a bizarre echo of the film's crucial plot twist ('She's my sister *and* my daughter'), Nicholson learnt that the woman he had always thought was his sister was actually his mother, and that his supposed mother was really his grandmother.

Above all, Wasson looks at film's presiding spirit, that tormented imp Polanski, who gives a gleeful cameo as the 'midget' with a switchblade, slicing open Jake's nostril: 'He-ey, kittycat, you're a real nosey guy...'

Polanski was 'a man who had survived too much'. As a child in Warsaw, he watched his father weeping as he was marched from the ghetto across Podgórski Bridge. He ran to him but was ignored, and when he persisted was told in a whisper, 'Shove off.' They didn't meet again until after the war. Before that, the Germans had taken away his pregnant mother – to Auschwitz, where they murdered her.

In Hollywood, he married the gorgeous hippie actress Sharon Tate, who 'looked like California'. In 1969, at their house in Cielo Drive, she was murdered by the Manson 'Family', with several of their friends, while pregnant with their first child. Confirmed in his belief that 'our destinies are the result of apparently meaningless coincidences', Polanski has since consoled himself with uninhibited hedonism.

Wasson's prose has a Hollywoodish tendency to overheat – 'A broken mind sees ... the black chasm of "could", waiting, smug as gravity, to ravage every newborn thought' – but in Polanski's case this is justified. He has supped full of horrors, and in dozens of films has turned his nightmares into art. *Chinatown* is surely his masterpiece.



'Now then ... what was it I came up here for?'

Brainy love triangle

HAMISH ROBINSON

The Dolphin Letters 1970-1979: Elizabeth Hardwick, Robert Lowell and Their Circle

By Saskia Hamilton

Faber £35

In 1970, the 53-year-old poet Robert Lowell, then married to the writer Elizabeth Hardwick and living in New York, travelled to England to take up a fellowship at All Souls.

At a party in London, he met and fell in love with Lady Caroline Blackwood, the former wife of Lucian Freud. Lowell immediately moved in with Blackwood, who was living in a flat in Redcliffe Square with her three small children.

Lowell's series of anodyne letters to Hardwick and their teenage daughter Harriet in New York make no mention of these new arrangements. However, Hardwick sensed something was wrong, and feared that Lowell, who was regularly hospitalised for manic depression, was about to suffer one of his more or less annual bouts of mania.

Rumours also reached her that Lowell had taken up with another woman. When she finally heard that it was Caroline Blackwood, whom she and Lowell had encountered some years before in New York, she laughed, assuming that this new amour was merely a symptom. In former manic phases, Lowell had declared his love for a series of younger women whom he hardly knew.

But Lowell had fallen in love with Caroline Blackwood in his right mind: their feelings were mutual, his intentions serious. To complicate matters further, Lowell then suffered a bout of mania and was hospitalised in London. Blackwood, who had her own fragility, fled with her children to Ireland. The practised Hardwick flew in from New York to support him. Hardwick flew home,

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Lowell recovered and Blackwood returned. Hardwick and Lowell were subsequently divorced, and Lowell married Blackwood and had a child by her; they lived in Kent for several years.

However, the new marriage was not stable for long, and Lowell found himself working back in Boston alone. Blackwood told him she wanted to end the relationship. A distraught and increasingly helpless Lowell moved back in with Hardwick, who accepted him on a cheerfully non-committal basis.

In 1977, returning from an attempted reconciliation with Blackwood in Ireland, Lowell died of a heart attack in the back of a New York cab. Hardwick came down from her apartment to find him clutching a parcel containing a portrait of Blackwood by Lucian Freud.

This superbly edited collection includes the letters and telegrams exchanged by Lowell and Hardwick and their daughter Harriet during these events; Blackwood contributes a single letter. There are also the letters of friends who found themselves involved, including Mary McCarthy, Hardwick's confidante, and Elizabeth Bishop, Lowell's fellow poet and literary conscience.

The bulk of the letters, and the best, are those written by Hardwick. Apart from one or two spikes of searing invective and frequent howls of frustration, they show remarkable generosity and affection. They are full of the details of their lives – and the lives of their friends. Even during their divorce, she took a large hand in his affairs, dealing with his property, finances and tax returns. Lowell's letters – at least those to his wronged wife and daughter – are in comparison supine or evasive.

More than a hundred of Hardwick's letters to Lowell surfaced only in 2010. They had long been sought for their intrinsic literary value; and also because Lowell had used what appeared to be extracts from them in his unrhymed sonnet sequence, *The Dolphin*, a 1973 account of his relationship with Blackwood. Hardwick was outraged when she first saw the typescript. Lowell was shifty. The controversy provoked two letters from Elizabeth Bishop that have become classic statements of literary morality: 'But art just isn't worth that much.'

Hardwick's letters now stand clear of the cut and paste of the poetry. Lowell had done much the same to his first wife, Jean Stafford – he had a taste for feminine invective – but in a fiction. Yet his motivation should not be misunderstood. The label 'confessional',



'Have you tried turning it off and back on again?'

as applied to Lowell's writing, is a misnomer. His life, his family life, his family history, current events and history – all of it was raw material consumed in the pursuit – as Yeats might have said – of images.

He worked like a steam shovel, to use one of his similes, and chomped through everything in the same manner, obsessively if not manically. He could not have achieved Bishop's perfection, with its measured view of art, though he sometimes tripped over himself trying to.

The results are mixed – some poems are miraculous – but the scope of his ambition was enormous, classic and had nothing to do with self-exposure.

Valley girl tells all

JOANNA KAVENNA

Uncanny Valley

By Anna Wiener

4th Estate £16.99

In 1999, David Bowie appeared on *Newsnight* and said the internet was an alien life form and an exhilarating and terrifying force for disruption. Paxman seemed pretty bemused.

Yet Bowie was right. The digital revolution has radically altered society. We have access to vast reams of information; the old monopolies have been undermined; formerly silenced communities and individuals can now be heard.

At the same time, we have seen the emergence of a new form of power: 'surveillance capitalism', as Shoshana Zuboff defines it. Our personal information is collected and sold; our private lives are visible to those who govern us. All this raises major philosophical questions about power, knowledge and freedom.

Uncanny Valley is a response to some of the above. It is a memoir, describing five years Anna Wiener spent working in Silicon Valley, aged 25 to 30. She arrived in 2013, having fled from a literary agency in New York, where she was 'privileged but poor'. Tired of elite stasis, she wanted her life to 'pick up momentum, go faster'. She worked initially at an unnamed data-analytics company and then at an also unnamed company, which closely resembles GitHub. Wiener's title is a reference to the eerie feeling that afflicts us when we're confronted with an entity (robot, doll, virtual-reality actor) that is meant to resemble a human but somehow doesn't.

Wiener finds the Valley uncanny indeed. The gold rush of big data is happening: 'Not everyone knew what they needed from big data, but everyone knew that they needed it.' Everyone 'salivated over predictive analytics, the lucrative potential of steroidal pattern-matching, and the prospect of bringing machine-learning algorithms to the masses'. The data-analytics company wants to make it easier for companies to 'collect … and analyse data' and they also want to unseat the 'big data incumbents: slow-moving corporate behemoths'. Wiener spends her days in 'God Mode' – with access to 'all of our customers' data sets'.

She contends with dire sexism in the office, with solitude and a lurking sense of unease: 'I felt free, invisible, and very lonely.' She goes on dates with men 'who seemed boring and benign, if well-versed in social theory'. She has a gift for lovely, self-lacerating descriptions. She dismisses the internet as 'a collective howl' and then cyber-surfs guiltily (who doesn't…): 'Just me and my Id, hanging out, clicking.' She reads 'books that had been heavily documented on social media, only to find that the books themselves had a curatorial effect – beautiful descriptions of little substance, arranged in elegant vignettes'.

Things in general are quite dreamlike. Companies, films and people are left unnamed. Facebook is the 'social network everyone hated', Google is 'a search-engine giant down in Mountain View' and the Matrix is 'a science-fiction movie about hackers who discover that society is a simulated reality'. This works to make the ordinary unfamiliar and to express Wiener's sense of dislocation. Yet it feels a bit odd when Edward Snowden is left unnamed as well, and referred to as 'the whistleblower'. Snowden made a political decision, elaborated in Laura Poitras's film *Citizenfour*, that he would reveal his identity and would not hide in the shadows.

After Snowden, someone tells Wiener that she works for a 'surveillance



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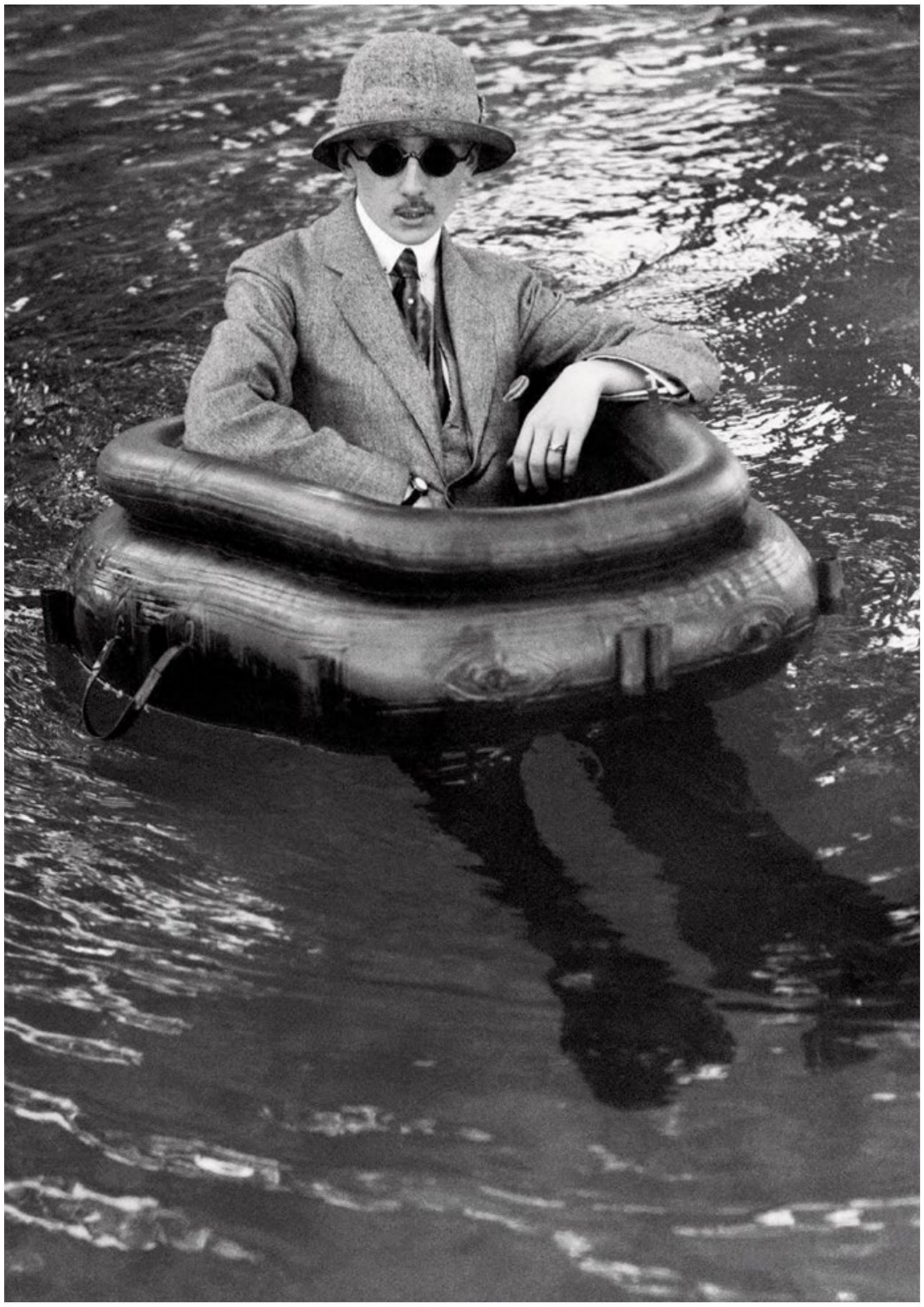
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company' and 'the veil between ad tech and state surveillance is very thin'. She writes, 'I didn't know how to respond… It was perhaps a symptom of my myopia… I was hardly thinking about the world at all.' Elsewhere she explains, 'We didn't think of ourselves as participating in the surveillance economy…' She later wonders if 'the NSA whistleblower had been the first moral test for my generation of entrepreneurs and tech workers, and we had blown it'. She mentions writing of 'little substance' but not the works of Shoshana Zuboff, Christopher Wylie, Peter Pomerantsev, Glenn Greenwald or Carole Cadwalladr.

But Wiener's point may be to explore both the ambivalence of life within the surveillance economy and the illusions we maintain. The result is fascinating, ambiguous and genuinely uncanny.



'Zissou in the pool at Rouzat' by Jacques Henri Lartigue, 1911. From *Lartigue: The Boy and the Belle Époque* by Louise Baring, Thames & Hudson, £28

JACQUES HENRI LARTIGUE ©2020 MINISTÈRE DE LA CULTURE – FRANCE/AAJ HL

After we've gone

CHARLES FOSTER

Footprints: In Search of Future Fossils

By David Farrier

4th Estate £16.99

All decent people want to be remembered well. In the ancient world, moral life was often seen as the effort to be a good ancestor.

If that's how you see things, David Farrier's brilliant, plangent book will leave you gasping with shame. Our grandchildren (if any survive) will look back on us with contempt.

Farrier imagines what fossils we'll leave, and so how the future will see us. He succeeds, and his success is terrifying. The book is the first draft of a eulogy for a dazzling, lovable, confused civilisation and the home it destroyed.

The overarching determinant of our legacy is climate change. Most of us are too tired or too frightened to look closely at the facts, but Farrier recasts them in a way that just might make them real to us. If, today, the world stopped burning fossil fuels completely, anthropogenic carbon could influence the climate for another half-million years. When the last residue of that carbon leaves the atmosphere, 4,000 future generations of humans will have been and gone. Yes, the climate cycles even without us, but we've made the cycle spin 170 times faster than it should be doing.

This means that to see many of our fossils, palaeontologists will have to put on their scuba gear. We're entering another Noah age, and there's no known ark-builder. The fossil-hunters will have to squeeze their way through the plastic blanket covering the sea but, when they have, they won't be disturbed by fish or marine mammals. Jellyfish, fat and fecund on the phytoplankton that bloom on the nitrogen will rule the waves. They don't mind the low oxygen concentrations that suffocate the seas.

There will be lots of archaeology down there. The loss of the Greenland and west Antarctic ice will increase global sea levels by 36 feet, engulfing Kolkata, Jakarta, Shanghai, Copenhagen, Algiers, Lagos, New Orleans, New York City, Buenos Aires and (it's not all bad news) London and Miami. There will be imprints of credit cards in the same kind of shale that held the footprints of dinosaurs, and the iron in mobile phones and laptops will have turned to glittering fool's gold. Seawater will make short work of shopping-mall concrete, and looters will have salvaged many of the valuables, but there will be shifting mountains of plastic spoons, and crabs in the mouths of dress-shop dummies.

The ocean will be a glutinous soup of jelly, bags, bottles and irretrievable history. Sea ice is a library, full of data about the Earth's past and, just like Alexandria's library, it is being burned. The Earth's memory is leaching out into the sea, along with the microplastics caged in soft ice crystals.

Any remaining humans will have retreated to higher ground, where they will eke out a living in dusty settlements built on the top of airtight and watertight landfill sites containing un-rotted hot dogs. The shape of the remaining land wouldn't be recognised by us. Quite apart from the fact that most of the degraded topsoil will have been blown and washed into the sea, humans are literally ☞

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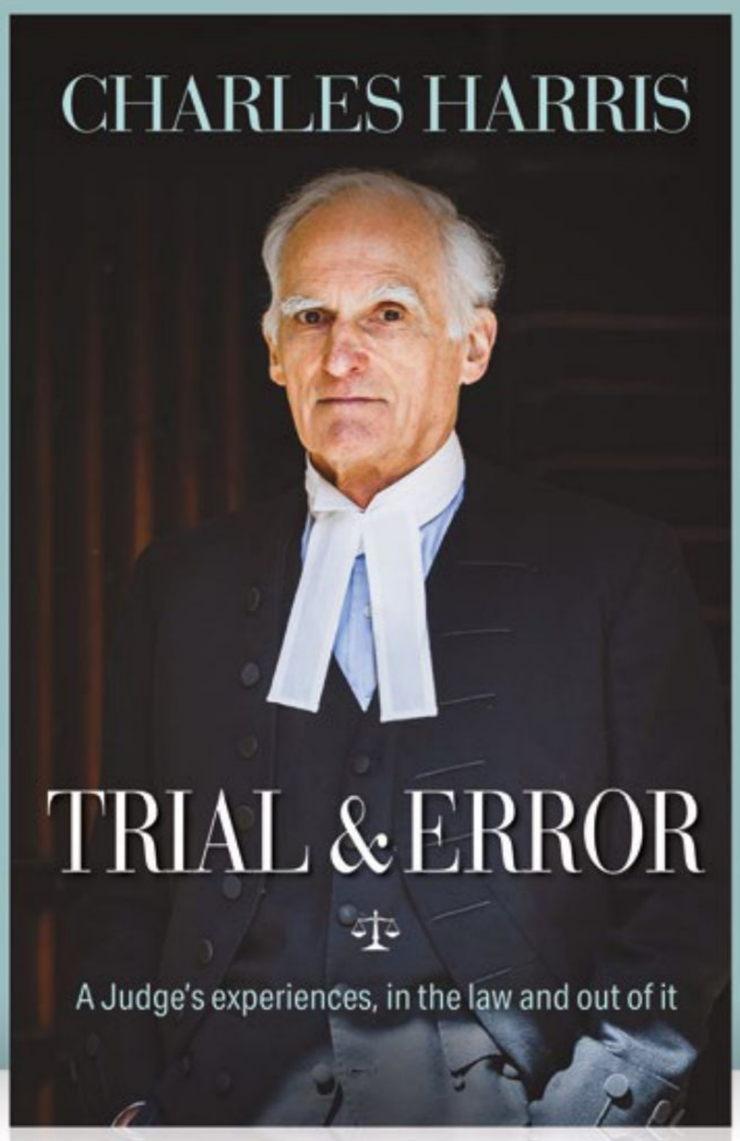
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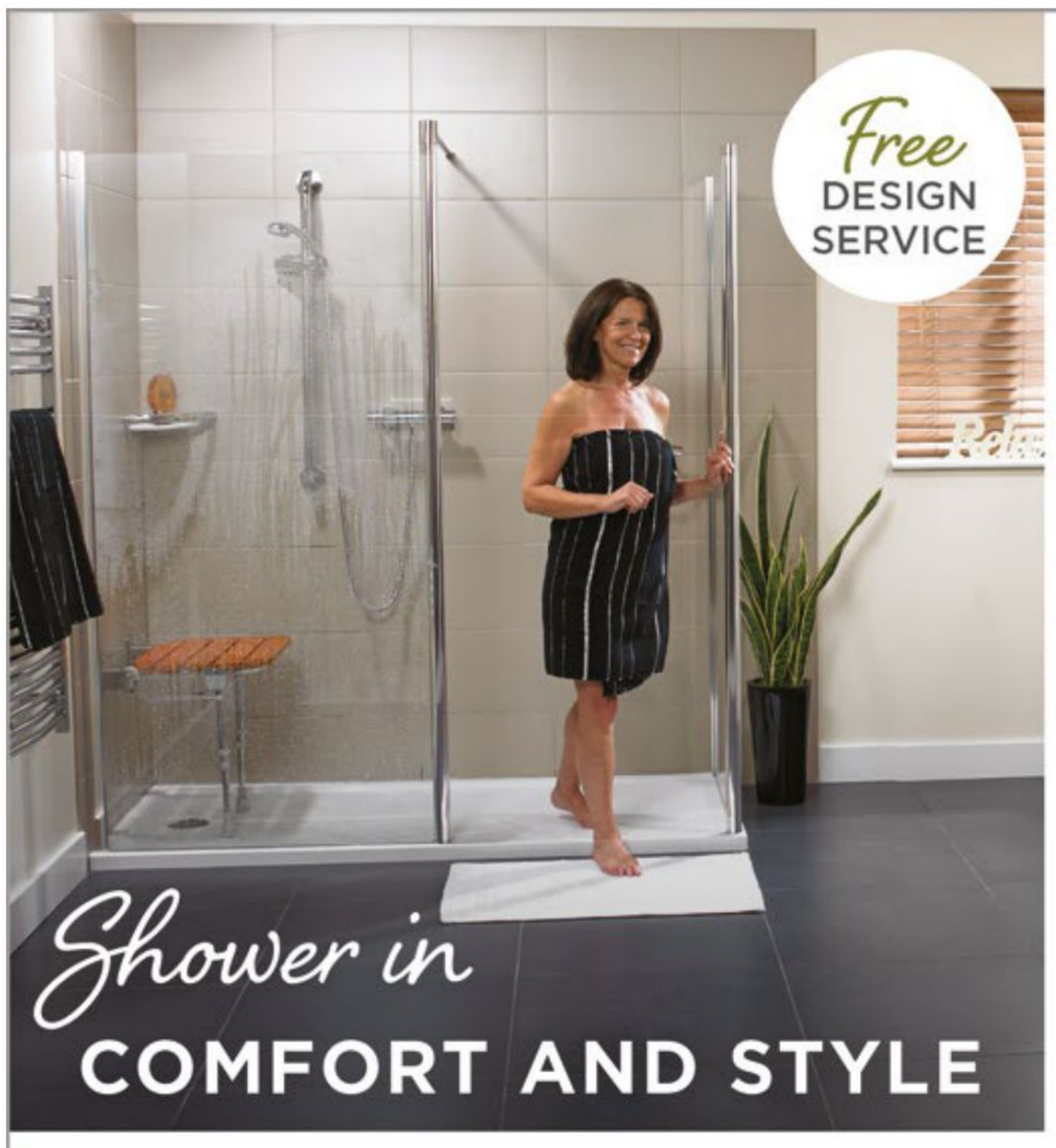
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Those future explorers will have to be careful. Chernobyl (which will have caused more than 40,000 cases of cancer by 2065) will be uninhabitable for 20,000 years. We've buried huge quantities of radioactive waste in the ground (let's hope it's above those rising seas), but how will we warn future generations that it's there? It'd be unwise to rely on written warning signs, because language itself decays. It's estimated that in 10,000 years' time, English, if still spoken, will contain just 12 per cent of today's basic words.

Even if anyone can still read our books, there may be no books to read. Paper books will have been eaten by heat-resistant insects, and the servers holding electronic data – if they have been moved to the high ground in time – may well have overheated and failed.

There are some deliberately created future fossils. The Voyager probes, which could theoretically last billions of years, carry disks with sounds and images from Earth. They boast to posterity about the Great Barrier Reef, an Antarctic expedition, a highway in New York State and the sound of human footsteps.

I can think of a better message: 'Goodbye,' it should say, 'and sorry.'



'It's amazing, really – married for 50 years and died minutes apart'

French, Polish exiles

KATE HUBBARD

House of Glass: The Story and Secrets of a 20th-Century Jewish Family

By Hadley Freeman

4th Estate £16.99

It was Hadley Freeman's original intention to write a book about her grandmother, Sara, and her relationship with fashion.

She remembers Sara not just for her clothes, but also for an air of melancholy that hinted at some 'inner emotional drama'. But then, rootling around in Sara's closet, she finds a shoebox containing, among other things, a defaced photograph, a letter denouncing 'la famille Glass' and a sketch by Picasso, and she realises that there's another, bigger, story to tell about the lives of her Jewish family, her grandmother and great uncles, through the 20th century.

Henri, Jacques, Alex and Sara Glass were born as Jehuda, Jakob, Sender and Sala Glahs in Chrzanów, Poland, a typical shtetl out of *Fiddler on the Roof*, where, in the early-20th century, Jews lived harmoniously alongside Catholic Poles.

It wasn't to last. A pogrom in 1918 saw the livelihoods of Chrzanów's Jews destroyed overnight by their neighbours. Against a background of economic hardship and rising nationalism, Jews were labelled as Bolsheviks and outsiders: untrustworthy, disruptive and self-interested.

Jacques was the first Glass to go to Paris, in 1920, setting up as a furrier; his siblings followed. If they'd stayed at home, they would probably have ended up in the gas chambers, as did 90 per cent of Poland's Jews, mainly denounced by Poles. Yet the current Polish President denies that Poland bears any responsibility for the Holocaust. As she writes her book, Freeman is all too aware of a 21st-century resurgence of anti-Semitism.

The Glass siblings embraced France. Henri, tall, handsome and scholarly, became an engineer and invented a kind of microfilm machine that would make him a rich man. Alex, 'small, bald and tough like a bullet', looked every inch the Polish peasant he was, and yet he conceived the unlikely ambition of becoming a couturier and, by sheer force of will, succeeded. He 'made clothes that were Frencher than French' and mixed in the worlds of fashion and art, a friend of Dior, Chagall and Picasso.

Sara grew up to be a beauty, found herself a job as a pattern-designer and had a fiancé whom she loved. Then, in 1937, just when life for Jews in France was becoming uncomfortable, Alex brought an American, Bill Freiman (later Freeman), to dinner. Halfway through the meal, Bill announced that he was madly in love with Sara and begged her to come to America. Sara sailed off 'to marry a man she didn't know and liked less', believing Bill was a big shot in fashion who could save the entire Glass family from the Nazis.

Freeman spells out the anti-Semitism of Vichy France and the way it set out to remove immigrant Jews. Henri and his wife went into hiding. Jacques, always the mild and passive sibling, registered himself as Jewish, leading to his internment and death in Auschwitz. Alex, the big character here – the showman, the spinner of tales – had a war full of drama. He joined the Foreign Legion and distinguished himself. Later he opened a salon in Cannes, selling clothes to the wives of collaborators and German officers, but also working for the Resistance. He was arrested by the Gestapo, escaped by throwing himself out of a train, and was hidden on a farm in the Auvergne, where, as Freeman discovers, he's still remembered.

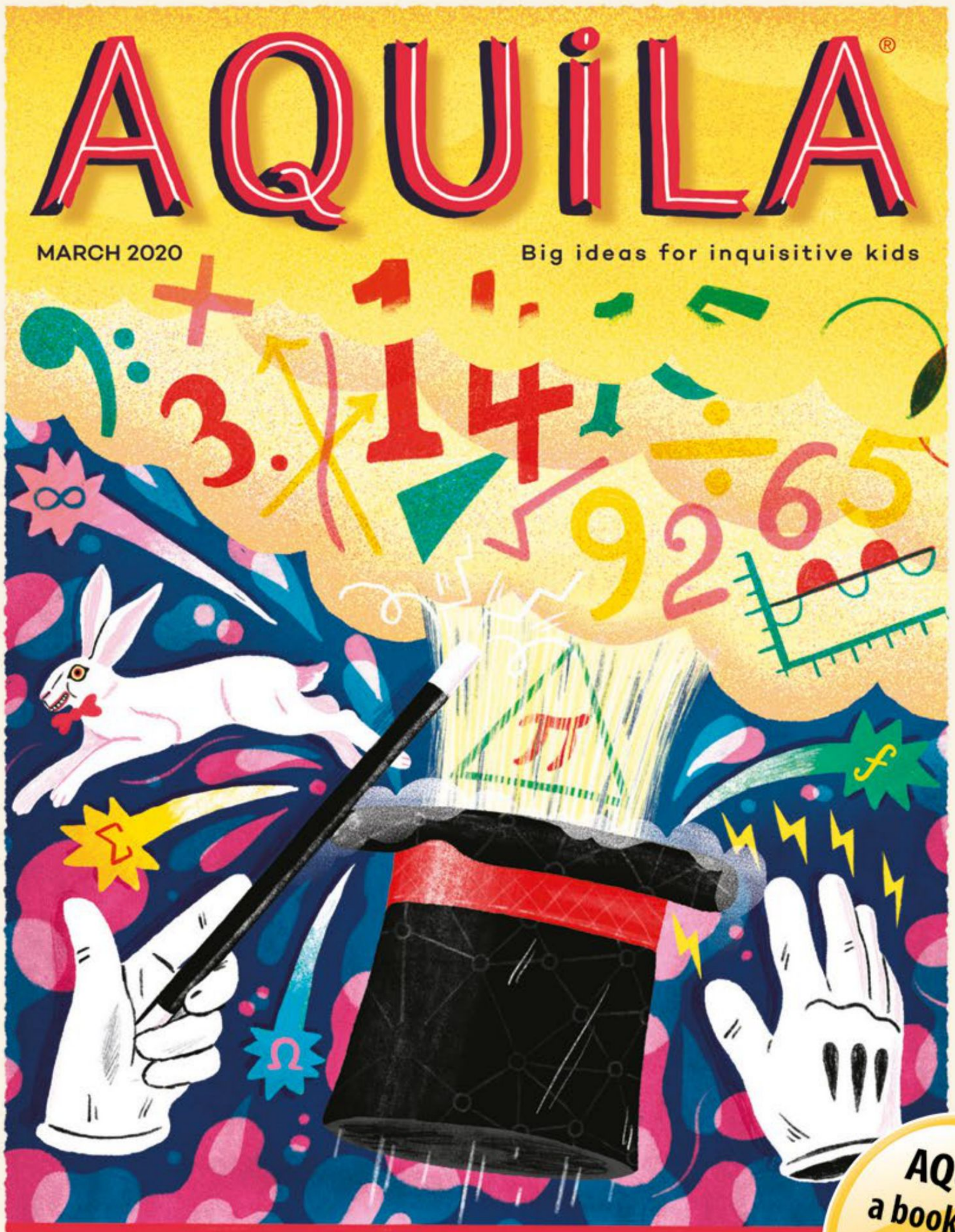
Henri, Alex and Sara survived the war. Alex never let up. Alone among the siblings, he clung to his Yiddish accent.

What drove him? The fear of losing everything? The belief that Jews have to work twice as hard to get anywhere?

After the war, he resurrected his fashion house, with Ava Gardner and I M Pei among his clients, before reinventing himself as a highly successful art dealer.

Bill, who owned a garage (nothing to do with fashion), loved his chic French wife (she looks exquisite in Alex's clothes), but he was in no position to bring her family to the US and he could never make her love him. She became a dutiful Long Island housewife, a devoted mother and, in her 70s, the grandmother Freeman remembers, still pining for France, still waiting 'to live the life she wanted to live'.

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Don’t let Dominic Cummings kill the BBC

The Corporation is flawed but large parts of it are worth preserving

STEPHEN GLOVER

Over the years I have written dozens of articles about the BBC.

I have doubted its impartiality, and impugned its metropolitan liberalism. It is too big and dominant. The pay of its stars, and legions of senior managers with ridiculous titles, is astronomic by the standards of the public service.

Because it has been so dumbed down, much of its output is indistinguishable from programming pumped out by commercial channels. One way and another, the Beeb is a flawed organisation whose mandatory licence fee is hard to justify in a multimedia world.

And yet in the bitter stand-off between the Government and the Corporation, I find myself sympathising with the latter more than I thought possible. Needless to say, its failings haven’t disappeared. But the Government’s slash-and-burn attitude seems excessive and unbalanced. The person driving it is, of course, the irritating revolutionary iconoclast Dominic Cummings.

He nurses a long-standing hatred for the BBC. In 2004, his think-tank described Auntie as the ‘mortal enemy’ of the Tory Party and called for ‘the end of the BBC in its current form’. He is chiefly responsible for the Government’s boycott of flagship news shows such as Radio 4’s *Today* programme and BBC2’s *Newsnight*. The snag with this approach is that it deprives ministers of the opportunity to put their case. At a time of crisis – for example, during February’s severe flooding – they are also less easily held to account than they should be.

If Mr Cummings were running the country, rather than advising and guiding the man who is, the BBC would be doomed. What does Boris Johnson think? He certainly doesn’t love Auntie.

In fact, his view is probably similar to that of Mr Cummings. In 2012, he wrote, ‘The prevailing view of Beeb newsrooms is, with honourable exceptions, statist, corporatist, defeatist, anti-business, Europhile and, above all, overwhelmingly biased to the Left.’ There’s no reason to suppose he has changed his mind.

Very possibly stoked up by his consigliere, Boris grew increasingly impatient with the BBC during the election campaign, when he suddenly revealed that he was ‘looking’ at the licence fee. He also raised the possibility of ‘decriminalising’ non-payment of the annual charge, even though in 2016 the then Tory administration had agreed to extend the fee until 2027. A ‘consultation’ has been set up to consider the issue.

If shoplifting were decriminalised, it would become more widespread. Even quite respectable people, finding their wallets empty, might pop into a supermarket to pick up a box of detergent. Something similar would happen if evasion of the licence fee were no longer a matter for the courts. Mr Cummings hopes to weaken the Beeb by undermining its revenue base. Most people would probably continue to pay the £154.40 annual fee – but there would be plenty who would not.

In short, he is playing hardball. According to a report in the *Times*, he and his chums in No 10 don’t simply want to decriminalise non-payment of the fee. They would like also to eviscerate the BBC by cutting down its television channels (ten at present) and radio stations (50). But the *Times* claims that the Prime Minister is queasy about such a confrontational approach and ‘is not as gung-ho on the licence fee as [Mr Cummings]’.

> ‘Despite its inevitable decline, the BBC still helps to keep us together as a country’

Perhaps, for all his justifiable reservations about the BBC, Mr Johnson recognises that it is one of our few enduring national institutions. Despite its inevitable decline in an age of hundreds of television channels, and the rise of powerful American broadcasters such as Netflix, it still helps to keep us together as a country. Not all of its programmes are easily reproducible by commercial stations.

The overmighty BBC stands in need of reform, but large parts of it are worth preserving. I don’t trust Dominic Cummings to accomplish such a delicate task. I hope, though I am not certain, that Mr Johnson is capable of undertaking it.

Following the sad suicide of television presenter Caroline Flack, the world was keen to find someone to blame.

Some politicians attacked the media. Labour leadership contender Sir Keir Starmer took a swipe at publications for ‘amplifying’ damaging social-media posts about Flack, and suggested he would take action to ‘diversify’ the press if he succeeds Jeremy Corbyn.

But of course he didn’t provide any instances of newspaper excesses. My impression was that, whether online or in print, the tabloids portrayed Caroline Flack as a desirable and glamorous woman. When she was alleged to have biffed her boyfriend, they were less admiring, though that is perhaps understandable.

More plausibly, others blamed social media, which evidently played a big role in her life. Maybe I’m being naïve, but I wonder why sensitive stars don’t cut themselves off from these toxic exchanges. In my admittedly much more modest world, I was once told that something I had written had provoked a nasty Twitter squall – but it remained a mystery to me as I don’t follow social media.

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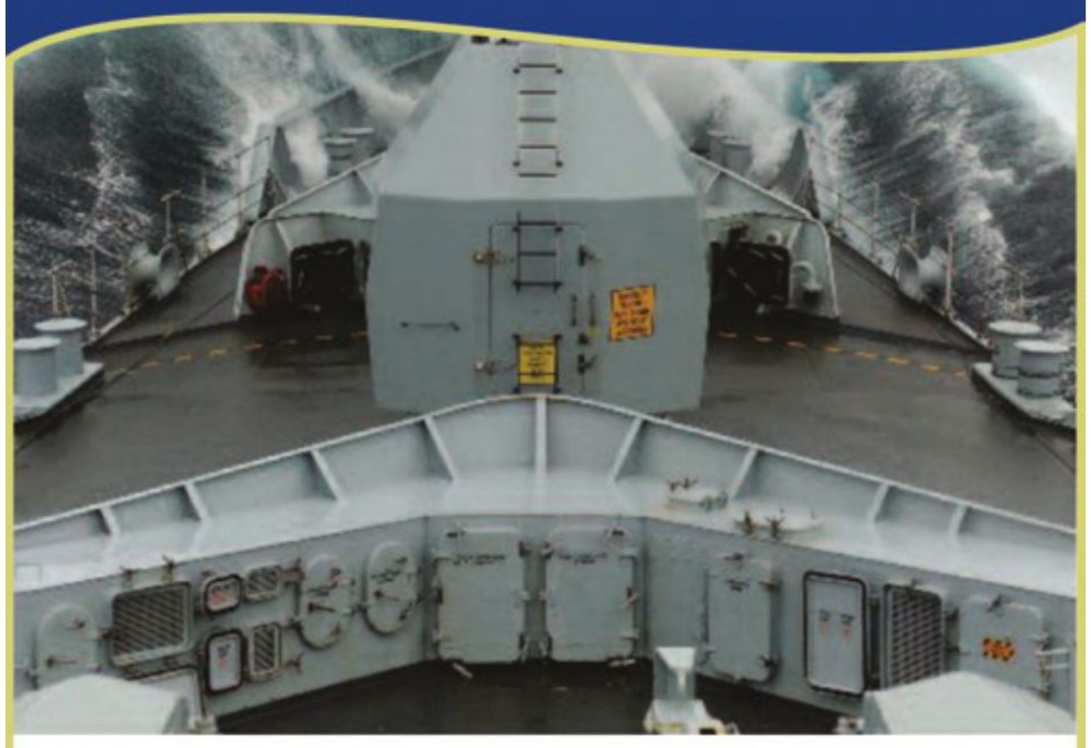
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King George was mad – about books

200 years after George III's death, a show reveals his brainy side

DAVID HORSPOOL

Is it too late to rehabilitate George III?

In the popular mind, he's likely either to figure as Nigel Hawthorne's distracted, intemperate fruitcake from the Alan Bennett film, with his 'what what?'s. Or to those who have scooped the West End hot ticket, *Hamilton*, he's a cheery psychopath: ''Cause when push comes to shove/ I will kill your friends and family to remind you of my love.'

Or, most succinctly, in the words of the *Horrible Histories* song ('Born 2 Rule'), which helpfully distinguishes between all those Georges: 'I was the mad one.'

It's not much of a legacy, and is hardly improved when you add the one political fact that most of us can reliably ascribe to his reign. George III was the King Who Lost America.

Bennett has a predictably sideways view here, saying, 'He could be said to have earned America's gratitude: if without him there would have been no war, there would also have been no United States.'

You begin to think, 'With friends like these…', when Bennett adds, 'By the same token, I always feel Judas deserves some sort of slap on the back, because without him Christianity would never have got off the ground.'

But people have been disobliging about George III, who died 200 years ago, on 29th January 1820, from the start.

In 1776, after all the stirring stuff about Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness, the Declaration of Independence presents a catalogue of very specific accusations against the 'present King of Great Britain', making no allowance for the fact that Britain, no more than America itself, was not the personal fiefdom of its sovereign.

George III did not always see it that way. He complained that one of his prime ministers, George Grenville, had stopped offering 'counsel' and was telling him instead 'what he was to obey'.



Crazy guy? A George III gambling token

And George wasn't particularly lucky in those prime ministers. He was too pally with the first, the Earl of Bute, his high opinion of whom seemed to be shared with almost no one else in the country. But he got quite a lot of the worst of Pitt the Elder, who had a nervous breakdown while serving as Prime Minister in 1776-78.

The king was far from alone when it came to mental illness at the top of government. Pitt continued nominally in charge, while refusing all human contact. Lord North, with whom George had a good working relationship even as America slipped from their grasp, told the king after the Battle of Saratoga that he (North) had lost his memory and understanding. Stress management does not seem to have been an 18th-century virtue.

What about George's own 'madness'? Setting aside any posthumous diagnosis of porphyria or the like – which can only ever be speculative, and would not be of much assistance even if proved – perhaps we can sympathise with him about whatever his illness was. And, perhaps, his rehabilitation might begin. That is certainly the hope of the organisers of a new exhibition at one of the king's former residences, Kew Palace.

Kew was where George spent his childhood, being prepared, after the death of his father Frederick, to succeed his grandfather George II. It was also (along with Windsor Castle) where he was confined during his illness.

The exhibition reminds us of the scope of the mind that was so troubled in later years. George was a man of wide cultural interests: a book-collector on a prodigious scale, whose 65,000 volumes (and 18,000 pamphlets) were kept at Kew and bequeathed to the nation. They make up the King's Library at the British Library, whose magnificent bindings form a great illuminated column several storeys high in the atrium of the modern building.

He appreciated music, too: a concert programme written in his own hand will be on show at Kew. Handel's *Messiah* might have been written during his grandfather's reign, but it was George III who gave his patronage to memorial concerts for the composer at Westminster Abbey, and was fan enough to try to get Charles Burney, who wrote about the events, to be more celebratory.

The curators also confront George's mental health, with displays of doctors' notes and instructions for his care written by his daughter (one of 15 children).

They are even hoping to use the exhibition to 'contribute to a national conversation around mental health', a cause admirably championed by members of the present royal family.

Their predecessor might not have recognised the 21st-century grammar about national conversations around mental health. But if the show at Kew helps to save George III from the mad, bad caricature, it will certainly have changed a very old conversation indeed.

George III: The Mind behind the Myth opens at Kew Palace on 3rd April

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The ultimate destination for Grand Tourists in the 19th century, the Bay of Naples is one of the most evocative parts of the Mediterranean to this day and still holds a remarkable magic. With a fascinating history and a vibrant present, Naples itself is now a city determined to show off its unique charms to the full. Visits to the Roman sites along the coast are included in our tour, as is a wonderful day on the verdant island of Ischia.

We will be staying at the beautiful Hotel Santa Lucia (www.santalucia.it).

Full itinerary and terms and conditions at:
www.theoldie.co.uk/tours

Day 1 – Arrival Depart Gatwick with BA at 3.15pm; arrive Naples at 7.15pm

Day 2 – Baroque Naples We visit the spectacular Baroque churches, including the exquisite Cathedral of San Gennaro and Santa Maria delle Anime del Purgatorio ad Arco, with its macabre cellar of human bones. After lunch at a traditional Neapolitan pizzeria, we visit the stunning Museo Archeologico.

Day 3 – Herculaneum: far better than Pompeii Excavations began here in 1738 under the Bourbon King Charles. We also visit the beautifully restored Villa Oplontis, once home to Nero's wife Poppaea.

Day 4 – Capodimonte Museum We start at the Capodimonte Museum, built by Charles VII of Naples and Sicily to house his collection of paintings and sculptures, including Caravaggio's *The Flagellation of Christ*. After lunch we visit the Palazzo Zevallos and stroll through the evocative Spanish Quarter.



Day 5 – Paestum We head south to the ruins of Paestum, one of the most impressive ancient sites in the Mediterranean, where the remains of Magna Graecia include three exceptionally well-preserved Doric temples, dating from the fifth century BC.

Day 6 – Castel Nuovo and Palazzo Reale We take a panoramic sightseeing tour of the thronging streets of Naples, each of the neighbourhoods with its own flavour. We visit Castel Nuovo, which dominates the seafront, and the Museum of the Royal Apartments.

Day 7– Isle of Ischia We cross the bay for a day on Ischia, where from the 1950s Sir William Walton lived with his wife, Susana, who created the world-renowned garden at La Mortella. After exploring the island, we'll enjoy lunch and a guided tour of the garden.

Day 8 – Departure Depart Naples with BA at 11.05am; arrive Gatwick at 12.50pm

Price: £2,690 per person including flights, accommodation, all transport, breakfast, all lunches and dinners with wine, all entrance fees and the tour rep. Single supplement: £490. To book: call Patrick on 020 7593 2281 or email patrick.millar@kirkerholidays.com

FABIO DI NATALE/ALAMY

Johnny Grimond: Words and Stuff

Foot-in-mouth syndrome

'Well, it's as long as a piece of cheese, really,' remarked the chairman.

'Indeed,' murmured one of the directors, ambiguously. The others kept their eyes fixed on their board papers, lest one catch another's eye. Board meetings were always hazardous. Many of the chairman's ideas were crazy, and his comments could be even crazier. But they could be entertaining too. He never failed to produce a malapropism or two, and some were inspired. 'We can slush this till the end of the meeting,' he might say. 'The smaller the beer, the more the ruffles are.' 'There's no pancreas for this problem.' 'You can charge a foot and a mouth.'

English is often misused. Some words seem designed to trip up the unwary. 'Masterful' means 'autocratic', whereas 'masterly' means 'skilful'. 'Forego' and 'forgo' bring similar confusion. So do 'venerable' and 'veteran', and 'tragedy' and 'travesty'. And some words are misused so habitually that their meaning expands. With English, howler turns to orthodoxy when an errant meaning becomes prevailing practice. Except in the context of lamb cutlets, toast or women's busts, 'rack' is now almost always misspelt as 'wrack'. *Chambers Dictionary* acknowledges as much by giving it an entry with the meaning 'torture, torment', adding in brackets 'erroneous spelling'.

The chairman's wayward way with words was different. Unwittingly, no doubt, he was taking his cue from Constable Dogberry and Mistress Quickly, two of Shakespeare's characters, and Mrs Malaprop, Sheridan's comic creation in *The Rivals*, who gave her name to a particular way of mangling the language. Their difficulty concerned a confusion of one word with another, usually because they sought a pretentious term in an effort to impress.

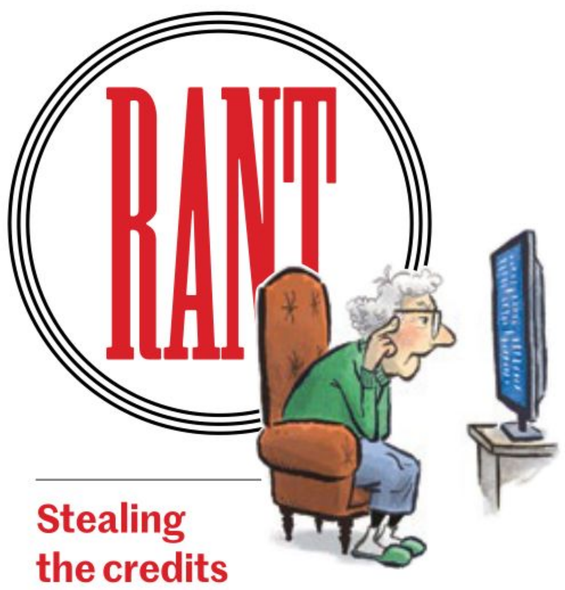
Thus the constable announces, 'Our watch, sir, have indeed comprehended two aspicious [*sic*] persons,' and Mistress Quickly proudly declares that Falstaff has been 'indited [*sic*] to dinner'. For her part, Mrs Malaprop avers, 'She's as headstrong as an allegory on the banks of the Nile,' while 'He is the very pineapple of politeness.' Meanwhile, 'I have since laid Sir Anthony's preposition before her.'

It's not surprising that there should be modern Malaprops: as long as pretension and pomposity exist, some people will make fools of themselves by reaching for words they don't understand. The other day I overheard a smart young man complain that a friend had 'renegaded on the agreement'. An aristocratic member of Parliament, mildly intoxicated, spoke of 'Britain's empirical tradition'. In the days of Shakespeare and Sheridan, at least in literature, such people were drawn from the ranks of the uneducated, as policemen and innkeepers. Mrs Malaprop was well off, but hardly sophisticated. Today's real-life Malaprops, though, may come from the highest reaches of society and public life.

A good example is George Bush Junior, who, as an opponent remarked of his father, was born with a silver foot in his mouth. 'I am a person who recognises the fallacy of humans,' he declared. 'They have miscalculated me as a leader.' 'Quotas, they basically delineate based upon whatever. However they delineate, quotas, I think, vulcanise society.' 'They said, "This issue doesn't seem to resignate with the people." And I said … Whether it resignates or not doesn't matter to me.' 'Families is where our nation finds hope, where wings take dream.' 'I know how hard it is to put food on your family.' 'The senator … can't have it both ways. He can't take the high horse and then claim the low road.'



And the chairman (MA, Cantab) was just as eloquent. He didn't 'want to belabour the point,' but he was 'in a cleft rope'. He needed 'someone to bounce the wall against'. 'We'll set the pigeon among the cat.' And how right he was when he said, 'That's complete gobblededick.'



ELLEN ISAACS ALAMY/TOM PLANT

Stealing the credits

I can't stand the odious voice-overs as the credits go up at the end of a programme.

I want to read the credits – to find out the name of an actor, screenwriter or director. The interruption of a disembodied voice announcing the next programme – usually with an appalling accent and a jolly tone – is most irksome, especially when the screen is 'minimised' so that you can't make out the credits at all!

It's extremely disrespectful to anyone whose name appears in the credits. It is incredible that Equity, the actors' union, has been unable to stop this shameful practice.

The television channels, always so competitive for ratings, evidently fear that viewers will switch to another channel. So the viewer must put up with this silly voice announcing the next programme, with a title for it squeezed into the bottom left-hand corner of the screen.

It is no wonder that people of a certain age and good taste watch the Talking Pictures channel, where you get all the credits without interruption. Long live slow-moving credits!

SMALL DELIGHTS

Putting in the final piece of a jigsaw. SHEILA HUDSON, KIRKWALL, ORKNEY



Email life's small delights to editorial@theoldie.co.uk

Oh, and another thing: could directors please make it clear to an audience exactly when the story actually begins – without those endless recaps of what happened last week? And at the end of the programme, could they stop telling us what we have to look forward to next time? The response in my case is to want not to watch it ever again – especially if all I have to look forward to is sociopathic murderers and violent thugs with strange haircuts.

TV companies must think we have no memory at all. How disrespectful and insulting to the intelligence of the audience.
MICHAEL THEODOROU

Arts



FILM

HARRY MOUNT

MISBEHAVIOUR (12A)

TRUE HISTORY OF THE KELLY GANG (12A)

Big news stories are so interesting that dramatisations of them have got to be extremely good to be better than real footage.

The big shoot-out between outlaw Ned Kelly and the police took place in Australia in 1880 – not much footage there, then.

But the story of *Misbehaviour* – the protest at the Miss World contest at the Albert Hall, when feminists pelted the contestants and Bob Hope with flour bombs – happened only in 1970. So there's plenty of glorious footage of Bob Hope, the first black Miss World, Jennifer Hosten, and Miss World's organisers, Eric and Julia Morley. In one sublime clip which appears in the closing credits of *Misbehaviour*, the 52-year-old Eric Morley shows the girls how to sashay along the stage in a gown and crown.

Rhys Ifans as Morley dramatises this scene beautifully – but he's one of the rare rays of light in this dire film. Keira Knightley is bland as one of the protest leaders, flattening what little life there is in the banal script by Rebecca Frayn and Gaby Chiappe. It also doesn't help that Knightley is better-looking than most of the Miss World contestants.

What fun a gifted comic writer could have had with the Morleys, and the parade of lovelies from around the world, and all the national stereotypes that went with them.

Instead, there are two triumphant stories, set against each other but with no resultant tension: the feminists protesting at the objectification of women; the big break that Miss World gives to the contestants, particularly the winner, Miss Grenada (Gugu Mbatha-Raw). The film is so badly written and directed that you end up feeling the triumph of neither.

True History of the Kelly Gang makes a much better fist of dramatising a famous moment in history. Based on Peter Carey's eponymous 2000 book, it's really a violent, sweary biopic of Ned Kelly (1854-80), the most famous baddie – a goodie to some – in Australian history.

George MacKay, fresh from playing the wholesome lead in *1917*, plays Kelly as a marvellous study of a psychopath with a heart. The film traces Kelly from his rough childhood, with a wild father and prostitute mother, through his young bare-knuckle fighting, graduating to his taste for multiple murder with his compadres, the Kelly Gang.



Smoking hot: Russell Crowe in *True History of the Kelly Gang*

You can see why Kelly turned psychopathic with that sort of upbringing – but MacKay reins in the overacting, subtly building up the underlying craziness. That craziness is whipped up to breaking point by Kelly's adversary, Constable Fitzpatrick (Nicholas Hoult – gifted at playing the polite, upper-class, British officer with a chunk of ice in his heart).

It's a perfectly good retelling of the famous story, all the way up to Ned's final shoot-out with the police in his home-made iron-man costume. The bleak, washed-out landscape of Victoria, Australia, where it all really took place, adds to the authentic feeling. The brutal, punky soundtrack cleverly doesn't detract from that authenticity.

But it's all a bit cat-sat-on-the-mat. There's the simple plot. And then there's the simple dialogue, with long gaps between spoken sentences that attempt to communicate some non-existent meaning lying beyond the straightforward story of a killer on the run. When Kelly is finally hanged, I felt neither pleased nor heartbroken.

When a script has no humour, sadness or intellect, great actors can still save it. MacKay is pretty good but he's not in the class of Russell Crowe, who has a fairly big cameo as Harry Power, the fat, old rogue with an understated grumpiness who instructs young Kelly in criminal ways. God, Crowe's good: alternately chummy and paternalistic to Ned, and remorselessly vicious when he starts killing.

And, in a scene that steals the film – but doesn't quite save it – Crowe sings, and sings well, a ballad of his own composition, *Harry Power's Waltz*, full of robust double entendres. He has particular fun with the word 'constable'.

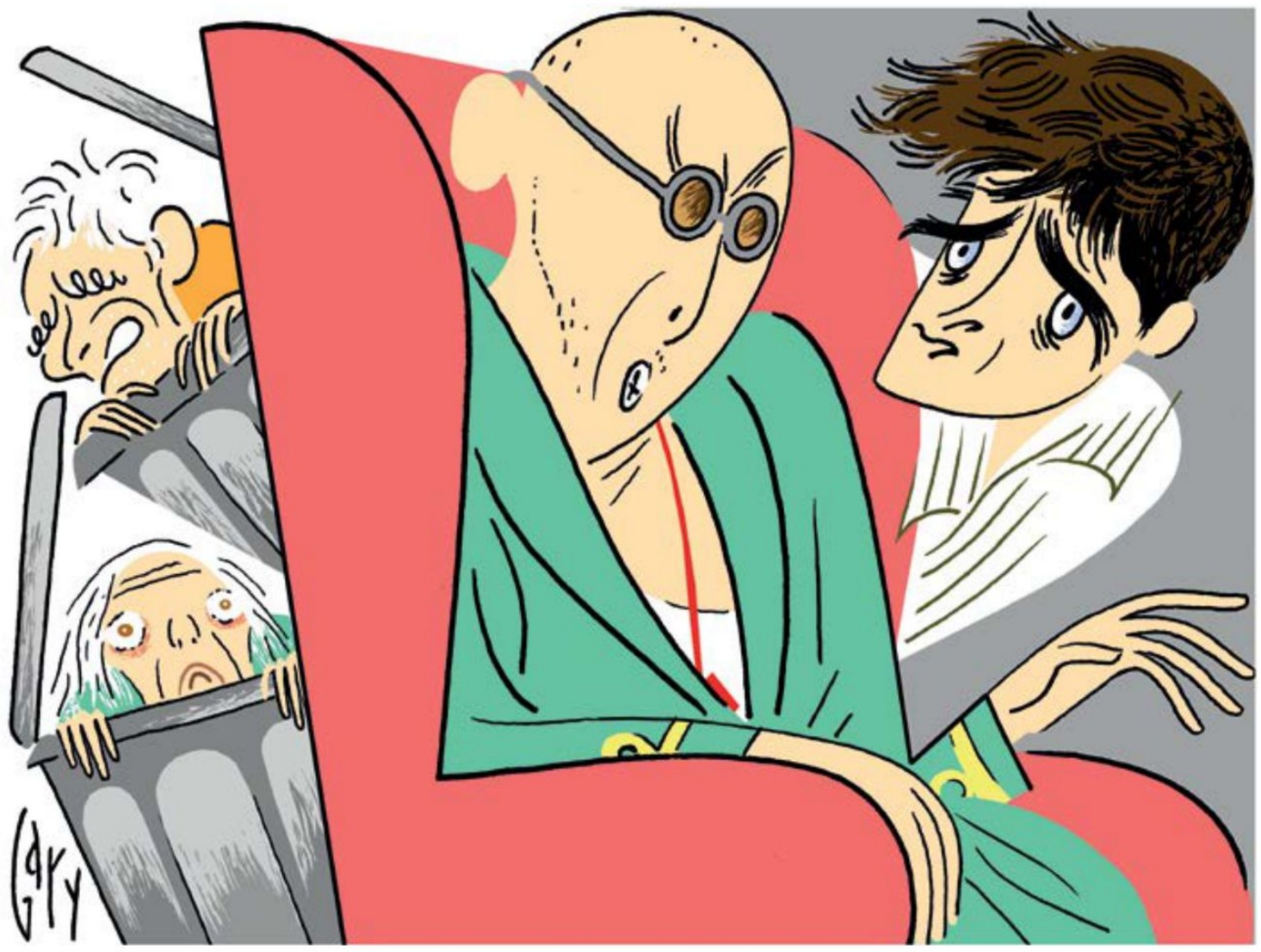
To think that Russell Crowe started off in *Neighbours*. Ramsay Street's loss is Hollywood's gain.

THEATRE

NICHOLAS LEZARD

ENDGAME

Old Vic



***Endgame*: Alan Cumming as Hamm is superb; Daniel Radcliffe as Clov tries hard**

Not everyone likes Samuel Beckett's work. Particularly his theatre work. One novelist I know says she would rather have her eyes dug out with spoons than watch one of his plays. This makes me think the less of her but at least it's a testament to Beckett's power. His plays make pretty much every other dramatist look as though all they do is have young men in flannels bound through French windows and ask if anyone's for tennis.

My novelist would, though, once having gone through the business with the spoons, be in an ideal position to play Hamm, the chief character in *Endgame*, Beckett's follow-up to *Waiting for Godot*. It's very much Godot's brother: Hamm a crippled and blinded Pozzo; Clov, his servant, a shorn and articulate Lucky. Meanwhile, Hamm's parents, Nagg and Nell, live in a pair of dustbins at the front of the stage. Godot is outdoors, *Endgame* indoors, with two high windows which suggest that they are eyes in a skull, looking outwards to nothing but a 'corpsed' landscape. As in *Godot*, nothing happens – twice. (Although in this production, once: there's no interval. After a half-hour appetiser of Beckett's little-known *Rough for Theatre II*, a sharp and witty piece which cleverly gets the audience in the mood, we have a full 120 minutes of *Endgame* without a break. Not all the audience make it all the way through.

Why should this be? Surely people going to see Beckett know what they're letting themselves in for? Well, not necessarily. Not if their chief reason for clicking on 'buy tickets' is the fact that Daniel Radcliffe is one of the four cast members.

Yes, it's Celebrity Casting. I have no problem with this in principle; if it exposes more people to Beckett's work, then I'm all for it. But it can have its drawbacks. A friend went to see *Mojo* with Rupert Grint in it – funnily enough, that play also involves people in dustbins, or rather one person in two dustbins. In the loos in the interval, my friend heard one young Grint fan howling in tears that Grint could be in anything so awful.

Anyway, it's to Radcliffe's credit that he has taken on the role of Clov. He bustles about with stepladder, folded at the waist with burdens both literal and spiritual, while Hamm (Alan Cumming, with withered legs) orders him around, each character locked miserably into the other's orbit. (In an unguarded moment, Beckett said their relationship was based on his own marriage.) Clov pronounces his own name to rhyme with 'of'; Hamm pronounces it 'clove': a nice way of economically illustrating class distinctions. (And 'clove' comes from the French *clou*, or nail; 'hamm' is an emasculated hammer. And the parents in the bins, Nagg and Nell, together make up the German *Nagel*, meaning 'nail'. Clever, eh?)

The big problem is, alas, Radcliffe. It's not really his fault. You can't really muck about with Beckett: the Beckett Estate is unbelievably strict when it comes to allowing theatres to stage the man's work: try setting it in space or the Vietnam War and you will be sent off with a flea in your ear. But there's no proof against miscasting. It's just that Radcliffe is too young, not decrepit enough, insufficiently haunted – or corpsed, if you will – to play Clov. He does try hard, as well as any actor can. But it will be a long time before his voice escapes Harry Potter.

Alan Cumming is superb; the actor playing Hamm has to be (the character's name also makes us think of a ham actor). For some reason, he has not been given the toque that Hamm is meant to wear; never mind. It's a demanding part, and Cumming is up to it, although I was dismayed that the funniest line in the play (at one point they pray and, disappointed, Hamm says, of God, 'The bastard! He doesn't exist!') is flubbed, and passes unnoticed. But there are many other laughs, albeit verging on the grim. Karl Johnson (you may know him as the incomprehensible yokel cop in *Hot Fuzz*, or the terrified doctor in *The Death of Stalin*) plays Nagg as if this was the part he was always born to play; Jane Horrocks as Nell has few lines but there's nothing anyone can do about that.

In the end, the celebrity casting doesn't really matter. The play itself sees to that. I pitied those audience members who had come solely because of Pottermania and came away with nothing but bafflement. Some, I fear, may be scarred for life.

But I had a wonderful evening, contemplating death, near-death, the futility of existence and the humour that we can bring to bear on these things. Unlike its characters, *Endgame* never gets old.

RADIO

VALERIE GROVE

On the day of my *Oldie* deadline for this piece, I got a call from Sue MacGregor (returning a message from me).

'Is this a bad time?' she asked.

'Well, Sue,' said I, 'they're talking about the BBC on *Broadcasting House*!'

So we both hung up to listen. In the *BH* chat about today's papers, another broadcasting Sue (Cameron) flourished the *Sunday Times* front page: 'Number 10 tells BBC licence fee will be scrapped – make viewers pay by subscription – force BBC to downsize.'

Not a great shock – but, surprisingly, the *BH* panellists agreed it was high time.

'Quite right,' said Sue C. 'It's scandalous that they send people, mainly women, to jail for not paying the TV licence, while they live high on the hog.'

Anyway, the *BH* trio argued, in ☞

seven years' time – when the BBC's Charter is up for renewal – the technological landscape will be quite different. 'And the BBC is held in such affection,' said Sue C. 'People will subscribe to it.'

Readers will hear more than enough about this in the months to come: and it will be mostly TV stuff – which is not my concern, except for my addictions, *University Challenge*, *Only Connect*, *Newsnight*, *HIGNFY* and *Would I Lie to You?* They'll get my subscription.

For me, the crucial words in today's news story were 'Radios 3 and 4 will be safeguarded'. So it's not quite the end of the BBC as we know it (as Sue MacG put it), if this 'safeguard' turns into fact. And I trust that includes the orchestras.

Mohit Bakaya, the newest Radio 4 controller, aged 55, is, like all controllers, charged with luring the under-35s ('replenishers' in BBC parlance) to the Radio 4 habit. Sorry, Mo: doomed. It's us you need to please. Pandering to them, you turn us off.

Changes are afoot at Radio 4 anyway. Sue MacG has left *The Reunion* after 17 (yes, 17) remarkable years. Great pity: few could choreograph such disparate gatherings – eg an IRA bomber and his victims or the Queen's Coronation maids of honour – as skilfully and authoritatively.

Soon Sarah Sands will have to be replaced as editor of *Today*. And who will chair *Just a Minute*? (Might it possibly be Gyles Brandreth? He's terrific at it.) Poor Lauren Laverne gallantly perseveres with *Desert Island Discs* – a real trooper, faced with unkind disdain. But shed no tears for *Only Artists*: it's already been replaced by the excellent *More or Less*.

David Oldroyd-Bolt's Rant in last month's *Oldie*, about Radio 3, was timely. Oldroyd-Bolt is, at 30, a classic Young Fogey with old Third Programme instincts, Rees-Moggishly yearning for lofty intellectual standards. I understand that: I too dread hearing a girlish voice gushing about a piece of music that is 'amazing' or 'incredible'. The word 'incredible' should be banned from the airwaves anyway. I've even heard someone say, of a politician, 'She's incredibly believable.'

I share David O-B's reverence for Donald Macleod on *Composer of the Week* – currently Monteverdi. But surely he can also cheer Tom Service's *The Listening Service*; Sean Rafferty and Katie Derham on *In Tune*; the eclectic mix tape of *Words and Music*; the *Early Music Show*; *Night Waves*; non-girlish presenters Sara Mohr-Pietsch, Clemency Burton-Hill and Fiona Talkington; as well as Michael Berkeley's *Private Passions*.

Lord Berkeley's guest the Rev Jonathan Aitken had little new to confess about his downfall, life inside, godly redemption ('greeted by bucketloads of scepticism') and ordination at the age of 76. But his music was splendid.

He began with John McCormack, who personally sang to the boy Jonathan when he was holed up with TB in Dublin. Aitken ended with his story of a dinner with Richard Nixon and Harold Wilson, when former POTUS and former PM discovered a shared love for Gilbert and Sullivan, and proceeded to sing 'When I was a lad' from *HMS Pinafore*. Both were word perfect.

TELEVISION

ROGER LEWIS

Some programmes I know I'll never watch, such as *My New Greek Life* (C5), in which a 55-year-old Welsh woman 'looked for love in Crete', or *Plastic Surgery Undressed* (BBC3), where breast-reduction procedures were gone into. Apparently big boobs give you a bad back; that's why Elizabeth Taylor was in a wheelchair.

But if I like *Countryfile* (BBC1), it's because it is nicer to look at fields and mountains on the telly-box than it is to plod about in them in reality. I grew up on a farm and absolutely hate the outside, where it is either boiling hot or freezing cold and wet, and unerringly monotonous. Now EU subsidies will stop, I suppose agriculture is at an end, and the remaining land will be buried under the HS2 desecrations and affordable homes.

It is always good to see John Craven, however, who I'm told is 79. I remember him for his *Newsround*, half a century ago.

I also enjoy watching the regional news here in Hastings, as the anchor man is Fred Dinenage, a hearty 77. Many of us will recall Fred as the bright spark on *How*, the information show for youngsters, which opened and closed with a Red Indian greeting. Also on the panel was the legendary, pipe-puffing Jack Hargreaves, who explained rural crafts ('Here's a pair of axes from an old murderer') or the mysteries of fly-fishing.

The token lady was Bunty James. I wonder what happened to Bunty James, as I'm sure I didn't dream her up, as I sometimes think I did Wincey Willis. Is she still with us? If memory serves, I once saw Fred Dinenage throw a snake or spider at Bunty James. As the credits rolled, she was still screaming.

The other string to Fred's bow is serial killers. He has presented heaps of documentaries about them, and was mentioned in one of the new episodes of *Inside No. 9* (BBC2). These Halloween playlets are always brilliant, even when they are not, as the acting is of a high quality, roping in the likes of David Morrissey and Jenna Coleman.

I liked the football changing-room episode, where everyone was concealing corrupt secrets. Another show, set in a high-rise flat once inhabited by a serial killer, where there was a severed head left in the wall, combined the grotesque with the madly comical.

Reece Shearsmith and Steve Pemberton, who write and star, are the Galton and Simpson of our day. I love their unique mixture of Vincent Price horror with slapstick and *Play for Today* claustrophobia – what a lot of material they find in people's poky habitats.

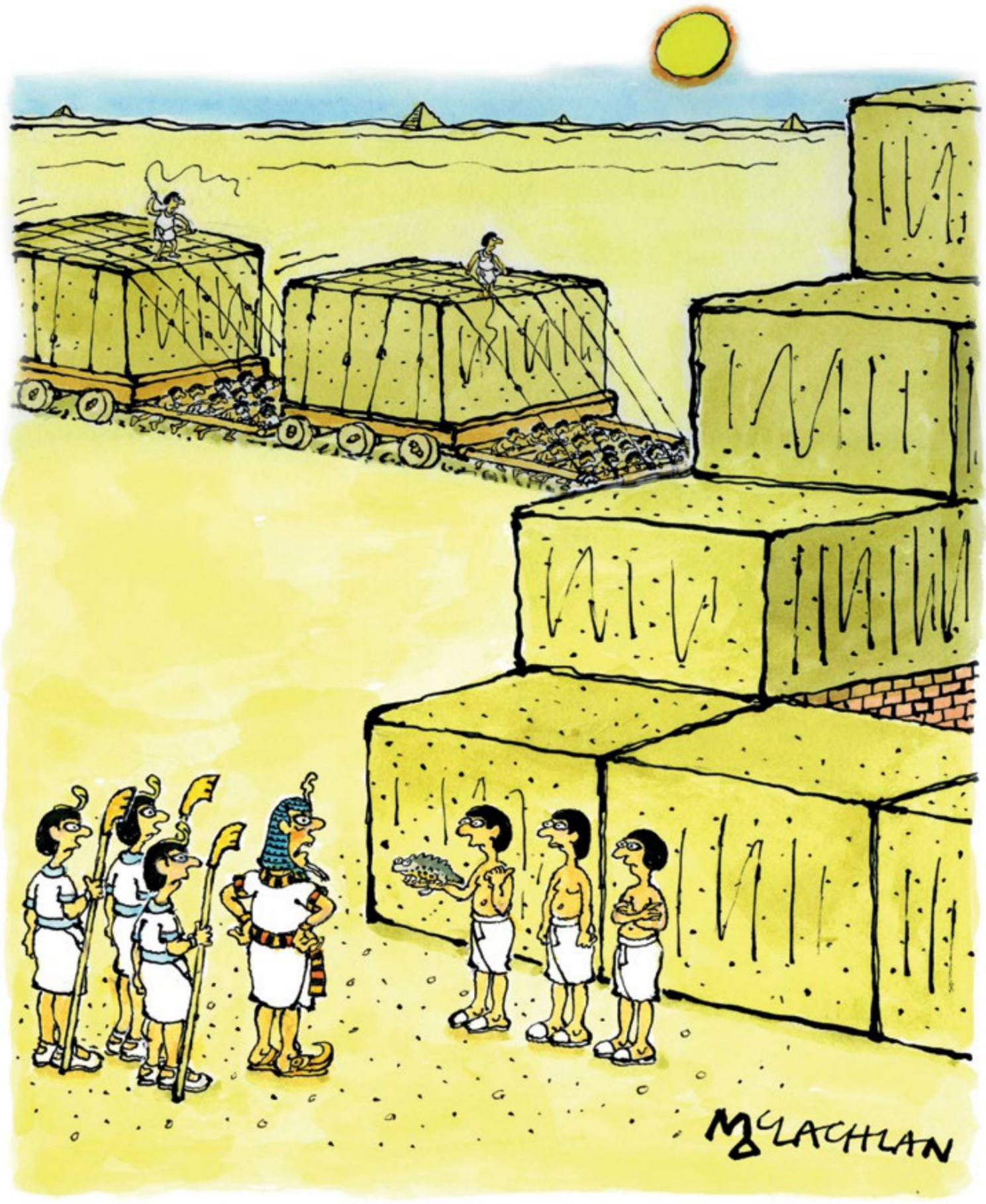
Somebody must have convinced David Tennant that he conveys villainy better than virtue (he is to impersonate Dennis Nilsen later in the season), and so the problem with *Deadwater Fell* (C4) is that it was hardly suspenseful.

Tennant, as a control-freak doctor, was clearly the wrong un from the opening scene. Nevertheless, I managed to be confused, especially by all these identical-looking, bearded men with thin arms and the flustered mums in baggy pullovers. There were barbecues on the beach;



Coven club: Rita Tushingham, Kathy Kiera Clarke, Sheila Atim, *The Pale Horse*

Ed McLachlan



'What the hell's a great crested newt!?!'

corpses in a fire. People were alive, then dead and then alive again – a flashback structure, I later discerned. There were stepchildren, remarriages, wild affairs and shared parenting – the cast was so inbred it could have been set in Norfolk, but it was Scotland, so Tennant could give his West Lothian accent a big airing.

By a cheeky scheduling coincidence, the new version of *The Pale Horse* (BBC1) was shown at the same time as the older one, with Julia McKenzie. (I never liked her Miss Marple – I am devoted to Joan Hickson, who had genuine majesty.)

Either way, what the adaptations demonstrated is that, despite corn dollies and seeming supernaturalism, and a Cotswold village as a place of witches and evil spells, Agatha Christie was a painful realist. If people's hair is falling out, this will be because of poison and chemical reactions, not voodoo.

Rufus Sewell, the new Michael Wilding, evidently found it easy to play a devilish charmer, with wives and mistresses everywhere. Bertie Carvel, in an absurd pair of teeth, was the wicked pharmacist. And if Sean Pertwee, as the policeman, muttered and lowered his voice any further, the only creatures capable of hearing him would be dogs and bats.

The big puzzle, though, was where was Miss Marple? She'd been either written out or shoved under the floorboards, though of course in the original novel (1961) she doesn't materialise at all.

MUSIC

RICHARD OSBORNE

ELGAR'S BIRTHPLACE
THE AESTHETE OF KNOLE

The National Trust is not an organisation much associated with music, for all that several of its houses have been prized concert venues. Yet there have of late been some interesting developments.

One is at Knole in Kent where, as the Trust's *Handbook* coyly puts it, we can unearth 'the life and loves of a former resident'. And, no, this is not some music-loving Tudor earl with a taste for viols and décolleté duchesses but a 20th-century aesthete – novelist, pianist, famously fastidious critic – who might have stepped directly from the pages of Proust or Huysmans's *À Rebours*.

The other development is in Worcestershire across the River Severn beyond Worcester, at Lower Broadheath, where Edward Elgar was born. The idea of the birthplace being turned into a museum was Elgar's own, a task overseen by his daughter, Carice, after his death in 1934. It was Elgar's mother who in 1856 persuaded her piano-tuner husband to rent the modest, six-room, red-brick Broadheath cottage, so that her next child might be born and raised in the countryside. Alas, with a growing number of children to accommodate, the plan proved impractical. Within three years, the family was back in Worcester.

Elgar can barely have remembered the place; yet, down the years, he carried deep within a sense of having been exiled from 'a better land'. It was the hurt that would be the spur to his creative life.

Preserving the birthplace's sense of rural apartness while keeping it financially viable has never been easy – which is why a trial collaboration between the Elgar Foundation and the National Trust has proved so welcome.

I only wish the Trust made it easier to find. Such are its protocols, the birthplace is indexed and mapped in the *2020 Handbook* not under Elgar or Lower Broadheath, but under The Firs, the cottage's old adopted name. Elgar often recalled the smell of those firs baking in the summer sun. Writing to a friend who'd sought out the cottage in 1920, he exclaimed, 'Oh! How cruel that I was not there – there's nothing between that infancy & now, and I want to see it.'

Eddy Sackville-West had no such visceral attachment to Knole, which his father, Major-General Charles Sackville-West, inherited from his brother in 1928 – greatly to the fury of Eddy's cousin Vita, who felt she'd been disinherited. He had known the house as a child, but it was only after his father was posted to Guernsey in 1925 that Eddy, recently down from Oxford, was given rooms in Knole's picturesque gatehouse tower.

It's those rooms, with their pink walls, blue upholstery, Duncan Grant firescreen, 1920s paintings, books and periodicals and a glorious, cygnet-shaped EMG horn gramophone, that have



Knole's Renaissance man: Eddy Sackville-West by Graham Sutherland

now been restored by the Trust. And if Knole is a journey too far, there's always Nino Strachey's *Rooms of Their Own*, a superbly written and lavishly produced photographic record of the lives of Virginia Woolf, Vita and Eddy, as seen through the rooms they inhabited and the friends who peopled them. Published by the National Trust in 2018, the book sells for an absurdly affordable £14.99.

By the time Eddy moved to Knole, he had already published his novel *Piano Quintet*. Critics who welcomed Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music* with such phrases as 'the finest novel about music ever written in English' had presumably never heard of *Piano Quintet* with which *An Equal Music* shares some similarities. Seth may be the more practised novelist, but Sackville-West has an unrivalled touch where music is concerned – witness the novel's dénouement, set during a performance of Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier* at the Vienna Opera.

Frances Partridge has left an extraordinary sketch of Eddy listening to Liszt on the gramophone, 'making darting rushes about the room like a water beetle to look at the score or play a few bars on the neglected piano'. This was a sign of the hyperaesthesia from which he suffered; a condition, along with another which caused sudden nosebleeds, that turned him to writing rather than performing. His contributions to the famous 1950s *Record Guide* still read well, both as literature and as criticism. Look no further than his introductory essay on Chopin to discover writing that, far from being simply 'fine', is wise, informed and richly versed in the culture from which the music derives.

Vita Sackville-West may have been happy to traduce Eddy as a throwback to the 1890s. Not so Nancy Mitford, who immortalised him as the valetudinarian Uncle Davy in *The Pursuit of Love*. Amusing, kind, gossipy and immensely erudite, he was the perfect foil to Nancy's father, Lord Redesdale, who is portrayed in the novel as the rambunctious Uncle Matthew. Redesdale's fondness for playing Galli-Curci recordings at peak volume on the gramophone must have caused Eddy many a nosebleed.

STUART EMMERSON/ALAMY/THE ESTATE OF GRAHAM SUTHERLAND

GOLDEN OLDIES

RACHEL JOHNSON

TRIUMPH OF THE OTHER BBC

I bring you vindaloo hot 'n' spicy news from the throbbing indie scene.

After six years, Bombay Bicycle Club – named after a chain of North London Indian restaurants – is back.

I know this not because I am an avid follower of bands composed of alumni of University College London and Camden School for Girls – the *NME* in 2007 anointed BBC, if I may be permitted to acronymise them thus, 'the hottest band to come out of North London for a very long time'.

I know this because when I went to do the papers on *The Andrew Marr Show* the other Sunday, they'd been booked to play their new single as the credits rolled. I was in make-up when they were rehearsing, and the monitor had them on.

'We've had Snow Patrol, we've had that Damon Albarn – and that army chap,' said Brenda from make-up. 'James someone.'

'James Blunt?' I ventured.

'Yes. Brought his kids in. That was quite an eventful morning,' said Brenda. These hair and make-up ladies have seen it all.

I liked the new, catchy, breathy, wafty single, *Eat, Pray, Wake*, from the new album, *Everything Else Has Gone Wrong*, titled in tribute to the last few years in politics.

My little foot was tapping as the whispery vocals stole into my heart. Brenda lifted my fringe and airbrushed my Sunday-morning face.

'Eat … pray … wake,' the lead singer breathed, as I noted that he had become bald and hipster (ankle-length trousers, brogues) since I'd last heard the ensemble.

After Len McCluskey and Steve Barclay had done their interviews, the five-strong band mustered in front of their mikes at 9.55am. I left the Green Room to watch from the wings.

The drummer struck up. Clash. Bang. Clash clash bang. Then the bass joined in.

The lead singer, Jack Steadman, opened his mouth. Nothing came out.

Andrew Marr had just been interviewing the Brexit Secretary; they sat politely on set as the band played on.

But all we could hear was the drum and bass. Of the vocals, we could hear – as a result of the way the audio was mixed for broadcast – not a dicky bird.

Bombay Bicycle Club, aka BBC, play Glasto this year, it is mooted. The new album is great.

But watching Andrew Marr and Steve Barclay pretend to rock out when I knew they couldn't hear a single word was the maddest thing I've seen so far of 2020. What was BBC doing on BBC1 on a Sunday-morning politics show anyway?

Come back, *Top of the Pops* with all your lip-synching – all is forgiven. At least we could hear the vocals.



Hotter than a vindaloo: Bombay Bicycle Club spice things up, Trinity club, Harrow



Old woman by *the* Old Master: Rembrandt's *Portrait of an Old Woman, Aechje Claesdr*, oil on panel, 1634

NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON

EXHIBITIONS

HUON MALLALIEU

Young Rembrandt

Ashmolean Museum, Oxford
27th February to 7th June

Like most people who have ever looked at even one of his works, I reverence Rembrandt. Were I forced to name my most admired Old Master painter it would be him, unless I had recently spent time before *Las Meninas*. But Rembrandt also once gave me another great thrill, if a rather childish one. In June 1969, when I was a youth on the front counter at Christie's, we sold a *Self-Portrait* to Norton Simon for 460,000 guineas – then equal to $1.1m and now equivalent to perhaps £8.5m. Some time afterwards, two Old Master specialists were delegated to take it to the Export Licensing Committee, with me riding shotgun in a second taxi. They departed without telling me the address; so I was able to shout 'Follow that cab!' and hang out of the window as we raced down Piccadilly. It was a first for my cabbie, too.

This show proudly announces itself as 'the largest collection of works devoted to the young Rembrandt' and the first of its kind in Britain. Thank heavens, that does not – indeed cannot – mean an overinflated and exhausting exhibition on the Tate model (as I feared, the recent Blake show was almost as gigantic as its 2000 predecessor). But it is an easily digested treat, offering 34 paintings and 90 drawings and prints by the Master, including several self-portraits, and 10 paintings by his most significant contemporaries.

The Ashmolean has a close relationship with the Museum De Lakenhal, Leiden (twinned with Oxford), Rembrandt's birthplace, which in the autumn of 2016 brought about a loan of four of his earliest paintings – genre subjects illustrative of the senses.

One, *The Spectacles Seller*, or *Sight*, is back again, making an ideal starting point. It dates from 1624, when Rembrandt was 18, and, although it is impressive, it shows how much he had to learn. The rest of the exhibition demonstrates how quickly he progressed in the following ten years.

Incidentally, *Smell* was rediscovered only in 2015, and *Taste* still lurks somewhere unknown, awaiting a fortunate finder.

Constantijn Huygens and Hendrik van Uylenburgh, who played crucial roles in launching Rembrandt, are given due recognition. Huygens (1596-1687) was a statesman, poet, musician, collector and patron. He discovered Rembrandt and his friend-competitor Jan Lievens at Leiden and bought the former's *Judas Repentant* in 1629. Charles I's agent followed this lead soon afterwards. Uylenburgh was the dealer who took Rembrandt on in Amsterdam, and whose cousin Saskia he married.

The latest painting is the 1634 *Portrait of an Old Woman, Aechje Claesdr* – the widow of a Rotterdam brewer – which shows the Master's complete maturity and mastery.



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GARDENING

DAVID WHEELER

NOT ALWAYS FROM AMSTERDAM

Bring on the tulips.

'Buried deep in the make-up of the flamboyant, cultivated tulips that fill flower shops in spring must be the ghostly genes of their wild cousins.'

Thus wrote Anna Pavord, whetting our appetites for a small, brown, onion-like bulb – maker and breaker of long-ago fortunes – in her convoluted, occasionally mysterious, sometimes reckless, wholly engaging saga, the 1999 classic *The Tulip*. Only roses have a more colourful and, yes, more fragrant story to tell.

So fond of tulips am I that in 1987 when I launched the gardening quarterly *Hortus*, I chose them as my company logo. Just before she died in 2010, I asked eminent wood-engraver Yvonne Skargon to revamp the image (pictured). The last engraving she made, it's crowned the contents page of every issue since.

Tulips enthral gardeners. Easily cultivated, they come in an assortment of colours, from the chalkiest white to near-black. Some bear beguiling stripes and featherings (thanks to an otherwise benign virus) seldom seen in other plants.

Moreover, their numerous species and varieties – wild and cultivated – please us with a flowering season that lasts from mid-February to late May. Some flaunt their beauty a mere three or four inches above ground; others stand up to two feet tall.

Plant the bulbs deep: the tallest can cope with a depth of ten inches, which will also enhance their longevity, guaranteeing annual extravaganzas for years to come.

Forget what you've learned from that song: tulips did not originate in Amsterdam, although it remains a major trading post and they're grown throughout the city and widely across the Netherlands.

Where, then, did these wild darlings, holders of those 'ghostly genes', so cleverly 'improved' (depending on your point of view), come from?

Their homelands stretch from eastern Mediterranean islands across Turkey and through semi-desert and steppe locations from the Caucasus in the north to Kurdistan. They were the small, profitable cargo of countless forgotten Silk Road carpetbaggers and latter-day botanists.

My many April visits to Istanbul have coincided with its Tulip Festival, a prolific blossoming in parks, on roadsides and traffic islands and just about any place where a fistful of bulbs can be dug in.

Sixteenth- and 17th-century Iznik ceramicists adopted the pointy-petalled *Tulipa acuminate*. And so they brought mosque and palace interiors to floriferous life. The tulip's stylised representation is still seen everywhere on walls, billboards and municipal publications. Symbolically, the tulip is to Istanbul what bamboo and pandas are to China.

At home, I grow some of the diminutive species in pots to bring into the house when they're flowering. In the garden, we plant taller, cultivated, modern varieties in colours that catch our eyes when those seductive bulb catalogues hit the doormat every autumn.

Current favourites include 'Abu Hassan', a gold and mahogany-crimson mid-season variety; indispensable 'White Triumphator'; and almost all the Viridifloras – soft-coloured champagne flutes with prominent green markings.

My liking for wild species embraces almost any I can get my hands on: tall, guardsman-red *Tulipa sprengeri* from Turkey's Pontic coast (which better gardeners than I manage to raise and naturalise from seed), mid-height yellow-and-white *T tarda* and multi-headed star-like *T turkestanica*, whose name boldly proclaims its motherland.

Finally, a confession: I buy bunches of tulips from supermarkets – before the season begins. These acts of anticipation prepare me for the embryonic flowers readying themselves below ground; flowers certain to gladden the heart and cheer our Easter garden visitors.



YVONNE SKARGON

Skargon's blooming *Hortus* engraving

KITCHEN GARDEN

SIMON COURTAULD

SQUASH

I have been musing on the vegetable family known as squash.

The name comes from the United States, having its origin with the native people we no longer call Red Indians. Marrows, courgettes and pumpkins are all squashes (*Cucurbita* is their Latin name), but the term is in this country attached principally to the increasingly popular butternut squash.

Butternut, according to my dictionary, is a North American white walnut which grows on a tree of pale-coloured wood, perhaps resembling the skin of the butternut squash. No mention is made of this variety in my kitchen-gardening book published in the 1970s, while this year's seed catalogue from D T Brown lists eight different butternut squashes.

Squash is also described as a fruit and was originally grown in the tropics, but today's varieties of butternut, shaped like a large peanut, have been bred for ☞

British climate and are simple to grow. Two seeds per small pot should be sown on edge in a greenhouse at or soon after Easter, and the stronger of the two planted out in early June.

They are suitable for trailing on the ground or growing up a tripod of poles in the same way as runner beans. Like marrows and pumpkins, they require a rich, fertile soil and will sprawl successfully over a compost heap. Watering is important, and should be done around and not over the trailing plants.

The butternuts should be ready for harvesting from late September and are known as winter squashes – as are pumpkins. There are some weird-looking specimens of winter squash, one variety of which is called Turk's Turban. Summer squashes come in all shapes and colours; some are known as patty pans and have scalloped edges. If picked when small, they can be eaten raw.

Among the butternut varieties, one is appropriately named Walnut. Harrier is said to mature in little more than three months, and Butterbush should produce up to five fruits per plant. I intend to try some this year, hoping for early-autumn sun to harden their skins so they can be successfully stored for the winter.

COOKERY

ELISABETH LUARD

BETTER FISH TO FRY

Good news from our North Sea fishing grounds. Herring stocks have recovered from their virtual disappearance in the 1970s through overfishing. The silver darlings are once more plentiful in waters that may shortly, with political will and a following wind, be returned to the custody of our island nation.

Herrings move to and from their spawning grounds in vast shoals; some more than 100 miles long. Different groups breed at different times of year, depending on latitude, current and preferred shallows (small fry need a continental shelf). Once the females have spawned and the eggs are fertilised, the fish are spent – skinny and not worth eating. That is why herring fleets follow the shoals, landing their perishable catch at convenient ports for cleaning and barrelling with salt – important before the advent of rail transport – accounting for a lively international trade in salt herring as well as regional specialities such as kippers (split, bone in, cold-smoked), bloaters (whole, usually ungutted, lightly smoked) and rollmops (filleted and pickled with vinegar).

The problem with fresh herring for the home cook is boniness and a short shelf



ELISABETH LUARD

life. Boniness is mitigated by careful removal of the feathery belly bones and searching out pinheads with tweezers – while the consequences of inattention can be soothed by an accompaniment of plain boiled potatoes (soft and slithery – you get the picture). To check for freshness, look for bright eyes, scarlet gills and minimal reddening round the head – and use your nose. To prepare from the net, scrape off the scales with a blunt knife, remove the head (or not, as you please), slit open the belly and scoop out the innards, rinse briefly and pat dry.

Now you're ready to fillet or cook the fish whole. To fillet, working from head to tail, use a sharp, narrow-bladed knife to slice the flesh parallel to the backbone right down the length of the fish; first one side and then the other.

Our herring fleets once employed thousands and fed millions. As my granny used to say, you don't know what you've lost till you lose it.

Grilled butterflied herrings

Fillet the fish as outlined above, leaving the two sides joined at the back. Dot the flesh side with butter, season with salt and pepper, and sandwich together in pairs held in place with bamboo skewers. Grill or fry and serve with more cold butter and plain, boiled potatoes, well drained and shaken over the heat to dry.

Oatmealed herrings

Leaving heads and tails in place, gut and rinse the fish and flip them through finely-ground pinhead oatmeal to make a light coating. Fry gently, with or without bacon dripping (herrings have plenty of subcutaneous fat), turning once, till the fish flesh feels firm to the finger. Serve with well-buttered clapshot – mashed neeps and tatties.

Kippers

My Edinburgh grandmother liked hers jugged: tail upwards in pairs in a roomy jug with just enough boiling water to warm the fish through. My grandad, on the other hand, preferred them blistered under the grill with a pat of butter (as do I).

Bloaters

These are delicious just as they are, served at room temperature with a dollop of creamed horseradish. Their slight gaminess makes them perfect for fishcakes and kedgeree.

Rollmops

These, to my mind, need the Scandinavian treatment: drain, scissor into bite-size pieces and combine with an equal volume of diced cooked vegetables – beetroot, potato, carrot, raw cucumber – and a creamy, mustardy dressing with dill.

RESTAURANTS

JAMES PEMBROKE

The Harrow Inn, Steep, Hampshire

Smokestak, Shoreditch, London E1

With the possible exception of the marketing manager of Corona beer in the light of the eponymous epidemic, my daughter, Honor, was in January the unhappiest girl in the world.

She had mistakenly taken the pledge of Veganuary, thereby eschewing the consumption of not only things with faces, but also their issue. No milk. No honey. In solidarity, my wife, Josephine, and I went to stay with Lucy Og, the former *Oldie* tour leader, who has since made a lifelong commitment to veganism and, as a protest against *Bake Off*, has become gluten-free. Her Damascene conversion was a major cause for celebration for the local wildlife: squirrels and rabbits gambol happily in the knowledge that Lucy's shotgun has been decommissioned and their livers will never again be served up as canapés.

All her gastronomic brilliance is now devoted to her stepchildren. Umpteen gallon jars of home-made sauerkraut stand sentinel on the kitchen table, plopping their euphonic way through the various stages of fermentation. This multicoloured orchestra of bubbling pops and wheezes resonated throughout dinner, rather like the laboratory soundtrack from *The Man in the White Suit*.

Although she's a huge loss to omnivorous cooking, Lucy's vegan cottage pie (and vegan sausages for breakfast) were delicious and easier on the eye and stomach than the vegan ready meals that dominated our home fridge until, mercifully, on 23rd January, Honor cracked. As I write, the icy family hearth resembles a medieval abattoir, complete with half a defrosting pig. Like her dad, she's a little too 'all or nothing'.

Unlike many vegans who delight in their doctrinaire, holier-than-thou diet, Lucy insisted on taking us to her local pub, the Harrow Inn, at Steep. The landlady, Claire McCutcheon, is the fifth member of her family to hold court in this child-free time warp. There can be only a dozen such pubs left in the country: beer straight from the barrel; two small rooms with stuffed extras from Beatrix Potter; no indoor loo, but Claire is wholly welcoming – we are all her 'darlings'. Post-it notes announce the bill of fayre: ham or cheese ploughman's (£7.60) or Scotch eggs. The portions of hand-cut ham were so huge I was able to spare my beef tomato for uncomplaining Lucy to accompany her crisps.

Faced with his wan and pale sibling, my carnivorous son, Leo, was in desperate need of meat before returning to student life in January. We needed to get some distance between us and Bean World, as the family home was renamed during the 23-Day Siege.

Contrarily, we headed to Shoreditch, bound one day to declare itself Britain's first meat-free borough. Bypassing the Fauxmagerie ('Anyone for cashew-nut brie?') and the Vurger Co, we landed at Smokestak, which is practically the last redoubt of meat in Shoreditch, and well worth the trip from anywhere in the south-east. Leo was like a beast released: he had a bone-marrow flatbread, with a chaser of crispy ox cheek, before tearing his way through the barbecued brisket and beef rib. He barely remembered to drink the £27 bottle of Rhone. Funny how he had no such amnesia with our best wine on Christmas Day, when he and our dear neighbours laid waste to our little cellar.

Smokestak, 35 Sclater St, London E1 6LB; www.smokestak.co.uk; tel: 020 3873 1733; main courses £12-£17; whole beef brisket for all the children/grandchildren £150 (order the day before)

The Harrow Inn, Steep, Petersfield GU32 2DA; no cards; cash or cheque only

DRINK

BILL KNOTT

MUSCADET WITH MORE MUSCLE

The first two things to say about Melon de Bourgogne are that a) it isn't a melon, and b) it isn't grown in Burgundy.

It's a grape, grown primarily in the westerly vineyards of the Loire Valley, where it is responsible for Muscadet. Even more confusingly, the name Muscadet relates, supposedly, to the variety's musky or flowery (Muscat-like) aromas: except that Melon de Bourgogne is notable for its complete lack of floweriness.

It was born in Burgundy (its parents are Pinot and the obscure but promiscuous Gouais Blanc) but, apart from a small patch in Vézelay in north-western Burgundy, it has been grown more or less exclusively in the Loire-Atlantique region since the 17th century. The Dutch were enthusiastic planters, prizing the rather thin, neutral white wines that Melon de Bourgogne produced as ideal for distilling into *brandewijn*: brandy, literally 'burnt wine'.

As a tasting note, 'thin and neutral' still applies to much of the more basic Muscadet produced, but, thanks to a *nouvelle vague* of ambitious producers, there is a new focus on quality, too. The best vineyard sites have been rewarded with *crus communaux* status: Gorges, Clisson and Le Pallet are the names to look for, with others in the pipeline.

These wines are made to stricter standards than bog-standard Muscadet, offer more elegance, roundness and complexity, and are often very expressive of their terroir: the clay and quartz soils in Gorges, for example, lend a slight smokiness to its wines, while Clisson's granite and gravel produce wines that can have a gentle quince flavour after a few years in bottle.

The phrase 'sur lie' on a Muscadet bottle indicates that the wine has been aged on its lees – the sediment left after fermentation, mostly dead yeast cells – for a few months, with the wine being bottled between March and November in the year following the harvest. This, in theory, gives a richer flavour and a tighter structure to the wine, without sacrificing its bracing, bone-dry character: Morrison's Muscadet Sèvre-et-Maine Sur Lie 2018, from their The Best range, is a good example, and a snip at £7.50.

Whether you crack open a bottle of *cru communal* or a more basic Muscadet, a plate of seafood should never be far away, especially at this time of year, when shellfish are at their very best. A dozen oysters with some buttered brown bread and a squeeze of lemon (go easy on the shallot vinegar: it will clash with the wine) is a classic combination.

As is a big bowl of mussels *à la marinière*: soften a chopped shallot or two in a knob of butter, add the mussels and a glass of Muscadet, cover and cook until the mussels are open, then shower them with black pepper and chopped parsley: some recipes add garlic, thyme or cream, but all the dish really needs is a baguette to soak up the juices. And, *naturellement*, the rest of the bottle of Muscadet, a pleasingly symmetrical accompaniment.

Simple to make, very quick, remarkably cheap, and one of the finest matches in the whole of gastronomy.

The Oldie Wine

This month's mixed case from DBM Wines comprises four bottles each of three wines: a crisp Muscadet that would happily accompany the first few days of spring; and both a Chilean Malbec and a Spanish Shiraz that, should winter persist, will offer solace, especially if served with a warming beef stew. If you wish, you can buy 12 bottles of the individual wines.



Muscadet 'La Roche Blanche', Domaine des Herbauges, AOP Muscadet Côtes de Grandlieu Sur Lie 2018, offer price £10.99, case price £131.88 Bone-dry; hints of grapefruit and honey.



Malbec Reserva, Nostros, Valle del Bio Bio, Chile 2018, offer price £8.89, case price £106.68 Smooth Chilean red with supple tannins and lots of black cherry and raspberry fruit.



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SPORT

JIM WHITE

FAIRY TALE ACROSS THE MERSEY

By the time you read this, Liverpool will be Premier League champions. They'll probably be declared winners earlier than any other club in English football history.

As predictions go, this is not in Mystic Meg territory. Jurgen Klopp's team have been leading the pack so decisively that the trophy could have been bedecked in red ribbons as early as Christmas.

By mid-February, they were 27 points ahead of Manchester City in second place – the most substantial distance between the leaders and the rest ever recorded.

In the red quarters of Merseyside, no one will mind that it has been the least challenging title race ever. Not when its significance is so substantial. For 30 years, the Anfield diehards have watched a trophy they once considered their own head elsewhere. They have been obliged to suffer the triumphalism of supporters of Arsenal, Chelsea, Manchester City and, worst of all, their most hated rivals, Manchester United. Even Blackburn and Leicester have won the trophy since a Liverpool captain last got his hands on it. Now, finally, that indignity is over.

The fact that everyone else appears to have given up the chase, wheezing in Liverpool's wash, will be of no consequence in Bootle and Kirkby, Toxteth and Speke. There they have been planning the celebrations for months. Liverpool are back where they believe they belong: at the top. And nothing else matters.

Yet for the organisers of the competition, for the suits in the Premier League's swanky headquarters in Marylebone, the salesmen who have sold it around the world in ever more lucrative deals, this will have been an alarming season. A big part of their sales pitch has long been that this is the most competitively uncertain sporting tournament in the world: its unpredictability is its greatest commercial asset.

Not this year. The ease with which Liverpool have won is the kind of thing you witness in France. What the millions of TV subscribers in Africa, Asia and Australia want to see is nip and tuck, to and fro and last-minute turnarounds. What sells around the globe is a competition that extends into the final moments of the last game. Not one that was over before the clocks went forward.

It has been a perfect storm of factors that has undermined the competition this year. Liverpool's unquestioned excellence has coincided with every one of their potential challengers' crumbling. After seeing off Klopp's team last season, City have mounted the most feeble title defence on record, their ageing team undermined by UEFA investigations and bans. Chelsea have stalled after being precluded from entering the transfer market, having breached financial fair-play regulations. Tottenham have self-immolated at the very point of offering consistent challenge. Arsenal and Manchester United have failed haplessly to rebuild following the departure of legendary leaders. It speaks volumes that the most forthright efforts to resist the Liverpool surge have come from Leicester and Sheffield United, two clubs without the financial resources to mount sustained title surges across a season.

So good is Klopp's team, so effervescent his players, so skilful and adept his recruitment and coaching, even if any of the other teams had got their act together, Liverpool would surely have won the title. And rightly so. They play a style of football that is a joy to watch. It just might have been nice to see them triumph against some odds – instead of against a Premier League with all the competitive urgency of a bucket of custard.

MOTORING

ALAN JUDD

LOTS ON YOUR PLATE

February is one of the two best months in the year in which to buy a new car, the other being August.

This is because of the March and September numberplate changes. Buyers generally want the latest registration, hoping it will help the car look younger if and when they sell; even though it's as old as one with the previous registration bought a week before.

Dealers find it difficult to move stock in February, but they have to make room for new stock because March sales are an astonishing five or six times the February rate. If you're a February buyer and don't mind the old plate, you'll find dealers keen – so buy now and haggle hard.

Conversely, to buy second-hand from a dealer, wait until March (or September), when forecourts will be awash with trade-ins they're keen to move on. Again, it's always worth a haggle.



The first two letters are the DVLA local memory tag. They indicate where the vehicle was registered. The two numbers indicate the age of the vehicle. The last three letters of the vehicle's registration are randomly generated.

Our current version of age-related numberplates began in September 2001. But, instead of a single annual change (which other countries seem to manage), the Government yielded to the motor trade's pleas for twice-yearly changes in order to spread sales. Under the present system, therefore, the first two letters of your plate designate the area in which the car was first registered, the two numbers indicate the year and the three following letters are random.

There's a complication. The registration year is deemed to run from March to March, with the divide in September indicated by a change in the first number digit. Thus a car registered in 2007 between March and September is designated 07, while one registered between September 2007 and March 2008 is designated 57. However, because this would lead to repetitions or additional numbers as decades change, and perhaps concerned that the motoring public might find annuality insufficiently challenging, the authorities further decreed that the September digit change should itself change with each decade.

From 2011, therefore, 5 became 6. Now that we are in 2020, 6 will become 7, so that cars registered between March and September will be designated 20 and those from September 70. Thereafter, 2 and 7 will alternate for the rest of the decade, when 7 will become 8.

Confused? Yet it all started so simply in 1904, with the number plate A1. The first holder of this was Earl Russell, elder brother of the philosopher, who queued all night to get it. A keen early motorist who liked to pass himself off as an electrician, he was regarded by his parents as – in his brother's words – 'a limb of Satan' and was sent down from Oxford for 'malpractices'. One result of his distinctive numberplate was that the police soon had him logged as a 'hooligan driver'. He enlisted as a private in the army's Motor Volunteer Corps and was later imprisoned for bigamy.

As for your next car, whether or not you care about the registration, if buying from a dealer don't be embarrassed to haggle but don't demand the impossible.

There's usually middle ground somewhere. Like you, he (as it nearly always is) has a living to make and may be unwilling to drop the price. He might give you a better trade-in or an extended warranty at no extra cost. If it's near the end of the month and he has quotas to fill, he will almost certainly come down.

Always remember it's a buyer's market. You can walk away and find the same or better elsewhere. He'll know that better than you – so make use of it.

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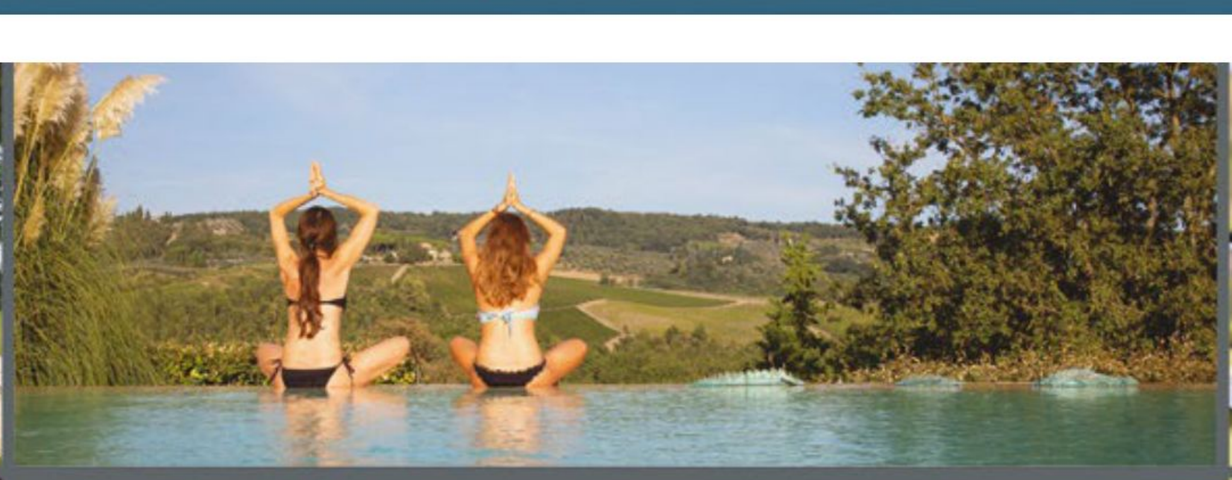
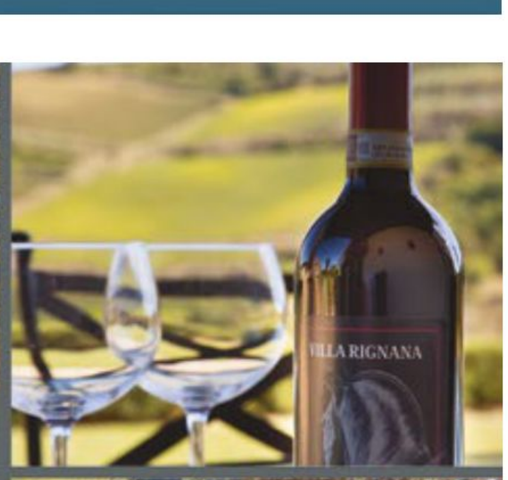


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Matthew Webster: Digital Life

The dawn of the 5p tweet

Whatever your views on the climate-change debate, I don't think we can deny that reducing carbon emissions is generally a good plan. Microsoft certainly thinks so, having announced that they want to be 'carbon negative' by 2030.

You probably think that using the internet is a sensible and responsible way of playing your part. Surely it's more in tune with Greta Thunberg's views to hold video conferences than to drive to meetings.

But is it really? Behind our apparently responsible use of computers in our clean and well-lit offices lies a fairly grubby secret: the internet has caused a massive increase in the consumption of electricity.

The starting point is data centres. These are warehouses full of computers storing websites, Facebook, emails and all the films people watch online. Data centres consume something like two per cent of the world's electricity – and that's only the beginning. You must add the cost of transmitting data to and from them, and the cost of running both the networks that are the internet and our own computers. Supporting the internet and all the associated kit is using about six per cent of the world's electricity.

Remember, 25 years ago that figure was probably too small to calculate.

The electricity has to be generated somehow. Some say that, in China, three-quarters of the electricity used by computing is produced by fossil fuels. At the current rate of growth, in five years' time China's computers alone will be consuming as much electricity as Australia currently uses for everything.

It's not just China, of course; we are all at it. As more of the world's activities move online, and more people use the internet, the demand for data centres and network capacity only increases.

There is some good news. For example, Scandinavia has a growing industry of exporting capacity in data centres built in cold places (which reduces the cost of cooling) and powered by hydroelectricity. Microsoft is testing the placing of data centres underwater in the Orkneys.

That still doesn't get round the cost of transmission and running the computers and televisions we use to watch films.

So how do we tackle this issue? I can only think of three ways – two of which would be very unpopular, and a third on which I am pinning my hopes.

First, we could enforce the throttling back of internet speed. In other words, slow it all down so that Netflix and iPlayer don't work any more. I can't see any government doing that in a hurry or lasting long if they did.

Secondly, we might force, via taxation, users to acknowledge the carbon-emissions cost of their activities and to either cut back or pay up. A 5p energy levy for every tweet, perhaps – or for every email? This would certainly reduce usage, but it would be a brave politician who started imposing taxes on every Facebook post or WhatsApp message.

Third – and I think this is our best and probably our only hope – we can keep our fingers crossed for technological advance. That is, finding more efficient ways of storing, transmitting and using data. I am not aware of anything much on the horizon, but Microsoft, for example, is investing $1 billion over the next four years to help people working to solve this problem.

I hope others will join in. Necessity really is the mother of invention and I have confidence in the ingenuity of mankind to regulate itself sensibly, if slowly. It's happened many times before in many areas: stone tools made cutting possible; chronometers made navigation workable; the steam engine allowed mass transportation.

Fingers crossed.

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Margaret Dibben: Money Matters

Beware of freeloading freeholders

Developers building housing estates are using homeowners as cash cows. Instead of allowing people to buy houses freehold, they keep the freehold and sell only leases.

Freeholders own property outright, including the land it sits on. Leaseholders own only the building, not the land, and just for a fixed number of years, after which ownership reverts to the freeholder. Leasehold tenure is more usually associated with flats.

Freeholders charge homeowners ground rent and service charges every year, an extra source of income that has tempted developers to retain the freeholds. But they have not been content with a peppercorn ground rent or modest service charges. They introduced clauses to the leases of the newly-built houses, ensuring the annual ground rent will double every ten years; so what starts at a few hundred pounds grows into thousands.

Even worse for the owners, developers have been selling the freeholds on to third-party investment companies, sometimes without telling the leaseholders first. In law, leaseholders have the right of first refusal to buy the freehold, once they have owned the property for two years.

Investment funds then employ managing agents, and managing agents impose even more fees called 'permission

fees', which they charge whenever homeowners want to improve their properties, whether it is minor repairs or building extensions.

Buyers' solicitors – who are often recommended by the developer – should point out these onerous restrictions, but many buyers do not realise the implications until they try to sell.

Countless homeowners are now finding it impossible to move house, partly because potential buyers have become aware of the pitfalls and also because lenders refuse to give mortgages on properties with a ground-rent-doubling clause or short lease.

In March 2019, some builders agreed to stop doubling the ground rent and instead to link rises to RPI, but this has not proved much help to owners wanting to sell.

The government has for some time been calling for improvements to the leasehold system and, last June, said that newly built houses should always be freehold, and ground rents on new leasehold flats should be zero. These regulations have not come into force – and anyway would not help homeowners who are already stranded.

The Law Commission published proposals at the start of 2020 to address leasehold homeowners' problems by reducing the cost of buying a freehold, known as enfranchisement, and the cost of extending a lease.

It put forward three proposals, but all have been criticised for favouring landlords over leaseholders. The argument is about who stands to lose or to benefit more – landlords who will miss out on future income or leaseholders who improve the value of their property.

Last summer, the Commission and Markets Authority started investigating whether leasehold houses have been missold and whether buyers have been hooked by unfair contract terms into paying excessive administration, service and permission charges and ground rents. The work is ongoing.

Despite all the investigations taking place, nothing is going to change soon to help the many people who have unwittingly bought leasehold houses and are stuck with expensive constraints indefinitely.



'I was just wondering if I could get some time off to hibernate this winter...'

New

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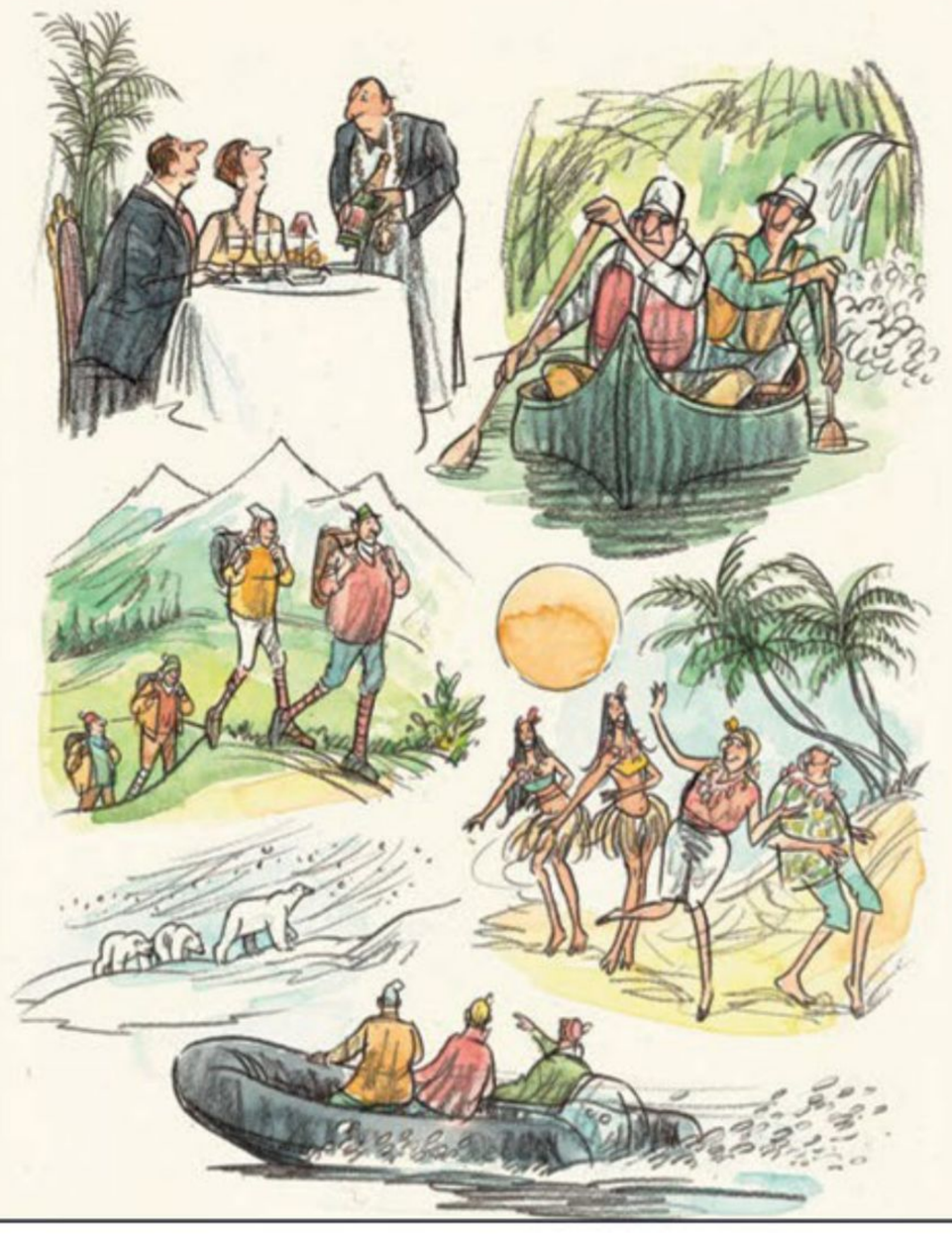
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BIRD OF THE MONTH

Stock Dove

BY JOHN McEWEN * ILLUSTRATED BY CARRY AKROYD

Though one could sooner blast a rock
Than scatter that dense flock
That through the winter weather
Some iron rule has held together.

Yet in another month from now
Love like a spark will blow
Those birds the country over
To drop in trees, lover by lover.
Andrew Young, from *The Stock Doves*

For Gilbert White (1720-93) in Hampshire, the stock dove (*Columba oenas*) was a winter migrant. It was also called the wood pigeon or wood dove; today's wood pigeon was then called the ring dove.

Now widely resident, the stock dove is the woodland equivalent of its coastal cousin, the rock dove (*Columba livia*). Both are smaller than the wood pigeon (13 to 17 inches) but, unlike that bird, the stock dove nests not on branches (except in dense thickets) but in holes (even rabbit holes) and clefts; sometimes on coastal cliffs.

Stock doves can indeed flock in winter like many birds after the breeding season. But it is its tendency either to pair up or to go it alone that distinguishes the stock dove from the habitat-sharing wood pigeon. One recent flock of wood pigeons (90,000) constituted over a third of the stock dove's entire UK population (260,000), which is more than half the Continental population.

It was not officially recognised as a species until the early-19th century. The first known reference to it in English – 'stock-dowe' – dates from 1340. 'Stock' meant tree trunk, with which the bird is associated through its preference for nesting in tree holes – generally in old trees. Dense plantations of conifers are not to its taste. Such a shy, singular, woodland and open-country bird is more familiar through its call than through sightings.

The rain came heavily and fell in floods;
But now the sun is rising calm and bright;
The birds are singing in the woods;
Over his own sweet voice the Stock-
dove broods…



William Wordsworth, from *Resolution and Independence*

As usual, when bird sounds are translated into words, every witness has a different adjective and rendition: deep, low-pitched, gruff, soft, monotonous, disyllabic, moaning, rhythmic, pumping, throaty, crooning and grunting – ooo-*woo*, ooo-*ue*, who-uh, who-uh etc. Undeniably the call has two notes, is repetitive and upbeat; questioning. Like Wordsworth, W H Hudson was an admirer, preferring it to the more celebrated and soothing coos of wood pigeons and the purring of turtle doves.

On sunny spring days, stock doves can be seen performing aerial courtship displays: 'The male doves fly at treetop height, then lift their wings in a shallow V-shape and glide in broad arcs like paper aeroplanes. Sometimes the female joins in, urged on by her mate in a precisely choreographed, aerial ballet' (Brett Westwood and Stephen Moss, *Tweet of the Day*).

Their normal flight has more verve and urgency than wood pigeons', with searing twists and turns, especially when breaking cover or at the glimpse of a gun. Unlike wood pigeons, they have no white markings, and they lack the white rump and black wing bars of that similarly vigorous flyer the rock dove, progenitor of townie feral pigeons.

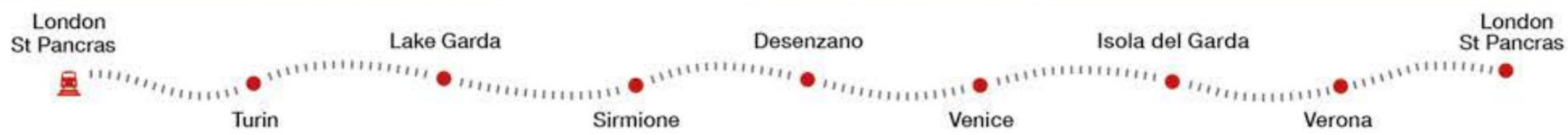
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Getting Dressed

Model of a modern major-general

John Ogden, army officer turned adman-novelist, has ageless style

BRIGID KEENAN

My brother-in-law, John Ogden, is the best dressed man I know.

Ever since I started this column, I have been trying to persuade him to appear in it but only now has he agreed. That's because *The Oldie* mentioned his novel *Antique Drum* in last month's Old Un's Notes. The last of a trilogy, the book is based on his experiences in the army in the 1950s and involves a thrilling murder mystery in Kenya.

Ogden was married to my sister, Moira, a brilliant Woman's Editor of the *Times* until she died in 1972. They had two sons. The younger one, William, recently became a therapist and the older one, Perry, is a famous fashion photographer (he took the main picture of his dad here). A documentary feature film about Perry, *Skin + Soul*, premièred at the Dublin International Film Festival in March.

Father and son dress very differently. Ogden junior goes for black jeans and black T-shirts or sweaters, 'a very modern way of dressing which I don't really understand', says his father. 'He carries a *bag* – I wear a coat so I can put things in the pockets.'

Ogden, 86, is of the old school in which men wear 'coats', not jackets, with their trousers, and women wear 'coats and skirts'.

Ogden junior says, 'I wear a shoulder bag just *because* I don't like putting things in my pockets. My father dresses traditionally but with an edge, a twist. He is a sharp dresser.'

Ogden senior was called up to do national service at 18. He liked it so much that he stayed on in the King's Shropshire Light Infantry.

'You had to have your uniform made for you in the army; so almost automatically you had your clothes made as well. In fact, my father always had his suits made. He lived in Paris at one period and I found a receipt from a French tailor dated 14th June 1920, for Monsieur Ogden's '*veston gilet pantalon, francs 700*' – about £11. My first suit came from Savile Row and cost £40. I gave the tailor a banker's order of £5 per month, so I could buy things regularly. My cutter was Mr Peacock; I still have some of his clothes.

'I also used a cheaper tailor, who had a very red face. Once he made me a pair of trousers with one leg longer than the other. When I showed him, he said, "Oh dear. I cut those after lunch." Savile Row became too expensive for me: £4,000 or more for a two-piece suit now! That is 100 times more than my first one, over twice the rate of inflation.'

Ogden left the army when he was 30 and joined an advertising agency, J Walter Thompson, mostly because he had just read David Ogilvy's book *Confessions of an Advertising Man*. He later worked for Ogilvy himself – 'the closest person to a genius I ever met'.

At JWT, the executives were known as the 'suits' because that is what they all wore, all the time. Then when the agency was pitching for the Levi account, some bright spark bought jeans for the team to wear. They didn't get the job. Ogden found the jeans so uncomfortable that he took them off as soon as he could.

Ogden has back problems and can't wear anything tight round the waist – which means he always wears braces rather than belts and carries a stick.



Dapper dad. With his sons in 1967

'My stick is older than me. It comes from Patrick Howard Antiques in Dublin, where they have a wonderful collection. This one is made of cow horn and partridge wood from the Caribbean.'

He watches his weight: 'The secret is vegetable soup; I make it myself. Vegetable soup means I now weigh 12 stone instead of 13. That, and no second helpings.'

Ogden has his hair cut at Ara's Barber Shop, in Kensington, where, like all Oriental hairdressers, they insist on eyebrows as well: 'Not ears, though, as I have hearing aids in them,' he grins.

He uses Trumper pomades to control his fine hair and buys Ecco rubber-soled shoes because of his back.

In our picture, Ogden wears a grey flannel suit by his tailor, Sims & MacDonald in Holborn, and a shirt made by Budd shirtmakers in Piccadilly Arcade. His Afghan hat was bought in Portobello Market. In summer, he wears a Panama; so named, he tells me, because they were first made in Ecuador for those building the Panama Canal.

Ogden's tie was designed by him as the regimental tie of the fictitious regiment in his books, the Prince Regent's Light Infantry. 'I took the design from my Peter Jones dressing gown.' If you order all three books in his trilogy (available at a-military-education.co.uk), the tie comes free.



PERRY OGDEN

Suit by Sims & MacDonald, shirt by Budd, hat from Portobello Market



Height of Passion

Once a decade, the villagers of Oberammergau stage a re-enactment of the Easter story. Their profound dedication moved *William Cook*

Christmas is coming, and where better to spend Advent than in Bavaria – a place that feels as if it were made for Yuletide, with its fir trees, crisp white snow, Lebkuchen and Glühwein.

And where better in Bavaria to spend Advent than in Oberammergau, one of Germany's most beautiful villages, home of the world's most famous Passion Play?

In the cosy living room of his quaint old house, on the green edge of the village, Peter Stückl is showing me his treasured photos of his appearances in this biblical epic. Peter made his debut when he was seven, back in 1950. Since then, he's been in every production of this ancient play, which has been performed here (and only here) every ten years since the 17th century.

In 1950, he appeared in the same production as his grandfather. Next summer, he's appearing in the same production as his grandchildren. 'Every child is proud when they can be in the Passion Play,' he says.

I first came to Oberammergau 20 years ago, to see Peter play Caiaphas, the man who condemns Jesus – a riveting performance, full of rage and angst.

This time, he's playing a smaller role, but even after 70 years his enthusiasm still burns bright. Peter's family have appeared in this play for generations; in Oberammergau that's not unusual. Ask anyone in this Alpine village and they'll tell you the same thing: taking part is a precious privilege, reserved for people who were born here (or have lived here for at least 20 years). It makes no difference whether you're playing a bit part, or Christ himself. Only 5,000 people live here, and almost everyone is involved. It's a unique link with kinfolk long dead and kinfolk yet unborn.

The origins of Oberammergau's Passion Play stretch back nearly 400 years. In the 1630s, in the aftermath of the Thirty Years' War, a vicious plague swept through Bavaria, carrying off many survivors of that murderous religious war. The inhabitants of Oberammergau vowed to God that if He spared them, they'd enact the Easter story every ten years for evermore.

At first it was just a local spectacle, but eventually it grew into an international attraction. Thanks to Thomas Cook & Co, it became especially popular with British travellers, for whom it was part pilgrimage, part jolly package holiday.

Oberammergau came through the two world wars more or less unscathed, but Hitler left an awful legacy. He'd been a big fan of the Passion Play, on account of

The Oberammergau play was first staged in 1634 in thanks for deliverance from the plague. Right: Descent from the Cross



ZOONAR GMBH/ALAMY

its negative portrayal of the Jews. Any historical enactment of the Crucifixion was bound to incorporate some anti-Semitic elements but, after the horrors of the Holocaust, these elements came under increasing scrutiny. Bowing to pressure from international Jewish groups, the villagers revised their play and today, in my opinion, it's no longer anti-Semitic in the slightest – at least, no more than the Gospels on which it's based.

The driving force in the play's recent evolution is Peter's son Christian, who directed the last three productions, and is directing the 2020 production too.

Although Christian is a professional director, his cast are all amateurs (most of them have day jobs – Peter Stückl runs a Gasthaus), but there's nothing am-dram about this extraordinary show. The play is performed 100 times a season, over several balmy midsummer months. There are 5,000 seats in the open-air auditorium – yet most performances still sell out.

It's an incredible experience: the last week in the life of Christ, from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday, squeezed into six hours (with a break for dinner), performed by a cast of hundreds against a backdrop of Alpine peaks.

The actors insist it's just a play, not a religious rite, but if you're remotely religious you'll find it profoundly moving.

And it's not just the show that's special – it's the place itself. Oberammergau is a charming spot, a cluster of Hansel-and-Gretel houses in a lush green valley in the foothills of the Alps. 'In big cities,' says Peter, 'they're always in a hurry. We're not.'



ARNO DECLAIR

Getting here is fairly easy (it's 60 miles south of Munich – about 90 minutes by train or car), yet once you're here, the modern world feels far away. Until 1990, married women were forbidden from appearing in the Passion Play, as was any unmarried woman over 35. (Until that rule was rescinded, the man playing Jesus was sometimes older than the woman who played his mother.)

Arriving here, you're reminded that Germany is a pious place. Unlike the C of E, the German Church is funded directly by the taxpayer and, in rural areas like Oberammergau, the clergy maintains a major presence. The Bundesrepublik has always been pretty evenly split between Protestants and Catholics (formerly a large minority; now a small majority).

And although the vast majority of the play's performers are Catholic (like the vast majority of Bavarians), most foreigners who come to see the play are Protestants – mainly from Britain, Scandinavia and America. Maybe Catholic countries have enough religious rituals of their own.

Every ten years, Oberammergau is invaded by half a million of these pilgrims, as it will be this coming summer, filling every Gasthaus (and spare bedrooms in private houses). But most of the time, it's a sleepy place – a great base for exploring this picturesque corner of Bavaria. The surrounding area is a nature reserve, protected from development.

Whether you prefer a bracing hike or a gentle stroll, it's ideal for walking. The ornate baroque monastery of Ettal is only a few miles away – an easy walk through woods and meadows. If you're out of puff when you arrive, you can return by bus.

A few miles further is Linderhof, one of several fairytale castles built by 'Mad' King Ludwig – and my favourite, by far. It's not quite as spectacular as Neuschwanstein (his most famous castle, the model for Disneyland) but it's far more intimate, with only a fraction of the tourist traffic. The schloss is a weird pastiche of a Louis XIV château, surrounded by fountains, waterfalls, and grottoes inspired by Wagner operas.

Back in Oberammergau, I meet up with Anton Burkhart (a forester by day) who played a passionate, pugnacious Jesus in the Passion Play I saw here 20 years ago (this time, he's playing Joseph of Arimathea). His brother has played Pilate. His sister has played Mary. I ask him whether playing Jesus changed his life.

'Yes,' he says, with simple clarity.

On the train back to Munich, I think about my German grandmother, who came to see the play as a teenager. I always assumed she'd seen the 1930 production, but it turns out there was a special production in 1934 to mark the play's tercentenary, attended by Hitler.

Now I wonder whether *that* was the one she saw. Maybe that's why she never talked about it. I wish I'd asked her what she saw. It's too late now. She died 20 years ago, a few months after I came to see this show.

If you can get a ticket, do come and see it. You won't regret it. You'll never forget it. The journey is a kind of pilgrimage, and it's more than just a play.



Double rooms at the friendly, four-star Hotel Böld (www.hotel-boeld.de) start from €120, including breakfast. Lufthansa fly direct to Munich from £82 return. For details of the Passion Play, visit www.passionsspiele-oberammergau.de

Smoke under the water

LUCINDA LAMBTON

At Witley Park, Surrey, millionaire fraudster Whitaker Wright built a splendid underwater smoking room before coming to a grisly end



Wanted for fraud: Wright in 1903

There cannot there be many spots in the British Isles as bewitching as the great glass underwater smoking room at Witley Park in Surrey.

Today in a sorry state of decay, it was originally lushly comfortable, with semicircular padded sofas, a mosaic floor and, as a decorative bonus, a whopping great palm tree, taken, no doubt, from the whopping great palm house on the estate.

It was part of a labyrinthine network of ramps, tunnels and chambers – some decorated in the Oriental style – built both in a lake and underground, created in the late 1890s and early 1900s.

The star of the show, though, is the smoking room, at the end of a 400-foot-long tunnel, reached by a spiral staircase leading from a lakeside entrance. Strolling down it seems already to be an unbeatable experience to enjoy in Surrey – until, suddenly and gloriously, you are enveloped by the delights of the dome.

What a shock and a half! It is 80 feet high and perched on by – you know but cannot see – a winsome, life-size statue of Neptune. By now, you are submerged beneath the surface of one of three interconnecting lakes: the square lake, with a 30-foot-high cascade into the bathing lake, and then there is the big lake, covering 50 acres, once peopled with a wealth of statues and fountains.

All of them were man-made and what a man it was who made them: a multimillionaire fraudster called Whitaker Wright, whose architectural forays were as adventurous as any built in Britain.

Over seven years, he employed between 400 and 600 men to toil at transforming his parklands, working day in, day out, on the grandest of schemes. Hills were levelled and refashioned elsewhere and there were temples and statues galore, as well as a boathouse and a bathing house designed by Edwin Lutyens.

A fountain of a dolphin's head, carved from a single 80-ton block of marble, was sent from Italy – but it was so enormous that when it arrived in Southampton the railways refused to transport it north.

Nothing daunted, Whitaker Wright dispatched a traction engine to haul it home. When the engine came to bridges that could not be passed under, Wright ordered that the roads be lowered until there was room. He built grottoes and Oriental pavilions and commissioned 'gorgeous stables'. They were centrally heated and, according to the *Royal Magazine* in 1903, 'of a blatant sumptuousness that must have embarrassed the horses'.

There was lavish praise of 'the wonderful way in which Mr Whitaker Wright had "improved nature" at his home in Surrey … hills were removed and built again by hand'.

He was lyrically described as 'a sombre silent man in black from the City of London who strode about the park, carrying a great oak staff whilst superintending: "We will have a great lake here,"' he said, in effect. '"This hill blocks the view – take it away. Cut down this wood. Here we will have a grotto. An Italian fountain would look well here. But first have a wall built, ten feet high all round."'

This wall was built solely to give employment to the locals and still stands there, ever useless, to this day.

He also commissioned a lumpenly hideous, neo-Tudor house – albeit with a theatre, an observatory and, if you please, a velodrome – but making up for this ugliness in spadefuls was the creation of the quite magical smoking room. Once again the *Royal Magazine* flowed forth:

'It is a wonderful place – a fairy palace. In summer, it is delightfully cool – in winter, delightfully warm, for the



LUCINDA LAMBTON/CHRONICLE/ALAMY

temperature is always fairly even. Outside, the clear crystal glass is a curtain of green water – deep, beautiful green at the bottom, fading away to the palest, faintest green at the top, where little white wavelets ripple. Goldfish come and press their faces against the glass, peering at you with strangely magnified eyes. On summer nights, one looks through the green water at the stars and the moon, which appear extraordinarily bright and large, for they are magnified quite ten times by the curved glass and water.'

Hurray! It cost £20,000 and was of course created with utmost care. For if one of the square panes of three-inch-thick glass should break, the smoking room would be filled with water within only five minutes.

Wright had his critics, such as an elderly Derbyshire shareholder, the Rev Randle Feilden, who groused that he 'felt that a man who entertained his friends under water was not to be trusted'.

Whitaker Wright was extraordinarily rich; by the time he was 31, he had lost two fortunes and made three, through his worldwide mining speculations, along with a quantity of finance companies in England. He made a vast fortune in America and Australia promoting mining companies; it was a fortune for himself and himself alone, in that he never paid a penny back to any of his investors.

In 1900, they all crashed, dragging numerous small investors with them, including Wright himself, who was prosecuted for having manipulated the accounts and sentenced to seven years' imprisonment for fraud.

After accusations of excessive 'window dressing' of the balance sheets, as well as the loss of some £8m, within minutes of the verdict he killed himself with cyanide. With his usual extravagance, he swallowed enough to kill several men and it was said that every organ in his body emitted the stench of prussic acid.

The scandal was immense, with his supporters – among them such swells as the ex-Viceroy of India, Marquess of Dufferin and Ava – suffering grave public humiliation.

One particularly intriguing aspect of this sensational saga was Whitaker Wright's financing and building of London's Bakerloo Line, when he enlisted the help of Charles Tyson Yerkes, controller of the Chicago tramways. With Sir Robert Perks, Yerkes was to buy up and develop London's Underground system from the late 1890s. Together they built two tunnels under the Thames, which were the important forerunners of Witley Park's 400-foot-long route to Whitaker Wright's smoker's paradise.



Stately pleasure dome: the 1890s smoking room at Witley

End of the American dream

Four hundred years after the pilgrims landed on Plymouth Rock, *Ivo Dawnay* struggles to find their spirit on the election campaign trail

If, by some glitch in Einstein's space/time continuum, the Pilgrim Fathers were to sail into Plymouth, Massachusetts, today, they might be a little disappointed by the shining 'city upon a hill' their descendants have created.

Given that this November will mark the 400th anniversary of their miserable, storm-lashed two-month passage, they might quibble a little about the quality of the tourist infrastructure, too. The legendary Plymouth Rock, so celebrated by Ella Fitzgerald, has been split, stapled together and canopied by a pompous Corinthian temple. In February, it was vandalised with red paint by, it's thought, local gang members. The Pilgrim Hall Museum is, frankly, underwhelming and the replica *Mayflower* that is usually docked in the bay is away for repairs, returning this summer.

But then the 1620s were not the age of the selfie and the Puritan mindset was more interested in survival than in marketing. They would have enjoyed The Tasty – a diner on Plymouth's Court Street, whose kale and blue cheese salad is really, well, worth the trip.

My own mission to the New World to find the legacy of those tough, self-reliant, deeply religious and almost humour-free souls was proving harder than I had expected. Far from a shining city, much of today's New York is like a steel-and-glass Babylon, where the 'chosen people' are Wall Street oligarchs and the rest of us merely doormen. And



JANICE DREW

Plymouth Rock, vandalised in February by, it's thought, local gang members

not, as the Psalmist advised, doorkeepers 'in the house of my God', but rather dwellers 'in the tents of wickedness' (Psalms 84:10).

Even God has been commoditised and politicised, as witnessed in the annual National Prayer Breakfast on the first Thursday in February, with the generous sponsorship of the Hilton International Hotel in Washington, DC.

At this year's shindig, President Trump, in attendance, was asked if he could forgive a fellow Republican his sins. The day before, Mormon Senator Mitt Romney was the party's sole dissenter in the acquittal of the President in his impeachment trial. Romney said a vote for acquittal was 'a violation of his oath to God' to uphold the Constitution.

Did the President turn the other cheek? Did he ever. 'I don't like people who use their faith as justification for doing what they know is wrong,' Trump said. 'We can't let that go.'

Yet this is still an astonishingly religious people. On Sundays, there are traffic jams on Washington, DC's Connecticut Avenue as people drive to a bewildering array of churches.

And it is even more so out in the sticks. My wanderings through the snowy wildernesses of Iowa and New Hampshire actually turned up numerous examples of pilgrim values – tough, resilient, good-hearted people with a strong sense of community and civic values. The pilgrims, after all, were the original, self-organising Town Hall democracy that eventually gave birth to America's arguably greatest three gifts to the world – the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.

In the splendid five-domed State House in Des Moines; in a basketball court in Keene, New Hampshire; and at the fire department hall in New Baltimore, New York, I observed citizens governing their affairs with a vigour and lack of cynicism that would amaze most shoulder-shrugging Brits.

But what of the 'Shining City'? (It was, by the way, Ronald Reagan who added the 'shining'.) In a little New England village called Sharon, I visited the humourist P J O'Rourke for his take on his own pilgrim roots.

'Does their spirit still run strong in the DNA of American politics?' I asked. 'Where is the evidence?'

'No, and nothing,' was his abrupt reply.

But that was the gonzo journalist talking. Let P J ramble and the hidden patriot could not be concealed for long. Sitting in March Hare Farm, his exquisite, snow-bound, colonial homestead with its panelled walls and old oak beams, one half-expected Paul Revere to call at any moment.

'Americans are very proud of America,' he observed. 'It is an exceptional country.'

However, he went on to add that his own philosophy was more in line with that of the 'unreadable' British philosopher Michael Oakeshott. 'I take conservatism to mean liking the place where you live and preferring "present laughter to Utopian bliss".'

To assist me in my pilgrim's progress across the USA, O'Rourke introduced me to a direct descendant of John Winthrop, the Puritan leader of the Massachusetts Bay Colony who actually coined the concept of the city on the hill. Winthrop the First was the author of *A Model of Christian Charity* – a sermon given in 1630 in Southampton before his pilgrim fleet sailed for the New World. It is widely



JAMES FLETCHER

Star-spangled banner. A souvenir-seller at a 2020 Trump rally, Manchester, New Hampshire. *Below:* P J O'Rourke prefers 'present laughter to Utopian bliss'



ATHENA/ALAMY

deemed the foundation document for American exceptionalism.

His namesake and 11th-generation descendant, now 83 and living in Charleston, South Carolina, argues that his illustrious ancestor was not contending that America was a city upon a hill, a beacon of hope to the world, but that it should aspire to be.

'The Puritans believed in a rather Spartan way of life,' he told me. 'The important thing was to be on the right side of morality.'

'And are they?' I asked.

Not the current lot was Winthrop the 11th's view.

A fruitless search among the pundits and politicians at the primaries turned up nothing in my search for the pilgrims' modern heirs. Until, that is, I reached the banks of the Hudson River in upstate New York. There the Rev Dr Roxanne Jones Booth, a former missionary, now minister at the Riverview Baptist church, answered my prayers.

'If you are looking for those pilgrim values today, you will find them in the African-American churches,' she said, brooking no contradiction. 'We have to take care of one another, because no one else does. We believe in the work ethic – doing what you are equipped to do. And we take responsibility for our community seriously.'

Eureka, and how appropriate. The representative of arguably the most put-upon and downtrodden ethnic group in the US claiming kinship with another persecuted and huddled group – the 102 all-but-destitute *Mayflower* pilgrims who fled across the Atlantic for a promised land, yearning to be free.

BA flies to Boston (returns from £281). Ivo Dawnay stayed at the Sandwich Inn, Sandwich, Massachusetts (doubles £61)

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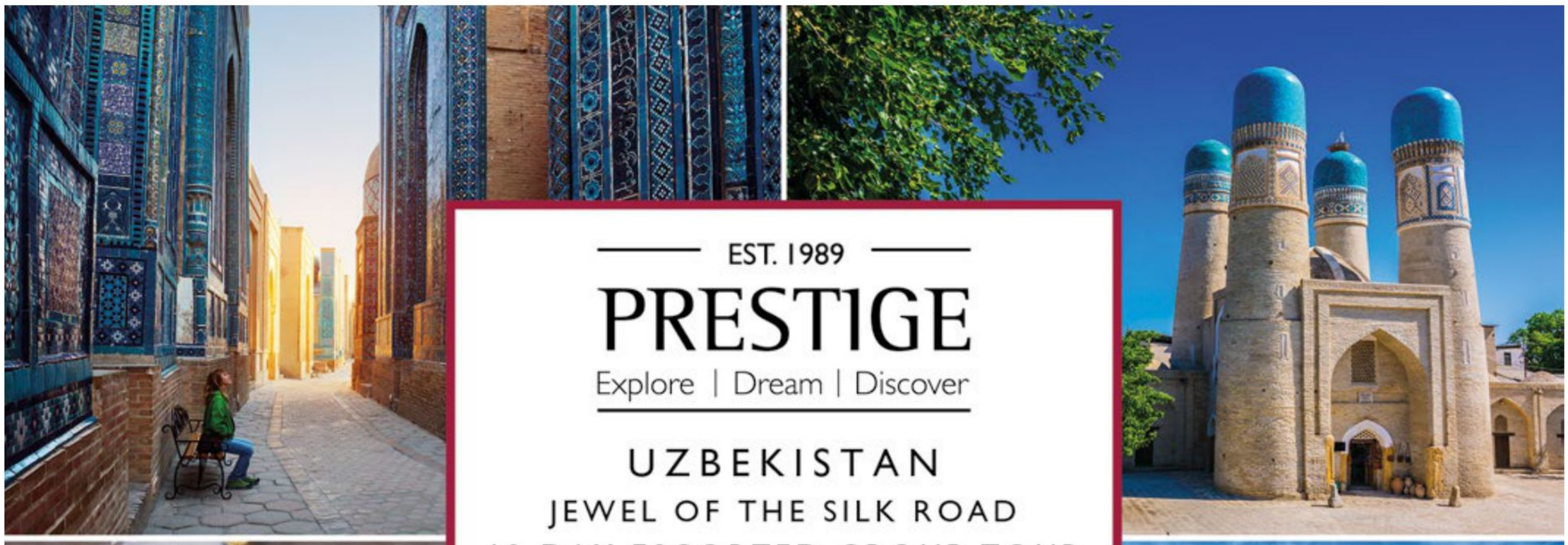


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Muddy waters in the West Country

PATRICK BARKHAM

Slub. Gubber. Clodgy. There are more than 30 old dialect words for mud in Sussex alone. And, as a wet winter drew to a close, all of them also applied to western England.

I had dressed for a city walk – brown Chelsea boots – because I'd plotted a route across north Bristol. The Frome Valley Walkway is a path that sounds as if it might be suspended among the treetops. But almost every step involved a short slide in viscous, reddish soil that had been put through God's liquidiser.

Our near ancestors spent half their lives knee-deep in mud when not living in houses built from it but, in the present era, even a moderate slathering is too much for most of us.

The mud indicated that people had recently tramped these paths, but there was no one about during my muddy midweek stroll. I began in suburbia, alighting at Bristol Parkway, where the station has swallowed Stoke Gifford, a commuter car park rampaging around the old village church. I headed through an empty housing estate called Harry Stoke –surely a 1950s footballer?

The only signs of life were the swoosh of passing cars and the occasional, mysterious, suburban errand: a woman climbed out of a sports car and walked down the street brandishing a cat basket and a large, pink-enveloped card. It felt like the dénouement of a short story.

I chose to access the Walkway via what the map called a Community Forest Path, which was less delightful than it sounded. I crossed wet meadows beside a stream that had turned the colour of fudge because of earth-moving for a fast-rising 'collection' – as the developers like to say – of new homes. (As if you buy a house the way you choose a chocolate from a selection box – or perhaps treat yourself to two.)

A great tit seesawed away but, within 500 yards of the M32, it was drowned out by the traffic. This became a blanket of noise that smothered all coherent thought. It abated in the underpass, but then I became irritated by the farmer who had annexed most of this tunnel for his machinery, corralling walkers into a narrow, barbed-wire-lined path as if we were recalcitrant cows.



Magpies cackled and the fudge stream quickened as the land sloped down to the Frome, a merry, chocolate-brown river which had carved a tree-lined sanctuary into the landscape. The Frome was full, yet obediently kept within its banks.

Entering the Walkway was like closing a padded door on an argument. It was beatifically calm to be encased in this narrow, damp valley of moss, ivy and ferns. A dual carriageway soared overhead, but its only impact on the peaceful world below was a brief explosion of litter blown from its heights.

Where the path diverted into a well-heeled cul-de-sac at Frenchay, Neighbourhood Watch stickers set me wondering about unsavoury characters.

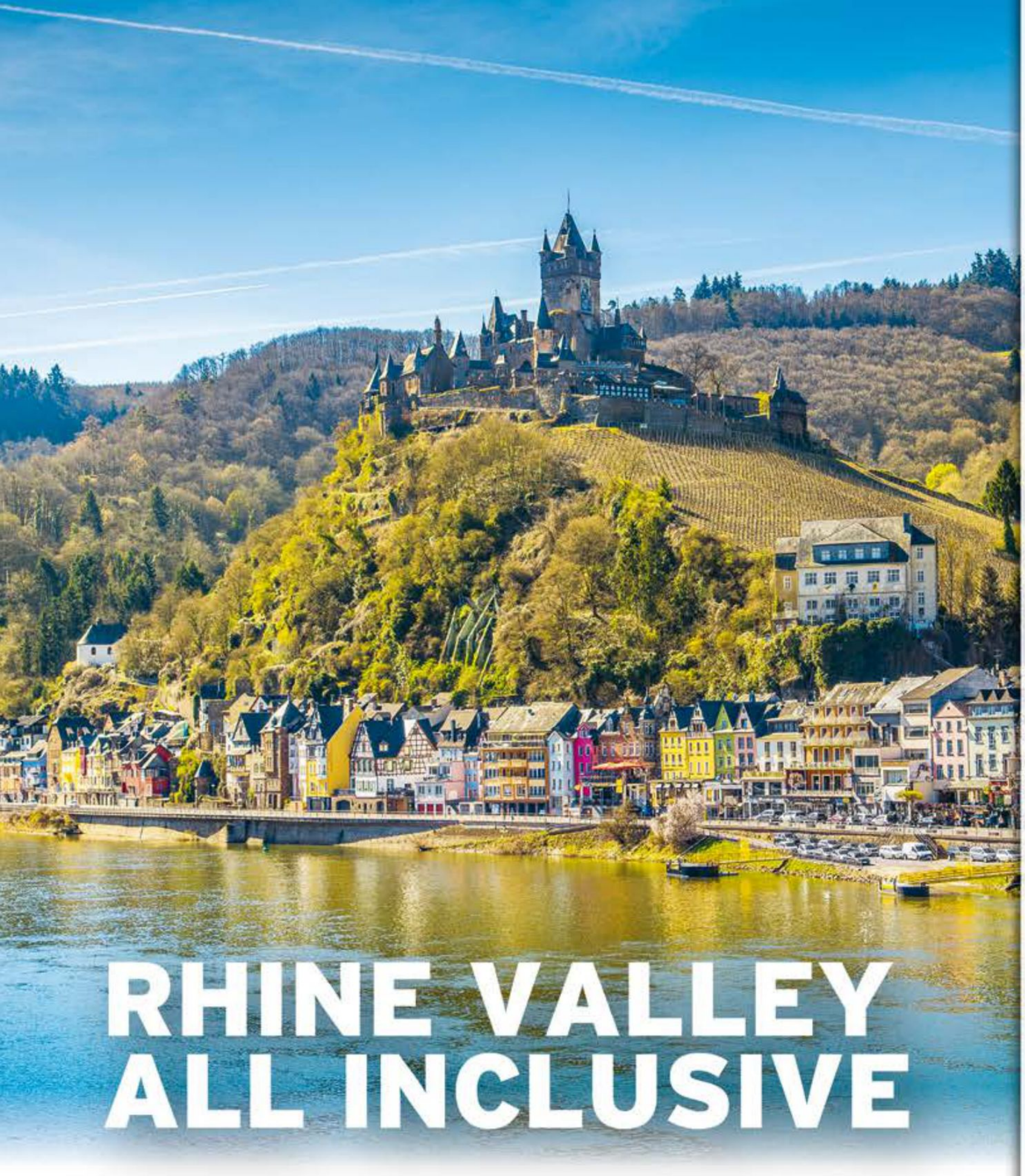
The only lurker I disturbed was a thickset buzzard, which flew from the woods. There was a hint of colour in the trees, trunks and branches shining yellow, as if the lichens were limbering up for spring. Rooks assembled for parliaments over the water.

The tight valley became a miniature gorge, walls of stone rising, and I could see why this craggy, ferny, Romantic landscape attracted the attention of Humphry Repton, who designed many of the paths and vistas here for the Oldbury Court Estate.

There were more walkers now, urban hipsters with dogs and headphones, and the sun spilled into the gorge. It illuminated a pretty, riverine island, and the mud glinted with mischief and merriment. This was its last hurrah before spring. The mud was enjoying its hegemony while it lasted.

I walked south-east from Bristol Parkway and joined the Frome Valley Walkway just beyond Hambrook. It is six miles from Parkway to central Bristol, or three to Snuff Mills, where there is a car park. Buses can take you back to Temple Meads or Parkway

GARY WING



rail discoveries

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Day 3. Cochem
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Days 4-5. Rhine Gorge cruise
Today's excursion takes you by rail to St Goar, where you will join a boat for a pleasure cruise through the timeless and iconic Rhine Gorge. One of the most scenic and striking sights along the Rhine River, the Rhine Gorge is dominated by the legendary Lorelei Rock, situated in the centre of the river. Stop at Rüdesheim then after some free time, head back to the hotel by rail. Enjoy a free day in Remagen on Day 5.

Days 6-7. Boppard
Today and Day 7 are at leisure. You may wish to take the train to Boppard. Once a Roman fort, Boppard has earned UNESCO World Heritage status thanks to its impressive castle and its time-honoured viticulture.

Day 8. Return to London
After breakfast, take the train to Cologne, where you change for the service to Brussels. From here join the Eurostar to London St Pancras, where your holiday concludes.

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The Queen of British cartoons

Posy Simmonds tells *Louise Flind* about the art of drawing French bakers, teenagers' trainers and the green lushness of Somerset

Is there anything you can't leave home without?
Notebook and pencil – I feel naked without those.

Something you really miss?
My pillow, because sometimes in hotels you get those ones that boil your head and in the morning you look like a beetroot.

Favourite destination?
I do spend quite a lot of time in France. West and north are my favourite points of the compass.

Earliest childhood holiday memories?
Because I've got quite a few siblings, my father used to rent a little boys' school in Devon right by the sea. The school cook would come in, the cleaners would come in and there was a little gym in the basement for if it rained. The library was full of very old-fashioned books, GA Henty and Ripping Yarns *sort of stuff. A week before we left, a fair would set up and we were given sixpences and you could just get lost there and go on the dodgems.*

How do you research the look and behaviour of people? Do you go out on the streets with a sketchbook?
I used to but I don't do it so much now, partly because people say, 'Will you stop staring at me?' or 'Can you draw me?' I've got quite a good memory for things I want to record.

Is it harder to do teenagers?
No, because teenagers, a lot of the time, wear a kind of uniform. I will often make a little note what kind of trainers they wear and just look at clothes.

Did you do French research for *Gemma Bovery*?
We went to Rouen and that little village that Flaubert based Yonville in Madame Bovary *on. The narrator of* Gemma Bovery *is a French baker – I saw his prototype first in Brittany and then in a men's shop in Paris.*

Did you do English rural research for *Tamara Drewe*?
I did some in Dorset and quite a lot in Somerset because it has the green lushness I wanted.

Are you a traveller?
Not really, no. I travelled a lot this year because Cassandra Darke *came out; I went to Holland, Germany and France. I hate airports apart from people-watching. I went through Germany by train, looking into people's back gardens – heaven.*

Where did you go on your honeymoon?
I don't think I had one. My father died. It might have been two or three days away – somewhere in the West Country.

Do you lie on the beach on holiday?
I used to, a long time ago. I like sitting on rocks and I like dirty weather, too. So if someone said I could have a holiday in Florida or Iceland, I'd always go to Iceland.

Do you have a daily routine even when you're away?
Depends on the host. Generally, Richard and I both like mucking about. We're happy just sitting somewhere, mind in neutral, or reading a book, or walking.



Are you brave with different food abroad?
Yes, I like most things. I can't eat oysters any more, which I used to love – because I had a bad one and was ill. I've had mussels since – no problems.

Strangest thing you've ever eaten?
In Greece, a bit of bull's bollocks, which was chewy – and when I asked what it was, the man went a bit pink.

Favourite international food?
I suppose nothing can beat some French bread and cheese, and I salivate just thinking about some pasta I once had in Lucca.

Best and worst experiences in hotels when abroad?
When my stepchildren were very young (8 and 10), we were in a hotel lift in Menorca, which suddenly stopped because there was a fire at the bottom of the lift shaft. I tried to be very, very calm and eventually they managed to put the electricity on – for long enough for the lift to go straight down to the fire. And there was a line of waiters with buckets and hoses.

Do you have a go at the local language?
I speak French quite fluently, enough German to order a beer or ask where the Bahnhof *is, and a bit of Greek because I was a governess for Greek children. So most of my Greek is commands – 'The food is ready… Come, children… We're going now… Quickly quickly.'*

Biggest headache?
Mosquitoes – I blow up and for some reason the bites go poisonous; also jellyfish – and sometimes the lavs aren't quite what you'd want.

What is the strangest place you've ever slept in while being away?
Someone's garage.

Top travelling tips?
I'm quite chaotic. We're quite near Eurostar and we once missed the train because we were so cool about it. Anti-mosquito stuff is a good precaution.

Finally, is there anything you'd like to plug?
Cassandra Darke, *which came out this time last year, but there are still people buying it. I just saw two people in Waterstones buy it!*

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Genius crossword 385

EL SERENO

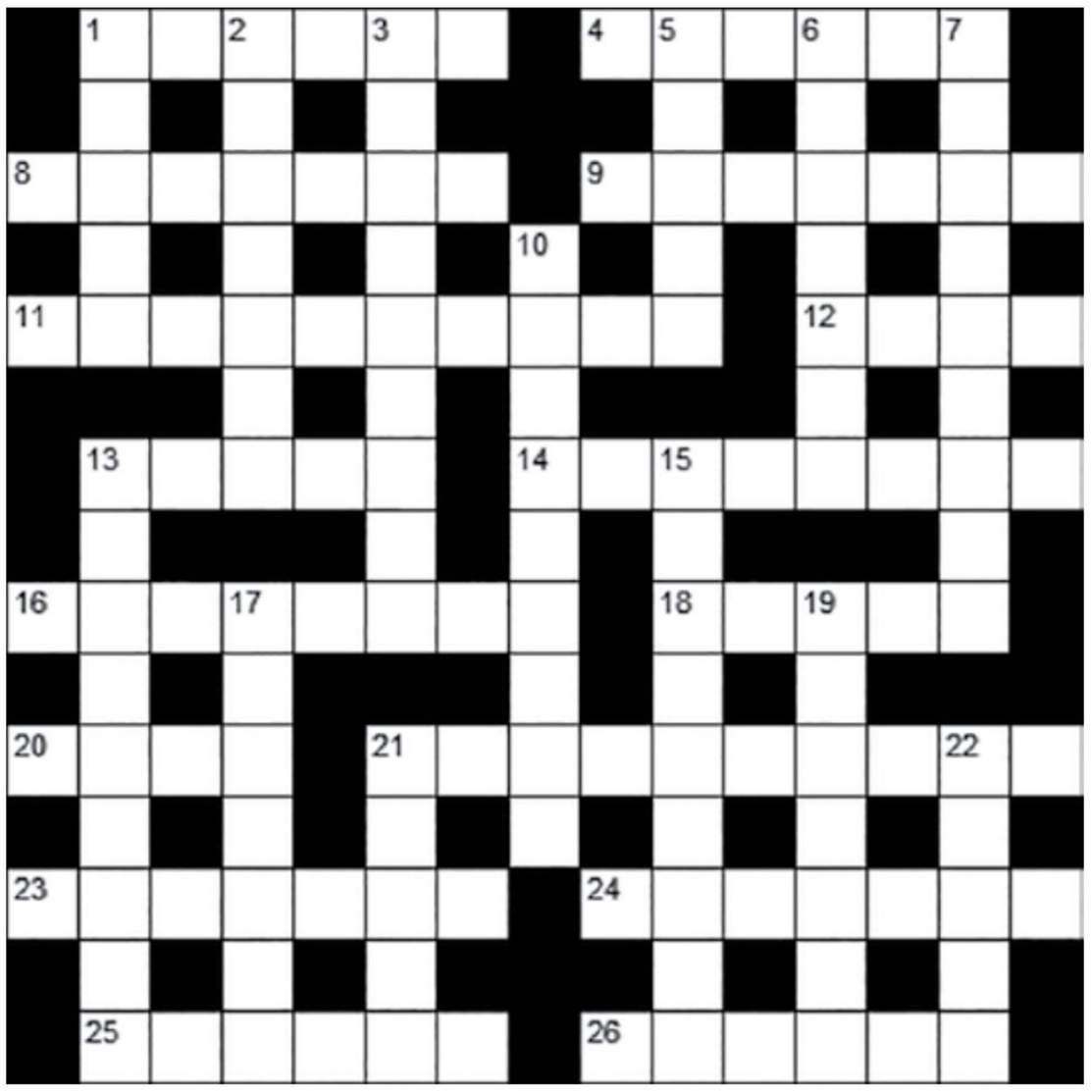
No tricks here - just 6 clues that share an absent definition. There are a couple of other normal clues that vaguely reference this definition.

Across

1 Capital amount returned before answer in court (6)
4 When army rest, having lost all protection (6)
8 Divorce one's love and other people will be rejected (7)
9 Fabulous swimmer millions admire after a fashion (7)
11 Key excuse for performance art (10)
12 Oddly cold moon, one of nine (4)
13 Dross incorporating new words commonly used (5)
14 Beginning to doubt, and upsetting noisy American (8)
16 Attitude struck in front of international academic (8)
18 Message team regularly and suffer (5)
20 Enthusiasm mostly found around university (4)
21 Tough criminal behind tart (4-6)
23 Put off harbouring case of extremism (7)
24 Large flier must eat a couple of thousand (7)
25 What the exchequer collects after hearing of wrong rules (6)
26 City model does Salvation Army (6)

Down

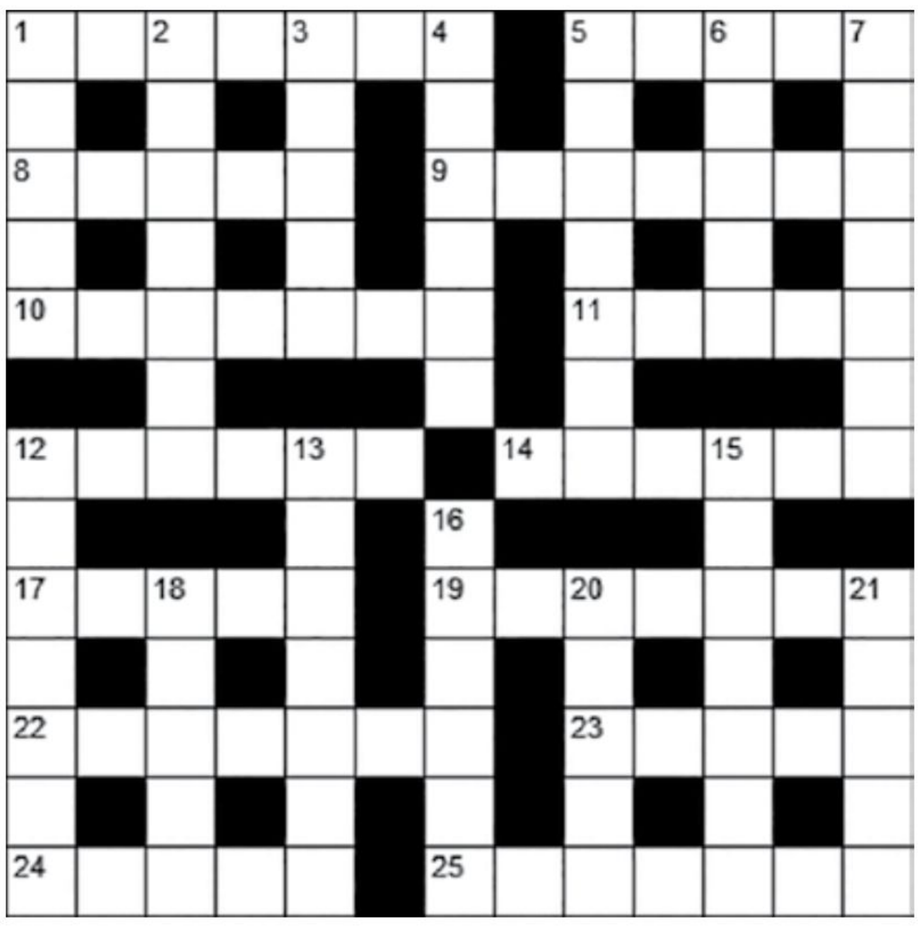
1 Considers applications supporting Microsoft initially (5)
2 Leader's wife admitted to consult a naturopath (7)
3 Insurance may not cover these going initially into new cat foods (4,2,3)
5 Lament the Spanish say before day's end (5)
6 Copying two identical notes on blubber (7)
7 Religious humour with universal appeal, outwardly (9)
10 Capital types or solitary chaps across river (9)
13 Instruction for someone with a habit such as coke might be? (9)
15 Too enthusiastic about finding love in poet (9)
17 Religious festival north of the Orient (7)
19 9 regularly found in university faculty (7)
21 Animal that's holy without and venal within? (5)
22 Index tracker sheltering surplus (5)



How to enter EITHER scan this page and email it to **comps@theoldie.co.uk** OR post your entry to 'Crossword 385', The Oldie, 23/31 Great Titchfield Street, London W1W 7PA, with your home address, which we will use only if you win the prize below. **Deadline: 3rd April 2020**. We do not sell or share your data with third parties.

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Moron crossword 385



Across

11 Attendant
5 Mock, rib
8 Tall
9 Boat race meeting
10 Opposes
11 Implied; understood
12 Brooded
14 Fit of hysteria
17 Accumulate
19 Notice
22 Keepsake
23 Treatment; tradition
24 Evade
25 Sorrow

Down

1 Of the sun
2 Turning down
3 Bottomless gulf
4 Lunge
5 Meaner
6 Garret
7 Precisely
12 Teemed
13 Concentration; nub
15 Recount
16 Happy; festive
18 Bearing weapons
20 Team
21 Fencing swords

Genius 383 solution



Solutions to 1, 11, 19ac. 18 and 24 offer a small selection of books by Ian McEwan.

Winner: Christopher Miller
Runners-up: Liz Wicken, Jacqueline L. Boyce

Moron 383 solution Across: 1 Subdued, 5 Essay(sub judice), 8 Earth, 9 Prattle, 10 Smell a rat, 12 Sad, 13 Recess, 14 Allied, 17 Pen, 18 Gunpowder, 20 Lorries, 21 Oasis, 23 Excel, 24 Dithers. Down: 1 Seeks, 2 Bar, 3 Upholds, 4 Depart, 5 Exalt, 6 Satisfied, 7 Yielded, 11 Eccentric, 13 Repulse, 15 Lookout, 16 Unused, 18 Grill, 19 Rests, 22 Sue.

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BRIDGE

Human nature being what it is, there is a natural curiosity to see the bridge equivalent of a professional golfer do an 'air shot' – miss the ball completely. Do bridge experts ever have unmitigated disasters, entirely of their own making?

Absolutely. In the 2015 European Championships, Tony Forrester made a splinter bid of 4♠, holding only one spade (as splinters do), agreeing my diamonds. The trouble was I also held only one spade and thought 4♠ was a natural bid. He wasn't best pleased to be declaring 4♠ with only two spades in the partnership.

The long-time partnership of Chip Martel and Lew Stansby had a spectacular bidding mishap on this deal from the 1996 Vanderbilt.

Dealer North Neither Side Vulnerable

North
♠ –
♥ K J 9 8 4 2
♦ A 9 8 7 3
♣ 10 9

West
♠ J 9 4
♥ Q 6 5
♦ J 10 5
♣ K J 7 5

East
♠ K 10 8
♥ 7 3
♦ Q 6 4
♣ A Q 8 4 2

South
♠ A Q 7 6 5 3 2
♥ A 10
♦ K 2
♣ 6 3

The Bidding

South	West	North	East
		1♥	double
1♠	1NT	2♦	pass
3♣	pass	pass (!)	pass

Stansby, South, intended his 3♣ bid to be 'fourth suit forcing', an artificial bid asking for further information (I agree). But Martel thought it was natural, therefore apparently revealing a ghastly misfit, and because he was understandably none too proud of his one-level opener, he passed before worse trouble developed.

Rather than give up in his ridiculous contract, Stansby taught us all a lesson in focus. West led ♦J (a trump lead was perhaps indicated) and declarer won ♦K, cashed ♠A discarding a heart, trumped ♠2, cashed ♥AK and ♦A, trumped ♦3 and trumped ♠3. He had made the first eight tricks, leaving East with only his five trumps. He tried a third heart from dummy and if East had sleepily trumped low, Stansby would have overruffed with ♣6 and actually made his contract. East spoiled the show by trumping with ♣Q and the defence quickly took the remainder.

Ironically, the (non-optimum) 4♠ contract reached in the other room had to go one down on a club lead, losing two clubs and two spades, and so Martel-Stansby did not even lose points on the deal.

ANDREW ROBSON

Competition

TESSA CASTRO

IN COMPETITION No 251, you were invited to write a poem called *Wrapping Up*. Fay Dickinson's eco-friendly re-user of wrapping paper noted that 'Tape leaves no marks on foil paper / If removed with care, / And tissue sheets are reusable / Although easy to tear.' Stan Bloxham wrote of wrapping, for a museum, a Victorian carving knife once used to cut a thin slice for each member of a large family. Tom Marvin's narrator was the wealthy bubble-wrap king, sleeping on a bed of bubble wrap and dreaming of bubble wrap. Commiserations to these and congratulations to those printed below, each of whom wins £25, with the well-wrapped bonus prize of *The Chambers Dictionary of Great Quotations* going to Dorothy Pope.

Oh pretty charismatic boy, so long
It took me to see through your charming ways.
The scales fell only slowly from my eyes.
Till recently I could see nothing wrong
In you, financed you willingly, headstrong,
Ignored advice, mistook your tactic eyes
For what I wanted there to be – not wise
Nor practised in deceit – my life a song.
But then when I was helpless, needing friends,
You cancelled our arrangements for ten weeks.
My injuries then healed, your emailed words, a lash,
Suggested lunch (of course at my expense).
Throughout the meal, I studied your techniques
And counted the embedded hints for cash.
Dorothy Pope

I sit, enveloped and cocooned in this upholstered chair.
I was born and, seconds old, was wrapped. I wonder where
That cloth is now, that touched me after blood and hands and air?
Wrapped up warm I grew, wrapped up in cloth and love and prayer.
Through past and present clothing I meander as I sit,
From nappy's starched and binding folds to work suit's tailored fit,
School uniform and party frock, cloth hated, cloth adored,
The wedding dress, the funeral veil, time-wrapped and tissue-stored.
The bathtime towel, the bedtime gown, the duvet, blanket, sheet,
The mittens on my playground hands, the socks on ageing feet.
The bandage and the plaster, the pad, the sling, the cast
Wrapped, birth to death, from swaddling to shroud, from first to last.
Few allowed so intimate as cloth, and few would dare,
But doctor, lover, undertaker, water, self and air…
Rapt in thought I sit, among the wheelchaired, rug-robed laps
And know that all the thinking in the room is under wraps.
Jane Bower

There was no top table – masters ate with the boys,
To stimulate intelligent conversation.
'I knew a boy, once,' said the Head, 'who seemed
To relish being kicked. We called him Corkarse.'

This from a man who'd dined with Gandhi, banned
All forms of corporal punishment on his appointment.
The ensuing silence, studied if not stunned, appeared
To flummox him. Who it was that finally coughed,

And changed the subject, I do not recall, but I believe,
With hindsight, that he was possibly attempting
To draw out the bully sitting on his left.
But Queer-
Fellow, the other side of him, like all the rest of us –

Like Corkarse, probably – knew when to keep shtum.
Bill Holloway

COMPETITION No 253

Time for the ever popular annual *bouts-rimés*. Please write a poem with these words in this order as the rhymes: bare, peace, cease, stare, nowhere, geese, release, air, day, shone, alone, they, away, stone. Entries, by post (The Oldie, Moray House, 23/31 Great Titchfield Street, London W1W 7PA) or e-mail (comps@theoldie.co.uk – don't forget to include your postal address), to 'Competition No 253' by 2nd April.

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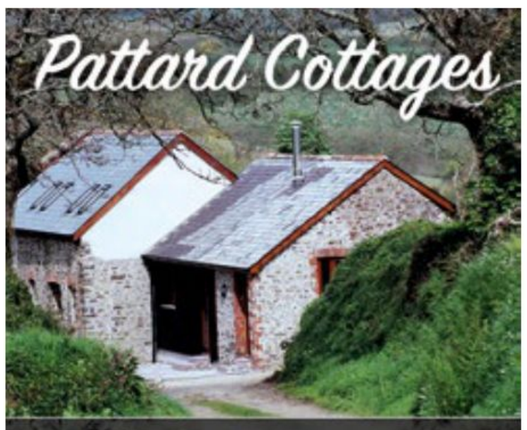
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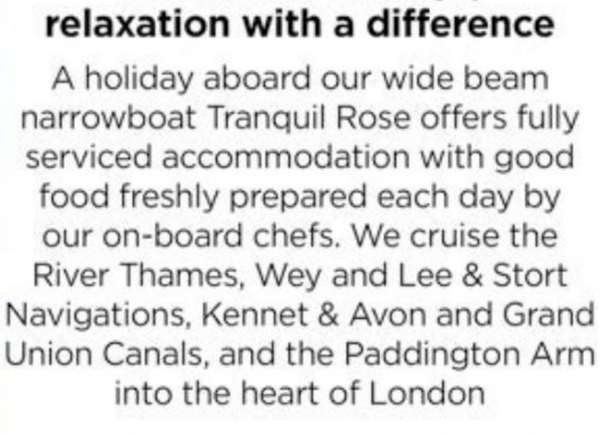
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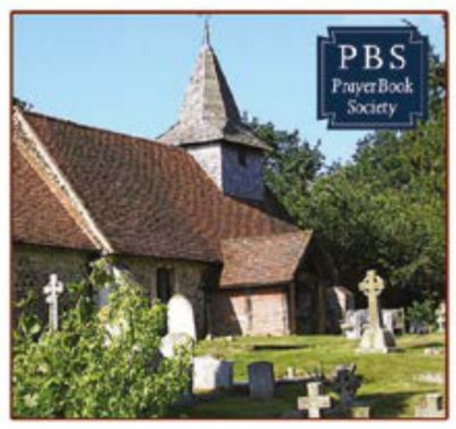
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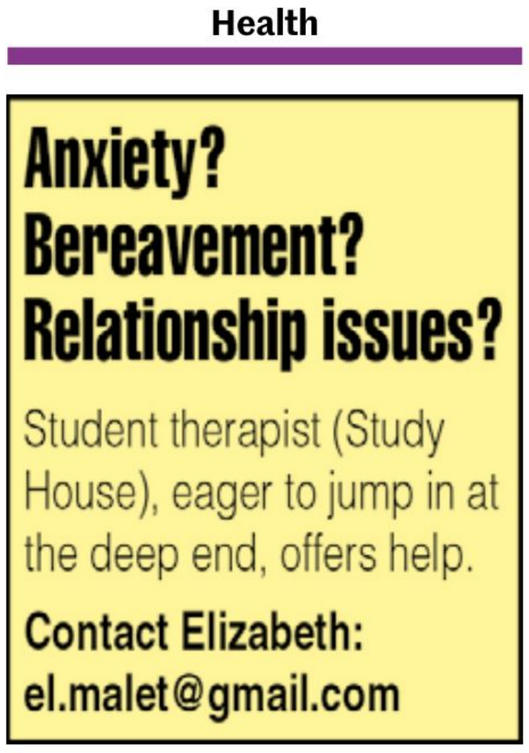


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Health

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Studies show that 8% of all women snore and it has a strong connection to sleep apnoea. "Maybe we don't talk about the problem, but none of my friends have had the same problem as I. In the first hand it was a social problem for Eva. "I am ashamed when I need to share a room with someone".

She visited her doctor and he said that as Eva was neither overweight or had high blood pressure, therefore there was less danger of it developing into sleep apnoea. But, he warned, that all people get weakened, slackened musculature as they get older, and that Obstructive Sleep Apnoea can have serious consequences.

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On a trip two months after Eva started training, her family pointed out that she was no longer snoring. She did not say that the cause was daily training for 90 seconds with IQoro. "Well, then it has probably gone away", was my answer, laughs Eva who during the next trip did not bother her friend with her snoring.

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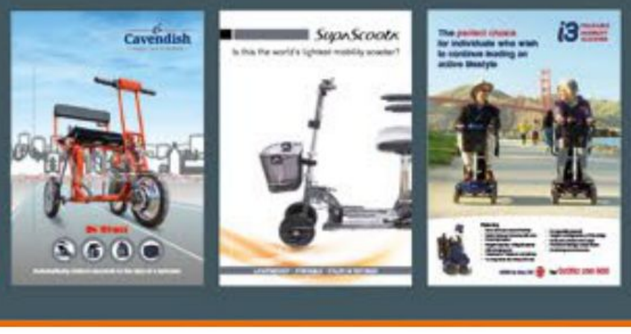
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Don't torment yourself

Q *The man who lost his wife and is now consumed with regrets has my sympathy. At 77 I'm consumed with sadness about the uselessness of my life. All my memories are of cringe-making mistakes. Did I ever do anything worthwhile other than marrying my wife of 55 years? Why does the human memory seem to focus on the bad stuff? I sometimes wake during the night with a regretful incident on my mind and cannot go back to sleep. If asked, 'What would you change about your life?', I would say, 'Everything [except my marriage, that is.]' I'm sure I cannot be alone in my negativity. How do people shake it off and just get on with the present? The past is gone and no longer important except that it preys on my mind.*
EG by email

A My only tip is to print out a copy of Goya's horrifying *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* and accompany it with a note to yourself, saying something like 'For God's sake, it's 3 in the morning, when everything looks ghastly. You're not alone. All over the world, people are being tormented by such thoughts. They're not real. You're basically a good person. Now go back to sleep and look at everything afresh in the morning.' Mad as it seems, I find the sympathetic tone of this can comfort me. (But obviously ask your doctor about medication for depression as well.)

Cuckoos in my uncle's nest

Q *My elderly uncle lives on his own; it's difficult for me to visit often. The last time I looked in, I was horrified to find that he has befriended some very unsavoury young people who appear to have moved in and taken over. They are rude to him, dirty and, according to him, pay no rent. I have suggested calling the police, but he begs me not to: he says they are sometimes kind to him and make him cups of tea and it's better than having no one at all.*
Helena by email

A What a terrible position to find yourself in! Your uncle is a victim of a newish scam called 'cuckooing', whereby young drug-dealers or criminals befriend lonely old people in big houses and eventually squat there and take over, often becoming quite brutal and threatening. It's not just gangs, either. One woman arrived at her grandmother's to find a perfectly pleasant young Chinese woman ensconced in the kitchen: she had been living in the house for three months rent-free and was planning to bring her family over. The plan was evidently to persuade her grandmother to leave her the house in her will. Unless you can prove your uncle has lost his mind, there is little you can do except perhaps give him more time yourself. I'm afraid my sympathies are rather with him. If no one from my family cared enough about me to visit often, I think I'd prefer even the company of criminals to none at all.

Hell of noisy restaurants

Q *We've been asked out to an anniversary dinner by my son. The problem is that we can't hear in noisy restaurants and I know the one he's going to book has a high ceiling and no carpets and it's impossible to communicate. What can I do? Obviously it would upset him if we didn't go.*
Chris, Bishop's Stortford

A If it's for *your* anniversary, then obviously you can ask if you can go somewhere quiet. But if it's *his*, you'll just have to sit it out, trying to lip-read and not to let anyone see you desperately looking at your watches under the table. No doubt when he was young, he had to sit through meals with grown-ups he couldn't communicate with very well. Now it's your turn. As it will be his, when his children ask him to noisy restaurants in the future.

Virginia's crystal ball

Q When I was very young, I went to a fortune-teller and I asked how long I'd live. I was told not to worry: I'd live until I was 73. Well, now a fit 72, I'm wondering how accurate the clairvoyant could have been. I obviously want to hear it was all tosh!
L Palmer, Bridlington

A I've been down that route, too. And yes, it was tosh. I'm sorry you are getting worried. It's amazing how people with such little power to predict have such huge power to induce anxiety. However, I'm lucky enough to know a particularly good clairvoyant. Gypsy Rose Ironside is her name and she has uncanny talent for prediction (she foretold the results of both the referendum and the election). She tells me you are certain to live long beyond your 72 years and well into your eighties or nineties, or maybe even longer. Money back, she assures me, if you are not entirely satisfied.

Please email me your problems at problempage@theoldie.co.uk – I will answer every email that comes in; and let me know if you would like your dilemma to be confidential.

The Oldie

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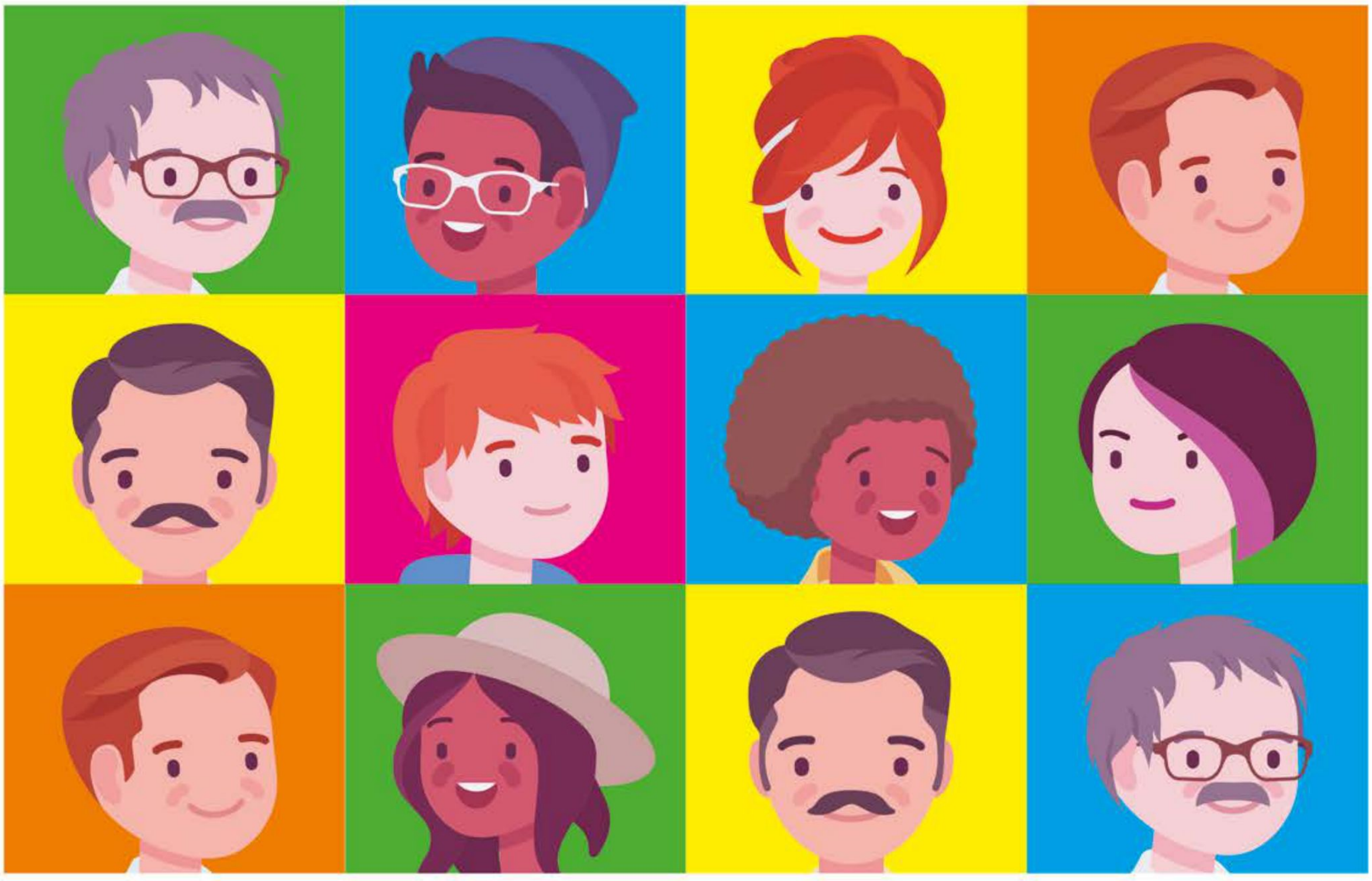
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The Oldie

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Wheelchair humour Melanie Reid
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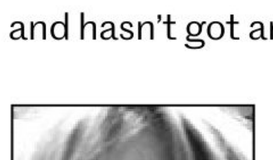


Celia Dodd has been a journalist for over 30 years, contributing to the *Times*, the *Independent* and *Daily Mail*. She writes about everything from relationships and education to profiles of pin-ups, including John Peel and Lou Reed. She is the author of two books: *Not Fade Away: How to thrive in retirement* and *The Empty Nest*, and is currently working on a third. She has three children and two grandchildren and hasn't got an empty nest – yet.



Melanie Reid is a writer with the *Times*. Since 2010, when she broke her neck in a riding accident, she's written 'Spinal Column', an award-winning account of disabled life. Born in London, resident in rural Scotland, she's a patron of Spinal Research, the Association for Continence Advice, the Colostomy Association and Friends At The End.

Her memoir, *The World I Fell Out Of,* won the Saltire Prize for Non-Fiction in 2019.



James Thellusson always wanted to be a writer but got sidetracked by a career at global marketing group WPP. Luckily, his 95-year-old mother moved in with his family and inspired a second career as a writer and blogger with his Man in the Middle blog. He stupidly believes Boomers shouldn't be blamed for everything.

The Oldie

Growing Old Disgracefully

April 2020

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Roll on, laughter

Melanie Reid sees the black comedy of life on four wheels

There's something intrinsically funny about the sight of a human being in a wheelchair.

I'm sorry, but there just is. It's all wrong. It's that faint whiff of the circus, like those poor dogs, fitted with a trolley on the back end, who haul themselves around as canine rickshaws.

For such tragi-comic potential, I enjoy hospitals, especially outpatient departments. A bloke in a wheelchair jingles past, chained to a police officer on either side. Would he? Could he?

I remember the late John Callahan's cartoon of the sheriff's posse examining a wheelchair in the desert. 'Don't worry, he won't get far on foot,' says the lawman. But how can they be sure? That's the ever-present joke. When someone's in a wheelchair, you're never certain what they're capable of.

Magnificent cameos come and go: a large, healthy-looking woman in one of those throne-like NHS wheelchairs, hands folded over her handbag, exuding entitlement. She's being towed backwards by a weary porter. To her, it's a sedan chair; to him, it's a wheelie bin.

Wheelchair-dependent for a decade after a riding accident, the loss of dignity is the most darkly amusing aspect. Homo sapiens's ultimate pratfall – from striding tall around the land, arch-predator, most successful species ever, to becoming... well, a human wheelbarrow. Without legs, in an instant you're stuffed. In tougher times, when your knees buckled, things were much simpler: you were supper for wolves and vultures.

Regretfully, that's not an option today. Instead cheerful tyrants from occupational therapy fit you with castors and pitch you into a sadistic game show where you're trussed in a metal cage, dwarf-high, with everything exquisitely out of reach.

Let me list some: light switches, wall plugs, door handles, cookers, taps, kettles, high cupboards, low cupboards, bookshelves, shower nozzles, microwaves, the centre of the table, loo flushes, window catches, clothes hangers, coffee jars, and the top three sections of the fridge. Suddenly your furniture has doubled in bulk and there's no access round the sides of anything.



Not taking it sitting down: Melanie Reid on her seat of power

To assist, you are given a grabber, a stick with a trigger on one end and a pincer on the other. Swiftly this becomes as important to you as your reading glasses; you will stash it in a hallowed place, and fly into an unfathomable rage if anyone moves it. The piteous wail 'Where's my grabber?' really means 'Which selfish bugger is trying to make my life even harder than it is already?'

As you creep around, grinding your fillings in frustration, you'll find your chair deprives you, in no particular order, of physical contact; spontaneity; authority; a nice buffet (other people will fetch you food, they just never choose right); the ability to end an argument by flouncing out of the room; and, worst of all, any escape from bores.

Nope – trapped at fart height, at the mercy of the dangerously well-meaning, forever cast in supplication, you must develop an alternative strategy for power. Napoleon was pretty short and he managed it; you can, too.

First, communications are essential. A phone on a lanyard round your neck, with all your white knights on speed dial. Ditto an alarm button connected to a squawk box, so you can yell if you get stuck. Also a torch, glasses and house keys.

Next, hygiene. Get your bathroom user-friendly. It's hard enough feeling remotely attractive in a wheelchair; no sense getting smelly. Basins are hard to get close to, you dribble toothpaste and food down your front, and by night-time your lap will resemble the kitchen floor – crumbs, festering bits of garlic, soup stains and probably a cockroach or two.

Establish docking stations in every room. Here you cache your levers of power. TV remote controls. Crib sheet for finding Netflix. Tissues. Scissors. A pen. Itch cream. Winegums and a good book. A spare phone. Pills. Batteries. Bank cards. An iPad. The *Times* crossword. An article about online dating for the over 50s.

Be shameless. Cultivate a slave – they need never know what your last one died of. Shed a lifetime's integrity and learn emotional manipulation. You're crippled. You're sore. You're hungry. Your fridge is empty. Play on it well enough, and pretty soon you'll be looking at a three-course meal, home baking, a week's shopping and a lift to the pub.

In time, you may even acknowledge some minor advantages to a wheelchair. You always have a seat. People are generally nice to you. You can drink alcohol without showing the effects. You may even aspire to a catheter and leg bag, which mean you need never fret about being caught short either. Every flowerbed is a loo.

Finally, remember that you are cast in one of life's blackest comedy roles. Your sense of humour is not disabled. You are a human ridiculously mounted on wheels. To this day, my mordant fantasy is to spring to my feet before an audience, give a little smile, and walk away.

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I want to retire to *Fawlty Towers*

Bring back the custom of hotel-living, says *Mary Killen*. An *Oldie* hotel with permanent residents would be heaven



Faulty hospitality: the Major (Ballard Berkeley) was a permanent resident at *Fawlty Towers*

My interest in old people's homes started in 2003 when a friend's grandmother took an alcohol-fuelled tumble at the age of 80 and was admitted to a private facility for rest and rehabilitation. The grandmother had plenty of money; my self-employed carpenter friend did not.

Once Granny had recovered from her fall, however, no member of her unimaginative family could see themselves providing the round-the-clock *monitoring* – not nursing – she needed. So she languished in the private care home for 16 long years, using up every last penny of my friend's potential inheritance.

By looking after her himself, he would have saved the family £720,000 in today's money that the 'don't care home', as I called it, cost. All Granny needed was someone in the same domecile to check she hadn't fallen again.

'But she wouldn't want me to wipe her bottom when it got to that stage,' he agonised.

I've nursed old people myself and you both soon get used to bottom-wiping. They would much prefer you did it than a stranger.

She didn't need nursing but soon Granny had surly wenches chemically coshing her by delivering her 'medication' (ie the stupefacients they had a doctor to prescribe) on the palms of their outstretched hands.

She chose to stay in her room all day rather than face the indignity of joining the other zombies, arranged like sacks of potatoes in front of a blaring television set. And so this sturdy specimen survived for another 16 years.

'If we had known it was going to be 16 years, then I might have taken your advice,' my now impoverished friend has told me.

And, all the while, the UK has an ongoing NHS crisis with a lot of the blame being laid at the door of the so-called bed-blockers, who have nowhere else to go.

My own parents' original intention was that, when the time came, they needed to be monitored but not nursed. They would simply move, as permanent residents, like the Major in *Fawlty Towers*, into the congenial hotel in the centre of our provincial Ulster seaside town.

The King's Arms was a handsome, atmospheric and rambling Victorian centre of social excellence with its two restaurants – one serving sophisticated dishes like Lobster Thermidor, the other with Ulster Fry – and four separate bars which accommodated by turn doctors, dentists and lawyers; prosperous tradesmen; respectable young drinkers and alcoholics.

Unfortunately, its charismatic manager died and, for inexplicable reasons, the local council decided the town had no need for a hotel, even though it was the very epicentre of its social life. The Troubles were on and no one was concentrating. It was duly bulldozed and a Dunnes Stores sprang up in its place.

So, in the absence of the King's Arms, I began to look around for other seaside hotels in the *Fawlty Towers* mode. There was nothing to be found, even in England where

'Surely, if *The Oldie* opened its own hotel, applications would flood in. Or consider a permanent world cruise'

the south coast had been historically studded with seaside hotels containing one third permanent residents and two thirds passing trade.

As in *Fawlty Towers*, but with better standards, these allowed permanent residents to sit down to three meals a day; to be shopped for and cooked for by someone else, have their television mended when it went wrong, their plumbing seen to and lightbulbs replaced.

They would be in no danger of being burgled, flooded or locked out and there would always be someone to chat to and a set of fresh faces to observe, Desmond Morris-style, in the dining room and discuss once their backs were turned.

The *Fawly Towers* model was ideal for the period when the resident could still walk unaided (zimmer frames and sticks permitted) and had their full – or let's say 80 per cent – of their wits about them; before the need to be dosed with regular medication they could no longer be relied upon to take themselves.

When full decrepitude beckoned, the permanent resident could be moved to a suitable care home.



DAFYDD JONES

Pointing to the future: Giles Wood and Mary Killen from *Gogglebox* at home

What happened to the *Fawlty Towers* option? One day, I rang up the manager of the Chatsworth Hotel in Eastbourne to ask him what had happened to the traditional permanent resident.

He replied, 'It's funny you should say that. Only today, I was asking my porter why we don't have any permanent residents. It's not that they wouldn't be welcome – we would welcome them with open arms. But nobody has presented themselves in recent years'.

His answer was an enigma wrapped in a mystery. Prices are surprisingly difficult to come by but a 2017 national survey cited £531 a week as the lowest cost for a care home. To live at the Victorian, three-star Chatsworth Hotel in Eastbourne, which sits on the seafront of this Sussex town, will set you back £600 a week with three meals a day, pleasant seaside breezes and a changing cast of characters to feast your eyes on. Why has nobody come forward?

Anyone who has been to an *Oldie* lunch at Simpson's in the Strand will testify that *Oldie* readers share social values. They are easy-going, fun-loving, stimulation-seeking and literature-consuming, with hearty appetites for food and drink. Surely, if *The Oldie* opened its own hotel, applications would flood in?

Step forward Luke Johnson or Stelios, and set one up for us.

Permanent residence in hotels is so prevalent in the US that the Census Bureau commissioned a study that found extended stays have been a growing sector of the hotel industry since the 1990s.

To end your days at the Carlyle Hotel in New York has become a lifestyle choice for the super-rich. Ironically, they save money because they don't have to hire their own doormen, butlers, housekeepers, chefs or concierges.

Until such time as the *Oldie* hotel is up and running, readers might consider a permanent world cruise where food and entertainment are included in the price, as is the change of venue and fellow passengers.

This was the option plumped for by American widow Beatrice Muller, who lived for 14 years on the QE2 because the rate of £3,500 a month compared favourably with a Florida retirement home.



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Is your glass half full?

Celia Dodd celebrates the different stages of being an oldie

People don't talk enough about what's good about getting older, apart from the obvious things like acquiring wisdom and a free bus pass. And yet it's got to be good; otherwise why are sixty- and seventy- somethings the happiest people on the planet? One survey found a huge gap between younger people's Eeyore-ish expectations of old age–memory loss, frailty, no sex– and the generally happier reality. The trick is to see the glass half full; it could add years to your life.

The young oldie (50-64)
For a while, 60 really does feel like the new 40. And then someone gives up his seat on the train and the chasm between the way the world sees you and your mirror face suddenly hits.

But who cares? You're the one reading your book in smug comfort and travelling to work unfrazzled.

At this stage, the irritations of ageing become harder to ignore but are easy to manage, whether it's not being able to hear in restaurants or rogue hairs sprouting everywhere.

But you do have to face up to the fact that your body requires the maintenance levels of a vintage car. It's a good excuse for a cheeky 'power' nap when you feel like it and to indulge in physical activities you genuinely enjoy, whether that's wild swimming or trekking the Camino de Santiago. At 50, you've got a 50% chance of living another 40 years – and, since regular exercise helps keep body and brain in shape, you may as well have a good time.

Longer life expectancy means the years ahead present a brand new stage, not a winding-down.

Pondering how much life has changed over the last forty years puts the next forty in perspective, and crystallises the wisdom of making a plan full of new purpose.

The middle oldie (66-85)
If you want to stop work you can; since 2011 there is no legal retirement age (unless you're an air traffic controller or some other exempt profession).

Retirement gets a bad press. It's true that it makes some people feel lost, bored and even depressed. But what's not to like about doing what you want with no alarm, boss or commute? These days, retirement is a flexible affair, with more people choosing to mix paid and unpaid work with having a good time. And you can usually claim your pension if you continue working.

The key is to take control of your time and fill it with things you've longed to do for years. This way, you won't end up at the mercy of relatives looking for an unpaid nanny or someone to take their car in for a service. And you'll save yourself from eyes glazing over when you say 'I used to be a ….'

When it comes to health, a big worry is not being able to remember whether you've brushed your teeth. But the latest research shows it's possible to improve brain function, including memory, with physical exercise. And it's never too late to start.

A horrible aspect of getting older is that barely a day passes without another friend getting some dire diagnosis. Feeling 'there but for the grace of God' seems slightly shameful, but it focuses the mind in the most life-enhancing way: there's no point waiting for the right time to gallop bareback across a beach or declare your undying passion, because it may never come.



'You did? At your age?'

Urgency spurs people to get on with living life to the full in a way they may never have done before.

The old oldie (85+)
This is when life can get seriously anarchic: you can eat cake for breakfast and take a bath at 3 in the afternoon with no guilt, although some oldies still draw the line at drinking gin before 6pm.

If you're forced to give up driving, you can drink as much as you like when you go out. It's nice to be offered a lift for a change.

Taxis are cheaper than running a car. On public transport, you're bound to get a seat, however crowded it is; and someone always offers to carry your suitcase. You can talk to anyone about anything.

At this great age, no one is expected to be au fait with technology. Athough the horrors of computers and smart phones loom large, you're less likely to be greeted with withering looks when you ask for help. A more mundane frustration is not being able to change a lightbulb or being told off by relatives if found halfway up a ladder in the attempt.

It comes down to accepting help gracefully and learning to relish the great pleasures of slowing down: stopping to chat, staring at the sky and appreciating each new outing and encounter. It's almost inevitable that physical limitations will mean you can go out less.

Diana Athill, who always looked on the bright side of old age, right up to her death at 101, insisted that the increasing rarity of new acquaintances and outings to galleries made them more enjoyable than ever.

Romance v Reality

Liz Hodgkinson prefers the joy of fictional late-life love to the cold reality

At one time, all the lovers portrayed in literature were young or very young, as in Romeo and Juliet.

These lovers may have been star-crossed, the love may have been unrequited or it may have led to happy ever after, but it was, without exception, young love.

There was no such thing as love, sex or romance between older people. But then, around the 1990s, everything began to change.

Oldies, whether recent retirees or much older, were suddenly being allowed to have romantic feelings, to fall in love again and yes, even to have sex with each other. No longer were they grumpy old grandpas or grandmas fulminating from their rocking chairs about the olden days. They were leading exciting lives of their own.

One of the first British TV series in this new genre was *As Time Goes By*, starring Judi Dench and Geoffrey Palmer as Jean Pargetter and Lionel Hardcastle, former lovers now in their 70s whose lives come together again after 40 years apart. The storyline was that they first met in 1952, fell head over heels in love with each other and then re-met when Lionel took his memoirs to be typed by Jean's typing agency.

This gentle comedy was a surprise hit, not only with older audiences but viewers of all ages. One has to say that much of the success of the series, which ran from 1992 to 2005, was mainly down to the superb acting of the main characters.

This was followed by *Last Tango in Halifax*, where two former lovers, Alan and Celia, again now in their 70s, are reunited through social media. This series, starring Derek Jacobi as Alan and Anne Reid as Celia, aired from 2012 to 2016. A new series is planned for 2020, proving that older love has become an established theme for television comedy drama.



ALAMY

Oldies in love: Geoffrey Palmer and Judi Dench in *As Time Goes By*

Last Tango was based on the true story of screenwriter Sally Wainwright's mother's late-life romance, culminating in her second marriage. Geriatric romcoms, as the genre is disparagingly known, are by no means all based in fantasy.

In films, too, there has been a considerable crop of movies in recent years featuring senior citizens falling in love. The breakthrough was *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel,* where Douglas Ainslie, played by Bill Nighy, falls hopelessly in love with Evelyn Greenslade, played once again by Judi Dench. This 2011 film, where a group of retirees move to a dilapidated hotel in India was a slow burn but eventually became a huge hit and international success.

The movie, based on Deborah Moggach's 2004 novel, wanted to show that older people still had much left to live for, including – but not limited to – finding new loves or re-igniting old ones.

Retired High Court Judge

Graham Dashwood, secretly gay, has come to India in the hope of finding his long-ago Indian lover. Madge Hardcastle, played by Celia Imrie, is cynically looking for a rich man to marry. This film was followed by *The Second Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, with the same ensemble cast of mainly older actors. It has now become a much-loved franchise.

Another hit was the 2014 *Grand Budapest Hotel*, where Ralph Fiennes plays a middle-age concierge attending to the intimate needs of his aristocratic, female guests of a certain age, including Madame D, played – with prosthetics – by Tilda Swinton.

Given that everybody loves a love story, what is the difference between romantic comedies starring young people and the ones with rather older characters.

First of all, in senior romcoms the characters come with much baggage. They are certainly not starting off with a blank slate, but have previous relationships, children and grandchildren, careers, family difficulties and may also have serious health issues. This makes their back stories interesting and complex, giving more scope for drama.

Then sex, hardly ever a problem for younger lovers, becomes a hurdle to jump over. There is frequent mention of erectile dysfunction and Viagra where the men are concerned.

The men in these romcoms are often anxious about their performance or lack of it. The women too are conscious that their bodies are not as taut and nubile as they were half a century ago.

Although they appeared revolutionary at first, baby-boomer romances have now become a box-office staple, putting older bums back on seats. These cinemagoers, who may no longer be able to relate to young film romances, lap up the older love stories.

But the genre is by no means always light and fluffy. In the latest late-life romance, *The Good Liar*, the story becomes considerably darker.

In *The Good Liar*, two people nudging 80, supposedly looking for love, meet through social media, enjoy some dates

‘Geriatric romcoms, as the genre is disparagingly known, are by no means all based in fantasy’

together and, before long, Roy, the male character played by Ian McKellen, moves in with Betty, a wealthy widow and retired academic played by Helen Mirren.

Although at first this seems like yet another elderly internet romance, it soon becomes apparent that both parties have a sinister agenda. We have to wait until the end of the film to realise just how sinister it is.

This 2019 film moves the oldie romance into another category – serious crime. In order to work, dramas depicting older people in romantic relationships rely on consummate acting skills. Where young romances are played out on screen, it is almost enough for the actors to be good-looking.

When Brigitte Bardot was in her heyday, filmgoers flocked to see her ravishing beauty and were not that bothered about the clunky acting. With senior romances, it is the quality of the acting that makes the story believable – or not.

In films and books of the past, if an older man had a love affair, it was almost always with a young innocent girl. Films like *Lolita*, based on Vladimir Nabokov’s 1955 novel, and *Last Tango in Paris*, starring Marlon Brando and Maria Schneider, have creepy older men lusting after vulnerable young girls.

The older woman was hardly ever seen as a viable romantic possibility. But that has all changed, with women up to 80 now being seen as desirable by men of the same age or even younger, as in *Grand Budapest Hotel*.

In books, *Dinner with Edward* is a delightful real-life story, where *New York Post* journalist Isabel Vincent, with her marriage falling apart, takes up with 92-year-old widower Edward. He invites her to his place for delicious meals and to go over their lives together.

There is no overt romance but a hint of a *tendresse* as Edward lovingly takes all day to shop for and prepare feasts for his special guest. The recipes are included in the book, lending added piquancy.

As older or rekindled love becomes a fictional and film cliché, how far do these stories reflect real situations today?

I would say, they do and they don’t. There are now many dating sites aimed at the over-50s and ever more older people are hoping for a second, or even third or beyond, chance at love.

We are healthier and longer-lived than ever before and many of us are divorced or widowed and not finished yet, at least in our minds.

But the reality is that the chances of meeting somebody who fits the bill, or most of it, are remote. Why?

Because, over the years, we have become set in our ways, fussy, intolerant, with all our character flaws rampant. Nobody we meet is ever quite handsome enough, interesting enough or rich enough.

In the novel *Olive Kitteridge* by Elizabeth Strout, the spiky but oddly vulnerable, widowed 74-year-old Olive goes out on a series of dates with similarly widowed Jack Kennison. All she can do is find fault with him. She is cross that he interrupts her routine.

Because of thoughts like this, oldie romances often fizzle out almost before they have started. But they make compelling viewing and reading!



*‘Do you **have** to hum?’*



ALAMY

Not such a fab life: Mother (June Whitfield), Eddie (Jennifer Saunders) and Saffy (Julia Sawalha) in *Absolutely Fabulous*

I'm the meat in the sandwich generation

James Thellusson is the squeezed oldie in the middle, hemmed in on all sides

Mother is 95 years old. Her mind is as sharp as a claw, as is her tongue. She's a lioness in winter.

'Your gut is larger than your father's when he had his stroke. You need to go on a diet,' she says as we sit down for a Sunday roast.

'Do you have a special arrangement with the police which allows you to break the law?' she asks any time the speedometer nears 30 mph.

I get lectured. Everyone else gets a grey-age charm offensive. She knows the birthdays of our friends's children and what they're studying at university. She remembers what people wore when she last saw them, even if it was a decade ago. She is unfailingly polite and, if Debrett's ran an etiquette competition, she'd win.

'She's interested in people,' says my wife. 'You could learn from that.'

Everyone agrees she is 'unbelievable for her age'. But age is taking its toll. The short walk to Sainsbury's is now a marathon; the stairs in her maisonette, a mountain. Tepid streetlights, dimmed to balance the council budget, make her scared of going out after dusk. The everyday world is a bear trap.

One night, she passed out in front of us. In an overcrowded A&E, I held her hand while someone threatened a nurse with a knife and an old woman in a backless patient gown wandered past us with her buttocks bare to the world.

'Oh dear, this is like a bad night in the Underground during the Blitz,' said Mother.

> 'I held her hand while someone threatened a nurse with a knife'

She'd fainted because she hadn't taken her blood pressure pills. 'Nothing serious,' said the doctor. Except, when your pills are keeping you alive, not taking them is pretty serious. But I've learnt that remonstrating with her about her slapdash pill-popping is pointless.

'They're liquorice allsorts to me, darling. I like some but not others. Sometimes I can't face having any of them at all. There's no point lecturing me about it.'

That night changed everything. Now my wife and I talk about when something 'serious' will happen, not if. Going on holiday feels like a dereliction of duty. If she doesn't answer her phone, we become edgy. How many times do you let the phone ring before you act? We're living in standby mode as if we were working for the emergency services.

'It's time to plan for the future. She needs to think about whether

it's safe for her to live alone anymore. You must talk to her about what she wants to do,' says my wife.

Talking to Mother is a great idea in theory. But actually doing it will require diplomacy, patience and impeccable timing. I'm not sure I'm up to it. Who am I to disturb her status quo? Cowardice consumes me. I wish I had a sister because this is the sort of discussion best handled by a woman. I even consider bribing my daughter to do it for me. I don't dare ask my wife.

'Just get the conversation going, like a sherpa at a political summit. Obviously, I'd get involved at a later stage. Sign the declaration. That sort of thing,' I suggest to the rest of the family.

'Pull yourself together,' says my wife scornfully.

'Man or mouse?' asks my son.

'Squeak, squeak, squeak,' mimics my daughter.

I'm rubbish at practical things. Ask me to put up a picture and I'll give it a go. But the picture won't hang straight. Forcing me to organise my Mother's retirement is like asking Coco the Clown to organise D-Day. I can sense that my credibility as a husband, father and son is at stake if I get this wrong. So I buckle down for a week and uncover a smorgasbord of positive choices for Mother: a retirement village in the Cotswolds; assisted living in Ealing; a Catholic care home a stone's throw from her flat. I share my research with the family.

'You've missed out the "Best Exotic Marigold Hotel",' says my daughter, laughing at the pile of sales brochures.

'I don't like the sound of this one,' my wife adds, picking up one. 'Their slogan's "Where the staff become friends".'

'Which one has the best sustainability policy?' asks my son, who plans on being an eco-warrior when he grows up.

'I don't think it should be a key factor, myself,' I say.

'Typical Boomer,' says my son, shaking his head.

'Have you factored in the chance she may prefer to come and live with us?' my wife asks.

'Who cares if I fall down the stairs? At least they'll be my stairs'

A shiver runs through the family. She's named the elephant in the room.

'No, I haven't factored it in yet.'

'I'm abroad next year,' my daughter, a language undergraduate, announces. 'So, it wouldn't bother me if she did. It would be the right thing to at least give her that option. As long as she doesn't get my bedroom, of course.'

'Granny watches old war movies all day,' counters my son, who plays Fortnite on the sitting room TV as incessantly. 'I'll need compensation. Like my own TV.'

He's put his finger on one of the potential pinch points of family living: who controls the TV remote.

'She must have her own TV,' my wife decides. 'Possibly two. In her bedroom and downstairs.'

Immediately, everyone relaxes.

'So, in the event that she wants to move in with us, we're all cool with that?' I ask. Nods all round.

Before I talk to Mother, I want to write her a letter setting out the options I'd researched. I hope it will give the conversation structure. The letter starts: 'Perhaps now is a good time to move somewhere better suited to your needs.'

'What's this?' she says, shaking the letter at me a few days later. 'An eviction notice?'

'I thought it would help,' I say.

'I thought you were my son, not Peter Rachman,' says Mother. 'I don't like other old people and I don't need help.'

'We're just worried about things like the stairs,' I say feebly.

'Who cares if I fall down the stairs? At least they'll be my stairs.'

The letter did not have the desired effect. The Lioness bared her claws and I retreated. A month later, though, Mother says she has been thinking things through and wants to talk.

'I love my flat but it's time for me to think of the future. Let's go look at some of these places.'

'Great. It'll be fun. Like doing the Grand Tour together,' I say, trying to be positive.

'Don't be ludicrous. It's no Grand Tour. We're going to Uxbridge not the Uffizi.'

Our Grand Tour was more like the Canterbury Tales. We met a cross-section of society on the same pilgrimage, converging at the same places repeating our litany of questions. Mostly Mother behaved.

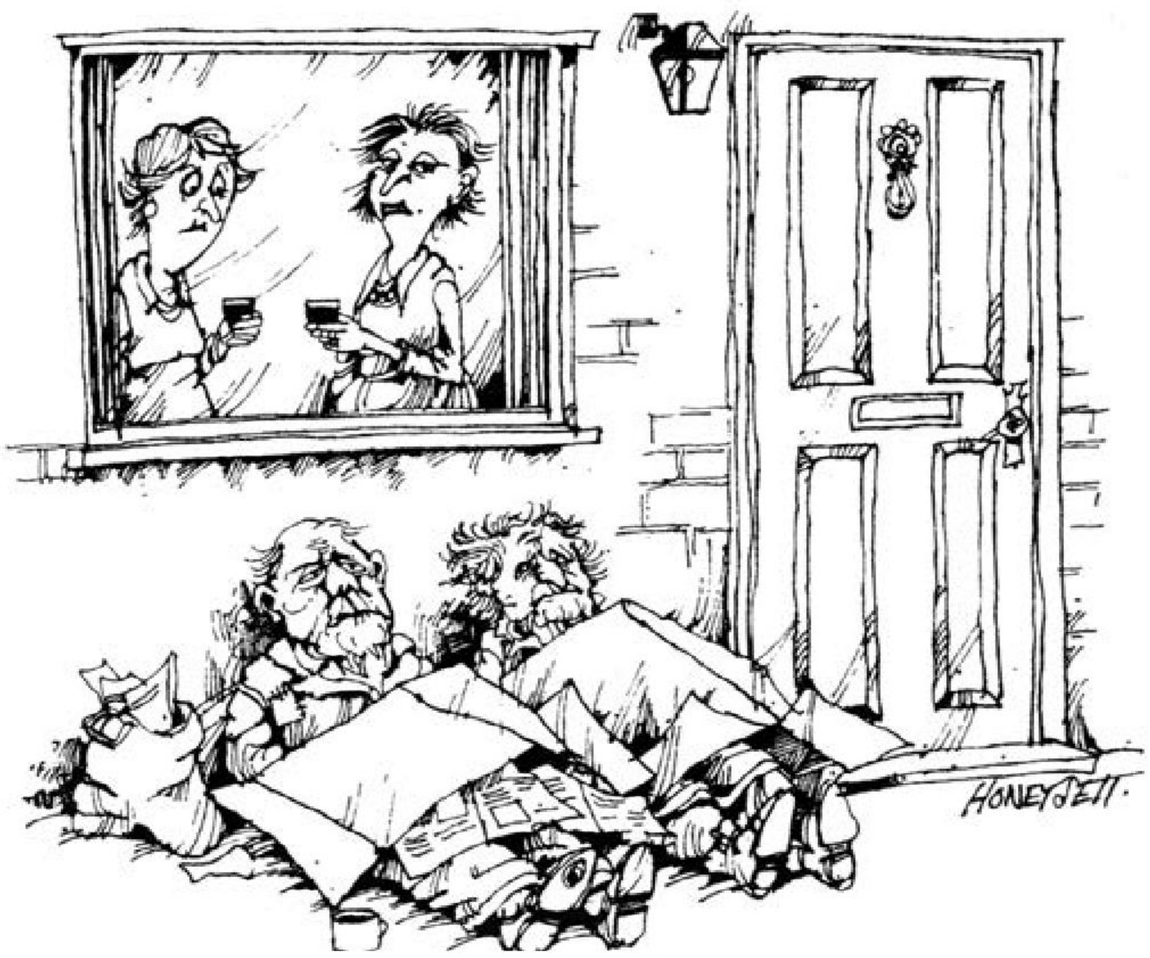
'We saw her at a convent yesterday,' whispers Mother to the woman next to her. She's indiscreetly pointing at an aging female pop star, who is loudly asking questions. 'She didn't let anyone else get a word in edgewise there, either.'

Two things are immediately clear. First, Mother has too much money to qualify for help from the state and too little to afford high-quality private care for very long. Secondly, the things homes pride themselves on the most leave Mother cold. She's not interested in film clubs, gyms or bridge. Communal dining are her two least favourite words in the English language.

'You know where this is going, don't you?' says my wife.

'She's coming to live with us?'

'Yes. We'll get the builders around and convert your study into her bedroom.'



'Nigel persuaded his parents to move nearer so he could keep an eye on them'

Think outside the box

If you want the final say on your funeral, it pays to plan ahead, says *Andrew Watts*



ALAMY

Remains of the Kray: Ronnie Kray's East End funeral, 1995

My local newspaper's Christmas edition carried an interview with a local funeral director.

This was a canny bit of timing on her part: the number of deaths in this country always peaks after Christmas. January 6 – the last day of Christmas – has 25 per cent more deaths than average. (It is also the busiest day of the year for divorce lawyers.) She finished the interview by declaring that 'funerals are for the living.'

She doesn't really believe that. I know – the parish priest told me – that she regularly organises funerals at which she and the priest are the only mourners. Often these are 'public health funerals', where no next of kin could be found. It would be quite reasonable to give these people the no-frills service that the local authority is statutorily obliged to provide. But – perhaps because she saw a crucifix when she collected the body, and deduces that the deceased was a Christian – she arranges for a priest to give them a Christian ceremony. She behaves as if she believes funerals are for the dead.

Who are funerals for? American poet, essayist and undertaker Thomas Lynch says, 'The formula for human funerals was fairly simple for most of our history: by getting the dead where they needed to go, the living got where they needed to be.'

For Lynch, the two essential tasks of a funeral – to dispose of the deceased's body, and to mourn the passing of a life – are one, and he dismisses modern funerals as 'commemorative events where everyone's invited but the dead guy'.

Rosie Inman-Cook of the Natural Death Centre, a funeral education charity, disagrees: 'The trouble with undertakers is they don't want to think outside the box,' she says. More people are separating the two functions; sometimes completely.

'That's the biggest change I've seen in the past five years: people are dealing with the essential disposal of the body by direct cremation, and holding a celebration, maybe around the sprinkling of the ashes.'

In direct cremation, the body is taken straight to the crematorium without any ceremony. The family

do not attend – that costs extra – but they receive the cremated ashes. It is intended as an affordable option, although, for some people (such as David Bowie), it's a choice.

Even when there is a ceremony at the crematorium, it is increasingly distinct from the main funeral.

According to Fr Keith Owen, an Anglican priest who trains clergy to conduct funerals, this is the biggest change since he was ordained.

'Clergy used to do most of their services in crematoria; but then the church started to be more open, and people who weren't regular churchgoers began having funerals in church, without the rigid time restraints.'

The half-hour slot at the crematorium – leaving by a different door so as not to run into the next set of mourners – transforms into a private ceremony for the close family.

Although cremation is now more popular than ever – over 77 per cent of bodies are cremated– not everyone wants to outsource the preparation and disposal of the body. Some families want a hands-on role in getting the dead where they need to be as part of their grieving process: washing the body themselves prior to the funeral, for example.

Rosie and her charity support families getting involved and in doing as much themselves as possible. 'In this country, we are completely free. We can look after the body at home, if we want to; we can bury the body on our own property – we don't need anyone's permission [although the Environment Agency gently suggest it shouldn't be near a watercourse]; we can book the crematorium; we can transport the dead–we can drive playing their favourite James Last CDs at full volume in an estate car we've hired for the job. We can buy a coffin online and decorate it ourselves – that's a great way for families, especially children, to get involved. We can do what we like.'

One highly regulated option is burial at sea; you need permission from the Marine Management Organisation, and it will usually only be granted for one of two designated coastal sites, Newhaven in East Sussex or off the Needles on the Isle of Wight, chosen because

'One lot was using a motorcycle hearse but they hadn't checked that the back door was closed properly'

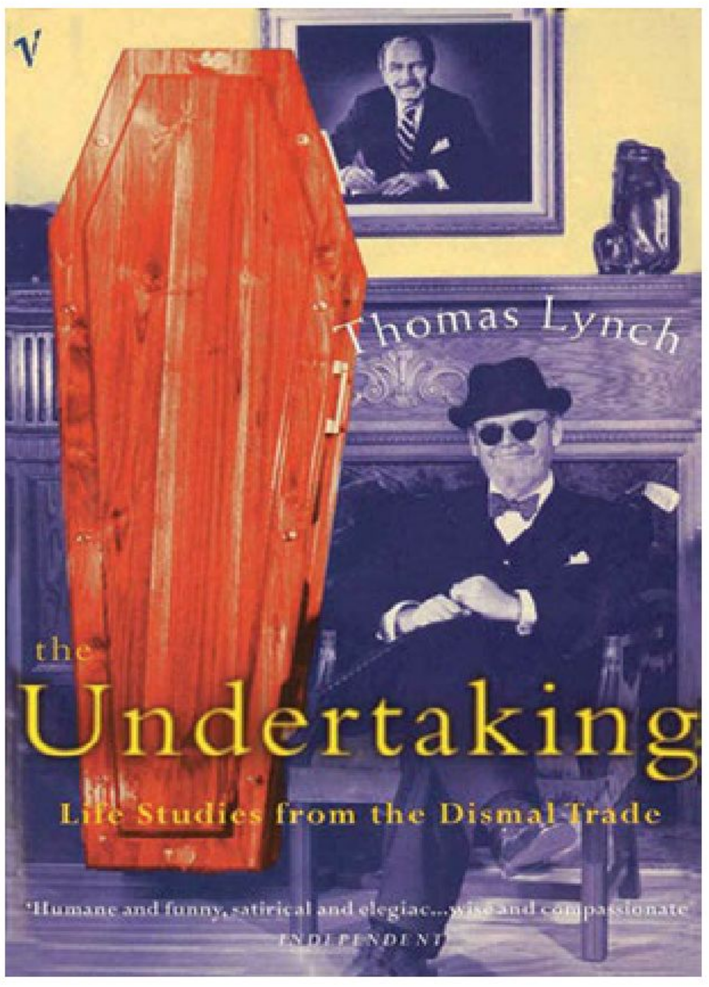
they are not subject to strong shoreward currents. The coffin must be biodegradable and designed to sink quickly.

A more common and popular means of returning a body to nature is a natural burial site. Bodies are buried in eco-friendly coffins or shrouds, and Rosie is enthusiastic: 'These burial grounds are incredible bits of protected habitat – and what's left of you becomes a living breathing tree, rather than emissions up a crematorium chimney.'

But if you really want your body to be useful after death, leave it to a medical school.

'We call them our silent teachers,' says Kim Claridge from the London Anatomy Office. 'People say they're saving money on the funeral, but I'm not sure that's the main driver for donating. A lot of our donors are in their 80s and they remember a time before the NHS; they just want to give something back.'

But what are they giving back? Claire Smith, Professor of Anatomy at Brighton, describes it as 'the gift of exploration and knowledge to doctors and health professionals,



On the dead beat: Thomas Lynch

who use that knowledge in the care of every patient they treat. I calculated that one single body donation can affect the lives of around ten million patients.'

Under Human Tissue Authority regulations, you must personally consent to donate your body to medical education before you die.

'Although the consent form is a legal document,' says Kim, 'we don't insist the family follow their wishes. They're the ones that have to live with that decision.' She advises talking to your family about your wishes before your death.

In fact, everyone I speak to for this article makes this point: written instructions don't always get read until after the funeral. And then your loved ones have 'got the guilt of knowing they've done the wrong thing, on top of everything else,' says Rosie Inman-Cooke. 'It's so important to have these conversations with your family.'

Amanda Jane Dalby, a funeral director from Halifax, suggests the sooner the better. If you wait until you are seriously ill, your family will be reluctant to talk about your death, not least because they want you to keep positive about your potential recovery.

She says, 'If you can talk to your family before you're ill, then it's not an upsetting conversation. It's a great comfort to the family, knowing exactly what you want.'

Amanda is a no-nonsense Yorkshire woman – although, like most people who work in the funeral profession, she switches to caring and empathetic the moment I mention my mother's death – and is disparaging about 'cowboy' undertakers.

'One lot was using a motorcycle hearse [the coffin is carried in an adapted sidecar] but they hadn't checked that the back door was closed properly. Going up the hill to the crematorium, the door opened and the coffin slid out!'

Even if you trust your family to choose the funeral director, that choice might have been made for them. Care homes often have a contract with a local undertaker to remove bodies quickly – in vans marked 'Private ambulance'. While the next of kin is within their rights to switch to another undertaker to conduct the funeral, they rarely do in practice.

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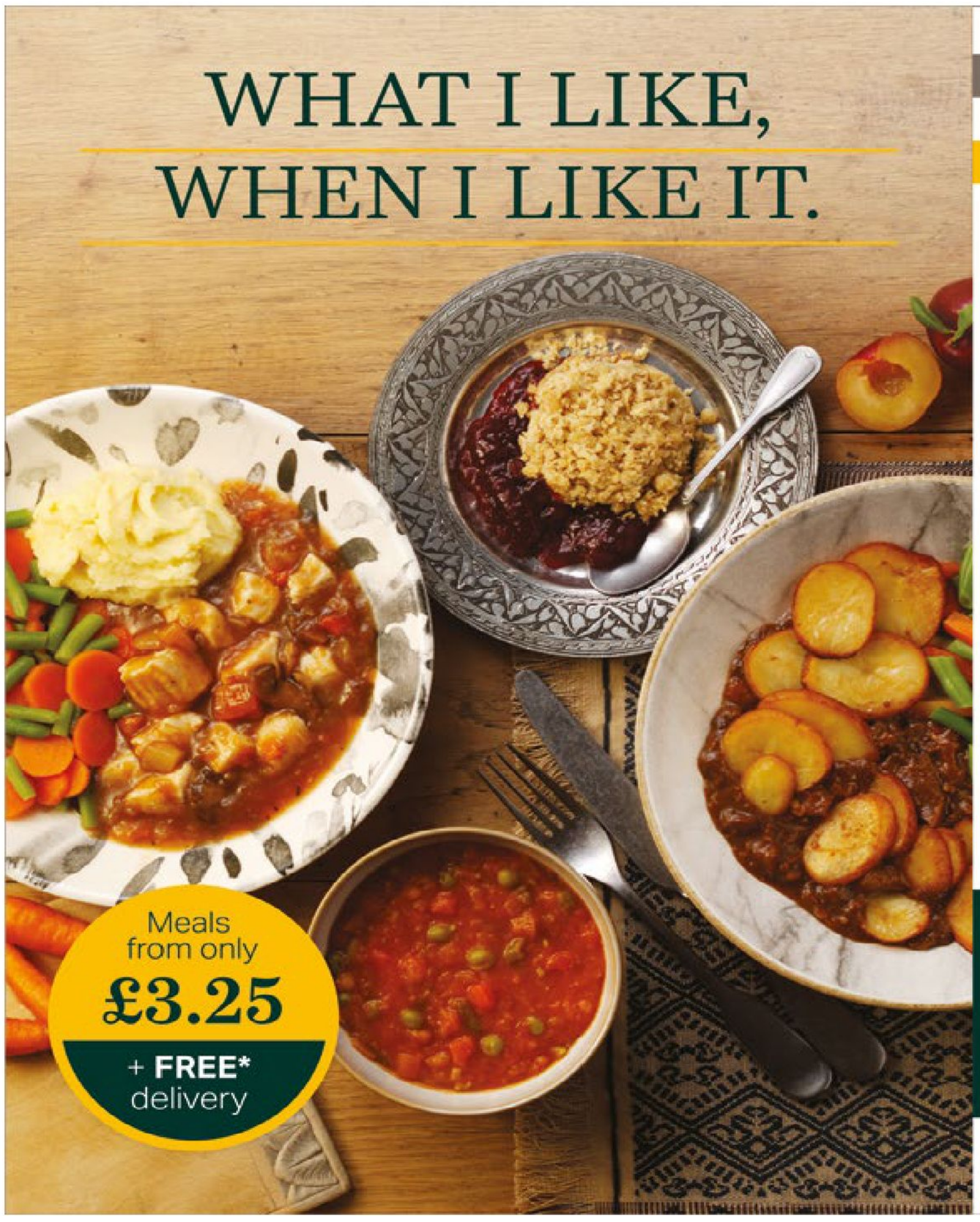
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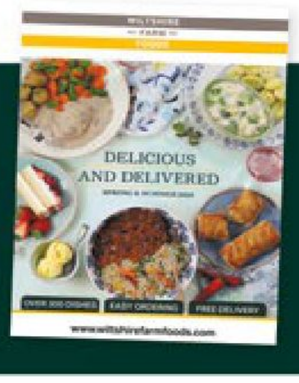
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somebody, people are vulnerable and distressed,' says Louise Eaton-Terry, a funeral costs expert at insurer Royal London. 'They're not thinking about what comes after, and, quite often, people are already on a path with a certain funeral director.'

And, once on that path, she says, 'Prices and quality are not being assessed in the way other purchases are – it's the ultimate distress purchase.'

According to Royal London, only five per cent of those arranging a funeral get quotes from more than one undertaker, despite the cost. The average cost of a funeral is now £3,785.

'A black Victorian hearse, drawn by plumed horses, will set you back around £1,750'

Cremation fees and burial fees have been rising above inflation for years; but discretionary spending is also increasing.

'You have to be quite brave to tell a funeral director you want to do things as cheaply as possible,' says Fr Keith. 'People assume they're honouring the dead by spending more money.'

The only sure way to relieve your family from this assumption, or to assure them of it, is to leave specific instructions and talk with them about what you want.

As Amanda says, 'Some people do want "fancy stuff", and we can always arrange that. A black Victorian hearse, drawn by plumed horses, will set you back around £1,750; a release of doves is £200; or a jazz band to march the cortège up to the crem is £500. Some people like that, even in Yorkshire.'

The Competition and Markets Authority is currently investigating the funeral industry. The National Association of Funeral Directors said, 'A key area that needed to be addressed was the unwillingness of people to accept the fundamental fact that they would die... By increasing awareness, consumers could be brought closer to behaving more like they would in any other purchase.'

In other words: remember thou that thou art mortal.

Nil by mouth

When *Susan Hamlyn* was hit by illness, she loved being silent for weeks

I spent four silent weeks, battered by a respiratory infection.

The first week consisted of frequent adjustments of the duvet according to temperature (duvet on when I was shivering, duvet off when I was burning up). I emerged from the undergrowth of bedding in the second week and lurched down the stairs, coughing and wheezing womanfully. A third week of soup and silent recuperation beckoned.

Pending appointments and commitments were easy to cancel with emails and texts. However, looming in week four was a conference I had to convene. For that, I needed my voice which was resolutely refusing to rejoin me.

I realised that I had not spoken a word since the 'descent of the beast' – except to the dog and that was more of a whimper which she seemed to understand and shifted off my toes and further down the bed. I became aware of needing words. Without them, one's head becomes an echo chamber – there is no give-and-take and one's thoughts bounce back at one like a ball chucked at a wall. It's a kind of solitary confinement that should, perhaps, be productive of profound spiritual journeying but – in my case, certainly – wasn't.

If you are the kind of person for whom the stuff of life is conversation, then weeks of silence is an odd way to live. The radio becomes a necessity and Radio 4 a *ficelle* of verbal sustenance. The ringing of the telephone becomes a source of fear; I am inaudible, but can I just leave it ringing? And, if I do pick up and croak, the person at the other end starts to whisper too which is maddeningly illogical.

I became addicted to silence. When the radio offers repeats, inanity or other unacceptables, silence is the only alternative and you come to drink it like a heady burgundy. Like alcohol, it wraps you in a comfort blanket – the world recedes; you need no-one; you can think happy thoughts about your own brilliance and the adulation you inspire in others. But, like alcohol, silence adheres to the law of diminishing returns – more does not equal lovelier.

Once your headache recedes, you can always turn on the TV and pick a companionable channel. In my case, it's Talking Pictures TV – I can take any amount of clipped Celia Johnson, dashing Michael Denison, rigid Raymond Huntley and cheeky Sam Kydd. And the words – wonderful, marvellous, infinitely varied words – gentle conversation

'If you are the kind of person for whom the stuff of life is conversation, then weeks of silence is an odd way to live'

over Gladys Henson's kitchen table or intense debate on Jack Hawkins's flightdeck. It's all there – and you don't feel guilty because you are, genuinely, not up to doing your tax return or shaving the privet.

When my voice re-emerged, I resented its inadequacy – this rusty lawnmower of a sound could not express the important things I now had to say. I sucked lozenges until my voice was my voice. It was like being a footballer, stretching again once the snapped Achilles had mended or a stranded car with a new battery, revving for sheer joy.

In week four, after my voice flexed back to life, I arrived early for the conference. It was wonderful. Somehow, I found myself listening, considering, contributing with far more attention – and gratitude – than before. My colleagues seemed erudite, brilliant and fascinating. Which, of course, they are. And simply talking was better than the most sumptuous of wines. I shall gulp down conversation to the lees.

Bigger is better

Hunter Davies loves living alone in his huge empty nest

So many of my dear friends and neighbours of a certain age and certain stage in their lives, have been downsizing recently.

They sell up their lovely, three-storey house, just like mine, in which they have lived all their married lives, just as I did. They move, usually only about three streets away and often to the next street, downsizing into a flat.

They chunter on about wanting to free up their capital to help their poor children get on the housing ladder – though I suspect it is to help their poor kiddos buy something bijou in Tuscany.

The real reason is that, by giving them money now, their estate will pay less inheritance tax; if they hang on for another seven years.

I love my house dearly. I love all the junk – I mean treasures – I have collected. I have about 20 different collections which include football books, postcards, first editions of newspapers, London Underground maps, the autographs of every prime minister since Walpole and thousands of Beatles items.

My wife moaned about the dust and vowed that, if I died first, it would all go to the dump. I hoped she only meant my treasures and not my body. She died first, unfortunately, four years ago.

So I have been in this house on my own these last four years, feeling guilty about all the wasted space. But recently I have acquired a lodger for my top floor, a young woman who is a nanny to a famous actor who lives locally.

Meanwhile, I live in the rest of the house. On the first floor is my bedroom, bathroom and office. On the ground floor is the dining room, kitchen and sitting room.

I am now 84, still fit and still chasing women, despite having had a triple heart bypass a year ago. But looking around the planet at all the elderly people who have gone before, the evidence is mounting. If you do live well into your 80's, stairs can be a right bugger. Which reminds me of the old joke.

Old woman to old man: 'Shall we go upstairs and make love?'

Old man: 'I'm not sure I can manage both.'

So I have thought of a cunning plan. I have started to rearrange the house so that, in the years to come, I will do all of my living downstairs.

The first thing I did was add a shower to my downstairs lavatory.



JOHN BOWLING

Home comfort: Hunter Davies with Paul McCartney's swimming trunks

The plumber said it was impossible, there was no room, and he would not be able to buy a shower that would fit the space.

'Don't be dopey,' I said, 'I want you to make the shower, make it fit; not buy a ready-made one.'

While I have to crouch to use it, I have noticed that we all get smaller with age. So, when I get to the stage when I use it full-time, I will hardy need to bend down.

I have earmarked part of the lounge as the future location of my ground-floor bedroom. When we bought the house in 1963, for the exorbitant price of £5,000, it was two separate rooms. We knocked it through – oh what creatures of fashion we are when it comes to ripping houses apart. When I need to, I will change it back, and restore the partition.

I already know where my office will be in those years to come: in my garage. After my wife died, I gave up the car. The empty garage became first a dump and then a play room for the grandchildren. Recently I have converted it into a proper garden room. It will serve nicely as my study in the future.

At the moment, I am using it as a corridor, walking through it to get into the mews, from where I go straight on to Hampstead Heath. It cost me £10,000 to convert it. So it is rather an expensive corridor – but it will prove invaluable.

This week, I have just completed the final element in my downstairs fantasy-living quarters. I have created a really fab, designer summerhouse which leads out of my dining room into the garden.

Technically, it is not attached to the house, as I would have needed planning permission. But I have double sliding doors – so I can go straight in.

It is so artistic and beautiful – hand-crafted, with a sort of domed, leaded roof. It too cost a fortune, which I am keeping quiet – OK it came to three times what I paid for the whole house. Mad, I know. But better than letting the kiddos have the money.

I will have my plants there, such as my bougainvillea. In the summer, I will sleep there, looking out at the birds and the bees, the many trees and flowers.

Meanwhile, the two floors above me will house carers, looking after my every whim and need, and lodgers, providing income.

All I need to do now is keep on living. If I don't get to 90, I will demand all my money back.

Be prepared

Armed with a bit of tech, it's a great ride into the sunset, says *Donna Freed*

I have a cranky uncle who is as generous with unwanted advice as he is stingy with just about everything else.

'You'll regret it!' he said when the vicar asked if anyone had any objections at a family wedding. 'Get ready for the fastest downhill ride of your life,' he snarled at me recently with regards to ageing.

Far more gently, Virginia Ironside – who will be performing her show *Growing Old Disgracefully* at Riverside Hotel, Mildenhall, on April 3 – points out that 'not only is going downhill less tiring, the view on the way down is far better than the one going up.'

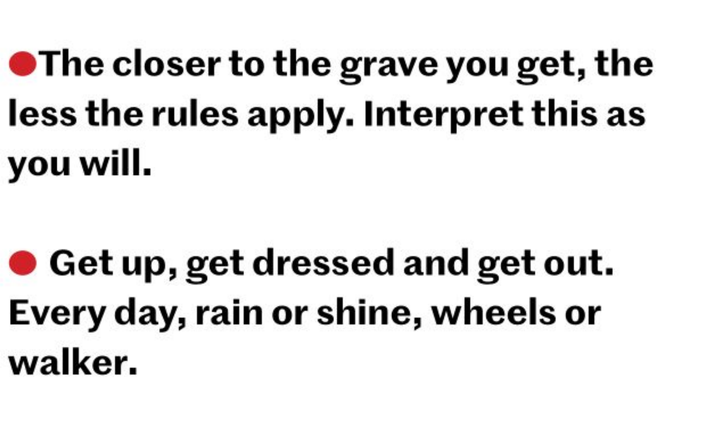
She adds, 'Remember that after a certain age, a friend with benefits means someone who is willing to drive after dark.'

Here are some other tips and gadgets I have gathered on my way down the hill to meet my uncle who, I hope, will cushion my landing.

● The closer to the grave you get, the less the rules apply. Interpret this as you will.

● Get up, get dressed and get out. Every day, rain or shine, wheels or walker.

● If you already have everything to 'see you out', then it must be raining. That rainy day you saved for has arrived. So go ahead and splurge: take a taxi; upgrade your ticket and stay in the room with a view.



● Keep a toe in the working world.

● Cheer up; ageing stinks but it beats the alternative.

● Bring some form of illumination wherever you go. With up to 6 hours of battery life, this portable light is perfect for brightening dingy waiting rooms, dark pub corners and unlit paths. £78.95 www.shop.rnib.org.uk

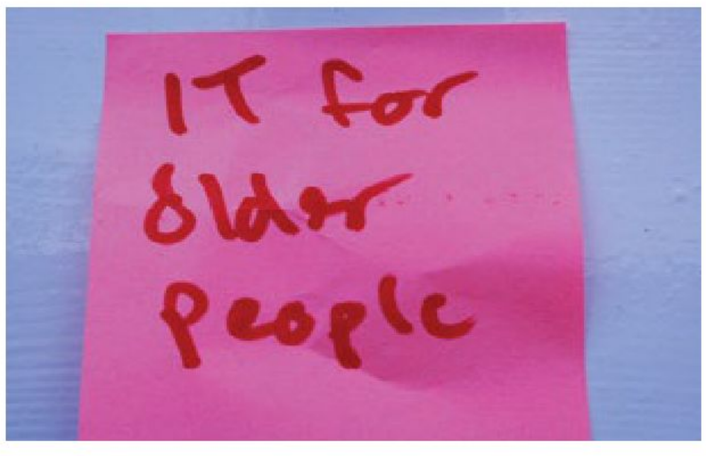


● If you're not sure whether you need to go to the loo, go. If you don't, you soon will.

● Adopt an older pet. Get all the warmth and companionship without the long walks, teething or having to worry about who will care for Kitty if something happens to you.



● You don't have to be a super 'silver surfer' but learn the basics and take advantage of technology. There are no queues for online shopping and bulky packages come to you.



● Emails, WhatsApp and social media such as Facebook are a great way to keep up with friends and family. If you're looking to get in touch with old school friends, try www.schoolmates.co.uk

● Learn a useful new language: sign language. Better yet: learn as a family.

● Don't let your hearing hold you back. Vibrating crying alerts, night vision and alarm-clock feeding reminders are only some of the features of this baby monitoring watch but only if you really want to babysit! £99.99 www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk



● Avoid anything with 'silver' in the title, such as 'silver' screenings. As hard as free biscuits and cheap seats are to resist, it's healthier to mix with people of all ages.

● Galling as it may be to admit, you don't know everything. Only five per cent of people who fund their own care get independent advice. Avoid the nail-biting anxiety for you and your family, arising from the 'pay as you go' approach, with a care fees annuity. Annuities and advice are available from, among others, Eldercare Solutions. www.eldercaregroup.co.uk

● While it's inevitable that you lose some friends through attrition, they will be replaced... by doctors.

● Make a will; it's just plain rude not to. Will Month (March 2020) is Amnesty International's free will writing service. www.amnesty.org.uk

Race to the finish line

Alan Judd road-tests mobility scooters and finds himself enjoying life in the slow lane

Seating: comfortable and adjustable. Steering: light. Acceleration: impressive – as with any electric vehicle. And no fiddling about with gears. Braking: easy – you simply stop accelerating and it brakes automatically; no fussing about with pedals. Handling and cornering: sharper and more stable than anticipated, even at top speed which is 8 mph but feels faster.

I wasn't, of course, testing the latest electric Tesla or Jaguar but a Shoprider Deluxe mobility scooter, belonging to my neighbour Ralfe, nonagenarian scion of an ancient Sussex family. Ralfe gave up driving a couple of years ago; since when, he has whizzed about on his road-going four-wheeler with evident relish. Actually, on two scooters – the first was stolen from his open garage; so have a care if you're thinking of getting one.

What, I asked, would he advise anyone considering a mobility scooter? First, both he and his family say, is don't leave it too late.

Many buy in haste on relinquishing their driving licences, and so they buy whatever's available in the nearest shop rather than what they need, taking no time to experiment. There's no need to buy in haste: you can hire one from the Red Cross from £15 per week, delivered and collected for £10. You can even borrow one for short periods. Motability offer a similar service via local suppliers under the Motability scheme.

The next thing is to be clear about why you want your scooter. If it's for indoor use, you don't need one – a wheelchair, possibly a powered one, will do. If it's for short local journeys which don't involve going on the road, a portable or pavement scooter is all you need. They're cheaper and lighter, with a battery range of 8-10 miles upwards. The portables are designed to dismantle and fit in the back of most hatchbacks.

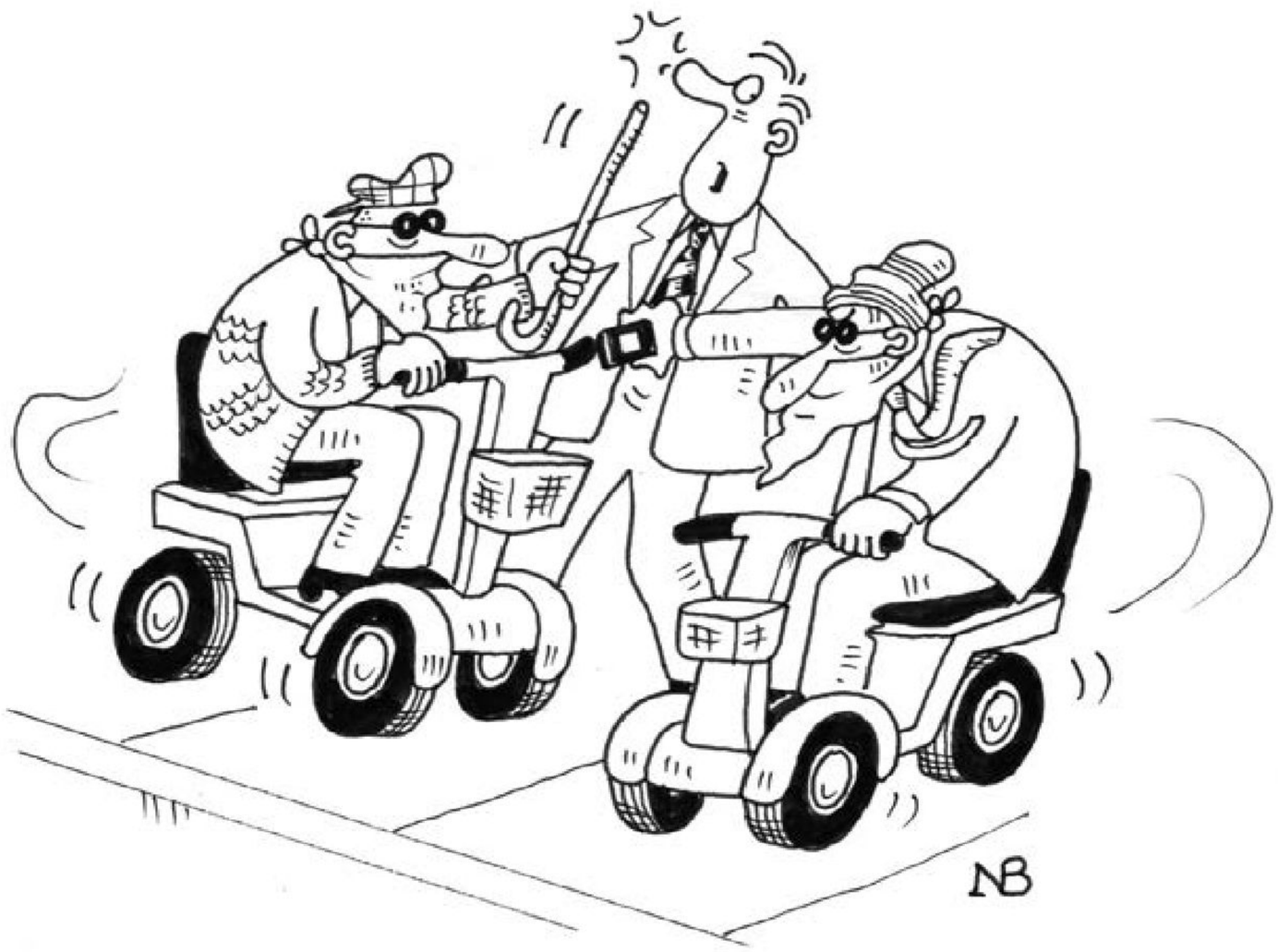
Those intended for pavement use have a top speed of 4mph – a fast walk – and cost from about £700-£800 (Amazon has them from £900-£1000).

If you want a portable, however, make sure you can lift the heaviest part - the motors weigh 22-60lbs. If, like most users, you intend it for shopping, make sure there are adequate attachments for front and rear baskets. These come in various sizes and cost extra but it's better to err on the large side. Ralfe didn't and finds himself stacking shopping between his feet, which is manageable but not ideal.

You must also ask yourself where you're going to keep it. The great majority of houses and almost all flats are too small. Large scooters won't fit through doors, climb steps, surmount ledges or squeeze into lifts. Ideally you need a garage or shed within easy reach of the house, preferably lockable and – essentially – with power for recharging. Responding to the increasing numbers of users, some high-rise blocks of flats have parking 'pods' on the ground floor.

As with electric cars, battery range is improving; 25-30 miles is common for larger scooters. The Quingo toura 2 claims 55 miles. Remember that these quoted figures reduce pretty dramatically, depending on battery age and use. Hills, weight and speed bring them down; especially weight.

Further evidence – as if we needed it – of our alarming national expansion in recent decades is that most road-legal scooters now quote maximum user weights of over 20 stone, with a couple I've found over 30 stone.



'Oh no! Mobility scooter muggers!'

That said, don't let range-anxiety beguile you into paying for greater range than you'll ever need. Users generally don't stray more than a mile or two from the launchpad, so 20 miles is probably ample as long as you remember to recharge on your return. I doubt many users embark on 50-mile scooter expeditions.

If you intend a lot of road use, however, ensure not only that your seat is comfortable and that you have a scooter with suspension all round, but that you splash out on extras such as wing mirrors, horns and capes or ponchos.

Remember how much wetter you seem to get on a bike than when walking? It's the same with scooters. In fact, you can even get a metal-framed scooter canopy offering complete protection, though it costs £499 plus £60 fitting (without VAT) and adds significantly to the height of your vehicle; so measure the height of your garage door. For the same reason, you'll want a good pair of waterproof gloves.

Running costs are low, the main expense being batteries and chargers. Most scooters these days run on a 24-volt circuit using two gel batteries, which are longer-lasting and more resilient than lead acid. They cost from £39.99 to £215.99, with chargers ranging from £39.99 to £89.99. These figures are exclusive of VAT, as is the scooter itself and any extras, so long as you certify that you are chronically sick or disabled and intend the item for personal or domestic use.

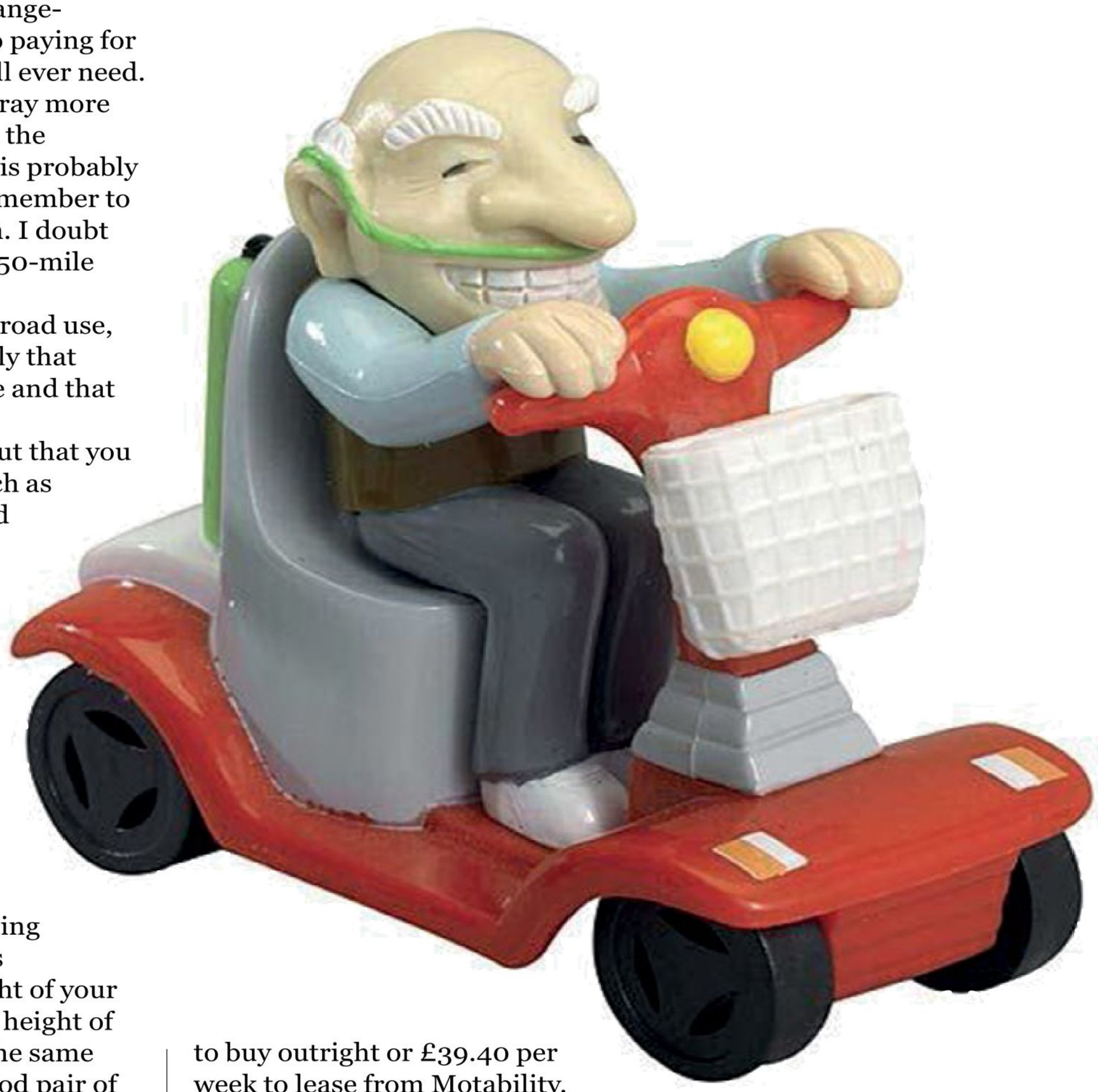
This does not mean that you have to be registered disabled – you don't – but you must be prepared to state your illness or your reason for limited mobility – e.g. angina, arthritis, lameness etc. If you lease your scooter from Motability rather than buy outright, all your costs are predictable and you can also make changes as your condition changes.

A high-end, heavy duty, road-going scooter such as the Breeze S4HD (range 30 miles, maximum user weight 31 stone), costs £4,499 to buy outright or £39.40 per week to lease from Motability.

Most leases – Motability has about 600,000 – include insurance (a wise precaution for road users), breakdown assistance, recovery, servicing and repair. Users generally pay for the lease from their mobility allowance, with change to spare.

Another consideration – slightly ticklish, this one – is how long you're likely to need your scooter and whether you really need a new one. A quick scan of what's available second-hand and little-used on eBay is a reminder that most scooter-users are of a certain age when they start and that not all are greatly older when they finish. You may feel safer buying from a Motability-approved dealer.

'Ralfe gave up driving a couple of years ago; since when, he has whizzed about on his road-going four-wheeler with relish'



Ralfe paid £800 for his second-hand Shoprider from Ghyllside in Hastings . He has had no trouble with it, save for two punctures caused by the rough track off which he lives. They solved that by fitting solid tyres.

Apart from the extras and options already mentioned, I would suggest a seat that swivels for anyone who finds twisting and turning difficult, a ramp if you need to get it up steps to park, a ramp and electronic docking station if you want to get it into your car without lifting and a pair of crutch or walking-stick holders if you anticipate difficulty getting around once you're off it.

You can also tie a flag to them to make sure motorists may see you more easily.

As a non-user (yet), I was pleasantly surprised by the ease and utility of my test drive on Ralfe's Shoprider Deluxe. It was fun; I'd have loved one as a child.

Look upon them as personal mobility machines, which is all that cars are, and keep moving.



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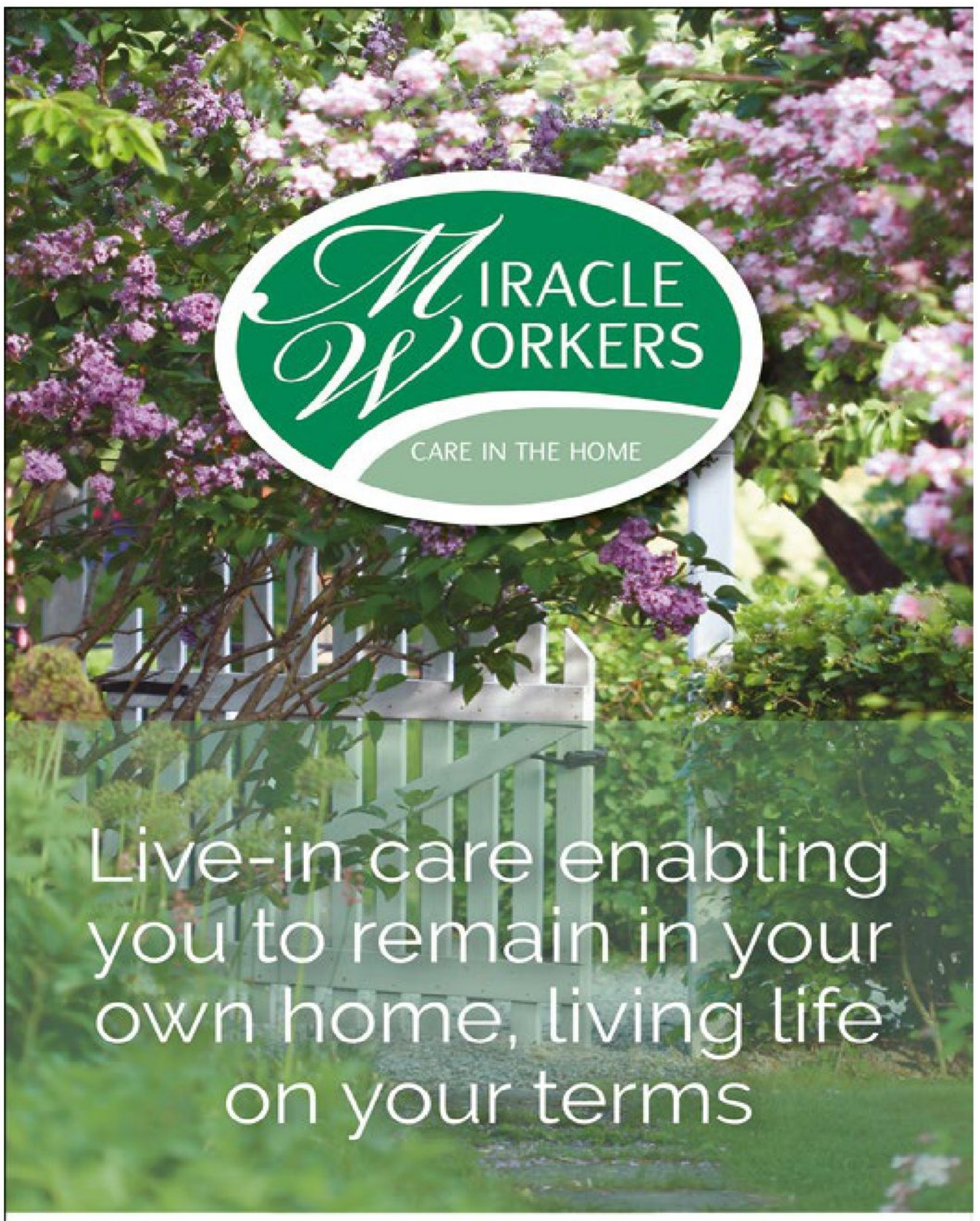
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Evergreen fingers

The eternal joys of gardening, by *David Wheeler*

I've known countless old gardeners, huffing and puffing their way to cherished greenhouses or ambling on sticks that double as weed-worriers and seedhead decapitators. One used a litter-picker to grab miscreant seedlings and snatch the odd flowering stem to carry back to the house, triumphantly.

A love of gardening should never be abandoned. We can't go as well or as fast as youngsters, but that's not the point. Gardening shouldn't be competitive – leave that to the Britain in Bloom brigade.

Others, too, find gardening competitive. Take the Chelsea Flower Show and its myriad offshoots. Certificates and medals fly around as if it's a vegetable Crufts. Lone gardeners (they're usually solitary souls) strive to grow the heaviest marrow, the longest runner bean, the fattest onion and the sweetest sweet peas. All good clean fun, of course.

Fortunately, I don't possess that cut-throat gene. Hence all competitive doings – football, whist, three-legged races and fancy dress parades – pass me by.

Physical exertion and mental stimulation liken gardeners to musicians, especially pianists, whose wrists, arms, shoulders, torso, legs and feet must work as efficiently as fingers.

Many were and are long-lived: think Horowitz, aged 86 when he died. Wilhelm Kempff was 96. Irving Berlin lived to be 101. Dame Vera is still with us at 102. Robert Mayer, forever remembered for fostering a love of music in children, lived to celebrate his 105th birthday and André Previn made 90.

Viola Smith, an American drummer, recorded her 107th year, beaten cleanly by Italian composer Cecilia Seghizzi, who took delivery of birthday cards aged 111.

OK, neither Mozart, Schubert nor Chopin made old bones, but each accomplished in their short allotted spans (36, 31 and 39, respectively) more than we could achieve in several prolonged lifetimes.



NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY

Octogenarian gardener Gertrude Jekyll

And gardeners? Yes. Harold Hillier had 85 productive years, planting trees until weeks of his death in 1985. Curmudgeonly William Robinson almost scored a century. His contemporary Gertrude Jekyll lived from 1843 to 1932.

Adorable Gussie (Edward Augustus Bowles), author of three enduring books about his Middlesex garden, clocked up a glorious innings of 89. Beth Chatto died two years ago,aged 95. And, in

> 'At a mere 74, I feel positively childlike among my gardening heroes'

November last year, I proposed a toast on behalf of 150 fellow gardeners at a lunch celebrating a very fit, able and talkative Penelope Hobhouse on the splendid occasion of her 90th.

At a mere 74, I feel positively childlike among my gardening and musical heroes.

What then is the secret? Activity! An active body and an active mind. Until struck by a mysterious bacterium that destroyed two vertebrae 18 months ago, I thought nothing of planting several trees and shrubs during my everyday rounds.

In that same year, I made 19 overseas trips, a dozen of them leading garden or garden research trips as far afield as Morocco, the Azores and New York – unwelcome news for Ms Thunberg, who might perhaps avert her fearsome gaze when she learns I've planted 1,500 trees in the last decade.

If spared, we might be lucky enough to reminisce in our sunset years, that interregnum between the hanging up of our garden implements and shuffling off to that Great Compost Heap in the sky.

I'd opt to dream of hours spent in my childhood Cotswolds garden, tending a productive bedsit windowbox in London, my first proper garden on a sandy Surrey slope and the two multi-acre ones I've made with a loving partner in the past thirty-odd years.

Armchair-bound, I'll wander in my mind through 1970s Hidcote and Sissinghurst (no crowds then, and cheap), Mottisfont for its roses, blue Himalayan poppies in Scotland, fields of wild gladioli in Cyprus, and the gardens of friends who shared bounty and expertise.

I'll dream myself back to an imagined Topkapı Palace (a familiar Istanbul haunt until a couple of years ago) and make my slow way through a succession of rose-perfumed enclosures.

A cool zephyr puffs from the Golden Horn. Elaborate turbans, brocades, shimmering floral kaftans and flower-imbued Iznik ceramics animate the scene. Topkapı though was also the scene of much cruelty as well as beauty: sibling princes strangled with silken cords, redundant consorts sewn into weighted sacks and launched into the Bosphorus...

But is not all beauty tinged with sadness – memento mori and all that? Forget the slamming of the final door. Instead, if you didn't get round to planting a tree twenty years ago, plant one now.

If you don't have a garden, chat up your local vicar or club captain – churchyards, cemeteries and golf courses make ideal alternatives.

Home not too far away from home

When *William Cook* chose his mother-in-law's care home, location was everything

My father-in-law always enjoyed *The Oldie* and looked forward to each new issue.

So it felt sad returning to the familiar house he'd so recently vacated, only to find the latest edition lying unopened on the mat. He'd died suddenly a few weeks before, at the grand old age of 85, and his sole concern during his final days was what would happen to the wife he'd loved with all his heart for the last sixty years.

My father-in-law had been my mother-in-law's primary carer, and it wasn't until after he died that we understood how much he'd done for her.

At first, my wife and I thought she could come and live with us, but we soon realised that'd be impossible. She has Alzheimer's and even looking after her for a few hours was exhausting. How her husband did it round the clock, God only knows. We knew we had to find a care home for her, and fast. But how to choose a nice one like the north London one where author Diana Athill (pictured) lived? She referred to it as 'a snug little nest'.

This painful process hasn't made me an expert. I still know little about the whole business and have much more to learn. However, my wife and I have found out a few things – mainly by trial and error. So, if you're going through something similar (or if you think you may go through it sooner or later, and I'm afraid there's a good chance you will), then I hope it might help to share some of the stuff we've discovered along the way.

When we went to look at care homes, I asked loads of probing questions. Most of them were pretty pointless, but there was one that actually hit the mark. I asked one of the nursing staff what was the thing that mattered most to her residents.

'Frequent visits from family members,' she told me. 'The more frequent, the better.'

That invaluable answer gave us a proper focus for our search. Clearly, we needed to find a place as close as possible to where we lived.

If you have a relative who's hale and hearty and lives a hundred miles away, you can visit them once a fortnight and spend a day there.

Once your loved one is in a care home, they probably won't have enough stamina for such lengthy visits. Little and often is a lot better – for them and you. Half an hour every day is far more helpful than several hours once a week, and that means you need to live nearby.

Once we'd decided proximity was paramount, our search narrowed to half a dozen places. Four of them had vacancies. We visited all four. There's lots you can find out online (particularly the results of recent inspections) but naturally there's no substitute for a thorough visit. Any decent care home should make time to give you a comprehensive tour.

Initially, my wife and I were preoccupied by the setting of each prospective care home. Was it in a smart location? Were there lots of amenities nearby? It didn't take us long to realise that these factors aren't so significant. They're the sort of things you look for when you're buying a house, but choosing a care home is completely different. You're not buying into the surrounding area. A nearby park is a plus, somewhere you can go for outings; but what matters is the place itself – what it feels like on the inside.

Some of this is dictated by the basic layout of the building. The larger places can feel cold and institutional and the smaller places often feel cramped and claustrophobic (the one we chose eventually was somewhere in between). The quality of the bedrooms is crucial but the shared spaces are also vital: and a nice garden is a must. Check whether the garden is well-maintained. I reckon that's a handy clue. If they can't be bothered to keep the garden tidy, chances are they're not so bothered about lots of other things you can't see.

The place we liked best had an attractive, secluded garden, several small communal rooms rather than one big one and a couple of compact dining rooms rather than a single cavernous refectory. The bedrooms weren't the biggest, but then again we didn't want my mother-in-law to be cooped up in her room all day. We especially liked the music room (my mother-in-law loves music) but although architecture and mod cons are important, the main thing you're buying in any care home is the staff.

The thing that makes a good care home is if the staff really care about the residents. Is there a precise way to work this out? Of course not. You have to trust





NEIL SPENCE

Keep on smiling: writers Fay Weldon and Diana Athill (1917-2019), who loved her retirement home, at an *Oldie* lunch, 2008

your gut. The woman who showed us round the place we chose was passionate about her job and full of affection for her patients. If you're not getting that sort of feedback, look elsewhere.

Another thing that stood out for me was all the information on the walls. It's not a foolproof guide, but it's a useful indicator. The place we chose had timetables for all sorts of activities: everything from discussion groups to singalongs, and photos of recent events.

I didn't compare prices until after we'd been to see all four places. I thought this would help me make a more objective choice. It turns out the one I liked least was cheapest and the one I liked best was most expensive. The fees are about five grand a month. Thank God, we can find the money but only if we sell her house to pay for it. It all seems terribly unfair.

She's been in the care home for six months now and, on the whole, we're pretty pleased with it. But it's a situation that requires constant monitoring, like putting a child through boarding school.

Indeed, another good reason to find a place nearby is so you can drop in unannounced at different times of day.

What's it like at mealtimes, and bedtimes? Are residents encouraged to take part in activities, or are they just left to their own devices? Do the staff engage with them, even when there are no specific jobs to do?

As you can imagine, it's been quite a haul, for my wife more than anyone. And it's forced us both to reflect on what will happen thirty years from now, when we'll both be in our eighties, like my mother-in-law.

Chances are, at least one of us will end up in a care home. Would either of us be happy with the level of care we've provided for my mother-in-law? Hand on heart, I'm not so sure. She lived through the war and her generation is more stoical. My pampered generation expects something a lot cushier.

> 'Thank God, we can find the money but only if we sell her house to pay for it'

Whether we'll get it is another matter. Somehow, I doubt it. The way I see it, more and more of us are going to end up in care or nursing homes with less and less money to pay for it.

But that's quite enough doom and gloom. The big picture is always grim. It's the little things which make life worth living, which give us the courage to carry on.

My wife drops in on her mother almost every day. I average about twice a week. Although she's more and more confused, she seems fairly happy, all things considered.

Yesterday, one of the nursing staff told us they heard her singing along to the radio. I think she's going to be OK.

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It isn't always good to talk

When fraudsters call, just hang up, says *Margaret Dibben*

Rule one for avoiding scams is never assume you are too well-informed or streetwise to get caught. Anyone can lose money to fraudsters. The numbers are massive–some £1.2 billion a year in the UK alone.

No one is too clever. Middle-aged university-educated savers, probably over-confident, are most likely to fall for pension scams.

Being nice is no help. An HSBC study found pleasant people got caught more often as they did not want to appear rude to cold-callers.

Being well-known is no protection either. Helen Mirren was told she had won a prize but had to send money first, which she did, leaving her feeling mortified.

Fraudsters have one aim: to steal your money. They will contact you by phone, text, email or social media. They sound warm, reliable, and might already know your name and bank account number.

They are disturbingly adept at using psychological tricks to gain your confidence and manipulate you into complying with their demands.

They say they are calling from somewhere you trust. Perhaps HMRC wanting to give you a refund, or demanding unpaid tax, and needing your bank account details right now. Or your broadband provider warning that your computer has a virus, or it needs to improve your security settings. Following the fraudster's instructions gives them access to your computer where they install software to steal your information.

The journalist Matthew Parris was caught by a cold-caller pretending to be from BT and promising better broadband speeds. Eventually he suspected the scammer was controlling his computer but continued answering questions until the man wanted his bank account details. Parris admits he was an idiot.

These examples are categorised as 'unauthorised' fraud - your money has been taken without your consent. While banks successfully stopped £1.6 billion of unauthorised fraud in 2018, £403 million was stolen in the first half of 2019.

Rather different is the burgeoning fraud considered 'authorised' – the authorised push payment scam (APP).

You might get a phone call, apparently from your bank, saying your account has been compromised and you must transfer your money out of your existing account into a 'safe' one.

You believe the new account is still yours but really it is controlled by the fraudster. The criminal immediately transfers your money elsewhere but your bank holds you responsible. Some 57,500 victims lost £207 million to APP in the first six months of 2019.

In another version, crooks intercept a genuine email chain sent by someone you know you will soon be paying a large amount of money – solicitors when stamp duty is due, or a builder's final invoice. The emails appear authentic; so, when you are told to transfer the money to a new bank account, you do not question it. You should.

Author Jonathan Keates responded to a bogus email which appeared to come from his bank, claiming it needed help to catch a thief. He transferred £120,000, almost his entire life savings, to a fraudster. Most of the money is still missing and Keates said his gullibility makes him wince.



'I'm sorry I don't have any form of identification. Isn't being your husband enough?"

Fake financial advisers rake in one-fifth of the money lost to APP scams, which promise high returns from non-existent investments. Never invest money through a cold-caller, ever.

As far as your bank is concerned, APP scams are your own fault because you knowingly authorised payment. Some banks have signed a voluntary code to refund customers caught by APP scams but it runs out on 31 March 2020.

Another growing fraud is sim-jacking where criminals steal your mobile phone number by persuading your network operator to reveal a Porting Authorisation Code (PAC). They then switch your number to another phone and access your personal information. The food-writer Jack Monroe lost £5,000 this way a few months ago.

Whenever you learn about a new scam, the villains have already launched the next; so you must suspect any unsolicited phone calls, texts or emails. Your bank or the police will never contact you this way, asking for personal details.

If you have any doubt about a phone call, hang up, even if you recognise the caller's number. Fraudsters can alter their phone number so it appears as your bank's. Journalist Decca Aitkenhead was reassured when a phone call showed her bank's name on caller display. The conman kept her talking for three hours while she transferred all her savings to his account. She said disorientation and disbelief turned into humiliation and shame.

If you believe it might be a genuine call, phone back on a number you have confirmed independently is correct. Fraudsters used to be able to keep the line open by not putting down the phone at their end but they no longer can.

Your bank should refund money lost to unauthorised scams but it is not guaranteed. The onus is on you to be careful.

Blogs



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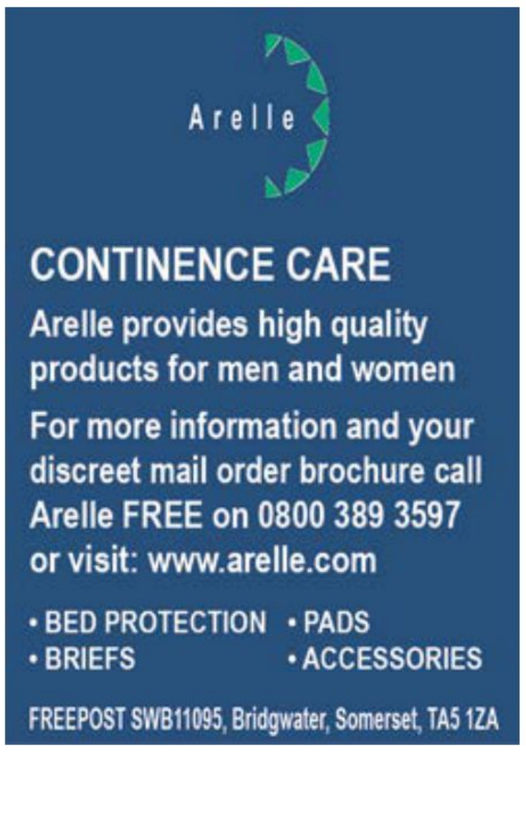
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My Oz trial

Trader Faulkner, 92, braves Sydney's shark-infested waters

During my working life I earned my living as an actor, theatre director, writer, acrobat and flamenco dancer.

How have I lasted so long? First, I walk to every destination whenever possible. I no longer have a car. I left it parked back in 1982 after the entire floor of the car collapsed onto the road and I landed bum first on the asphalt! For years afterwards, I travelled around London on a push bike. But, in 1995, a van turning left into a side street failed to see me and knocked me to the ground.

Luckily I'd seen him turning and had swung my leg over the bar of the bike a second before the collision. I was fine, but the bike was a complete write-off.

I live in a top-floor flat in London, near Gloucester Road, with 98 stairs and no lift. These I climb several times a day to reach my front door – the arrival always a well-earned joy.

I love a whiskey and ginger ale and I allow myself one every evening at six. Never more. I also like a good red wine and have one glass over lunch or dinner.

My father, who was born in Ashby-de-la-Zouche, was a very successful character actor in Australian silent movies. An alcoholic, he died aged 62 when I was a boy of seven. As he lay dying, I was taken to his bedside to say goodbye. A year later, I was taken to visit my dying maternal grandfather. Just as I wished him goodbye, he vomited at my feet and instantly expired – unforgettable.

When I awake every morning, I do forty minutes of stretching exercises and then – every day of the year except Sundays – I take a cold bath, soaping myself and lying submerged for 13 seconds before rinsing and getting out. On Sundays, the Lord's day, I allow myself the luxury of a warm bath. Such a decadent indulgence!)

I was raised in the Church of England but, as a 12-year-old day pupil at St. Aloysius College in Sydney, I was attracted to the Catholic faith simply because it had women saints – Mary Mother, Mary Magdalene, Bernadette, Joan of Arc etc –and converted.

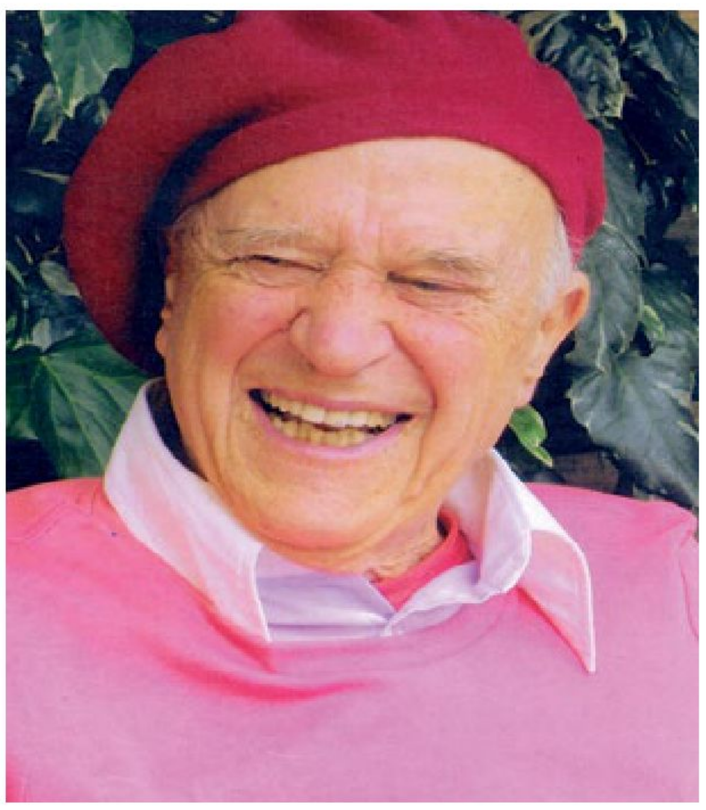
From that time on, I attended mass each Saturday evening to give thanks for my good fortune and my long healthy life.

I can no longer hear the sermons but my faith is a great source of comfort and reminds me to cherish the memorable moments of my life.

There are two particular moments in my long life that stand out as especially memorable.

My proudest and most humbling moment was easing my only child Sasha out of her mother's womb and into my waiting hands.





Trader surfing on Queenscliff Beach, Sydney, in 1950. Left: Trader today

Secondly, there was my lucky escape from a close encounter with a shark while surfing off Queenscliff Beach. It was at this same beach in 1934 that I saw surf champion Colin Grant lose his leg after being mauled by a shark.

Ten years later, he returned to Queenscliff with a wooden peg in place of the leg. 'I want to still a ghost,' he told us. 'Will you all come into the surf with me?' We did – and he stilled his ghost.

As a youth – up until I left Australia to come to London in 1950 – my earnest ambition was to swim right round the rocky headland in Manly on Sydney Harbour's north shore, dividing Queenscliff Beach from Freshwater Beach – a distance of some 1,000 yards.

When I return to Oz this year, I intend to realise that ambition. In addition to my daily excercises, I have added 30 lengths a day in the pool to my regime in preparation.

My old boyhood surf club, hopefully, will provide a surf boat to shadow my progress, with lifesavers rowing and my devoted friend Nesli Fairburn on board in case of any difficulties – as well as observers to look out for sharks.

I hope to still my own ghost and that that hungry shark's grand children aren't around and eager for a taste of old Trader!

'In 1934, I saw a surf champion lose his leg after being mauled by a shark'

SUCCESSFUL TREND INVESTING

Trend investing – also known as 'trend following' or 'momentum investing' – is a proven method of making money in the stock market, and goes back over one hundred years. It's fascinating how trend investors in very different times, and places, have come up with uncannily similar rules for making good profits.

Here are some that have stood the test of time:

- The vital importance of market sector recognition and a supply of accurate up-to-date performance data.
- Don't always be invested in the market. In times of market uncertainty, cash is a good place for your money.
- Test the validity of a new trend with a small investment first.
- Once a trend is established for a fund or sector, it is more likely to continue in that direction than to move against the trend.
- After a steady rise the fund, or sector, levels off and turns down with only occasional rallies; it is obvious that the line of least resistance has been changed from upwards to downwards. There is no need for explanations, now is the time to sell.

Now is perhaps the moment to have a quick flashback to the origins of the Saltydog system of investing.

In 1975, I set up a flat-pack furniture-manufacturing business and 10 years later, in 1985, I successfully sold it. Using some of the proceeds from the sale I invested in two investment bonds. I purchased these two bonds through an independent financial advisor as the investment company concerned did not deal directly with the public. Like so many people, I had been sold the illusion that financial advisors actually 'advise', that wealth managers actually 'manage', and that the financial industry has individual investor's interest at heart.

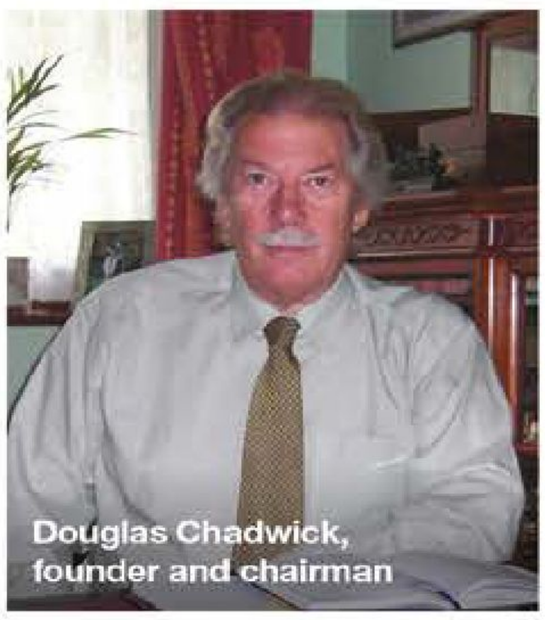
Stupidly, I only began to take an active interest in the performance of the two bonds 15 years later. I had two unpleasant surprises. Firstly, there had been little capital growth, and secondly, my money was still in the same market sectors as at the outset! It had just been sitting there, forgotten, throughout the 15 years, regardless of the dramatic changes in the investment landscape.

It was time to take control myself, and thus began the road that led to the Saltydog trend investing system.

Crucially, I didn't come to the data with a pre-existing strategy in mind. At the time, I wasn't a value investor, a contrarian investor, a passive investor, a trend investor or anything else. Essentially, all I had was an open mind and a talent for analysing numbers and one seemingly naive idea, and that was in order to make money you need to be in the market when it is going up and out when it is going down. So how to achieve that? I pored over numbers for about 70 individual funds, and after a few months I started to see patterns emerging.

The first of the patterns I noticed was that some funds would move together in the same direction, up or down, as if in tandem. After observing this phenomenon for a while, researching, and making enquiries, I worked out that these funds were in the same sector. Stated like this, it hardly seems like a revelation. In fact it seems blatantly obvious, but I was starting with individual fund data and nothing else. So to me it was a real discovery.

Now at Saltydog we have devised algorithms to examine and interrogate


Douglas Chadwick, founder and chairman

the performance of the many thousands of funds available for investment. The Investment Association sectors are plotted to show the relative performance between the sectors, and then presented in graph form for easy recognition. The best performing funds are then shown in a similar fashion, taking all the work away from the reader. This has expanded out of all recognition from what I was doing by long-hand in the early 2000s for the 70 or so funds that were available to me.

We also run a couple of demonstration portfolios to show what we are doing with our own money.

By sticking to a clear set of rules, and not being greedy or over optimistic, I believe that the average person can make a good return by trend investing. All you will need is a computer, a constant supply of up-to-date fund-performance data to assist your decision making, and access to a good fund supermarket. You should not be fearful. Cautious yes, but managing your own money will be in its own right a motivation to succeed.

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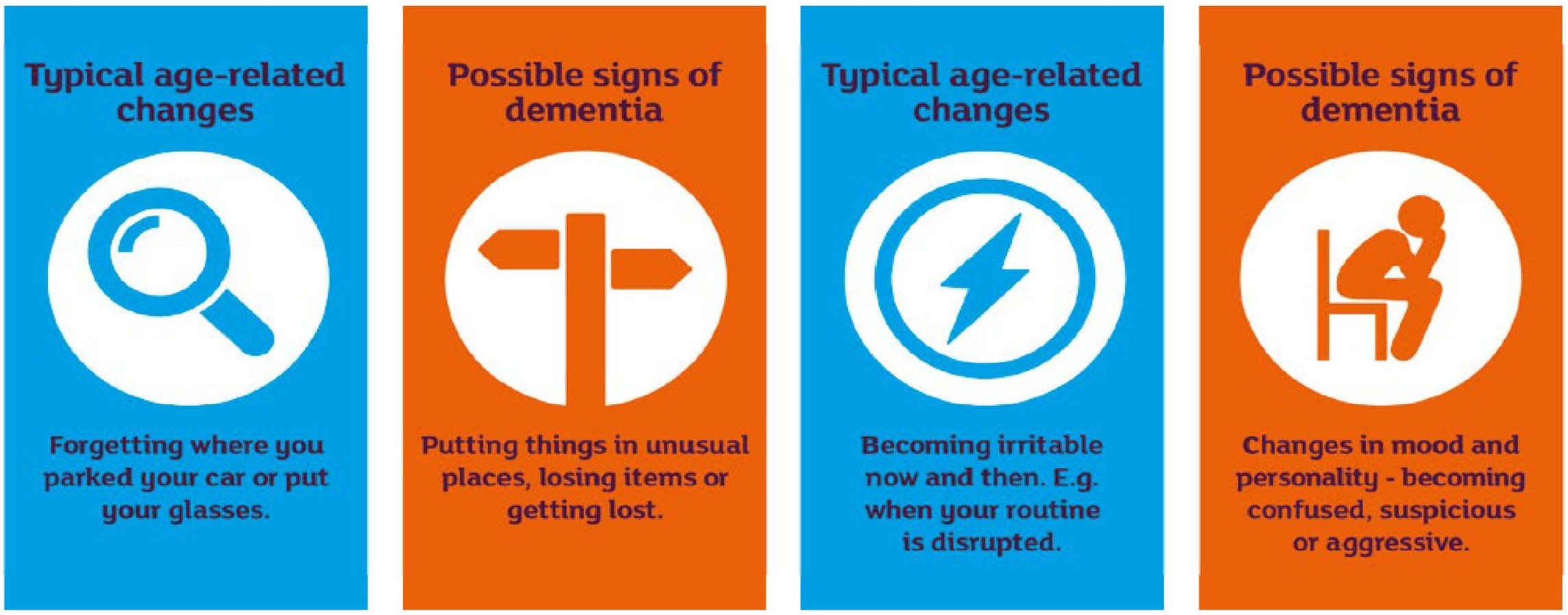
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The Oldie Podcast

Why Trump will win
James Fletcher, who's making a film, The Accidental President, talks to Harry Mount about the US election.
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50 years on Fleet Street – Mary Kenny
Mary Kenny, one of the founders of the Irish Women's Liberation Movement, talks to The Oldie's Ferdie Rous about her fifty years on Fleet Street, gender and Ireland's Brexit moment.
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Are criminals responsible for their actions?
The Oldie's Ferdie Rous talks to author, former prison doctor and journalist Theodore Dalrymple.
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Happy 100th Birthday, Rupert Bear!
Gyles Brandreth talks to The Oldie's Ferdie Rous about Rupert Bear, his love of words and why Shakespeare matters.
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The Oldie Blog

The kindness of strangers
By Wilfred De'Ath
In one of his last columns, Wilfred De'Ath asks where the NHS would be without its diverse staff
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Harvey Weinstein guilty!
By Charlotte Metcalf
Harvey Weinstein has been convicted on charges of a criminal sexual act in the first degree and third-degree rape. Charlotte Metcalf says his actions were an abuse of power, as well as sexual abuse
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The Pope's Latin teacher
By Katie Walker
Pope Francis took over from Benedict XVI seven years ago, today. Katie Walker remembers learning Latin from the old pope's teacher
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The oldies on the catwalk
By Cecilia Chancellor
As it's announced that a modelling theme park, ModelLand, is due to open in LA in May, Cecilia Chancellor explains her model comeback
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'Beachball to the sun' – a cosmic scoop
By Jeremy Hornsby
Jeremy Hornsby remembers meeting Professor Bernard Lovell on the eve of his greatest scoop
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The childish joy of being a leap-year baby
By Janet Duignan
As 29th February approaches, Janet Duignan, a leap-year baby, explains the Roman origins of this month's extra day
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Golden boys of the silver screen
By Charlotte Metcalf
Baby Peggy, one of the last silent film stars, has died at 101. In the 1980s, some young Surrey twins wrote fan letters to other Hollywood greats – and ended up caring for a fading starlet, writes Charlotte Metcalf
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RIP Wilfred De'Ath (1937-2020)
By Wilfred De'Ath
The Oldie is deeply sad to report the death of our star columnist Wilfred De'Ath on February 19th, aged 82. Here is William Cook's interview with him on his 80th birthday
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Only goodies use iPhones in the movies
By Harry Mount
Director Rian Johnson has revealed that Apple doesn't allow baddies to use their phones. Harry Mount reviews his wonderful film, Knives Out
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Albert Finney and Tom Courtenay – A movie love story
By Tom Courtenay
Tom Courtenay, 83 today, and the late Albert Finney were both new wave stars in the early 1960s but only became best friends on a film set in 1983
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Time to get rid of the licence fee
By Michael Cole
Former BBC Royal correspondent, Michael Cole, says it's time to end the vast payments to the BBC
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In bed with Graham Greene
By Wilfred De'Ath
What do the French think of English writers? Wilfred De'Ath knew
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