



# **THE RATHBONE ARCHIVE**

David Irving

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David Irving.

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Rathbone's Rambling was a daily blog which ran on the Talk Porty website from 22 August 2005 to 10 December 2012.

Inevitably a number of the posts have now disappeared. Reading through those that survive, I have edited out those which were only meaningful in their immediate context (i.e responding to other things that were happening on the website) and those which were eventually subsumed into Howff tae Hip Hop and other work which will hopefully appear on here in the future.

Those that remain after that sifting process are archived here. Unfortunately the accompanying images have proved impossible to transfer over, so you'll just have to use your imagination!

Instead of trying to present them chronologically, I have grouped them into topics:

Prologue

Life with the Rathbones

Arts and Crafts

Music

Politics and other heavy stuff

Boxing and other Sports

The Wonderful World of Oz

Comics

Books, Films and other Cultural Artifacts

Postscript

Unfortunately the accompanying images have proved impossible to transfer over, so you'll just have to use your imagination!

And remember, this is stuff for dipping into, if not ignoring altogether ....

# PROLOGUE

My friend Stan asked me a good question last night. It was :”Why do you do it?”, meaning why do I spend half an hour every morning gobbling my breakfast and trying not to get crumbs in the keyboard of this laptop while writing this piece.

I suppose one answer is to go back to August 2005 and the first bit of rambling: After the infamous Dalriada Spladoosh I mentioned that I sometimes found it difficult to get involved in Party issues as living so far away means that I feel a bit 'out of it'. There was then a discussion on the Party Diaspora and it was suggested that I start a blog to keep people informed on what I am up to, and maybe other Party exiles could do the same.

So that’s the official line, but Stan’s question was a bit deeper than that. Is it an overweening ego? Maybe. I’ve always been a bit full of myself, in an understated, quiet way of course. Is it attention seeking? Maybe, but if it is it’s unconscious. I’ve never been short of self confidence. Is it arrogance and/or vanity? Maybe. As my kids will attest, I am both perfect and can do anything..... I’ve been telling them that all their lives.

Then there are other types of questions: Is it an attempt at entertainment? Maybe. You will have to be the judge of that, but I assume that it is because the number of views goes up every day, so people must be coming back for more. Is it Art? Again you’ll have to be the judge of that. Art is anything you want to make it (some pretentious basket said that, and it wasn’t me). Is it science? Now that’s where the questions get really interesting..... take Erkki Kurenniemi.

Erkki Kurenniemi is one of those names which just trip off the tongue. Some of you may be familiar with his electronic music. Some of you may be more familiar with his documentaries. Most of you probably haven’t the faintest idea who Erkki Kurenniemi is.

Erkki Kurenniemi believes that at some point in the future medical advances will increase life expectancy to the point where there will be no living history because people’s memories will be so long that recording history as we know it will be distorted. Consequently he thinks it is incumbent on us to maintain a day to day record which can be archived for use by these semi-immortals in the future to understand what life was like before they were born..... a bit sci-fi, but potentially feasible.

Consequently Kurenniemi registers, one way or another, every trivial detail of his life. He takes at least a hundred photographs a day. Records the sounds of his daily life. Videos his every movement. Produces cassette diaries of how he feels. He has been doing that for decades. He looks forward to when he can directly download his consciousness into a computer. Some people consider him slightly dotty. I think he’s worth a google.

So, let’s look on these ramblings as my contribution to the great Party Archive and hope that in a couple of hundred years some semi-immortal will learn a little bit about what it was like to be spladooshed.

# LIFE WITH THE RATHBONES

Since the houses at the end of the street started falling into the old mine workings, peace has reigned. Unfortunately, there was a small paragraph in the local paper last week to the effect that an Order has now been placed before Parliament under the terms of the Mine Works Act 18somethingother. So it looks like they are going to get around to backfilling the holes and shoring up the buildings at last..... which is good news for the fourteen families who have been out of their homes living in digs for the last nine months.... but bad news for the rest of us. It means that the school will re-open. All those bloody cars blocking up the street morning and afternoon. All those idiots thinking that they can take a short cut to avoid the speed bumps on the main road. That imbecilic tune on the ice-cream van. They will all be back.

On a personal level, it has been another year of battling with my feet. A case of mind over metatarsals. If it hasn't been the achilles tendon it has been the knees. When it hasn't been the knees, it's been disappearing chiropractors. To add insult to injury I moved on to new shoes last month. Inevitably they rub in different places and I am now nursing a blister where blisters have never been before. Still, only two half marathons to go this season and then I can ease back until next March....

The creative highlight, of course, has been Radio Free Party. Thanks a lot, Dada, I have enjoyed every minute of it. Thanks, too, to all the other D.J.s for making it harder to compile sets because they have already grabbed the fandabbydozy tracks. (You know who you are, Americana...OK?)

For your delectation in the coming months, October sees the thirtieth anniversary of Mrs R and I getting hitched, on which she will no doubt have some pearls of wisdom. In November I am going back to Kenya to supervise the building of a nursery for aids orphans at Kilifi. In December I have to make up my mind if I'm prepared to carry on as Environmental Convenor. In January I shall renew my vow to spend more time with my guitar and in February Jim Jam and I will realise that we have left it too late to do justice to the Bimbo preparations. March sees the start of the half marathon season again, and I'll be back to ruining the metatarsals.

It's a hard life.

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I've been watching the repeats of Heimat on BBC4, and getting hung up on the logistics of developing the village into the town. The little details of the area around the war memorial change from episode to episode.. How did they do that? Start with the town as it was in the 1980s and work back in time, demolishing things, or start with a small set and keep adding?? Pity the DVD hasn't a "making of Heimat" featurette.

I suppose it would be possible to pull together a Porty Heimat. Virtual Memory.

To take one example, when I was small the area at the junction of Adelphi Place and the High Street was the tram depot. The trams used to go from there up to the Post Office at Waterloo Place. Then, when I was about nine, the trams were replaced by buses with signs on the back of the seats saying 'no spitting on the bus' and little metal plates for striking your matches on before you lit up your Craven A. Apart from a few memorial feet of track outside the Post Office, the tramlines were torn up, the depot was torn down and the flats were thrown up. Now I notice they've got nice little railings along the front and Mrs. Wright has put out her plant pots to add a bit of colour.

Then there were the shops in front of the villas in Bath Street, now all gone. Molly Hood's, where you had to take your sweetie coupons until rationing was lifted. The Barbers where you didn't need coupons to get something for the weekend. The Greengrocers, where the parsley actually tasted of parsley. And the chip shop which served real chips in real newspaper and is now the last to go.

Which brings me to Rathbone house from whence I came, replaced long ago by nothing much. The garden went even earlier to accommodate some rather attractive public conveniences, subject of another thread on this forum, glimpsed in this early seventies photograph. The building behind the house, used to be an ice cream factory before it became a depot for caterpillar tractors. It went in the comprehensive Pipe Street redevelopment.

When I was in Porty in August, Bob Jefferson asked me what changes I'd noticed. Honestly, very little, I replied, It is like watching your children growing up -Apart from having to buy new shoes every five minutes you don't really notice the little changes until it's too late.

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So: The Sports Clinic is beginning to lose sympathy with my achilles tendon problem. " You've been running on it again, haven't you?" Well of course I have been running on it again. That's what it's there for. So they get patronising. " It's commendable that you are still running at your age, but you have to accept that as we get older our tendons tend to become less flexible. You're obviously not going to stop running, so if it starts to play up, stop wherever you are and walk back."

Yesterday I was ten miles up a dismantled railway track when 'It' started to play up so I dutifully stopped and walked back. It was great! Instead of concentrating on the state of my psyche, I was able to enjoy the countryside. Aren't there a lot of butterflies about this year? White ones, red ones, yellow ones with an orange stripe. I'll have to invest in an I-spy book of butterflies. It'll be a good bramble harvest as well. A combination of the wet and the heat.

It also gave me time to contemplate the mysteries of cyclists. Why do so many of them insist on cycling on the road when there is a perfectly good cycle path only metres away? When they are in family groups, why do the mothers and children have cycle helmets but the fathers don't? Is it a macho thing? Why do they aim for the horse manure, but avoid the doggy do? The latter point also raises the question does anyone manufacture poop scoops for horse owners?

Halfway through the return journey there was a long, straight stretch of track. Well in advance I could hear the sounds of engines revving and assumed it was not someone listening to the Turkish Grand Prix. It turned out to be six adolescent young men racing each other on unfeasibly small motorbikes through a heavy cloud of class C smoke and laughing uproariously each time they crashed into each other. I sat on the bank, inhaling deeply, and watched them for a good quarter of an hour, but gave up when they started playing for the audience.

The way in which other runners would smirk as they passed was heartwarming. We are a close knit little running community along this track. It's a bit like the dog walking fraternity - we all know each other by sight if not by name.

The highlight came just as I was getting back to town. A cyclist slowed down to a tentative wobble. "Achilles gone again has it? I'll see you at the clinic tomorrow." These chiropractors never miss a trick.

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I was in the kitchen contemplating how long the thunder would keep off and watching Zorro make his mark on my cabbages when this little card came through the letter box: We regret that we were unable to deliver your goods as no-one was at home when we called. To arrange collection from our depot conveniently located fifty miles away please call the following number...

... I was out the front door like a shot and managed to catch the little oik (he looked 13 but was probably 23) before he got back into his van. "What's the meaning of this?" I asked. "It means, mate, that you weren't in and I have to take your stuff back." "I'm obviously in otherwise I wouldn't be standing here." "But you didn't answer the door wen I knocked, so its too late." "You didn't knock, you just stuck the card through the letter box." "You calling me a liar?" "Far be it from me to impugn your integrity, but..." "And it's in the computer now, so I have to take the stuff back." "What do you mean it's in the computer" He waved his little palm device at me. "I've entered it in 'ere that there was no one in." "Well, delete it then." "More than my jobs wurf ,gov."

Fifteen minutes later he conceded that he could actually delete things on his computer without the wrath of multinationals descending on us both, opened the back of the van and dumped the boxes out on to the drive. "Wot's in these anyway? They're fecking eavy." "Shelves", I replied.

This was the culmination of the ultimatum which the Rathbonettes and I had given Mrs. R at the beginning of the summer holidays. Is it really true that people in the teaching profession are obliged to keep cardboard boxes, containing every piece of work produced by every pupil they've ever encountered, in perpetuity? Mrs R seems to think so. (It's in her contract, she says). As a consequence, the only way that you can reach the computer this is being written on is to attach guy ropes to the loft hatch and abseil into the study. Television viewing requires the ascent of the east ridge of the living room and don't even contemplate using the dining room table without prior negotiation with the federal emergency management agency.

To give her her due, after the initial shock of the mutiny, she did settle down to a systematic sort-out of her clutter (sorry, essential archives) and I was forced into the other side of the bargain -- putting up shelves in the garage to store the results.

Once they had been de-oiled, the shelves were remarkably easy to put up. None of your old fashioned bolt together stuff. Oh no, this was easy, push together and twist-lock, heavy duty stuff designed for real garages, like the one Kevin Webster runs in Coronation Street. It only took two and a half hours.

By that time it was thundering merrily and Zorro had scarpered back to his hutch three gardens up. Needless to say, when she carried out the post construction inspection Mrs. R. homed right in on the dent where I had to give it a wee bash with a hammer before it would either push together or lock no matter how hard I twisted. Her ability to see the smallest blemish through the dullest gloom, aided only by a nanosecond of lightning flash, never ceases to amaze.

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The mayor was fashionably late and I was on tenterhooks. In fact, I had been on tenterhooks since the downpour the previous night. It's not easy being the environmental convener on the community council.

Here we were, our first Environmental Open Day and the nature reserve was a muddy quagmire, the rare breed sheep looked bedraggled and the rural story teller had rung up to say he was caught in a flash flood somewhere in Oxfordshire and wasn't sure when he'd get here.

But somewhere between introducing the mayor to the Bat Group and shuffling him on to the Friends of Stream Woods, the sun came out, and within half an hour the mud had been baked to a respectable imitation of crazy paving. He made it to the top of Windmill Hill with no mishaps and planted the commemorative tree (native species of course).

This was the culmination of a year of encouraging, cajoling and threatening people. Here we are, a rural community deep in the countryside and most people in the town only know the route to the station or the drive to Tesco. The idea was to get all of the local environmental groups to set up a 'gazebo' in the fields around the town and set up a 'nature trail' (with a quiz) which you had to follow to visit each of the 40 stalls and win a major prize.

It worked. We had over 3,000 people walk the five miles or so between 10am and 4 pm. All of the roast ox was consumed by the end of the day. We ran out of tea bags and no-one stole the sheep. Even the story teller turned up by lunchtime and sat on his bale of straw in front of the pumping station telling tales of the Green Man and explaining the significance of Beltain.

I felt so good, I might even try doing it again next year.

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The youngest Rathbonette has gone back to University, which means I can turn the default home page on Safari from Goldy Lookin' Chain back to Porty On-line and I no longer have to shout "Turn that bloody stuff down, I'm trying to get to sleep" at quarter hour intervals between 11pm and 2am.

This imminent Final Year lark has had interesting side effects. The late nights have reduced from seven a week to four, the number of pieces of metal has dropped from six to just a pair of earrings and some skillful make-up covering the piercings, and she has actually been getting down to some preparatory work for her thesis. She's decided that she's going to do a dissertation on The Changing Role of Women in the Media during the 20th Century. I have pointed out that as a subject it's both too broad and too narrow in its scope, but, as she says, that's rich coming from someone whose own thesis was on The Role of Dialectics on the Development of Urban Design.

Her parting words were to the effect that this was the crunch and she fully intended to get to every lecture and tutorial this term.

Not like that in my day. By third year we had worked out a rota which meant that each of us (except for Neil) took it in turn to attend lectures and take notes while the rest of us went off down the Meadows and played football. The collective approach proved invaluable in later life and it also allowed us to look forward to the occasions when Robin had to take the notes - especially in Social and Moral Philosophy. Robin always got to the heart of the matter. The lecturer might think that he had a complete grasp of Kant's exegesis on the teleological suspension of ethics until Robin asked whether that would apply to a dog as in his observation, dogs had as much autonomy over their actions as humans. Robin's lecture notes gave one a wider perspective on the subject. Neil got a First and the rest of us didn't.

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I was sitting in the pub with a Rizla paper stuck to my forehead. Because there was a ladies darts match on, Neil and I had to abandon our usual table and were sitting with the three vicars.

"Am I human?", I asked.

The guy with the cropped hair and the baseball jacket with the large 82 on it said I obviously hadn't looked in the mirror today, and everybody laughed.

I hesitated to ask if I was male. Because the darts match was blocking the entrance to the men's toilets, everyone had to use the ladies loo and I'd already been twice.

"Real or fiction?"

"Oh, definitely fiction", said Father Richard. Father Graham looked dubious and the Reverend Graham looked as if he resented this invasion of the holy corner. The three vicars regularly drink together. Father Graham is young, bouncy and red-headed. He's the priest at St Mary Magdalene and knows all about the Da Vinci Code. The Reverend Graham is minister at the Free Church and tends to be grumpy. Father Richard is a thespian, leads the local amateur dramatics and occasionally

gets bit parts in "movies". (Recently he's been in Gangs of New York and Saving Private Ryan.) His parishioners call him Father Lovie.

Father Graham confirmed that I was a quadruped, but the Reverend said I wasn't a horse. Neil confirmed I was a dog.

"Am I the Hound of the Baskervilles?"

"Yeah, a bleedin' horror", said No. 82 to further laughter.

No, I wasn't the Hound of the Baskervilles.

I quickly established that I wasn't a literary character, wasn't live action and was a cartoon character.

"Am I Deputy Dawg?" No.

"Am I Mutly?" No.

"You're on Sky", No. 82 said helpfully. "You've got a mini-me."

"Look", I said, 'Do you want to join in?"

"Okay", he said, coming over and joining us at the table.

"Then I must be Scooby-Do", I said, triumphantly, reached for the Rizla, wrote Torvill and Dean on the next sheet and stuck it on No. 82's forehead. Let's see how he likes being bisexual.

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I was putting the Dummies' Guide To Copyright back on the shelf when I noticed The Gardening Year. It seems like now's the time to put in my onion sets, so off I went to the garden centre.

It was the usual Sunday scramble for a parking space. They should never have located the garden centre opposite the pub, (or, conversely, I shouldn't go to the garden centre on a Sunday).

One easy step and I was out of the car and into the camping equipment. Tents to the left of me, calor gas stoves to the right and Jamie Culum trickling out of the tannoy. I have some friends who can wax lyrical about caravans and tents, but I just get annoyed at having to negotiate my way through this mini jazz festival just to get to the seeds catalogue.

The camping section eventually gave way to clothes. Now, I have to confess that I did linger. My Tommy Hilfiger raincoat is looking a bit passe and maybe something in green rubber with brown suede collar and beige and caramel plaid lining would cut a dash on the high street this winter.

Having reminded myself that I had a task in hand, I put the sartorial section behind me and ducked into the dim tunnel of tropical fish. I pushed my way past the aquatic anoracks drooling over the guppies and finally emerged into what appeared to be something to do with gardening.

I wandered round the shrubs for a wee while, looking for the scabby ones which are marked down after a hard summer. (Most of the best plants in my garden have been end of summer mark downs.) It's often amazing what comes back to life the following spring.

I was just about to pick up a particularly frazzled hydrangea when there was a tap on my shoulder. It was Sarah, one of the youngest Rathbonette's friends. "Hello Mr. Rathbone, would you mind looking after Darcy while I go to the ladies?"

I like Darcy and I think he likes me. I took him off to look at the birds in the aviary and when he became fed up with that we went off to the small animal enclosure. He tried to feed his blanket to the hamsters, but they didn't want it. (This surprised me, knowing the damage that they did to our living room curtains some years back.)

Sarah seemed to be taking her time, so I steered him back into the big greenhouse area and we parked ourselves next to the smellies and candles. Sarah couldn't miss us there. It was another ten minutes before she came out of the toilets, telling us that we wouldn't believe the queue in there. Darcy looked as if he, at least, believed it. I suggested that she'd better have a coffee to recover so we made our way through the African artifacts which are this month's special line, round the bookshop and into the coffee place. Two lattes, two pain au raisin and a milk for Darcy came to just under a week's wages and we had to sit listening to a selection of christmas ditties. Just over the trellis around the tables I could glimpse multi coloured santas climbing illuminated ladders up the side of neon chimney pots.

Finally bidding goodbye to Sarah and Darcy, I eventually found the information desk. I told them that I had come in for onion sets, but couldn't find any. The Christmas jingles were interrupted to ask Jason to come to the information desk. Jason kindly led me back through the african artifacts, past the gift cards and nick-nacks and through the house plants to a small corner display of seeds and bulbs.

I swear that this display was smaller than my linen cupboard and constituted the entire stock of seeds in the whole place.

I grabbed one of the three bags of onion sets and fought my way to the check out. The woman on the till didn't even ask me if I wanted a bag.

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Some people collect stamps, others go climbing Munroes and some spend their time spladooshing people on the street. I go in search of ecclesiastical passion cake. Which is why this week Mrs. R. was dragged off on our latest tour of cathedrals and abbeys en route to her brother's 65th birthday party in Dorset.

It was half term week down here and she has come to accept that half term weeks are used to bag another cathedral or two. This all started some years ago as an excuse to get away from the house and visit places that we wouldn't normally go. There are approximately 48 cathedrals in England

and Wales (depending on whether or not you count the catholic ones) and we have now reached the half way mark in our collection.

This week it was Winchester, Salisbury and Wells (with Sherborne Abbey thrown in as a windfall because we were passing at the time.)

Winchester turned out to be a flying visit because when we arrived we discovered that it was being used that day for the graduation service for the local university and we had all of twenty minutes to visit the building itself. Turns out is it very like St. Albans and was ideal for Mrs. R. to practice identifying the various styles. She now has a full grasp of Norman and Early English, but still has a tendency to confuse Decorated with Perpendicular. This led to a little difficulty in the retrochoir! Being shooed out of a cathedral was a new experience for me, and meant that we could not go down into the flooded crypt to see the Anthony Gormley sculpture. Still, we can always come again. (Probably to find it's closed because they are filming The Da Vinci Code there ----- honestly!)

Still, the rapid tour meant we could spend more time on the real purpose of these visits: sampling the passion cake in the refectory. I strongly believe that all cathedral's have a duty to maintain and serve passion cake to all true believers. The refectory at Winchester is very good, but, sad to say, the passion cake was a little dry and not really served with due reverence.

Mrs. R found Salisbury to be an altogether more edifying cathedral, mainly because she could see right away that it was all of one period, and that was a style she knew - Early English. The cloisters were a revelation and she revelled in the calm and tranquility for a good half hour before we could get to the refectory. Sacrilege!!! There was no passion cake at all. What they did have was an elderflower sponge, which was entertaining in its own little way, but who would have thought that such an eminent edifice would end up bottom of the league in the cake department.

Sherborne Abbey was an interesting little fan vaulted frivolity, but being a mere parish church, had no refectory at all. The local cafe did shortbread and cream teas, but no passion cake. (Though they did try to fob us off with carrot cake.)

Wells was wonderful despite that ghastly organ blocking the view across the scissor arches and the crossing. The rain was torrential and enhanced, rather than diminished the experience. There was an okay exhibition of contemporary icons in the chapter house and a so-so passion cake in the refectory.

Roll on Christmas when it's Rochester and Canterbury.

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We've got some french, cast iron saucepans and frying pans. They've got wooden handles which screw on to the actual pan by means of a metal rod which runs the length of the handle. Good for stopping your hands getting burned, but they do have a tendency to work loose

The frying pan is brilliant for cooking mushrooms, which is what I was busy doing during the week. I had just got them to that slightly slimy stage where they glide right off the pan and on to the plate,

so I lifted the frying pan off the stove and started to turn round towards the worktop. Unfortunately, the frying pan also decided to turn round. The whole top of the pan rotated on the handle, allowing the mushrooms to glide off onto my right foot, causing me to drop the pan. On its way down, it knocked the handle off the imitation drawer front on the sink unit.

The floor was quite clean and most of the mushrooms were saveable after a quick run under the tap and a wee re-fry. Regretably the same could not be said for the drawer handle.

It was a nice wee mahogany and brass number. Easy enough, I thought as I tucked in to the mushrooms; I'll take a wander down to B&Q at lunchtime and pick up a replacement.

I haven't been to our local B&Q for a few months. It's had a refurbishment over the summer. They've put in a mezzanine with all the kitchen & bathroom things now upstairs. Everything has been moved around. It took me ages to find the bit with all of the drawer and cupboard handles. There were round ones, square ones, long ones, short ones, ones with twirly bits and ones that looked like rugby balls. There were no mahogany ones with brass bits.

I wandered back to the house and got in the car. Off to Homebase in the next town up. Nothing doing. Off to Wilkes. Nope. MFI? fat chance.

An hour or so later I gave up and returned home. On to the Internet. Do NOT Google "Knobs". There were round ones, square ones, long ones, short ones, ones with twirly bits and ones that looked like rugby balls, but none of them were designed to be attached to kitchen units.

I finally decided that the only thing was to replace the handles with new ones, so I counted them. Thirty Four!!!! How many cupboards and drawers do we have? Rechecking and finding that there were really thirty four, I was off again to B&Q and spent this week's emergency allowance on some fairly basic turned wood handles that would not look too out of place on the Units.

By this time I was getting worried that Mrs. R. would get back before I'd replaced them. That gave me about an hour or so. Two hours and a long explanation later I was still trying to work out how to get the front of the sink unit off without having to unplumb the sink and washing machine.

Four hours later I had finished fixing the new handles.

I now have thirty three rather nice mahogany and brass kitchen cupboard handles and a greasy stain on the right leg of my chinos.

The former are on pBay being offered to a good home, while the latter are sitting in the washing basket awaiting the next accident.

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We had Dennis and Toni at the door over the weekend, asking if they could attach a couple of brackets to our flank wall and string some wires over to theirs. Given that we had agreed to lease them our garage roof last year, it seemed churlish not to agree.

This all started innocently enough about six years ago when Andrew, their youngest, spotted a santa claus on a parachute at the garden centre and demanded that they bought it for christmas. In the usual way of keeping kids quiet, they gave in, bought the thing and hung it up in their porch. What they hadn't realised was that it would bring out all of Toni's deep seated grand designs.

The following year the parachuting santa was joined by a christmas tree, with lights, on the top of the porch and a chiming wreath on the door.

Then it was santas on ladders climbing up the side of the house; a radiating star on the chimney stack and some very tasteful holly and ivy on the garage door.

People driving along our road would stop to have a look. From there it just took off, with something more being added each year, until last year they had more or less filled up all of their available space, hence the overspill on to our garage roof.

So, all weekend Dennis and his brother have been beavering away in sub-zero temperatures setting up this year's display:

On the flank wall, next to ours, there are ten BIG stars, a santa on a ladder, a santa dropping parcels down the chimney, and a neon christmas tree. On the front of the house there are another five santas and a big Merry Christmas. In the garden they have erected a scaffolding with a net covered in stars, a nativity, three christmas trees and three lifesized plastic reindeer. There is a load of reindeer hauling a sleigh jumping from their garage roof to ours, two christmas trees, one on their garage, one on ours, a rocking horse and a train and, on the wires slung between our houses, a Merry Christmas Everyone. All of the rone pipes are encircled by red lighting strips and the gutters are all festooned with icicles. The roof tiles have been picked out in fairylights.

The original parachuting santa is proudly hanging from his usual spot on the porch.

From our point of view it is great: we really save on electricity bills as we don't have to put on the hall light, the upstairs landing light or the bathroom light over the whole christmas period. On the downside, we sometimes have to queue in the traffic jam before we can get into our drive. Closer to christmas I might post a photograph so the wider world can see it in all it's glory.

Next year, I propose to rent them the cherry tree in our front garden.

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I was accosted by a giant carrot this week.

I was going quietly about my business when this large orange thing sidled up to me and said "I need help!" "Too right mate", I thought, but decided to give him the time of day. With my eyesight, anything to do with carrots can only help.

Rather than stand in the sleet, I followed him into the village hall, where half a dozen other locals were already ensnared.

It turns out that he was advertising something called The Big Barn

The Big Barn is a consortium of 6,500 farmers and organic food producers from across the whole country who are trying to sell their produce directly to the public via the internet. This grew out of the success of Farmers' Markets. If you go on to their website and enter your postcode, a map will come up showing every organic food outlet within a fifteen mile radius. That includes fish, meat, veggies et. al..

Because the big three Supermarkets only give farmers, on average, 9% of the final selling price, the farmers have had to find new markets in order to survive and, by getting closer to their customers through Farmers' Markets and selling locally, have added value to farm produce. They have also had to innovate in the things they sell. Cheese is a classic example of this. Britain now has more varieties of cheese than France.

We were given all the usual statistics, such as 30% of road freight traffic in this country is hauling food around; only 20% of the apples produced in the U.K. are eaten here, when 80% of the apples sold in the UK are imported; with Sugar Puffs you get what it says on the box - the product is 49% sugar; most Beefburgers contain 48% chicken - the bits you wouldn't want to eat, like ground up leg bones.

Apart from the map showing you where the outlets are, the site also gives you information about the producers. There's a section on crop and plant husbandry for those of us who either have an allotment or a patch in the garden where we try to grow our own. You can see what is in season every week of the year, and there is a recipe of the day. Mrs. R. and I enjoyed the following:

#### Herbed Cauliflower Bake

450g cauliflower florets  
2tsp unsalted butter  
4tbsp onions, chopped  
75g celery, chopped  
4tbsp mushrooms, chopped  
120ml vegetable stock  
1tsp Italian herb seasoning  
55g plain breadcrumbs

Preheat oven to Gas Mark 4/180C/350F. Cook the cauliflower until it becomes tender. Drain and keep warm. Melt the butter in a pan over medium heat. Sauté the onions, celery and mushrooms 4-5 minutes or until they begin to soften. Stir in the remaining ingredients except the cauliflower and breadcrumbs. Add salt and pepper to taste. Simmer another 2 minutes. Stir in cauliflower. Transfer the mixture to a lightly oiled baking dish. Sprinkle with the breadcrumbs and bake for 15 minutes or until the top has browned.

Best of all, the Essential Foods section includes chocolate.

The reason our giant carrot was accosting people is because they have now, hopefully, made a major breakthrough. ASDA are building a new supermarket in Biggleswade and , as an experiment, are

putting in an organic food section run by Big Barn. The idea is that if it is a success, then ASDA will roll the idea out in their other stores. That should force Tesco and the others to follow suit. If it takes off, it will encourage more farmers to team up and co-operate. They could then economically supply other buyers such as schools and hospitals.

So, if you see a giant carrot down your street, give it your support. At the very least, check out [www.bigbarn.co.uk](http://www.bigbarn.co.uk).

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I had a really fun week using the Scotsman Archive as part of the Local History project. While I was meant to be researching into Andre Letta (local impresario), I ended up getting side-tracked by the Portobello International Airport.

Following the Wright Brothers's first flight in 1903, the idea of flying caught the public imagination. By 1906 the Scotsman was publishing articles on the problems of flight and talks were given to the Edinburgh Philosophical Institution about Flying Machines, with experiments and working models. Inevitably, by 1907, people in the letters column were warning of the possibility of invasion by flying machines. In 1908, an aeroplane was exhibited at the Scottish National Exhibition at Saughton and on 21 December that year Wilbur Wright gave a lengthy interview to the Scotsman.

So it probably came as no surprise in May 1909 that a French company, seeking a place in the vicinity of Edinburgh for an aeroplane station, was put into communication with the directors of the Marine Gardens Portobello, who entered into negotiations with the French firm on the subject. The idea was to build a runway at the end of Seafield and develop flights between Portobello and Stirling, and the other side of the Forth. The runway would be the stretch of level ground about half a mile long to the north of the Marine Gardens. It formed a suitable starting ground in its natural state but was specially prepared in the way of levelling drainage channels which might have constituted a danger or obstacle to the flying machines before they rose into the air.

In the following August arrangements were made to exhibit Bleriot's aeroplane with which he flew the English Channel, at the Marine Gardens, but the visit was postponed owing to unforeseen difficulties in transit.

The discussions to establish the airport fell through.

Undaunted, the Directors of the Marine Gardens decided to offer a prize of £500 for the first British aviator to fly a British built aeroplane from the Marine Gardens to the Fife shore. £50 would be paid towards the expenses of any British aviator who succeeded in flying one mile in endeavouring to win the £500. The competitors were allowed to land on any part of the Fife coast east of Burntisland. Ample space for practice would be afforded over the Bruntsfield golf course.

Mr. E. M. Ling of Hull said he was willing to make the attempt, as did Mr. George Barnes of Lewisham and Major Norwall of Portobello. Unfortunately, Mr. Ling's attempt on 30 October 1909



was unsuccessful and after a few more trial flights, he abandoned his attempt. The others didn't even try.

It was not until August 1911 that Mr. E. W. Ewen, the only Scotsman to hold an aviator's certificate, made the flight over the Forth, from the Marine Gardens to Kinghorn and then back again.

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I was lying in the bath yesterday afternoon, listening to Salutation Road and giving myself a telling off. Here we were, a week in to the new year and no action taken on the resolutions.

I made three resolutions this year:

1. To make sure that the guitar stopped propping up the dining room wall and actually got played.
2. To reactivate Bimbo before it was too late.
3. To get Dorothy's eyes sorted out.

The first one was easily sorted. I took the thing out of its case this morning, plugged it in and played along with Martin Stephenson and the Daintees (Salutation Road, of course.) How long that will last, we'll have to wait and see. (The aim is half an hour a day, but that's ambitious.)

The second was fairly straightforward as well. Bimbo 2007 has begun. When I was at University someone in our year (who shall remain nameless - won't you Robin?) had the brilliant wheeze of submitting sub-standard work under a pseudonym. Soon all of use were doing it. If you had something which you knew really wasn't up to scratch, off it went under the name of B. Plenderleith. Amazingly, the tutors caught on to this and would give B. Plenderleith marks for his work. By the time we came to graduate Mr. Plenderleith (now affectionately known as Bimbo) had amassed an impressive body of coursework, but pretty dire marks. After graduation, he developed into a reunion club. Bimbo now consists of almost all of the people in our year (there are some stick in the muds who don't play along). We get together every five years and take over an hotel for a long weekend and create mayhem, then go off again and become decent citizens until the next time. This has been going on for decades. The next Bimbo weekend, in 2007, will be the fortieth anniversary. At each event someone is nominated to organise the next one. It usually takes ages, not least in finding a new, unsuspecting, hotel each time. This time round it is my mate Jim Jam's turn to do the honours and I said I'd help, so this morning I sent out 41 e-mails checking everyone's details and asking for suggestions for (a) the venue and (b) the mayhem.

The third is not so easy. Jim Jam's wife Dorothy died in 2004. She had been ill for some time with ovarian cancer. My way of dealing with that was to paint a portrait of her as I wanted to remember her, which was laughing on a sunny day up Calton Hill. So off I went, painting away. Every time Jim Jam comes round to our house, he takes a look and says yeah, that's okay, or no, that doesn't look right. This has been going on for a year now and the only bits that haven't got his seal of approval are her eyes. Maybe by the end of February?.....

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I was crossing the footbridge at the railway station on Thursday when an Intercity 125 went through. The updraft blew up a lot of dust, some of which went into my right eye. It really stung and by the time I got to the end of the bridge my eye was streaming and I couldn't see.

Instead of going for the train I decided to go back across the bridge and down into the town centre.

The staff at Dollond and Aitchison were great. They fussed over me and washed out my eye with saline solution. Then they apologised to the next person waiting for an eye test and gave me a thorough check up. The optician thought that he could see particles which had penetrated into my eye and so wrote out a letter and sent me off to the Casualty Eye Clinic, which is in the next town.

Obviously I couldn't drive, so I had to go back to the station car park to make sure that the car was secure. Then I had to get the bus to the Hospital. Driving by car to the next town usually takes about seven minutes. By bus it takes an hour and a half.

The Casualty Eye Clinic is actually an out patient department. If you are a casualty they have to fit you in when there is a gap between the out patient appointments. Another hour and a half and I was squeezed in.

I had another eye check up and the ophthalmologist said they would have to dilate. I was about to joke that my waters hadn't broken, but she didn't seem the type you could joke with. Instead she put some drops into my eyes and my pupils expanded to the size of tea plates. It was the first time I've had that effect legally.

I was then strapped into a machine that clamped my eyes open. A big bright light was focussed on my face and in she came with long pointy instruments. A couple of minutes later she advised me that a particle of salt was adhering to my vitreous fluid, but not to worry, with her long pointy thing she thought she could lift it off. I now understood why I was strapped into the machine. There were more drops to freeze the eyeball and the pointy thing came in for the kill. Another good sloosh with fluid and some more drops which turned my eyeball bright yellow and I was out the door.

The bus journey home was a hoot, starting with a funny look from the bus driver as I was buying my ticket. I was sitting near the door and got funny looks from everybody who got on. Little kids pointed. It was only when I got home and could look in a mirror that I could see that I looked like Marilyn Manson, with one huge yellow eye and the other only looking half normal.

A couple of hours later I blew my nose and all the yellow dye came through my sinuses and made an attractive stain on the handkerchief.

To my disappointment, the cyborg effect had worn off by the following morning. Less disappointingly the car was still in the station car park and still in one piece.

Next week I go back again for another dilation, just to check that no damage was done. Perhaps by that time I'll be seeing well enough to google British Rail and Public Liability.

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I worry about Harry. I suppose most of us here worry about Harry.

I was mowing the lawn earlier this week when he came wandering up, asking for Mrs. R. He looked a bit bemused when I said she was still at school. I suppose he thought that because he had finished for the day, the teaching staff would have as well. He wouldn't tell me what he wanted to talk to Mrs. R. about. That was between him and her.

He was intrigued by the fact that I was using the old manual mower and asked why I didn't have an electric one. I explained that there were two reasons: this was the first cut of the year and I find that it's easier to do a high cut with the old mower and secondly, the roots of the cherry tree push up through the grass and the blades on the electric mower strip off the bark, which isn't good for the tree.

He told me that his dad lets him use the electric mower at their house and he asked if he could have a go at our one. His hands just about made the handle of the mower if he stood on tip-toe and he couldn't get it to move. I stood behind him and helped him to push. We went down to one end of the lawn and then back to the other. He thought that was great and he thought emptying the clippings into the composter was great as well. His dad doesn't have a composter.

Harry sat on our step and watched me cut the rest of the grass and then he ate the digestive biscuit with red leicester cheese on it that I'd made for myself and hadn't eaten. When the paper boy delivered the local paper he looked at the front cover photograph and said that he knew the man. It was a photograph of our local P.C.. If he had opened the paper to page eight he would have seen the name and shame column. This has been a feature of our local rag for the last year or so. According to national statistics this area has the second lowest crime figures in England and Wales, and yet the local paper still manages to fill up a third of its content with dreadful crime. (the other two thirds are split between the activities of the Women's Institute and local sport.)

The name and shame column does just that. Anyone who has been up before the magistrates is identified, complete with address and sometimes photograph, and their misdemeanours outlined in graphic detail. Not much this week, only 68 poor unfortunates, 49 of whom were up for driving offences, mostly having no tax disc. Most of the rest were people watching t.v. without a licence, or fishing without a permit or riding the train without a ticket. There was one burglary.

In a small community like ours, this service is a godsend. It allows people like Mrs. R. to know what her former pupils are now getting up to and the rest of us know precisely who skips over the station car park fence to avoid the ticket barrier, who the person is fishing under the bridge, and whose clapped out old banger hasn't passed its M.O.T.

It also means that we know who is repeatedly up in front of the beak for dealing and using class A drugs. That's usually Harry's mum. And who gets done regularly for drunk and disorderly, criminal damage and assault. That's usually Harry's dad.

So we worry about Harry.

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We have a large beech hedge which is about seven feet high and three feet thick. I have to get up a stepladder to do the top, blocking half the pavement while I'm at it, so I don't consider that I am particularly inconspicuous whilst al fresco, but it seems that cutting the hedge makes you invisible.

I made a start about half past nine and was just getting underway when Joe's nurses turned up. Joe lives opposite us and had a stroke a wee while back, so the nurses come round every morning to cater to his needs. About twenty minutes later, out they came again and sat in their car with the window down, discussing Joe and his bodily functions. Either they didn't care that I could hear every word or else they didn't register that I was there.

As they were driving away Dennis came out on to his drive yammering away into his mobile phone. Seems that half the junior football team he manages had phoned in with sickies. Just a coincidence that it happens to be Cup Final day. He's having a right two and eight with some poor lad on the other end of the phone. I assume that he came out on to the drive to avoid swearing in front of his kids. I, of course, have a more robust lughole.

He had hardly gone back in when Paul came out onto the drive on the other side. He was shouting into his mobile as well. This time to the plumber who is meant to be doing his bathroom conversion but was running late. Maybe they both get poor mobile reception in their houses.

He went back in again and I was able to get on with another couple of feet of the hedge in peace. Until, that was, I became fascinated by this guy cycling very slowly along the pavement talking to himself. I didn't realise a bike could go that slow and still stay upright. It must take years of practice. He looked to be in his sixties. As he went past the ladder I noticed that he had a hands-free phone. Something about getting Ida to do it for herself.

Then Dennis was out again. Work this time. Could he go down to the depot and let a delivery in. It was no good him trying to tell them that it was his day off.

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I'm not sure what Dada has buried under his lawn. In our case it's hamsters.

We've had three hamsters over the years and still bear the scars.

One of them was the proverbial escape artist. Even the most careful surveillance could never identify how she did it, but every morning the cage was empty and she was running about all over the house. Things came to a head when she disappeared up the chimney for a week. It must have been a traumatic excursion because she died a few weeks later, presumably from smoke inhalation. The second one was vicious. If you went anywhere near it it bit your fingers off and it hissed. So much for cuddly little balls of fur. The last one lived in its wheel and ate the curtains.

Needless to say the Rathbonettes loved all three and they were each awarded a state funeral in the verdant pasture which pretends to be our back garden.

There seems to be a growing trend for back garden burials. You can get a booklet on how to do it from the National Death Centre.

In fact, provided you own the land, it is easier to bury a relative in your garden than to extend your garage or undertake any other building work.

There are no laws to prevent people being buried in their own garden, though you do have to fill in an authorisation form from the Environment Agency. (This is to prevent any ground water contamination by the decomposing deceased.) You also need to use an undertaker who is licensed :A body comes within the definition of "clinical waste" and as such cannot be disposed of except under the provisions of the Control of Pollution Act 1974 and the Environment Protection Act 1990. A licensed operator is usually needed but a local authority may waive the requirement in special circumstances. Remember it is a criminal offence to dispose of "controlled waste" otherwise than in accordance with the Acts.

You don't even need planning permission to dig a grave, although erecting a gravestone might stir the interest of the local council.

You need to be practical when deciding where you want your grave. Sandy soils are dangerous to dig in to any depth, and rock will obviously limit how far down you can dig.

If you are digging a grave yourself, you need to be careful and have help. If you are fit and enthusiastic, it should take about three hours work to dig a four foot deep grave. Try and shore up the first two feet of the grave so that it is supported when the mourners stand around it, and work steadily so that you don't strain yourself. You might want to take a bucket to stand on so that you can get out of the grave at the end of a tiring day!

You have a duty to inform any future buyers of the property. It's also a good idea to inform your neighbours (The site of the grave will not be officially recorded, and its accidental discovery in the future might involve a police investigation.) Don't be surprised if they are offended by the idea: though they cannot legally object, it might not be conducive to good relationships. Potential problems include a fall in a house's value of up to 20 per cent.

There may also be problems in gaining access to the grave if the house is sold. Though in that case, you can take it with you if you go. All you need is an exhumation licence from the Secretary of State at the Home Office.

Personally, I think we'll be leaving the hamsters where they are.

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Running can be unsettling. I've got a marathon coming up next week and have been building up my training on the country lanes around the town, and that's where the unsettling bit comes in.

Since the beginning of March I have been heading out along the old railway line which runs to the west of the town and then striking off across the farm tracks for a few miles and looping back.

I became aware of the man in the mac about six weeks ago. That's not to say that he wasn't around before that, but when it's raining you don't tend to pay attention to people in raincoats. It's only when they are wearing them in bright sunshine that they look a little strange.

Having said that, it's not just the mac that makes him strange. He's about six foot two with the kind of hair style where the hair has crept back about three inches from his forehead, making him look just a wee bit like Boris Karloff in the Frankenstein movies. He wears tan coloured hush puppies and black, slightly flared trousers and this long dirty brown raincoat which is buttoned up to the neck, so you can't tell if he's wearing a shirt or jumper or whatever underneath. And then there are the eyes staring out from under Noel Gallagher eyebrows..... (or maybe that's just me getting paranoid).

So, six weeks ago, there I was on my Sunday run, in the middle of nowhere on this farm track, when I saw him walking towards me. I say walking, actually he was striding in a quite determined fashion, staring straight ahead. When we passed, he didn't acknowledge me, just kept staring fixedly ahead and marching on. Peculiar, I thought, but then got back into my rhythm and carried on.

The following week, there he was again, at about the same spot at about the same time. Whereas the previous week it had been overcast and there might have been an excuse for the raincoat, this time it was warm and sunny but he was still buttoned up to the neck. Same determined stride, same passing me as if I wasn't there. And again the week after that, this time on the old railway line.

By the fourth week I was almost looking for him as I ran along and it helped to pass the time wondering why society has an inbuilt aversion to solitary men in macs.

If you google men in dirty macs, you get 5,580,000 pages. (even allowing for the fact that a number of those are puffs for Steve Jobs, that's quite a lot.) Most of them operate on the premise that dirty mac equals perv. There are even sites dedicated to dirty old man cartoons.

Some of it, I suppose, is the paedophile connection, though I believe that most of us have now realised that the dirty mac image was counter productive, concealing the fact that most child abusers are people other than old men in raincoats. The newspapers still regularly give the impression that most paedophiles and murderers are to be found amongst the unemployed or persons of "no fixed abode". They portray paedophiles as dirty old men prowling around the streets and childrens playgrounds looking for naive and trusting children; dirty old men in raincoats with pockets full of sweets. However, the reality is that the majority of the cases of abuse originate within the homes of the middle class.

Similarly, for years pornography was equated with the Dirty Mac Brigade, but now, if you take out some of the worst photographs, throw in some football, lifestyle and men's health pieces written by Cambridge graduates you can rebrand it a lads' mag.

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Doesn't the hot weather make people do funny things?

For a start, yesterday Mrs. R. said that she'd come and support me on my race. Now, given that over the thirty two years that we've been together she's never bothered before, I could only put it down to the heat. To be fair, she did change her mind and decide that it would be a more productive use of her time to do a washing instead.

Last night, late, the youngest rathbonette phoned up to say that it was too hot to come home, so she would be staying at Ryan's. (Oh yeah?) and this morning the elder rathbonette said she had decided to take the day off work to go to Alton Towers with her mates. (Shame .. it's supposed to be thundery there today.)

There was a piece in New Scientist a little while ago on the mating preferences of flies. A mere change in temperature is all it takes for the male flies to switch from being heterosexual to suddenly courting other males. The mutation is temperature sensitive, meaning neurons carrying the mutation suddenly become inactive above 30°C. At the normal 19°C, males are heterosexual. But ramp up the heat above the critical temperature and in about two minutes their behaviour changes. When put in a chamber with females, the males become largely disinterested. Add them instead to a vial with other males and they pursue them vigorously. Flip the temperature back to normal and the flies become heterosexual again. I have to say that this does not appear to be true of humans... or at least I have not been propositioned by another man so far this summer.

Obviously our bodies are designed to work within a fairly narrow temperature range and find it hard to cope with extremes, but they are also responsive to changes in pressure. The higher the atmospheric pressure goes, the crankier we become. Hot, humid days are apparently the worst possible combination as they cause sleeplessness, decreased activity, poor reaction times, irritability and lethargy.

Despite that, it's also true that most of us tend to feel better when the sun is shining. For weather to improve mood, people need to spend at least 30 minutes outside in warm, sunny weather. Researchers have found that spending time indoors when the weather outside is pleasant actually depress your mood. They suspect this is perhaps because people resent being cooped-up indoors or perhaps because improved weather can make normal indoor activities feel boring or irritating.

Lots of research over the years, both in Europe and the USA, has also shown that violent crime increases with temperature. However, this is not to say that scorching weather causes all types of crime to occur more often. There was little or no correlation found between heat and occurrences of rape, robbery, or property crime. Since violence is (typically) not the primary goal of these crimes, the weather had little effect on them. Of course, this is just a hypothesis. It could hardly be used in a court of law as a defense - "I swear, I did not mean to kill him! It was 110 degrees that day!"

Still, the implications are scary, especially with so many reports on global warming being released. It's bad enough that my ice cream will not last as long outside; now I'll have to deal with people trying to hurt me when I don't share it.

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So it was off to the wedding of Sunnyparty's daughter.

Logistically, our journey north had to take place on Thursday afternoon, when England were playing Trinidad and Tobago. The match sounded really boring on the radio, and presumably was really boring to watch on the television as well.

We decided to stop at Charnock Richards services on the M6. It was a looter's paradise. When you walked in all of the counters were deserted. No-one on the sweets, no-one on the papers and mags. No-one on the food. Everyone was in the restaurant, watching the match. Not only were they showing it on a big screen, but the commentary was being relayed around the whole complex on loudspeakers.

I went to the gents. Every urinal was taken. There were two Rooneys, a Lampard, a Crouch, an Owen and a Beckham with a wonky "B". Just as I came in England scored their first goal and to a man the ersatz team leapt in the air. Pee went everywhere.

The wedding itself could not have been better. The rain on Friday morning cleared and the sun came out in time for the bride's arrival. The flower girls behaved themselves. The babies didn't cry during the service and no-one's mobile phone went off.

The reception was in a really nice country hotel. The food was excellent, the speeches were funny, the music was fine and no-one got into a fight.

The younger Rathbonette discovered relatives that she never knew she had and her elders vowed to stay in touch and stop relying on weddings and funerals as a method of communication.

As the evening wore on Epykitten entertained everyone by demonstrating that he had nothing on under his kilt and Epykat entertained them all over again with her motherly reaction.

The following afternoon there was a barbeque hosted by the best man. Priorities were suitably established when care was taken to ensure that the showing of the wedding video was over before the start of Doctor Who.

I hadn't anticipated the barbie, so I felt a little out of place in a stripey top and jeans facing two Rooneys, a Lampard, a Crouch, an Owen and a Beckham with a wonky "B".

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Saturday was the annual fete. It's always on the first Saturday in July and there was no way that Fifa could persuade us to change the date.

Along with other members of the Community Council I was off bright and early to supervise the lads from the Young Offenders' hostel who were helping to put up the marquee and then spent another couple of hours folding the leaflets on out of school activities. (Inevitably they hadn't arrived from the printers until the night before and we always get them unfolded because it knocks a third off the price.)



By the time I'd done that I was suffering from repetitive strain injury to the fingers and bottled out of helping set up the bring and buy stalls. Given that the temperature was 31deg., I thought that it was a bit optimistic of the WRI who were hoping to sell winter warmers and set out their display of cosy hats, scarves and mittens on the second table in... but by the end of the day they had all gone!

The bouncy castle arrived about ten o'clock and I was charged with keeping the kids off it until their parents had coughed up fifty pence. Then it was into the stocks to have wet sponges thrown at me for half an hour. The Mayor was greeted at twelve noon by a rather soggy environment convener.

A quick lunch of sandwiches and coke and then it was helping the magician to keep the under fives in order while the disco was being set up.

M.C. Mike from St. Mary Magdalene was just getting into full swing when the crowd mysteriously disappeared, all gone within five minutes. I looked accusingly at the magician. He just shrugged and pointed to the clock. Three p.m. En masse they had rushed off to watch the match.

By half past three the marquee was down, the sponges back in the bucket and the bring and buy stalls tucked under the community hall stage for another year.

The town was remarkably quiet.

I got home in time for Rooney's sending off.

By the penalties Mrs. R. was getting quite agitated: "He's taking the flags in" ..I looked round from the television and indeed the guy across the road at No. 36 was hauling in the two large flags he had draped out of the upstairs windows three weeks ago. By the end of Doctor Who there wasn't a single flag on display in the whole street. ....

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I've not been myself this week. In fact I've been suffering from multiple personality disorder.

The end of term production this year is Oliver and Mrs. R. has been busy making costumes. As changes in the law mean that she can no longer keep pupils against their will in order to experiment on them in the privacy of our back room, that means that I have had to be both model and critic.

Monday night was quite straight forward. I was Mr. Bumble, which is okay if you like big hats and floppy coats with gold piping. And I got to bang on the dining room floor with the big stick thing.

Tuesday night was more of a problem. I was out at a meeting until after ten and really just wanted to settle down to Newsnight and then maybe slope off to bed. But no. It was to be a quiz evening. Could I tell which of these battered top hats was best for Bill Sikes and which one would suit Dodger? I said that I couldn't, which was fatal. Half two in the morning and four top hats and a pile of black paper on the carpet later and we still hadn't reached a decision. And there was still the

chef's hat for Food Glorious Food. Should it be an upright one, like Raymond Blanc's or a floppy one, like the cooks wear in Maurice Sendak's In The Night Kitchen?

Wednesday I was Fagin, half a dozen costermongers and Mr. Brownlow.

And then, on Thursday night I had the Walliams moment: Nancy at last. By this time Mrs. R. had taken to playing the soundtrack album as she worked, to give her inspiration. So there I was, prancing around the living room in my red frillies singing Omm Pah Pah.

Friday was the dress rehearsal, which by all accounts went well except for the plastic food, which everyone agreed looked... well, plastic really.

Guess who offered to make alternative nosh in time for tomorrow's opening night?..... at the moment she's trying to convert an old pair of tights into a string of link sausages.

It's a fine life.

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I bumped into Jack and Sandra when I went for the Sunday paper yesterday.

Let me rephrase that as I don't want to offend Sandra.... I met Jack and Sandra in the Town Centre when I went to buy the paper yesterday morning.

We exchanged pleasantries. I told Jack that the youngest Rathbonette had got her results back and could now legitimately put the letters B.A. (Hons) after her name, and he told me that he and Sandra were going off to Cornwall next week on their holidays. He'd like to go abroad but Sandra would just get confused with driving on the wrong side of the road, if, that is, they let her in in the first place. With a laugh he pulled at Sandra's harness. She stopped sniffing at my trouser leg and led him on his way up the hill.

The thought of Jack on holiday is an interesting one. How does he get around? I can understand how he manages to gad about the town here, because he has built up a mental image in his head and all of the guide dogs that he's had have presumably learned their way around.

But he and Sandra regularly go up to London on the train. (Jack likes jazz and goes to gigs at Ronnie Scotts and Pizza on the Park, among other venues.) He manages the train and the tube by counting the stations. But Cornwall is another issue altogether. I admire his courage and his ingenuity, but if I told him that he'd belt me one for being patronising.

Just on the topic of disabilities and the train... I got on the train last week to find that the compartment was full of school kids ( by which I mean every seat was taken by said pupils) The areas next to the doors were packed with adults who could not get a seat. The temperature was in the eighties ( or twenties if metric's your thing).

At the next stop a woman with two crutches and a stookie on her leg got on. She was obviously having difficulty standing up and trying to hold on to the overhead rail while balancing on her good leg. None of the kids moved.

After twice managing to catch her before she fell over, one of the men standing in our group between the doors suggested that one of the schoolkids should stand up to let her have a seat. In fact, to his credit, one of them made a move to get up, only for a loud command of "James, sit down". to emanate from the only seated adult in the whole coach.

When we started to remonstrate with her, this school teacher solemnly advised us that it was against Health and Safety legislation. A full risk assessment had been carried out by the school and all pupils had to remain seated during the entire journey. Before I could suggest that perhaps she could offer her seat to the woman with the stookie, the train had arrived at my stop. I hope someone else mentioned it. Forcefully.

I'm sure that Sandra won't put up with such nonsense on the trip down to Cornwall.

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It was lucky that I saw Jack down the underpass. Or, more correctly, lucky that I heard him talking to Sandra.

When I went down the underpass it was obvious that it had become flooded by the torrential rain that we have had over the last week. Sandra had clearly stopped Jack at the water's edge, but he would have had no way of knowing why she did it.

I explained to him that the underpass was flooded. He responded that he suspected as much. He had heard the splash when he dropped his keys. It turned out that he had been standing there in the rain for the last quarter of an hour waiting for someone to come past so he could ask them to retrieve his keys for him. I fished around in the water, found them and gave them back to him. He said that in future he would have to remember not to put them into the same pocket as his handkerchief.

We walked back up the ramp and crossed over the road to the town centre. Both he and Sandra were wearing their fluorescent yellow jackets and the cars stopped to let us over.

We went for a coffee and a chat. I've spoken with Jack many times in the past, but never really broached the subject of his disability. (A fear on my part of sounding patronising.) But the incident in the underpass had raised fundamental issues about being blind. I said that I was concerned about his vulnerability in that kind of situation.

He responded that it was a daily occurrence and he was used to it. There were always things which were a problem. Some of them were embarrassing, like using public conveniences. He had no way of telling which cubicles were vacant other than trying the doors, which frequently led to choice language from those in use.

Bigger problems were shopping and using cash machines. Just when he had memorised where things were on the supermarket shelves, they shuffled them around. None of the items had braille on their labels, so he constantly had to ask people to get things for him. The sequences at Cash machines were all different at different banks, which meant that he had to ask for assistance with them, which left him and his money vulnerable. Even when he had the money, it was not always easy to distinguish between bank notes.

At home, his two biggest problems were setting the alarm on his clock when the clocks changed in the spring and autumn, and pouring a cup of tea. He was now used to having a scalded thumb as he used it to gauge when he had reached the top of the cup .

Jack has been blind from birth. I asked him what was the most frustrating thing for him. His reply was straightforward. Not knowing what colour was. It reminded me of the remark in Diderot when he asked a blind man if he would have liked to see the moon and the man replied no, but he wished he could touch it.

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It rained here last night.

If you don't live where we live, then that might not have much significance, but for us that was the first rain since 23 May..... ten and a half weeks. Even the thunderstorms which everyone else seemed to experience last week passed us by. We could see them, about five miles to the west, and we could hear them, but not a drop came our way.

Given that the hose pipe ban has been in effect for six of those ten and a half weeks, the garden is now in a very sorry state and Mrs. R. and I have muscles the size of Vin Diesel's carting buckets full of bath water from upstairs just to keep the Kilmarnock Willow alive.

Given the size of our garden and the size of the watering can, we have had to make heartbreaking decisions between what will live and what will die.

Apart from the geraniums on the patio, the willow, the acers, the camellias and the hydrangeas have received favourable treatment, and a major offensive was launched to rescue the christmas tree for another year.

(The christmas tree was an impulse buy from Marks and Sparks three years ago which has overwintered quite successfully ever since.... another christmas and we will have fully recouped the investment in a rooted tree!)

Some of the plants are doing okay in the dry conditions, particularly the rosemary, which has gone rampant and the acanthus which is throwing up flower spikes and lush leaves all over the place.

Most of the poor dears, however, are candidates for horticultural Holby. The hebes have all copped it. The holly is dropping its leaves over what is left of the lawn and the ferns look like bracken after a forest fire.

On the fruit and veg side, the raspberries are doing surprisingly well, covered in fruit ... a month early, but the strawberries are little shrivelled stumps on the end of their runners and the red and white currants are indistinguishable from each other.

The potatoes have fallen right back and the leaves vanished in a puff of brown crispiness. If the ground wasn't so hard I'd dig them up, but I suspect that all I'll get is a handful of brown bools. The cabbages are nondescript and each cauliflower head is smaller than a broccoli floret. The onions have long since disappeared and the artichokes ( for which we are rightly famous in our part of the world) have collapsed in a heap.

The laugh is that last year I followed all the suggestions on gardeners world and put in mediterranean plants that are suited to dry conditions. All of them were killed off by the severe frosts that we had last winter.

According to the weather forecast, we should get another shower tomorrow. I can't wait.

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Joyce Coutts-Milne died on Friday. That probably doesn't mean much to most people reading this but will mean a lot to the people she helped and inspired over the years.

Joy (as she preferred to be known) was in the business of giving kids confidence, She worked with young people, mostly in Linlithgow and Bo'ness. In the sixties she identified a need to do something to address the boredom that so many of the kids she met seemed to suffer. Nobody she spoke to about it appeared to want to address the problem, so she took up the cudgels herself. She set up drama classes in church halls, schools and anywhere else she could get her hands on for free. It didn't matter if the youngsters could act or not, she gave them things to do. The productions they took part in were successful and they learned to believe in themselves.

I first met Joy in a Pizza Express in Hampstead in 1974. Mrs. R. had dragged me off to meet this remarkable woman who had let her on to a stage for the first time, and showed her how to do things for her self. I could understand why Mrs. R. was making a fuss. Joy's enthusiasm was infectious. We stayed in touch for the next thirty years.

When I put the phone down on Friday night, it made me think of the other people that I know who are like Joy. Every community has them - the ones that won't take no for an answer.

Bill Salmon for one. (Or Billy the Fish as the kids used to call him.) Bill had been motivated in the same way as Joy had. The kids in the village had nothing to do. He had a barn, so the barn became a part time youth club. It was popular. It was so popular that he had to stop using it as a barn and turn it over full time to youth activities. It wasn't long before he and his wife Rose were letting parts of their house be used as well. Eventually they were spending almost all of their spare time on activities for the kids, organising day trips, adventure holidays, and running the christmas pantomime every year. In time they persuaded enough people to cough up enough money to convert

one of the houses in the village into a proper youth centre. After Bill's death the Council took it over, fitted it out properly and re-named it the Bill Salmon Centre.

And then there's Bertie Everard. Forty years ago Bertie passed a young boy sleeping in a shop doorway. The next day, and the next again, the boy was still there when Bertie passed on his way to work. Bertie stopped to talk to him. He was sixteen, had had an argument with his dad and had been thrown out. There was no-where for him to stay. Even worse, he told Bertie that there were other people sleeping rough in the town as well. Bertie was shocked that he had never been aware of these homeless people before, and even more shocked when he discovered that no-one took responsibility for them. He took what money he had and rented a place where homeless young people could stay. Initially there were half a dozen kids staying in his flat. Bertie continued to campaign on their behalf and went round all the businesses in the town getting them to sponsor rooms in his "hostel". When the local cottage hospital closed, he formed a trust to buy it. In the early 1990s an extension was built on the back. Bertie's hostel now provides accommodation for 116 people. Bertie is now in his 80s and currently in hospital. There are, literally, thousands of people who have cause to wish him well.

I don't know who the Joys, Bills and Berties of Portobello are, but you can bet they are out there. Treasure them.

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After battling bravely with the abuses of the kids during their formative years, our suite is now showing severe signs of wear. (The fact that the eldest rathbonette jumped on the arm of chair when she was thirteen, and went right through didn't help. Nor did the fact that a couple of drunken christmases later, Jimjam sat on it and re-fractured the arm. Then there are all those years of resting coffee cups and/or wine glasses on the cushions while reaching for the remote, which didn't help to keep the stains at bay. So... time for a change

However Mrs. R. has very definite preferences. The shape must be boxy ( she doesn't like curvy couches.) The arms must be flat and wide enough to rest the exercise books when she's marking homework. The cushions must be a modest height above the back rest. The fabric must be of a good texture, not too rough and not too smooth. The colour has to be a particular shade of dark brown, not too chocolate, but not too light. Above all it, must not be leather. (She learned that lesson after someone wearing jeans with a dodgy stud scored all over her brother's leather suite. No matter what they tried the marks wouldn't come out. .... I know, I was wearing the jeans at the time.)

So it has taken us a few years to track down something which matches all the criteria, but at last we've done it. Daily trawling of the internet has paid off.

But then the suite in question has to be seen in reality, not just on the screen ( How else can you vet the texture?). Fifty miles up the motorway to the nearest stockist. And it's fine. She pokes and prods and takes the cushions apart while I smile at the nice sales assistant called Phillip.

As we fill in the paperwork Phillip casually mentions the problems some people have nowadays getting suites into their houses. Instantly I whipped my tape measure out of my pocket. No, it was almost the same size as our existing one. Whew!

Back home feeling pleased.

And then the little doubts creep in.

I'll be in Kenya when it arrives. Would Mrs. R. be able to cope if it didn't fit? Didn't we have to take off the living room door to get the existing couch in? I only measured the length. What if the height and depth are greater? Will the colour go with the curtains, or are we going to have to change them as well? Will the plan chest under the stairs leave enough room in the hall for them to get it past?

Inevitably, the following morning, I was measuring everything in site. The width and height of the front door. The width of the hall plus the plan chest. The width of the living room door. The width of the kitchen door in case they had to back into there to turn the thing. The floor to ceiling height.

Armed with fully annotated working drawings of the ground floor of the house, I set off back up the motorway.

Phillip was very understanding. It seems that about a third of his customers come back in a panic. Having looked at the measurements he reassured me that everything was okay.

I drove back happy. And then the doubts started again: What are we going to do with the old suite? The label saying that it is fire resistant came off years ago, so the furniture recycling scheme won't take it. How much is bulky refuse? How long will we have to wait for the Council to collect it? Will the delivery men give Mrs. R. a hand to get the old suite into the garage? Should I risk coming back from Kenya at all?

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It never rains but it pours. At least it's been doing that all this week down here. Which has been annoying because it's been too wet to sweep up the leaves from the Cherry Tree in the front garden.

That's a problem because every autumn the car disappears under a blanket of leaves unless you clear them off every half hour, and the pavement becomes a health and safety risk.

The tree proved to be a problem of another sort on Wednesday night. Dennis and Toni next door have just about finished festooning their premises with festive decoration (you might remember that I posted photographs of the seasonal splendour last year). Unfortunately, the decorations proved too much of a temptation for three young lads, who took it upon themselves to try to knock the massed santas off the garage roof by sheltering under our cherry tree and throwing stones at them. When the eldest Rathbonette came to the door to tell them to desist, one of the stones headed in that direction and unfortunately carried on through the front window. Needless to say, the lads legged it and the police failed to arrive.

Thursday morning was spent trying to persuade the glazier that, tempting though it was, I really didn't want to spend the next five days with a bit of chipboard as the main form of security for my house and Thursday afternoon was spent watching him standing in the rain replacing the glass.

Thursday evening was the second last meeting of the Kenya team before we head back to sunnier climes next week. There are eight of us and we are going out to build another hostel for aids orphans at Kilifi, which is about 50 miles north of Mombassa. The last couple of months have been spent drawing up the plans, arranging for the materials to be there when we arrive, getting transport sorted out and persuading businesses to cough up the sponsorship they promised. Everything has been going well.... So on Thursday night Jackie turns up to say that she is going to have to pull out, but Mark can go. On the plus side, Mark is a skilled carpenter and good company. On the down side, it means that we will have to get the flight tickets changed, arrange for him to have all seven vaccinations necessary, and travel up to the Kenyan Embassy in London to get his visa sorted out, and all that will have to be done tomorrow.

On top of that, during the week a tropical storm hit the coastal regions of Kenya causing flash flooding. Kilifi was particularly badly hit. Out of the population of 3,000, 700 are now homeless and five people drowned. It gets the little bit of rain and the odd broken window we've here into perspective.

Somehow, I think this project isn't going to be as straightforward as last year's was.

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I am knackered trying to catch up with all of the little things that have to be done before I go away:

The Christmas presents have all been bought and wrapped this week. Those that have to be entrusted to the mail have been boxed up and sent. The cards have been written up, enveloped, stamped and dispatched.

Wednesday was spent sweeping up all of the leaves in the garden, putting them in bin liners and taking them along to the municipal composter. On Thursday morning the lawn was covered in other people's leaves. Have they no consideration?

Yesterday started with the ironing. (Does it really make the clothes flatter so you can fit them in the case?) Do I take two or three pairs of jeans? Will I take something waterproof because of the rain they've been having? Long sleeves or short sleeves? How many underpants? The choices were endless. Each garment was lovingly pressed in between visits to the loo ..... I've started the malaria tablets and they always have that effect on me.

Hours were spent deciding which book to take to read on the plane. (Neil Gunn's *The Silver Darlings* came out on top).

Then it was phoning round everyone just to make sure that they didn't forget anything. There were the usual problems. Jan didn't have a holdall which would meet the hand luggage size restrictions....



we sorted that one out. Elliot couldn't find his yellow fever vaccination certificate.... his doctor did him a note. Kerrie wanted to know whether we could leave for the airport later than we'd planned because she wanted to take her son to the dentist..... no we couldn't: getting to Gatwick was going to be tight enough without risking delays on the motorway. (I can be hard when I want to.)

And then I got to Mark. You will recall that Mark was a last minute substitute. I had a whole load of hassle getting the plane tickets changed to include him, not to mention the trip up to the Embassy in London and back last Friday to get his visa sorted out. So I wasn't best pleased when he informed me that he sprained his wrist playing rugby on Wednesday and that his arm was strapped up. Though he could still come with us, he wasn't going to be able to do much. C'Est La Vie.

Finally I wrote out the instructions for Mrs. R. on what to do if her paranoias come true.... i.e. the contact details for the plumber, the gas man, the insurance company..... how to change a tyre on the car.... where the keys for the garden shed are....

So, it's time to go. The prostrate form of Mr. R. , scholar, seeker of truth and, regrettably, finder of truth, will shortly arise from his exhaustion to confront a problem that has tormented mankind since the beginning of time. A man knocking on a door seeking sanctuary and finding instead the outer edges of ..... the Twilight Zone

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It's a bit like the one on the front of Frank Zappa's One Size Fits All, and I'm beginning to love it. Mind you, it's taken a couple of weeks.

Despite all of those careful measurements and re-assurances from Phillip, the nice sales assistant, they did have to take the handles off the living room door in order to get it in and even contemplated taking the door off its hinges). But in it came, and out went the old one, consigned to the garage to await collection by the bulky refuse men.

The first thing was the banging on the back of the knees. After years of coming in and flopping back, exhausted, onto the couch, my sub-conscious had worked out the precise trajectory required for perfect repose. So, naturally, I flopped back without a moment's hesitation, to discover that this one is higher than the old one. Like a plane overshooting the runway, my backside skidded to a halt later than expected and the back of my knees banged against the bar below the cushions. A couple of days of practice runs were required to sort that one out.

Then there are the cushions themselves. My rear knew, and adjusted to, every nook and cranny of those old cushions and, in symbiotic fashion, they had adapted to accommodate my own nooks and crannies. These new ones are arrogant show-offs, always replumping themselves between sittings and tumbling me about into awkward positions every time I sit on them. Never mind, a few stern shufflings will soon settle their hash.

I usually sit on the extreme left, nearest the fire. This new sofa's a little bit longer than the old one. Not much, just an inch or two, but sufficient to completely throw out of kilter the balance on the stereo. I find that I'm getting a completely new perspective on much loved guitar breaks and drum

solos are appearing out of the ether. However, if I adjust the balance, Mrs. R. complains that it's gone wonky for her.

The television also needs a bit of adjustment. Not the picture, which I can see perfectly well, but the angle of fire at the remote control on the freeview box is slightly out, meaning that I have to move a couple of inches in order to change channels. That is just not on.

Nor is the fact that I can't see the postman coming when I'm lying back watching breakfast tele because the back of this new thing is just high enough to obscure the view out the window.

Worst of all is the fact that, when reclining, the reach from couch to coffee table has increased, leading to repetitive strain whilst imbibing.

On the plus side, however, that extra inch or two means that Mrs. R. and I can curl up side by side without one or other of us complaining about the arm of the settee poking them in the back.

Give it a few years and it'll be just like one of the family.

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I'll have to stop getting the slow train. As usual, it was packed, but I did manage to get the last seat, next to the toilet and the door between the first and second carriages.

I was just settling down to chapter 15 of *Burmese Days* when there was a rattle as the door between the carriages opened and then a thump as the person coming through bumped heavily against the toilet door..... "what the f\*\*\*?" I looked up. He was in his thirties, fairly tall, over six feet, and extremely drunk. The bottle of wine (a sauvignon blanc) was three quarters drunk. Another was stuck in one pocket. He'd obviously had a few before hand. "What you lookin' at?..." I returned to my book. He banged at the toilet door. "What the f\*\*\*?", he said again.

Then he started to sing..... "When the music's over, turn out the lights. Turn out the lights. Turn out the lights." He grabbed hold of the luggage rack and swung round. The wine flowed out of the bottle in a long arc, landing, mostly, in the lap of the woman sitting opposite me. No-one looked at him. He kept singing snatches from the Doors' repertoire for a couple of stations and then started a conversation with himself about the relative merits of Jim Morrison and Mick Jagger. Jagger, it seems, was a wanker.

He banged at the toilet door again, demanding to be let in. It wasn't in use, but none of us had the courage to tell him... if he'd only pull, rather than push at the door, then all would be well. Statistically, he should get the right combination in time. He didn't, and started to pee himself. By this time people were getting up and moving off down the compartment, hoping for other seats to become available at the next station.

A couple of stops further on, he suddenly got off the train and stood on the platform pretending to machine gun us as we pulled away.

In to town. Did what I had to do. Slow train back. Plenty of seats this time.

I was just opening up Burmese Days again when someone plopped down beside me. "Well well. Haven't seen you in ages" He stuck out his hand and I shook it. Big mistake.

Inadvertently I had given him the Tubalcain grip. He gave me the Jachin in return. From then on there was no stopping him. Did I know what was happening at his Lodge? Of course I didn't, but that didn't stop him telling me in lurid and graphic detail. Talk about indiscreet. I know know things about people in our County that I really wished I didn't. It was even more shocking when he told me with pride that he had been appointed a Steward at the Grand Lodge. If ever there was a candidate for having his throat cut across, his tongue torn out by its roots and his body buried in the rough sands of the sea at low water mark, it is him. By the time we reached my station he had invited me to a 'do' at his Lodge later in the month. I simply stared at him. I'm sure he took it as assent.

Which is where my problem comes in..... I'm not a mason. Never have been, never want to be. (Having said that, both my Grandad and my Great Grandad were Grand Masters.... their portraits in full regalia used to glower down on us from my mother's living room wall). I'm now sure that he will 'phone me up in a few days..... do I come clean? do I feign sillness or do I just emigrate?..... where is Roger Twongle when you need him?

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As those over on the Local History forum, who kindly enquired whether or not I'd snuffed it, are now aware.... I'm back on line.

I was sitting quietly on Tuesday filing my current episode of the Marine Gardens saga when the screen went blank.

I closed down, rebooted, and attempted to come back on-line. Nothing doing.

A quick dial to the B.T. status line indicated that there was a fault at our local exchange. Fine, I thought. Get on with something else and come back later.

A bit of retail therapy. A tuna toasty, a piece of white and dark chocolate cheesecake and a latte at Thornton's cafe (I've become very cavalier since my all clear from the hospital following the pulmonary embolism event) and back to try again. Still down, so I decided to leave it until Wednesday.

Wednesday morning, still zilch. Leave it until you get back tonight then. Five o'clock. Still zilch, so I phoned BT.

We've had our broadband from BT for the last four years with no problems, so this was the first time I had contacted their help desk. Excellent. No problems getting through. Friendly voice. Lots of patience and help. All on an 0800 free number. So far, so good.

The woman I was dealing with took me step by step through checking if there was a the fault on the router. There wasn't.... all the lights were on and all the settings were as they should be. I ran a diagnostic check on the computer. Everything fine and dandy. She concluded that it was probably a residual problem at the exchange. She'd get the engineer to deal with it. Give it eight hours.

I gave it eighteen. Still Zilch. I got back on to the help line. Another voice, just as friendly, just as helpful. We went through all the processes again and she gave me a whole load of technical stuff to discuss with Netgear just to make sure it wasn't the router. Meanwhile, she also thought it was the exchange so she would issue a further request to have the line checked. I should allow 24 hours this time.

Netgear were also very helpful. Again the first time I've had to deal with them. Even though the router was well out of warranty, because I had registered it they were prepared to give support without charge. I went through all of the diagnostics again and gave them all the technical info from BT. Their conclusion was that it was a line fault.

So this morning, in I went again. Still nothing doing. I contacted BT. They advised me that it definitely wasn't a problem at the exchange or on the line. They had thoroughly investigated. They could send round an engineer to check out things at my end, but that would cost. I explained that I had passed all of the info on to Netgear and they didn't think it was the router. Ashok, in Mumbai, pointed out that the only way to make sure was to connect another router. If that also failed, then it was definitely BT's problem. If it didn't, then it was Netgear's. I couldn't argue with that and reasoned that buying a new router was going to be cheaper than calling out the engineer.

Lunchtime I bought another router (Netgear again, but an up to date wireless model.)..... Voila, I am back boring the pants off you once more.

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It rained yesterday, which was good.... the first time in six weeks here. I've been waiting for a bit of precipitation in order to get the mulch down. (There's no point in doing it when the ground's dry).

I also wanted to get on with the mulching because of the therapeutic effect that spreading muck has on my senses.... I was in need following the incident at the Community Council meeting on Monday. Nothing to do with Gossip and Tittle Tattle, I may add, but a straightforward accusation that I was a luddite. Me! The man who embraced a Sinclair Spectrum within weeks of it being issued. Me! The man who invested in an electric screwdriver when all around thought they were merely a fad.

It was all Tim's fault. He asked for for the number of my mobile 'phone. I said that I didn't have one. The hush that descended on the room was palpable. I looked up, and every other eye was looking back at me. Talk about intimidating. And then it began. How could I not have a mobile phone? What did I do in emergencies? How did people get in touch with me? ..... How did I survive?

I explained that I had managed to get from the 1940s to now without the aid of a mobile phone quite successfully. I had run a department with 600 employees and a £20 million a year turnover with no major disasters. No-one had ever said that they had a problem contacting me and I had never knowing irritated anyone on a train. And just think of all the time I'd saved not having to respond to text messages.

There was a collective intake of breath..... and then I made a mistake.

I pointed out that I survived the first eleven years of my life without a television. We got rid of the copper and the mangle for a washing machine with a wringer when I was ten. We never, ever, had central heating and it was fun scraping the ice off the inside of the bedroom windows in winter and even now I have a thing about microwaves.

The motion was proposed, seconded and passed that I was an unreconstructed luddite.

To add insult to injury, I went for a pee after the meeting. There was no-one else in the toilet, other than this disembodied voice from one of the cubicles, cheerfully discussing his personal life with someone else on the other end of his mobile, quite oblivious of the amount of unwanted information he was sending out to the rest of the world. I didn't wait to hear if he was also engaging in a game of poo-sticks.

So, mulching now completed, I'm feeling a lot happier. The Garden's looking good as well.

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I coulda been a contender..... but I bottled out.

Maybe it was the heat of the day, or that long, slow crawl through the roadworks at the Road Bridge, or even the sinister shock of the black Dakota monolith, but by the time Birnam came into view, I just couldn't do it.

Having trundled the car down to a spot by the river, we made our way through the skirl of pipes to the arena. The pipes were skirling because there were what seemed to be a dozen of them, ranging from young laddies egged on by their mothers, through numpties in ray-ban shades, to auld jocks, all playing a different tune over a different drone. Ambient, it wasn't.

The stalls around the enclosure were the usual mix of tat, tat and tourist tat, mixed in with ethnic fare, like hamburgers, diet coke and something long and slippery in a bun. The gates opened at 11:00, events started at 12:00 and the parade arrived at 12:30.

Yes, this was the 143rd Birnam Highland Games and World Haggis Eating Championships.

After a ceremonial circuit of the field, Epykat, Sunnyparty, the elder Rathbonette and I settled down on the wooden settle just to the side of the Heavy Event Throwing Area. ( We knew it was the Heavy Event Throwing Area because there were signs telling us not to enter.)

As with everything heavy and highland over the last five years, all of the events - putting the stone, throwing the hammer, throwing the weight over the bar and tossing the caber - were dominated by Gregor Edmunds. After his first hammer throw sailed across the grass and came within whistling distance of Epykat's handbag, the excitement diminished as he proceeded to take over almost every event. (I ended up rooting for a wee ginger lad who looked about seventeen, could hardly lift the hammer and gave up when it came to the caber - give him five years and he could be up there with the best.)

Things started to become ominous with the announcement of the annual Kiltie Dash. "You could do that", said Epykat. Fortunately, it was only open to people wearing kilts, so I declined.

Then the competitors took to the track in front of us. Some had kilts, but some were simply wrapped in anything tartan. One guy had turned his car coat inside out and tied it between his legs. If I had known, I could have whipped the Massai blanket off Sunnyparty's couch before we left.

Then it was the climax of the day. The World Haggis Eating Championship. "You could do that", said Epykat. "No I couldn't", I thought. We got up from our bench behind Big Gregor and made our way up to the table beneath the lion rampant. The competitors had to eat a whole haggis and down a bottle of Carlsberg (courtesy of the sponsors). Fastest to eat all the haggis wins. As we stood, the tray of steaming haggi was carried past. They looked fat and greasy. By the time the whistle blew, they looked cold, fat and greasy. Each of the competitors had a different technique. Some cut their haggis into portions; some split them open and scooped out the contents. One lad cut open one end and squeezed the lot into his mouth like toothpaste. The winner was a diminutive young lass in a pink baseball cap..... I could have done that!

Still, the mince pie supper and can of vimpto from the chip shop in South Queensferry more than made up for my lack of courage with the haggis.

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What was it I was going to go on to? My cousin Ronnie and Dundee gangs, wasn't it?

When I first went down to London I only had two addresses. One was Mike Diggle's flat in Shepherd's Bush where I was going to live, and my cousin Ronnie's in Acton. So, after having settled down in Shepherd's Bush I took myself off one Friday night to pay Ron a surprise visit. It had to be a surprise because I didn't have a 'phone number for him and even if I did this was decades before mobile phones were invented and getting hold of people was more by luck than design.

Anyway, off I trotted to Acton and found the house easily enough. My bang on the knocker brought a guy with an excellent mullet to the door. I wasn't invited in. At the door I explained who I was and was asked if Ronnie was there. It turned out that Ronnie wasn't there. He had gone off to Jersey on a job. No, they didn't know when he would be back, but if I kept turning up at the pub on a Friday, then I would be sure to meet him one night. So I asked for directions to this pub and was told it was on the other side of Acton Park. Not too bad, I thought. That was on the Uxbridge Road, on my route back to Shepherd's Bush.

It wasn't too difficult to find. In I went for a little light refreshment before tackling the walk back home. To my delight it was full of Scots accents. To be more precise, Dundonian accents attached to equally friendly Dundonians. I was soon playing darts and chatting and by the third pint we were on first name terms. I discovered that I was sharing a table with Jimmy, Jimmy and Jimmy. Jimmy C was the eldest and came from down Hilltoon. Jimmy Mac was the most talkative and probably said too much. Jimmy from up Clepington Road didn't say anything, for now.

The next week I went back. Ronnie still wasn't there, but the three Jimmies were and we got on a treat. The third week there was still no sign of Ronnie so after a couple of pints I walked round from the pub to the house in All Saints Road. The guy with the mullet answered the door again. When I said that I was still looking for Ronnie, but he hadn't turned up, he thought that was strange because Ronnie had left for the pub at least an hour before. He offered to walk back with me, so we set off for the pub again. Except it wasn't the same pub. Ronnie called me a daft bugger as we settle down with our drinks. He asked where I had gone and when I told him, a bit of a hush settled on the group. He called me an even dafter bugger. Didn't I know that they, and he indicated the other guys in the bar, were Toddy and the three Jimmies and their mates were Shimmy? I hadn't the foggiest idea what he was talking about, but it seemed to be important to him that I hadn't told the Jimmies his name.

I was soon enlightened. Because I was Ronnie's cousin I was, by association, a Toddy and a Toddy did not fraternise with a Shimmy.

While Edinburgh has always had a gang culture, the various gangs have tended to come and go, sometimes borrowing a name from the past, but generally just bunging 'young mental' on to the front of the name of the scheme that they came from. In Glasgow gangs have mostly been linked in one way or another to the criminal underworld. In Dundee there was a whole, fully formed, gang sub-culture.

Most of what I'm saying here I learned in my evenings in Acton, but there is a particularly good book about the gangs of Dundee by Gary Robertson, called, appropriately "Gangs Of Dundee", which is full of hair-raising anecdotes by those who were, and are still, involved. To my shock, when I read it, I came across an interview with three guys who had been in the Shimmy in the seventies, called Jimmy Mac, Jimmy C and Jimmy W. Surely too much of a coincidence? I hope not. Jimmy Mac is quoted as saying: "Wi wir a wee but stupid at the time. Wi shoulda been makkin money." To which Jimmy W. responds: "Wuddya mean a wee but stupid? Wi wir ah fuckin daft!".

Like any city, Dundee consists of a conglomeration of residential neighbourhoods or, as we from the Capital like to express it, schemes. In broad terms there are about twelve schemes in Dundee and within those there are one or two subdivisions. Each of them has their own gang. Ronnie and his mates came from Douglas. Originally the gang from Douglas was known as The Douglas Mafia and then Mafia was changed to Toddy. Toddy, I was firmly told, stood for Teams Of Douglas Don't Yield.

The Shimmy's name was much subtler. Allegedly they started as a group of similar minded Mods who liked a bit of a ruck after football matches and took their name from the flip-side of The Who's 'My Generation', which was called 'Shout and Shimmy'. The Shimmy tended to hang out in the city centre and accepted members from anywhere.

Gary Robertson's book identifies at least two dozen separate gangs. Each of them had their own clearly defined territory and their secret signs, chants and colours.

Almost all of the gangs had hand signals through which they could identify, or taunt each other. There's not a lot of difference between the signs for the Hula and the Whitfield Shams, or the Douglas Toddy and the Fintry Shamrock, but it is the difference which could stop you getting your head kicked in.

The most obvious way to tell one gang from another was through their jumpers. All gang members wore jumpers in a solid base colour with a broad band of a contrasting colour across the middle. Every gang wore the same style, but each gang in their own colours. There wasn't ever a real equivalent for this in Edinburgh.

Douglas Toddy was black with a pale blue stripe. Whitefield Shams were white with a red stripe. The Beechie Mob were yellow and red. Hula were originally black with two yellow stripes and then changed to light blue with a single green band.

Robertson traces the jumpers back to The Shimmy's Mod beginnings, suggesting that they developed out of racing cyclists' jerseys. There are claims and counter claims as to how they started, but what isn't in dispute is that most of them were made by the woman in the wool shop in Victoria Road who knitted the jumpers to order. Just getting to the shop took courage as it was located deep in the territory of the Hulltoon Huns (black with a green stripe). As Gary Robertson points out, the owners of the shop must have eventually realised what was going on, but were happy to conspire in the gang culture as long as the money was coming in.

With hindsight the colours "wir a wee but stupid" as the Jimmies might have said. Not only did they signal the guys to other gangs, they also signalled them to the police, who from time to time clamped down on anyone seen wearing them.

I was soon to discover that most of the guys I was hanging about with in Acton, at whatever pub, were there because of gang warfare in Dundee, and that went for my cousin Ronnie as well.

At the end of the sixties problems were growing in the Dundee schemes. In Fintry alone over 900 houses were vacant and boarded up. The Dundee Courier estimated that there were 200 gang members in the Lochee Fleet alone (dark blue with a maroon stripe). The City Council's response was to introduce a 'best kept scheme' competition. The Director involved described this as like a best kept village competition which could help to combat vandalism and lead to a better environment for all.

What it did lead to was an increase in rivalry between the gangs. In a seven month period there were 280 assaults and 7 killings all gang related. It culminated at the annual carnival at Gussie Park where the police came under attack, showered with stones and bottles. There were 'shameful displays of hooliganism' with havoc and devastation from the park all the way to Kirkton and traffic on the Clepington Road was stopped. Most of the kids, aged between 16 and 20, who found themselves in the dock afterwards, were members of the Douglas Toddy.



Most of them found their way to London to keep out of harm's way. As an adopted Toddy I didn't make my way back cross Acton Green to the other pub, which was a pity because I had rather liked the three Jimmies. I never saw them again.

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When I wrote the stuff about Dundee Gangs the other week I made the comment that there wasn't really an equivalent in Edinburgh. That wasn't intended to be provocative, just a statement of fact, but I have had a response. "What about the Capital City Service then?" was the precise wording.

Two comments: 1) One sectarian group does not represent a city wide phenomenon in the way that the Dundee gangs did and 2) Football hooliganism is a completely different culture, with different motivations and different kind of territoriality.

That's not to say that Capital City Service are not worthy of some attention. There is even a whole book devoted to them.....hunt out ' These Colours Don't Run' by Derek Dykes and Andy Colvin. There is a whole sub-cultural genre devoted to Football Casuals, and Capital City Service fit into that niche. The hey day of the Casuals nationally was between 1984 and 1997 and it's probably true to say that was also the peak of Capital City Services.

I know that someone will come back and say 'what about the running battle in Lothian Road after the Hibs - Hearts draw in October 2006?' Well, what about it? That may well have happened even without the casuals and was nowhere on the level of the mayhem surrounding what the Daily Record called 'The Arena Of Horror' at Easter Road in November 1987 or the Hibs-Liege match in 1989 or even the campaign which the Evening News ran in 1990 to encourage people to shop a Casual Acquaintance.

As I say, there is some merit in looking at groups like these and what motivates them and I might come back to that at some later date, but not in the context of street gangs.

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To return briefly to gang culture in Edinburgh, over Easter I was reading 'Lavengro' by George Borrow. This was originally published in 1851, but, in part, is set in Edinburgh in 1813.

He describes the situation thus:

"One day I was standing on the green brae, where it slopes down into what was in those days the green swamp or morass, called by the natives of Auld Reekie the Nor Loch. It was a dark gloomy day and a thin veil of mist was beginning to settle down upon the brae and the morass. I could perceive, however, that there was a skirmish taking place in the latter spot. I had an indistinct view of two parties and I heard whoops and shrill cries.

Descending the brae I reached the borders of the morass where was a runnel of water and the remains of an old wall, on the other side of which a narrow path led across the swamp. Upon this path at a little distance before me was a bicker. I pushed forward, but had scarcely crossed the ruined wall and runnel when the party nearest to me gave way and in great confusion came running in my direction. As they drew nigh, one of them shouted to me: “Wha are ye, mon? Are ye o’ the Auld Toon?” I made no answer. “Ha! Ye are o’ the New Toon. Deil tak ye. We’ll moorder ye.”

The next moment a huge stone sung past my head.

“Let me be, ye fule bodies”, said I, “ I live yonder, aboon the castle.”

“Then ye’re an Auld Tooner. Come gie us your help, mon, and dinna stand there staring like a dunnot, we want help sair eneugh. Here are stanes.”

For my own part I wished for nothing better and rushing forward I placed myself at the head of my new associates and commenced flinging stones fast and desperately. The other party now gave way in their turn, closely followed by ourselves.

“Ye are na a bad hand at flinging stanes”, said the lad who first addressed me as we now returned up the brae. “Your aim is right dangerous, mon. I saw how ye skelpit them. Ye maun help us agin the New Toon blackguards at our next bicker.”

And so the teenage Borrow joined the Auld Toon gang and goes on to describe their numerous battles with the New Tooners, involving dislodged teeth, broken jaws, gouged out eyes and ultimately fractured skulls and deaths.

Not much change in 199 years.

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Exactly forty years ago I designed a little sign for a record shop which used to be in South College Street called Headquarters. It was nothing special. In fact it was a bit obvious, just a head divided into four parts. It acted as the open/closed sign on the shop door. Long before Headquarters closed down it had become faded due to the sun, so I retrieved it, stuck it in my portfolio and forgot about it.

Last year I was raking through my things looking for something else when I came across it again. Now, I am in fairly regular touch with Simon who runs the Edinburgh Gig Archive and a few of my pieces of memorabilia and reminiscences are posted on there. Among the sections on the site there is one for record shops and Simon already had an entry for Headquarters, so I scanned the sign and sent it to him and he added it to the site.

There it sat, looking faded and innocuous, with a little acknowledgement with my name under it. Until last Friday, when Simon received an e-mail from someone saying that I hadn’t produced it and wanting my name removed. According to this correspondent, all of the art work for the shop was

done by Kenny Skeed and I was obviously trying to steal his glory. (Kenny Skeed was a well known Edinburgh muralist and died in 2008.)

Simon, naturally, got back to me and I re-confirmed that I had done the sign, but as that was all I had done I had no reason to doubt that Kenny Skeed had done the rest of the shop. After all someone had designed the frontage, the bags and advertising and it wasn't me.

Simon responded to the e-mail accordingly and got a load of abuse back.

Firstly, it's no skin off my nose to be accused of not being the artist. I know I was. Anyone who knows my style and looks at it would know it was me and not Kenny Skeed. Apart from that it was based on a photograph of a friend of mine and I still have the photograph to prove it. And why, at my age, would I be trying to claim authorship of something which is forty years old and not particularly good in the first place if it wasn't mine?

No, what concerns me is the belief that people have that the Internet somehow gives them immunity from manners and lets them be as offensive as they like. Both e-mails Simon received were abrupt and gratuitously rude. Even if I had been at fault, he wasn't, so why attack him in that way, and over something so trivial and inconsequential, and why have a go at someone you don't know from Adam when you know none of the facts about what you are attacking?

Regrettably, this kind of behaviour is all too common in cyberspace, occasionally even in some of the posts on this site.

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I thought we were being burgled last night, but it was only an attack of no more nails.

Burglary was on my mind because we had lunch with JimJam on Sunday and he was telling us that they had been burgled. It happened through the night and, scarily, who ever did it had been into his bedroom while he and Arianne were asleep, took a few things from the room, including his watch from the bedside table, and left the door open. Down stairs all the lights were left on and the intruder(s) had gone off with the computer, stereo, etc.

So, when there was a clatter down stairs, I thought the worst. Creeping carefully on to the landing and peering down into the hall I couldn't see a thing. There was no further noise, so down I went. It was the pipe casing which had fallen off and dropped on to the hall stand.

Now, to go back a week or two. One night Mrs. R. thought that she smelled gas in the kitchen, but by then she had lit the oven and nothing had blown up so we didn't think too much about it. Coming down in the morning there was a distinct smell of gas, so I phoned the emergency number. I have to say British Gas were great. There was someone round within 15 minutes. The first assumption was that there was a fault with the cooker, so they stripped that, found nothing, and put it back together again. Then the boiler was stripped down, found sound, and reassembled. Then they disconnected everything, put a device on the meter and we all watched the numbers on the display slowly dropping. It appeared to be a leak on the supply pipe.

That may sound straightforward, but it wasn't. Our house was built in 1954 and has solid concrete floors. The supply pipe comes up from the street, under the front door, up the lobby and across the kitchen to the meter cupboard, all buried in the concrete.

The proposed solution was to get in someone with a pneumatic drill to dig up the floor, excavate the pipe, lay a new one and then concrete the floor, wait a few weeks for it to dry, relay the hall carpets and the kitchen floor, and presumably redecorate. The alternative was to take the supply pipe up the wall, run it along the ceiling and drop it down into the kitchen cupboard. Not particularly attractive, but a couple of thousand pounds cheaper. We went for the alternative.

It took them four days to do the work. You may recall the weather a couple of weeks ago. With no heating or ability to cook we had a good time going out to restaurants and the pictures every evening just to keep warm.

I had previously agreed with Mrs. R. that I would box in the pipes, but when I came to do that they hadn't left enough room between the pipes and the wall for me to get the drill in, so I had to resort to 'no more nails' to fix the casing to the ceiling. According to the packaging it should be able to support at least double the weight of the length of pvc I was asking it to hold up, but clearly it can't. So sometime this week 'no more nails' is going to be replaced with at least one nail every 100 mm.

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It's interesting reading the thread about rat running and the assumption that somehow the Council will take a common sense approach or, indeed, even listen to common sense.

Where I live we used to have a small parade of shops. There was a butcher, a greengrocer, a newsagent, a general store with a sub post office, a haberdasher who also fixed sewing machines, and a woman who ran party supplies. They had all been there for years, served our little community well and hence had thriving businesses.

Next to the parade there was a big house in its own grounds. The owner died and the house was sold. Then a planning notice went up. It had been bought by a company who intended to build a new store. (I'm not naming them because they are notoriously litigious). It was obvious to all of us who lived here what would happen. Almost everyone objected. There was a petition with over 5,000 signatures, but the planning approval went ahead.

The store was built and then began aggressively undercutting the shops next door until first the general store with the sub post office closed. Then the greengrocer and butcher. Then the newsagent. Because of the store the owners of the parade couldn't get new tenants to take over the shops so they decided to sell the whole parade. The haberdashers and the party shop woman were given notice and they went as well.

The Company bought the parade, demolished it and created a car park for their store.

Common sense should have told the planners that this would happen. We, as residents have lost good shops, our post office and our consumer choice. Worse, perfectly innocent and hard working people have lost their jobs and livelihoods.

Next ..... the store stands on a street corner not too far from the school, but the kids have to cross the road to get to it. It's not a seriously busy road, but kids are kids and there have been a number of near misses. Eventually one young lad was clipped by a car and had to go to hospital. The Council were petitioned for a crossing and, after a concerted and well organised campaign, they did listen and agreed to put one in.

However, their common sense told them that because the store was on the corner, the only 'safe' place for the crossing was 30 metres up the street. 30 metres further away from the school. Our common sense told us that no school kid is going to walk a further 60 metres to and from a crossing when they can run straight across the road. Nevertheless the crossing went in 30 metres up the street.

The inevitable happened. The kids kept dashing across the road to get to the store and the 'safe' crossing was only used by people on mobility scooters.

After continuing complaints by parents, the Council responded. They put metal barriers along both sides of the street around the junction where the store was. Clearly common sense dictated that these kids had to be forced to travel that extra 60 metres.

So now we have the situation where the kids are climbing over the barriers into the path of on-coming cars, dashing across the road and climbing over the other side.

The response when we suggest that a set of lights at the junction would resolve the problem was that the accident rate is not sufficiently high to justify that expenditure. Unfortunately that might not be the case for long.

Good luck with the rat running.

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Are Robins really friendly? Or are they only opportunist?

I was getting the raspberries into shape yesterday. If you grow raspberries you'll know that the suckers get everywhere. Out of one bed into another. Under the lawn, Under the fence and up through the path. So every year around this time I start digging them out and trying to get the raspberries back into the bed where they belong. It's one of those annual jobs that I don't particularly like for a couple of reasons. One, I don't wear gardening gloves because I find that you can't get a really good grip on the canes to pull them up if you're wearing gloves. Consequently all the little prickly bits on the stems get under the skin and take weeks to work themselves out again. Two, the things are so woody that they won't compost and are too long to go in the bin, so after they've been dug up they take a couple of hours to cut down into bin sized chunks.

This year it was particularly difficult. Except for the snow a couple of weeks ago we have had hardly any precipitation to speak of down here since April last year. In fact, statistically, we have had less rain than Morocco. Starting to dig was a revelation. The water from the snow had penetrated about two inches into the ground, then it became quite dry and crumbly and then, about four inches down it was like concrete. The first sucker I tried to dig out the trowel bent at the haft. I ended up having to get a chisel and hammer to break up the clay sufficiently to get the thing out.

In retrospect the hardness of the ground explains what happened to the fence. Just after New Year we had really high winds and our fence blew over. Not blew over as in a few panels came loose, but as in all of the posts snapped neatly at the bottom. My assumption is that there was no give in the ground which would have allowed the posts to flex so they sheared instead. So another of the tasks has been to dig out the broken bases of the posts, re-bed them, modify the panels and put the things back together again.

Which brings me back to the Robins. Before I opened the back door there were a blackbird and two ring doves on the lawn. A pair of magpies in the rowan tree and a couple of blue tits hanging on the feeder. As soon as I opened the door they all disappeared.

Then I started digging. First one robin started bobbing about on the path, then another two came to join him. As time went on they got closer and closer. Then they perched on the fence panels and finally joined me on the soil I had dug out the holes. It felt really pally. Nice to have such friendly birds watching you work. Then they started pecking away at the pile of soil where presumably I'd thrown up some seed or turned up a maggot, and I realised that they were as mercenary as the rest of us.

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Vampirella strikes again

Actually she has quite a nice bedside manner, but she does have a thirst for blood.

It started over a year ago when I was going off on one of my trips to Kenya. As usual I wandered along to the surgery to pick up a prescription for anti-malaria tablets. While I was there the practice nurse mentioned that my records showed that I hadn't had my blood pressure tested for some time. So she took my blood pressure and decided that it was too high. 154/90. I was referred to Vampirella.

She also took my blood pressure, still 154/90 and decided it was too high. She shook her head and said that I would have to give a blood sample. In our neck of the woods that meant going to the hematology unit at the hospital. So off I went, sat around for an hour, gave the sample and waited till next week before returning to Vampirella for the results.

They were normal. No abnormalities. But she was still concerned about the blood pressure, so she prescribed two tablets to be taken daily for the rest of my life.

I don't take that sort of thing lightly, so I bought myself a home blood pressure kit from Boots and started taking my own blood pressure. It was normal 125/80. I took it every day for a week. The highest it got to was 129/81.

Back I went to Vampirella. She took my blood pressure. 160/91. She sent me off for another blood sample. Meanwhile I was to keep taking the tablets.

As well as the tablets I was still taking my own blood pressure. It didn't go above 130/80.

When I went back to the surgery I took my monitor with me. Using my machine, in the surgery I was registering 155/90. On Vampirella's machine 154/90. Fortunately, my machine has a memory and I was able to take her through the previous week's results.

She was sceptical about it being 'white coat syndrome' so I suggested that I keep daily records for a month and see where that got us.

A month later my home readings were all still below 130/80. When I went back she accepted the readings, but now claimed that they were because of the tablets. She sent me off for another blood test.

We are now a year on and I have comparative data. My blood pressure has remained more or less constant over the entire period, except on the days when I have gone into the surgery. I went back on Monday. She sent me for a blood test.

Mrs. R. suggests that I stop taking the tablets to see what happens. I know what will happen, Vampirella will send me for another blood test and then tick me off for stopping the medication. She can be quite scary when she's roused and that's enough to give anyone hypertension.

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Sometimes I think my life is getting too close to Still Game for comfort.

Last night Jack and Victor, or should that be JimJam and I were in the pub with Stan and Kerr. The conversation was wide ranging. In other words we were able to talk about anything but the six nations rugby, which Stan found too painful to contemplate.

So we ended up having a good dig into three main topics.

The first was that old perennial, funeral arrangements. What do you want played. Who do you want to be there and who do you definitely want to go before you. Where do you want your ashes scattered or, if you don't want the wind beneath your wings, what do you want on your headstone.

The second was comparing the photographs on our bus passes. We agreed that Kerr's was probably the best, but Stan's was the most generic. Half the population could get on a bus with his pass and never be challenged.

That led us on to a discussion as to why, whenever we try to arrange a weekend away with our mates we always end up in an hotel which is linked to a golf course. What that means, in effect, is

that Dougie and Alex tend to dictate where we go. And when we do go we never see them all day because they are out on the links. It's been like that for the last forty years.

So we decided that this year it is going to be different. What we are going to do is see what is the furthest place we can get to for free using only our bus pass, and stay at the hotel nearest to it, wherever it may be. So far the record is held by Kerr who travelled from Edinburgh to Inverness via Fort William exclusively on the public bus system.

The third topic of the evening was all my fault. I mentioned Casuals a couple of posts back. We then had a long debate on what was meant by Casual. Not in the football hooligan sense, but in the sartorial. Was Burberry casual? What about Aquascutum or Stone Island? Probably all three. We agreed the Fred Perry sport shirts was definitely casual, but it was the continental lines, Fila, Lacoste, and Ellesse which really defined the style. Our conclusion was that it was just up-market Mod, but where Mod had been fanatical about the clothes, the Casuals were a bit lazy, being fanatical about the football, but getting the clothes off the peg. Between us we probably have about a dozen bits of clothing which might be classed as casual. Maybe we should try wearing them on our bus pass attempt.

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Hasan makes good coffee. That might not sound too strange, but he runs our local fish and chip shop and more people drop in for the coffee than the fish and chips. He's always a bit coy about how he does it, but it's certainly distinctive.

I put it down to his background. Though he is British born and bred, his family come from Turkey and I assume that there is something middle-eastern in the coffee mix.

Anyway, I was in there the other day for a coffee. Sitting at the table in front of me were a couple. She was rather large, with her hair pulled back into a straggly pony tale. He had one of those heads which go straight down from the ears to the shoulders, with no division between the head and the neck. It turned out that it was his birthday and she was treating him. He had the full english breakfast and two coffees. Hasan's sidekick, Zaid, brought it over to the table and put it down.

"And brown sugar" the guy said, so Zaid came back with two sachets of brown sugar.

"I said brown sauce".

Zaid protested. The guy insisted he had said brown sauce, so Zaid went back and brought a sachet of brown sauce then went back to the counter.

After a few minutes Mr. No-neck called over Hassan and started to criticise Zaid, his attitude and the lack of service. He had clearly asked for brown sauce and he had been brought brown sugar, and then the wog had argued with him.

Hasan politely said that perhaps the wog had difficulty in understanding what the guy had said. After all these foreigners do have language difficulties and were a bit thick. Take him, he was a wog



and he was a bit thick himself. He often found it difficult to distinguish between sugar and sauce. But then he had seen a programme on the television which suggested that most of us only used a fraction of our brain power, so probably most people were a bit thick. It was just as well, then, that people like our friend could use their full brain capacity and could understand that when they said sugar they really meant sauce.

The guy looked a bit confused, so Hassan elaborated. If everyone could use their full brain capacity, then we would all be able to communicate without misunderstandings, and if we all communicated without misunderstandings then the world would be a much more peaceful and tolerant place and Hassan wouldn't have to ask him to leave.

But unfortunately the world wasn't like that and Hassan chucked him out.

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I have a rather awkward filling between one of my upper front teeth and the adjoining incisor. It's a good filling, but slightly difficult as in order to get it to hold the dentist carried it over the gap between the teeth. As a result it is impossible to floss and I have to use interdental brushes to clean the very small space between the top of the filling and the gum.

Over the years I have worked my way through various makes and it's amazing the difference. Big ones, small ones, wire ones and plastic ones. Hairy ones and smooth ones. Unfortunately it is difficult to get comparative objective information. Almost everything on the web is tied in with one manufacturer or another.

The problem for me is getting the right size. Mostly they are either too large, or almost like a needle. It was quite some time before I discovered that there is an international standard and that there is meant to be a colour code for each size of brush. Apparently I needed an orange. So I started buying orange brushes. Some of them worked reasonably well, most of them were too thick and a good third of those buckled before I could get them through to the back of the tooth.

So I went down one size to pink. Have you every tried to get hold of pink interdental brushes in your local chemist? On-line you almost have to buy them by the gross. (That's an exaggeration of course). Icon Interdentals do them in packs of 48. Tepe do them in smaller amounts, but the individual cost goes up incrementally. Nevertheless I bought a range of pinks.

The first point to note is that while the international standard says that pink brushes should be 0.4 mm dia., of the five brushes I bought only two were 0.4mm. one was 0.5mm and two were 0.6mm.

Then the price, per brush, ranged from a whopping £2.99 down to 34p.

As before some of them buckled and bent. Only two of them went in the gap without forcing and all of them only lasted one brushing.

Then I came across a another brush, advertised as throwaway. It tapers from 0.4 to 0.6 and comes in a pack of 20 for £2, and can be bought from Boots, not on-line. The only problem is it is blue, not

pink. So much for international standards. It works fine for me though and demonstrates that it pays to shop around.

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It was two o'clock in the morning and Mrs. R. was restless. Eventually she got up. I assumed that she was off for a comfort break, but it wasn't that. I could hear her moving about downstairs and then she was on the 'phone. That was fine then, she was 'phoning her sister in Australia. I drifted back to sleep, barely disturbed by the waft of cold air under the duvet as she returned to bed.

Then just as it was getting light she was up again and getting dressed. That was unusual because I usually have to remind her to get up at least twice before she musters up enough motivation to go to work.

By the time I had washed and dressed she was almost finished her coffee.

It turned out that in the small hours she had realised that she couldn't recall putting her wallet back in her bag after she had been at Sainsbury earlier in the day. She had gone down stairs and looked in her bag and it wasn't there. She had gone through the Sainsbury bags and it wasn't there. She had gone out to the car and it wasn't there either. Nor was it in her coat pocket.

In it was her driving licence, her debit card, our cheque books for Lloyds and Santander, the pass book for the Halifax, £300 that she had withdrawn from Lloyds. What made it worse was she had also gone to pay the telephone bill and the folded up utility bill was also tucked in there. Enough information for someone to open another account and clean out our savings.

The 'phone calls had been to the Banks to cancel the card and put holds on the accounts. The early start was to get to Sainsbury when it opened up at seven.

We were the first in. The woman on the customer service till was very understanding. She went through all of the drawers and cupboards on her desk, but there was nothing there. She went up and down the row of deserted check-outs but there was nothing there either. She took our details and said she'd give us a ring if anything turned up. We didn't hold out much hope.

So it was off to the Police station, which unlike Sainsbury, didn't open until eight. It also, conveniently, has no public parking spaces outside. We sat for half an hour in an 'authorised permit holder only' space waiting to be reprimanded. When it did open, the duty officer took down the details, offered a little advice about not keeping all your details in one place. He asked us to give him a ring if anything turned up. We didn't hold out much hope.

Back at home we were waiting for the banks to open at nine so we could go in to arrange to set up new accounts, just to be on the safe side, when the 'phone rang. It was Sainsbury. Someone had handed in the wallet, with all of its contents intact, including the debit card and the £300. No, they didn't know who the person had been, but we could go over to collect it.

So off we went. When we got there the security staff asked for proof of identification, which Mrs. R. didn't have because it was all in the wallet. Fortunately the woman from the customer service desk swore that this was the right woman and they handed it over.

And the moral is.....

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I'm always fascinated by the way that viruses mutate.

The latest example is the bad cold that my daughter has been suffering from over the last week or so. Her facebook status has been full of reports on how bad this cold has been. The cold from hell in fact.

Now that she has given it to me it has mutated into the much less deadly man flu. According to Mrs. R. I am obviously exaggerating the symptoms. My throat can't be as bad as all that. This muscle ache is just something you have to expect in someone of my age. Surely overdosing on strepsils and ibuprofen is overdoing it a bit.

Why has Men's ability to turn a sniffle into flu and a headache into a migraine now become the default position? When I was younger a cold was a cold, not some sort of mythological subject of ridicule. Anyway it turns out that man flu may not be a myth after all thanks to research showing that men really are the weaker sex.

Researchers appear to have found that women have a more powerful immune system than men thanks to their hormones. The study showed that oestrogen boosts the immune system's first line of attack against bacteria and other invaders.

The research focused on an enzyme in oestrogen called caspase-12. It raises susceptibility to infection by blocking the inflammation the body uses to fight bacteria and other unwanted bugs. Experiments showed that the oestrogen kept immunity high. The results demonstrate that women have a more powerful inflammatory response than men. The finding raises the possibility of using oestrogen-based drugs to shore up the male body's defences.

So I agree with the Rathbonette that this is the cold from hell, and I will continue to lie back here on the couch with my strepsils and ibuprofen while Mrs. R. rushes out for the oestrogen supplements. Holland and Barrett do do oestrogen supplements, don't they?

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I do enjoy it when the kids think that they have discovered something new and I can quietly and smugly sit there thinking: 'been there before you'.

With the youngest, she and her mates have found Camden Market and are enthusing about it much in the same way as I did in 1972.

At that time the stalls had a good mix of retro clothing, bootleg tapes, handmade jewellery and bric-a-brac. Over the next few years some of the stall holders like Katharine Hammett and Red Or Dead, became so fashionable that they went mainstream and made a fortune. There were a handful of stalls in Inverness Street and a bunch around the canal lock under the railway viaduct.

Now Camden is alleged to be the fourth most popular visitor attraction in London, with about half a million people passing through it every week. There are xxxx stalls, around the lock, in the Stables, Along Buck Street and Inverness Street and filling up the Electric Ballroom.

The Lock still focusses on handmade jewellery, clothes and second hand books. The Stables (which is where the horses who towed the barges along the canal used to live) is mostly second hand furniture, though tucked in there are specialised stalls of which my favourite is Cyberdog with a bizarre range of pvc and rubber wear.

Buck Street is mostly clothes and Inverness Street started off as fruit and veg but is now a real mix, a bit like a traditional street market. When the Electric Ballroom is not being used for gigs, it tends to be taken over by name designers and imported clothes.

To be honest much of it is basic tat, but yesterday I stopped to rummage through patchwork flares, CDs, model cars and bicycles made out of drinks cans, soapstone buddhas, leather bags, cheap silver jewellery, Indonesian batik, stone sculptures from Africa, cassette tapes from Latin America, hand-painted plant pots and glassware, custom-made soaps of various technicolour designs by the slice, tarot readings, alternative therapy, henna tattoos and piercings, toy boats, painted lightbulbs, didgeridoos, back massagers and hammocks, art prints, furry bags, bongo drums, mosaic mirrors, bean bags, Afghan and Turkman rugs, wax jackets and green wellies, fake fur coats for £9, wig and hair extensions, 1950s cats'-eyes sunglasses and old BOAC bags, US licence plates and reproduction posters from Jimi Hendrix concerts, old Dinky toys, 1950S children's annuals, masonry dislodged from St Paul's Cathedral during the Blitz (allegedly) and all that within the first half hour. Everywhere there are stalls selling food from all over the world at really good prices. The Camden Market motto is :Being Unique Can Seriously Improve Your Life.

Nice to know the kids have discovered it at last.

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I've finally thrown out my filofax. It has been sitting in the bedside cabinet gathering dust for some time now. Initially it was superseded by a little Palm hand organiser, which in turn was pushed out of the way by the smart 'phone and then the i-pad.

When I first bought the thing back in the eighties I was in the first flush of being a Director. Everybody in our boardroom made a point of publicly flaunting their personal organiser. It made a change from penis envy.

Filofax turned what had been little pocket diaries into a highly visible compilation of must sees, must dos, business meetings and power brunches. Soon we were carting our whole lives around in spring loaded leather containers.

In its heyday mine held my personal details, separate calendars for work, home and holidays, my diary, my address book, note pages in at least six different colours, an electric calculator, my credit cards, a pen, a clear plastic ruler and a map of the London underground. (Just like my i-pad)

Now, should I be upgrading my i-pad, or is that just the current equivalent of penis envy?

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Continuing the penile allusion: Last year our local hospital was shut down, 'rationalised' with the one two towns away. As a result all of the services were moved an inconvenient fifteen miles down the road. With it went the clap clinic. As a result the doctors are now reporting an increase in young people presenting themselves at our surgery with chlamydia. These kids quite openly say that they are not prepared to make a thirty mile round trip to the clinic and don't understand why the local one was closed down. Apart from anything else, they can't afford to go to the hospital to get it treated. The fear is that chlamydia will rise as a result of the extortionate bus fares.

Like most places, Chlamydia is the currently fashionable STD round this neck of the woods. Fashions in sexually transmitted diseases do change. In my young day it was 'the clap' with all of the associated myths surrounding how you could and couldn't catch it.

Then, in the 70s, it was Herpes which was reputedly designed to ruin your sex life for ever because once it was in your system you had it for life and it could keep popping up at the most unexpected times. And no, you couldn't catch it from a lavatory seat. The so-called Herpes epidemic turned out to be typical sensationalist tabloid hype. The actual number of people with genital herpes turned out to be very low and the rest up us were being unnecessarily guilty about having cold sores.

Everything was overshadowed by the great Aids hysteria, which taught us all to avoid body fluids, only engage in safe sex, or, better still, don't engage at all. And no, you couldn't catch it from a toilet seat. The last thing that I would do is underplay the impact of Aids. For the last decade I have been working a couple of months a year in an orphanage for kids who parents have died of the disease and I know first hand the devastating effect it has had on the culture and economy of places like Kenya and Uganda. But in this country it was managed well and is effectively under control. Despite Edinburgh being demonised as the Aids Capital of the world I know at least three HIV positive people who have been living with the disease for over 25 years. Retrovirals can work wonders.

We'll pass quickly over Hepatitis and Trichomoniasis, both of which briefly hit the headlines in the nineties. The current disease is chlamydia, which, regrettably, most of the kids interviewed by our

local rag seemed to think was no big deal. Getting to and from the clinic was more worrying for them. The biggest concern for both boys and girls was not the possibility of contracting an STD, but their body image and why they didn't look like the people in the magazines they bought.

Perhaps next year we will move on to Molluscum Contagiosum.

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One of the most irritating aspects of aging is the memory thing. Things pop in to your head uninvited and won't go away. Sometimes things will not allow themselves to be accessed no matter how hard you try.

I wasted a lot of time yesterday trying to remember the surname of the brothers in The Jesus and Mary Chain (Jim and William Reid ) with the result that my reputation as a pop pundit was well and truly dented.

At the same time adverts from yonks ago were coming back with total recall. Specifically I couldn't get rid of Shake 'n' Vac, Nat West's pinball wizard cash point ad and the guy washing his Levi's in the launderette. Each of those pockets of my memory could have been more usefully filled.

How many brain cells does it require to store " Do the shake 'n' vac and put the freshness back." But beyond that how many more does it take to store the accompanying video of that woman sprinkling her powder and vacuuming it up again. Then there are the storage costs. That particular gem has been hiring house room in my brain since 1980. Most frighteningly of all, why, out of the millions of adverts I have seen in my life did my brain decide to file this one, and why is it bringing it back into my consciousness?

I can understand why I would want to retain the Nat West ad. From 1988, this is the one where the guy goes to the cash point and puts his card into the machine. Instantly the whole bank facade turns into a pinball machine with different parts lighting up as he enters his pin number. Beautifully done.

Same for the Nick Kamen Levi 501 advert. How many washing machines were ruined by people emptying bags of chuckies into them in order to get that stone-washed look? Allegedly Levi sales increased by 800% after that advert. Then Carling Black Label produced the spoof ad which was almost as good, with Mark Arden and Stephen Frost going even further by removing their boxer shorts. Two more loads of brain cells locked up in dubious commercial promotions.

I wonder how much else is filed away in there? Now, what is Lady Gaga's real name? That's a bit of info worth retaining.

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Talking of dogs and missing fingers, whatever happened to Pit Bull Terriers?

There was a time when every other ned in this town paraded the streets with his designer pooch. Of course the underlying motive was blatant. Pit Bulls were fighting dogs and the hope was that their owners would gain a similar reputation by association. The archetypal image was that Peter Howson painting called 'The Patriots' which used to be in the Glasgow Museum of Modern Art and is now, I think, in Kelvingrove.

To return to the urban myth for a moment, Pit Bulls were allegedly genetically modified ('bred' to you and me) to develop a job which clamps shut and just won't let go. The story has it that an american police sergeant attacked by a pit bull shot the dog eight times, but even dead the dog's jaw would not relinquish its grip and the policeman's leg had to be amputated to get the dog off.

Of course, ownership of Pit Bull Terriers was banned through the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991, but the problem was that the Act did not definitively state what a pit bull terrier actually was. It referred to ' a pit bull terrier type dog'. All such dogs had to be immediately neutered, microchipped and tattooed and it was illegal to breed the dog (which, given the compulsory neutering, was going to be a bit difficult anyway.) Above all, it was also illegal to keep it unless you had done all of the above.. It was also illegal to sell the dog, give it to anyone else as a gift or abandon it, so your options were pretty slim.

Because of resulting confusion in the courts the Government then issued a guidance note, which didn't clarify things. It said that cross breeds and mongrels could also be considered as pit bull terriers. The law also put the burden of proof on the dog owner to prove that their dog was not a pit bull terrier type. Consequently, because the police said it was, the courts accepted their view and, as far as I am aware, no-one ever successfully won a case. In some cases DNA tests subsequently proved the dogs were not pit bulls, nor even pit bull mixes. Not that it mattered; these dogs were still prohibited because they retained the 'appearance' of a pit bull.

What happened, inevitably, was that pit bull terriers went underground. You can buy them on the internet if you google 'pure american staffs'. Things come up like: "Blue brindle, blue fawn, pure American staffs sired by clashes buster blue import mother blue fawn 2 boys 3 girls really nice pups big and chunky will be 22/23 inch when adult very athletic type personal protection dogs will be real head turners the real old tyme type not the usual rubbish not to be missed deposits now being taken no withheld numbers please." Current going rate is £525 per pup.

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I was standing in the queue in MacDonalds yesterday waiting for my double sausage and egg MacMuffin meal when I thought: Bovine Spongiform Encephalitis. What happened to it?

This was the disease which was supposed to be devastating us all by now, but doesn't appear to have arrived..... yet.

The first case of BSE was recorded in April 1985. Some scientists claimed it originated as scrapie, a disease of the brain found in sheep. It was caused by a virus which lead to madness and death. The

virus was particularly hardy and could not be destroyed by heat. Any infected sheep were destroyed, minced up and used in cattle feed. That led to the virus being transferred into cows, with the same deadly effects. The cows were slaughtered, minced up and turned into beefburgers.....

Over 180,000 cattle were slaughtered at the heights of the scare in 1989, but it was estimated that, because of the long incubation period, as many as 482,000 infected animals could have entered the food chain, which meant that potentially millions of humans could have been infected. The human version was christened Variant Creutzfeldt Jakob Disease, or vCJD for short. It was anticipated that there would be thousands of human cases by now.

In fact, to date, there have been 176 recorded cases of human mad cow disease in this country and around 100 in the rest of the world. All cases of vCJD are co-ordinated through the National CJD Surveillance Unit which is based in Edinburgh.

The problem with vCJD is that there is still no diagnosis. The incubation period can be up to eight years and it is only when symptoms start appearing that people can be suspected of having it and only postmortem diagnosis of the brain can determine for certain whether the person had it or not. Consequently scientists still predict that we may all be vulnerable.

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Fifty nine years ago this morning my mum got me out of bed really early because we were going to my Auntie Margaret's at Gilmerton to watch the Queen. That meant getting the tram up to Princes Street and the the bus to Gilmerton from the bus station in St. Andrew's Square.

I was dressed in my best clothes, with my white coat with the brown collar, even though it was June. My great Auntie Mag was coming with us, but Nana wasn't because she was helping out at a party at the Alexanders.

We were going to Auntie Margaret's because Uncle Davie had bought a television set. I didn't know what a television set was. Mum and Auntie Mag were very excited by the television. When we got to their house in Moredun Park Gardens, the television set turned out to be a disappointment. It was just a big brown box, a bit like a record player, with a small grey square at the top.

Auntie Margaret had been up half the night making sandwiches and baking cakes and Uncle Davie and my cousins were busy taking the kitchen table out into the street. Everybody seemed to be taking their kitchen tables out into the street. Then Uncle Davie and the boys started taking all of the furniture out of the front room, except for the television set.

I was more interested in what was happening outside, with all these flags being strung up on the lampposts and all the food being laid out on the tables.

But I was herded back inside at about ten o'clock. Lots of people packed into the front room and then Uncle Davie switched on the television and the little grey square started to show pictures. I was told that this was the Queen's coronation. It meant nothing to me, but everybody else seemed fascinated. It went on and on and on so my cousin Robbie and I went to play in the garden. My mum



brought us back in because ‘this was important’. All I can remember of what was on the screen was the golden coach.

What was more important was getting to the cakes and sandwiches afterwards. We were all given a special Coronation mug for our lemonade. That mug used to have pride of place in my Nana’s kitchen in Bath Street until Frisky, the cat, accidentally knocked it over and it smashed in the sink. For christmas Auntie Margaret gave me a model kit of the golden coach.

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For some reason I was always given my pocket money on a Sunday morning after coming back from Sunday School. It was 3d (just over 1p). Some times it came a threepenny bit, which was a chunky brass hexagonal shape, a bit like a yellow 20p. There were also silver threepennies which looked like the current 5p, but they were exclusively reserved for choking unsuspecting pudding eaters at Christmas. I preferred it when I got my pocket money in the form of six halfpennies. It seemed like a lot more.

Usually those six halfpennies ended up in the till of Molly Hood’s sweet shop in Bath Street. It was a magic place with all of these big jars of all types of sweets towering over your head all the way up to the ceiling.

Sweets were still rationed and so I had to ask my mum for my ration book before I could buy them. I can’t remember her ever not giving me it, but I presume that she did use it as a way of limiting my consumption. It was a little square book with a beige cover. Inside were coupons which had to be exchanged for the sweets. You could only exchange a fixed number of coupons every week.

In Molly Hood’s shop there were lots of sweets which were four for a penny and she would let you have a selection .... pick ‘n’ mix before its time. For my 3d I could get a mixture of blackjacks, fruit salads, dolly mixtures and sherbet lemons. Alternatively I could have a Barrat’s sherbet fountain with a stick of licorice in it and a gob stopper. Or there was the possibility of a penny whopper (which was long, brown and chewy .... I shudder to think what was in it) and a packet of kp nuts. If I wanted to blow the whole 3d on one thing there were Rollos and, a little later in the 50s, Spangles. There used to be an advert for Spangles which showed an artist in smock and beret painting two men in kilts walking a scotty dog over the slogan “Jocks love spangles, docs love spangles, even still life artists in smocks love spangles.” Nobody at the time thought that was surreal.

If you had a pal, you could club together and really splash out on a Mars bar which cost fourpence. The only trouble with that, though, was cutting it up into equal slices. Unless it was really cold and the knife was really sharp, the chocolate tended to crumble and endless arguments about who got the bigger portion were sure to arise.

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I suppose Auntie Mag got dressed in her best for the Coronation as well, but in my memory I can only see her in her pinny. She never seemed to take it off. Most mornings it was accompanied by a head scarf tied round her head like a turban.

Aunty Mag was my Nana's sister and they ran a theatrical boarding house at 43 Bath Street. All sorts of strange types used to pass through there. To a kid it seemed very exotic.

Because most of the rooms were used by 'the guests', our lives were lived in the kitchen. I used to sleep on the couch which was in an alcove behind the kitchen table. My abiding memory of staying at my Nana's is lying on the couch in the morning listening to the sound of the clock ticking.

As was almost uniform in the 50s, Monday was washing day. This was a ritual. All of the bed linen was stripped off the beds, sorted into sheets, blankets, bolsters and pillow cases. They were then put into a pram and Nana and I would push it up to the High Street and then along to the steamie in Adelphi Grove. I used to love the steamie. Back in Bath Street Auntie Mag would be washing the more delicate things in the big galvanised tub, making efficacious use of a dolly blue bag and a poss stick to get them gleaming and the washboard to remove the stubborn stains. Then it was running them through the mangle. I used to get to turn the handle. I used to love the mangle as well.

At night I would have to climb up on the work top next to the big Belfast sink in the kitchen to get washed. That was alright during the summer, but in winter there was an icy blast from the window up your back. I didn't love the Belfast sink.

There weren't any supermarkets in those days and most people didn't have cars, fridges or microwaves. If you lived in Portobello, like us, that wasn't a problem. There were shops all along the High Street and down Bath Street. You could get anything. There were fishmongers, butchers, green grocers, bakers and dairies. Rudge's general grocer on the corner of Bath Street and Straiton Place was particularly good.

Then there were the deliveries to your front door. These came on horse and cart. The coal men came every week. As a child I just took them for granted, but when you consider the effort it must have taken to carry bags of coal up to the top landings of the tenements, they really had a hard job.

The Rag and Bone men would also come around once a week. You could tell it was them because they would ring a bell. I wasn't allowed to go out when the rag and bone men were in the street because they were 'tinks' and not to be associated with.

Then there were the skoosh carts, the lemonade man with his deliveries of lemonade and the magical american cream soda. There was the time when the lemonade cart overturned at the junction of High Street and Brighton Place, shedding its crates of bottle, and there was glass and lemonade everywhere. Maybe something had spooked the horse or it had caught it's foot in the tramlines.

An off-shoot of the horse and cart trade was the manure. As late as the 50s we were still familiar with piles of dung in the street and the smell of horses in the air. People usually went out with a bucket and spade and scooped it up for their gardens.

Finally, for real door to door service there was the Kleen-e-ze man who would sell you a brush for every occasion. What a job that must have been. I've never worked out how many brushes you would have to sell to make a living, but it must have been huge.

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The Queen's jubilee road show came trundling through our town yesterday.

The elder Rathbonette even took half a day off work to stand by the side of the road for two hours and managed to get a fuzzy photograph of an old woman in a blue hat sat in the back of a big car.

Over 2,000 children from all over the County were bussed in to meet the Queen. From Mrs. R.'s school little Elizabeth had been chosen to present a bouquet and Mary, the head teacher was to be presented to Her Majesty.

For weeks they have been practicing their curtsies and learning the etiquette. You do not speak to the Queen before she speaks to you. You address her as Ma'am. No shaking hands unless she extends hers first and if she does, no gripping, squeezing or pumping allowed. Eye contact should be no more than necessary and you should display a happy demeanor. Above all, you never turn your back on the Queen. Mary had all that down pat.

The Queen was arriving at the park, planting a tree to commemorate her visit, and then coming down the line of school children. She would stop and talk to Mary. Little Elizabeth would hand over her bouquet of flowers and then the Queen would go off to have lunch with the great and the good (the mayor and council to you and me).

As this was going to be a big day in the life of the kids, Mary decided to film the event on her 'phone, so she set to, taking shots of the line of kids and then the arrival of the Queen's car. Then she turned round to film the crowd.

When she turned back it was to see a little old woman in a blue hat filling up her viewfinder. Sheepishly she put down her 'phone. The Queen was standing there smiling at her. "Um", Mary said. "You were supposed to come to us after the tree planting", she said. The Queen's smile didn't waver. "Ah," she replied, "Wrong time." And then she walked off to plant her tree.

Quarter of an hour later she was back. It was as if nothing had ever happened. Mary did her curtsy. The Queen held out her hand. Mary shook it. Little Elizabeth handed over her flowers which, in turn were handed over to the Lady in Waiting. And then the Queen was off again, moving down the line of cheering school kids.

Roll on the Olympic flame which trots through in a couple of weeks.

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Dennis is a regular feature of our local coffee shop. If you go past at about half past nine in the morning he's there. Go back again at four and he's still there. I assume that Magda and Peter who run the place feel sorry for him. Dennis is 78 and gives all the signs of being very lonely since his wife died.

I was in there yesterday for a bacon bap and a latte and the only available seat was that next to Dennis. Inevitably he started chatting, and with Dennis you can't get a word in edgewise. Off he went telling me all about the time he played football with the Italian prisoners of war when he was a little boy.

It seems his father was a foreman in the Post Office Engineers, and his 'gang' was excluded from forces service but left augmenting defence requirements along the south coast of England in conjunction with the Royal Corps of Signals.

No schools operated during the war in Hastings. With little or no schooling, Dennis often accompanied his father to work, which was usually to remove all the metalwork associated with 'phones on poles along the road between Winchelsea and Rye as this was interfering with radar along this stretch. The task involved removing all the wires, steps etc. The service was maintained by laying underground cable. When bombers went over, which was quite regular, Dennis would hide under his father's lorry with him.

One thing his father always carried in his lorry was footballs. He was a keen amateur footballer, playing two or three times a week up to the outbreak of war. The footballs were obtained by collecting cigarette coupons, (he was a keen smoker) and lunch breaks always ended with a short 'match' played either on the road or in a field, with tunics as posts.

On the outskirts of Hastings was a large prisoner-of-war camp housing Italian prisoners of war. During light summer evenings they would walk to the camp with a football and play football with the prisoners. Goals were built from old railings and nets were fashioned out of old chicken wire.

One day just after the war was over Dennis and his family happened to be in Reading when this truck drew to a halt beside them. There were lots of men in the back shouting and waving. It turned out to be the Italian prisoners of war who were being repatriated.

He told me that a few years ago he had told all of this to a woman in Bournemouth who was doing some sort of history project.

By that time I had finished my latte. Before I was at the door Dennis had latched on to someone else and was telling them about hop picking in Kent.

When I got home I tried googling 'playing football with prisoners of war in East Sussex' and guess what came up? A whole page of war memories by a young boy called Dennis who had lived in East Sussex, collected in October 2003 for the People's War Archive.

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At around quarter past three this afternoon I will witness a bona fide miracle.

The main road through our town runs past the end of our street. About ten years ago the council put in a cycle track, which they demarcated with a nice surface of bright pink tarmac with a drawing of a bike in white at regular intervals. Between the cycle track and the carriage way was a solid white line and along the edge of the pavement double yellow lines.

For a couple of years everything went well. Car drivers stuck to the carriage way. The number of cyclists increased. The cycleway was linked up to the Sustrans network. Cyclists from outside the town who used to bypass it started coming in. The coffee shop had a bike rack installed outside.

Then a few cracks started to appear in the bright pink tarmac. Following the winter frosts it started to flake off. Everybody assumed that the council would come along to fix it, but they didn't. The following winter potholes began to appear. The council's response was to slap a bit of black stuff in the hole and tamp it down. The Cycle track looked quite spotty.

The cars started edging over on to the spotty track and surprisingly quickly the bike symbols and the white lines were being worn off. We assumed the council would fix it. They didn't.

The potholes reappeared. The markings disappeared. Even the yellow lines began to go.

Somebody got on to the council about it. They were aware of the problem. It was on the list. Another year went by and the cycle path had all but disappeared. The cyclists got up a petition. The council's response was that it was on the list. The local MP was approached. She said she would see what she could do. But she lost her seat at the next election and the Tories were in. The council's tune changed. The deteriorating cycle path was no longer on the list, it was a victim of the cuts. The chairman of the highways committee went on record to say it would take a miracle to get the necessary money in the foreseeable future.

Last week the road was closed every night. The entire surface was dug up and relaid. The cycle lane was reinstated. The white lines went down. The yellow lines went down. The little graphic bicycles reappeared. Even the railings and lampposts were scraped free of rust and repainted. On Friday they came along and strung bunting from lamppost to lamppost.

And at quarter past three today, for all of four minutes, someone will run along it holding the olympic torch aloft. Who knew the flame had such power to transform?

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You realise that you aren't as young as you were when you get a veruca on the sole of your foot. It's easy enough to go to the chemist and buy a tube of gel to bazooka that veruca, but trying to apply it is the hard bit. What's the point of going to the gym to keep fit if one little virus lurking in the shower can undo all that good work? Where did the flexibility in your knee joints go? And as for the hip, it can protest all it likes, but this little pest is going to get squirted. Just getting access to the sole of your foot can be a struggle.

Anyway, I eventually got into a workable position, and while I was down there it made me think about feet. I take mine for granted and you probably use yours with similar lack of thought. Feet are very special and we don't treat them right. We don't have enough regard for them.

The nerve endings in the bottoms of your feet connect up to all sorts of different parts of you. If your feet are neglected or mistreated the whole rest of your body will suffer.

Just consider the bone structure. The foot is a marvel of engineering. The delicate bones of the metatarsal arch can support enormous weight and sustain great shocks without breaking. Our feet are the supports and foundations on which we stand, then walk and run. They are the first, the oldest, and in most places in the world the only form of transportation.

Apparently Nijinsky had very square feet with his toes all about the same length. This was the reason he could jump so high. His toes, the last thing to leave the ground as he jumped, propelled him into the air like pistons.

The bushmen of the Kalahari can recognise each other's footprints as easily as we recognise voices. I couldn't recognise my own footprint. In fact I don't think I've ever consciously looked at my own footprint. Like the vast majority of people in the west I've become quite out of touch with my feet and they have responded by becoming insensitive inside their shoes.

It has been an enjoyable experience getting to know my toes again. Toes are wonderful. They can do a lot more than you realize. Wiggling them. Stretching them. Just spreading them out and having a good look. I haven't had this much fun with them since I was a baby.

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I read a hilarious article this week by Clifford Yudell on the Cannibal Liberation Front. He estimates that statistically there are at least 11,000 people with cannibal tendencies in New York alone. Across America it may be as many as three million. And why should they be denied their right to eat as they choose? There is nothing specifically on the statute books denying them that right.

It seems that they are getting together. A number of them (16) reserved a large table in a New York restaurant, arrived, checked in their coats and sat down. After cocktails they refused to accept the restaurant's standard menu because there was not one single item listed that would appeal to the average cannibal. Much to the surprise of the maitre d' they announced that not only had they brought their own dinner, but that they had every intention of using his kitchen to prepare it. The police were called.

Buoyed up by the resulting media coverage Cannibal 'cells' began springing up all over the country, culminating in the first Cannibal Pride day. Inevitably factions have developed. On the extreme right are the strictly orthodox CHEW (Cannibalism for Health, Education and Wellbeing). In the middle are the Cannibal Activists who believe that an end to political oppression of Cannibalism is the only way to achieve full social acceptance. And on the left, showing little patience for the other two groups, is the militant Eaters Liberation Front.

All of them are united, however, in condemning the fact that cannibalism is still prohibited by law in every country affiliated to the United Nations. Then there's the job discrimination. Apart from some fast food chains, no self-avowed cannibal can get work without hiding their eating preferences.

There are many misconceptions about cannibals. They are essentially just ordinary people with different tastes from the norm. You can't tell a cannibal just by eating with one. In fact you have probably been sitting next to them in the cafeteria for years without giving a thought to the torment they go through. Just think of the self-hatred they must experience every day when someone ask them what kind of sandwich they've got and they have to lie: "Oh, just tuna."

We all have to remember that cannibals are responsible citizens who want to lead private but honest lives. But let's be under no illusions: if we don't open up our laws, our economic institutions, our whole oppressive society, there's no telling what we'll have to deal with next.

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I do like a bit of casual ageism. I've had three instances of it this week alone.

I've been trying to get hold of a copy of Sonic Youth's 'Kill Yr Idols' for years and happened to find a copy in a little record shop in London's Hanwell Street which is not one of my usual haunts. I took it up to the counter. The guy serving looked to be in his late teens, early twenties. He looked at the record, then looked at me, then looked at the record again. "D'you know what this sounds like?" he said in a tone which suggested he thought I was making a mistake. I was tempted to say : " Yes, it's a pulsating blend of discordant guitars, impassioned vocals and compulsive drum patterns", but I just restricted myself to "Why?" "Oh, I just thought you might be, you know, a bit old for it." At least he was direct.

Next I was in our nearest Waterstone's, which has a particularly good comics section (which goes under the artsy fartsy heading of Graphic Novels). I've collected comics most of my life and might come back to that as a topic at a later date. Anyway there I was scanning along the shelves, sharing the space with this big guy in a fluorescent jacket. I assumed he was working on the building site in the town centre and had come in during his lunch break. Unfortunately we were getting in each other's way. "Looking for anything in particular", he asked. I told him I was looking for 30 Days Of Night by Steve Niles and Ben Templesmith. He was looking for anything by Steve Ditko. With a grunt he fetched a volume off the bottom shelf and handed it to me. "Present is it?", he asked. I must have looked slightly bemused. "Present?", he repeated. " I just thought at your age you must be buying it for your grandson or something."

The third event was really good fun. The more astute reader may have deduced the fact that the youngest Rathbonette is getting married later in the year. She has decided that she wants a sixties themed wedding. The wedding dress has been bought and we have spent ages discussing how I can co-ordinate with it in order not to embarrass her as we walk down the aisle. It has been decided that I must dress in full mod attire. The shoes were fairly straight forward (They are black and white brogues which more or less match the pattern in the lace on her dress). The Ben Sherman shirt was also fairly straight forward. The suit, however, is the piece de whatever. I tried looking at retro gear

on-line, but nothing looked right. A perfect opportunity now existed to relive those adolescent dreams.

So off I went to a bespoke tailor in the East End who still makes genuine mohair tonic suits to measure. His name's Gary. He's somewhat portly, nice smile, good bedside manner. We looked at a number of different photographs from the early to mid sixties and settled on the style. We draped various swatches of cloth over my shoulder to gauge what worked with my complexion. We got down to the various measurements. I went back again this week for the first fitting. It went on a treat. Just a few minor adjustments in the leg length and around the waist. "Nice fit", I said. "Trick of the trade" Gary replied. "I've been at this game long enough to know that by the time guys get to your age things have redistributed themselves a bit and I make allowances."

Let's hope I don't redistribute further before the big day.

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I'm allergic to a range of common medications, particularly anti-histamines and penicillin. Allegedly this is a consequence of my mother having been inoculated with all sorts as part of her job in the Eastern General and passing higher than normal doses over to me. (Anyway, that's the theory we got from Doctor O'Neil when I went down with all sorts of reactive complaints at the ages of seven.) What it means is a rash and itchy skin to mild anaphylactic reactions such as breathing difficulty and dizziness if I take anything which doesn't agree with me (including the potassium in bananas!)

So, if I need antibiotics I am usually prescribed imipenem, meropenem or macrolide. They really go to town on the bacteria, both the benign and the pesky ones. Which is a real problem for my internal colony of *Lactobacillus Acidophilus* which one capsule of macrolide more or less wipes out.

We all need our *Lactobacillus Acidophilus*. It's these little organisms which keep our digestive processes in efficient working order. They do battle with the unhealthy microorganisms that also reside in our intestinal tract by creating by-products such as lactic acid and hydrogen peroxide that create a hostile environment to the organisms that are unhealthy for us. Another spin off from their work is folic acid and vitamin K, both of which are good for us. *L. Acidophilus* also consumes the nutrients that are necessary for unhealthy organisms to survive, thereby out competing them for food.

When we were babies we acquired our collection of these friendly little bugs by drinking cows milk, and now, when we lose them, we can replace them by drinking pro-biotics like Yakult, or eating probiotic yoghurt. Allegedly. I have to say that I have consumed gallons of Yakult with very little effect. In fact Yakult contains very little *Acidophilus*. It is mostly another bacterium altogether called *Casei Shirota*. It's the same with yoghurts, which usually contain two bacteria called *Bulgaricus* and *Streptococcus*, neither of which permanently lodge in the lower intestine. Any yoghurt labelled 'long-life' contains no bacteria at all! Most manufacturers aren't very good at clearly labeling their yoghurts so you really need to read the small print.



It's worth shopping around for yoghurts which genuinely contain *Lactobacillus Acidophilus*. However, even better is getting hold of some containing *Lactobacillus Bifidis*. We all start off with a healthy supply of *L. Bifidis* which only comes from human breast milk. Inevitably it is not the sort of thing which gets emblazoned across the packaging, but if you look for Eupalan on the label then the culture in the mix has come from human milk. (You can sometimes buy Eupalan on Amazon, but it's not there all the time.)

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Once upon a time (actually 2006), there was a swan called Petra. She lived on the lake in the Aasee park in Münster in Germany. Though she was beautiful, Petra was a lonely swan because none of the other swans were friendly with her. Maybe it was because she was a black swan with a bright red beak and they were all white swans.

For a while the officials at the park were worried that Petra would lead a solitary life and tried to introduce her to various potential mates, all to no avail. Then suddenly, as is often the way of these things, Petra fell in love.

The object of her affections was a large, handsome white swan called Victor. The only problem was that Victor was a pedalo. She started circling the white pedal boat. Stare at it for a long, long time and make soft noises. She would also hoot angrily at anyone who came near the pedal boat. Biologists say this is how swans in love behave and swans take only one partner for life.

All summer Petra would follow Victor around the lake and at night she would roost next to him at his mooring. As winter came in the other swans flew off to their winter quarters, but Petra refused to leave. Every year the pedalos are put into a shed for storage when the lake freezes over and this year was no different. Victor was taken out of the water and put in the shed. Petra was distraught, flapping about trying to get into the shed.

Fortunately the local zoo had a heated pool in the elephant enclosure. Victor was taken there and Petra followed. All winter they floated together on the elephant pond. Come the summer they were back on the lake, with Petra blissfully following her true love as he was pedalled around the lake.

Their romance continued until 2009, when Petra suddenly disappeared. As she would not have deserted Victor willingly it was assumed that she was either stolen or had been taken by a fox. Despite numerous 'sightings' all over Germany in the years since, Petra has not returned.

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Thinking of Petra and her pedalo reminded me of the gay penguins of Bremerhaven. (What is it with those German birds?)

Back in 2005 three pairs of male Humboldt penguins at the Bremerhaven zoo had been seen attempting to mate with each other and trying to hatch offspring from stones.

The zoo issued a statement that said "Homosexuality is nothing unusual among animals. Sex and coupling up in our world do not necessarily have anything to do with reproduction."

There have been previous reports of exclusive male-to-male pairings among penguins. Homosexual behaviour is well documented in many different animals, but it is not understood in detail. It has been suggested that homosexual activity could serve various purposes - for instance, it may relate to social bonding and establishment of dominance . Some animals may simply exhibit a "drive to mate", while others may, like humans, enjoy non-procreative sexual activity.

The zoo introduced four females in a bid to get the endangered birds to reproduce - but quickly abandoned the scheme after the males showed no interest in the girls. This led to a campaign by the German Gay Liberation movement who protested that the zoo's action amounted to 'organised and forced harassment through the use of female seductresses'. Bremerhaven's mayor agreed saying that "Everyone, be they human or penguin, have the right to live as they please." The female penguins were removed. The six "gay" penguins remained at the zoo.

A few years later the zoo decided on another tack. Another pair of penguins abandoned an egg by pushing it out of their nest and so they placed it in the care of the homosexual penguins. They accepted the egg immediately and took turns in incubating it with their body heat. They did this for 35 days and the baby was born on April 25, 2009. Since the chick arrived, the gay penguins have been behaving just as you would expect a heterosexual family to do. The happy fathers spend their days attentively protecting, caring for and feeding their adopted offspring.

Warms the cockles of your heart.

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I'm a sucker for ufo sightings and, when visiting Mrs. R.'s sister am frequently to be found in Polmont staring at the skies.

Polmont, of course, is in the so-called Bonnybridge triangle and Bonnybridge lays claim to being the UFO capital of the world. Almost half of the town's residents have claimed to have seen a UFO at one time or another and on a yearly basis, around 300 sighting reports are received from Bonnybridge.

It all started in 1992 when James Walker noticed some strange lights in the sky while driving home. At first he thought they were stars but was startled when he saw them move and assume a triangle shape. Since then, UFO sightings have been coming in thick and fast in Bonnybridge. Many of the sightings occur at night and consist simply of weird lights in the sky. Often, they change shape or colour or modulate in brightness over time. Alien abductions have also been reported in the area.

And it goes on:

Take last year (May 2 to be precise) There was a lot of activity in the sky over Polmont. Particularly above the Klondyke garden centre at the motorway turn off. There were flashing blue and red lights

in a random pattern, hovering, going back and forward. Initially people thought it was a helicopter, but then it started moving slowly upward. Then it just took off and arched way up and over towards the BP refinery at Grangemouth. It was followed by a dim orange orb low in the sky towards Stirling. Then further down a bright orange light, like a BP flame but nowhere near the BP refinery. Suddenly about 10 things were moving in the sky at different times from between 12:00 a.m. – 1:00 a.m. They looked like satellites, but they didn't have a straight trajectory, they were weaving and changing direction. Then they dropped low and took off at seriously high speed. It was not shooting stars.

On 20 July a jogger was running along the side of the Union Canal from Falkirk to the Carron Lock Marina. He had just gone around the path where the boats are moored at the end of the canal at approx 11:50pm when he noticed a bright orange glow sitting low just over the treetops in front of him. It was just sitting there doing nothing, which was odd, but he thought it could have been a helicopter light or a Chinese lantern but then as he stopped to look at it more he noted several balls of light race in the sky both under and over it at great speed. These lights were sitting over Polmont. The balls of light were odd. The jogger counted six in all.

On 23 July a man out walking his dog in Grangemouth witnessed an orange ufo of some type. He assumed it was a chinese lantern at first, until it made a maneuver that no lantern could make, shooting up a little then back down, then after that it disappeared into the clouds. This was over Polmont around 12 o'clock at night.

There are more things in heaven and earth..... and Polmont.

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My father was always reticent about his war record. Apart from describing himself as a Commando, he kept what he did pretty much to himself. A few years ago (long after he was dead), I spent some time in the archives of the Imperial War Museum reading the diaries of his commanding officer, which outlined in detail the movements of his unit from 1940 to 1945.

It turned out that my Dad was in special forces and was one of the men who undertook the establishment of the forward command units in Normandy before the D-Day landings. That meant that he was one of a team sent in midget submarines to a point off-shore, from which they had to swim to the beach, make their way through the German lines and link up with French Resistance members and then make decisions on where the command points would have to be located for maximum effect. Fewer than 200 men served in the unit during the last three years of the war, and between them they won 90 medals, although their work has been little noticed over the past 70 years. It is simply because they were so good, and so secretive about what they did that nobody knows anything about them.

So it was with a bit of pleasure that when Mrs. R. and I were visiting the Aircraft museum at Duxford yesterday I came across a little cabinet in a section on D-Day. Included in it was the following testimony from a former member of the unit (who might well have served alongside my father) :

“I was dressed in a diving suit, in a submarine lying a mile offshore at Gold beach in Normandy in the days before the D-day landing. We arrived five days before the landing, went up at night to fix positions, and then returned to the submarines, which remained on the sea floor during the day. It was incredibly hush-hush at the time – quite critical of course that we did not tell anyone about what we were doing and people did not want to publicise it after the war, so basically no one has heard of us”.

What was even more pleasing was the comment in the same display that a memorial to them will finally be unveiled in September of this year. It is a four metre high granite stone, which will be erected at Hayling Island in Dorset, the spot from which they set out for Normandy.

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It was one of those torrential holidays that we love so much, cruising around the west country with the windscreen wipers on extra fast. It rained all the way down to Cornwall, mostly stuck behind the spray from the lorry in front. It rained all the time we were in Cornwall (except for one day), and it rained all the way back. Since we got back the weather down here has been glorious.

It was Cornwall because that's where the soon to be son-in-law comes from and we were going to meet his parents. That bit of it went off quite well. We all gathered together at the allotted spot in our macs and sou'westers and tried to spot each other. It wasn't too difficult - we were the only two couples there and besides his mum does look like Ozzie Osbourne.

The rest of the time was trying to find things to do out of the rain, which quickly becomes just finding things to do. As any resident of Portobello knows, there is a limit to the romantic appeal of standing on the sea shore in a forty mile an hour wind, being lashed by rain drops the size of golf balls while staring out at the white crests of the stormy sea. As any intrepid hill walker knows, there is a similar transient quality to the delight of tramping across the moor when you have to take your glasses off because you can't see a thing for the rain running down them, only to find that you can't see a thing with them off.

We resorted to tourist information: a handy brochure entitled 11 things to do in Truro:

Truro cathedral was fine, and out of the wet, until it closed for some sort of special service and we were in the wet again. The Hall for Cornwall is a theatre. The afternoon performance had already started, so we gave that a miss. Healey's Cornish Cyder farm sounded delicious, but was in the open. Same with the Callestick Farm Cornish Dairy. Neither of us play golf, and I doubt if anybody could in that wind, so Killiow Park Golf Course was out and neither of us fancied heading out across the estuary in the Enterprise Boats excursion. I did fancy the tour of Skinners Brewery, but as Mrs. R. pointed out, we have toured a brewery before. The Royal Cornwall Museum was very apologetic. The art galleries were closed for renovation but no, the extortionate admission prices had not been reduced, not even for soggy concessions. That left The ATV Centre, which would have meant dashing about in the wind and the wet on quad bikes or the Truro Bowl, which, given my knee problems, was also a no-no.

We ended up in the bandstand in Victoria Gardens. According to the brochure, beside the river Kenwyn, Victoria Gardens, originally created to commemorate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, is filled with exotic trees, shrubs and flowers. There is also a bandstand and during the summer, concerts are held on Sunday afternoons. You would not think you were in the middle of a city, the calm broken only occasionally by a train passing over the majestic granite viaduct nearby. The original viaduct was built by Isambard Kingdom Brunel in 1859, but was replaced with the present structure in 1904, and now carries the main line from Paddington to Penzance. It made no mention of the numerous kids sitting around drinking copious amounts of 'cyder' which didn't look as if it came from Healey's, and arguing with each other.

The only solution was to find somewhere to eat to pass the time.

Next stop St. Austell.

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I was sorry to read that at least one of the local kids hadn't managed to get the grades that his mum had hoped for.

I pass on the following tip for use in any re-sit:

Spend the time in the exam writing a letter to your mother telling her that you have finished the exam early and so you are writing to her to tell her how well you think you have done.

At the end of the exam hand in the letter instead of the answer paper. Take the answer paper out of the exam room with you, go to the library and look up the answers. When you've completed the paper, put it in an envelope and post it to your mum. (make sure to do this on the same day as the exam.)

When the envelope with your exam paper in it arrives at your house, intercept it. Take it back to the school and show it to your teacher, complete with the stamped addressed envelope and explain that you appear to have made an awful mistake.

Explain that you had finished the exam early and wrote the letter to your mum and must have put the wrong document in the envelope and sent it off. Hand over the exam paper for marking.

Most people who have done this have received straight 'A's.

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One of the great luxuries of the week is lying in the bath listening to Gardener's Question Time. If nothing else, it is tremendously reassuring.

Take raspberries. All summer I have been worrying about my rasps. There have been hardly any flowers and consequently only a few berries to date. I assumed that it was all the wet weather this year, but apparently not. It seems the problem wasn't that but the snow at the beginning of the year. Raspberries, it seems, don't like their roots frozen.

And the Hydrangeas. We've had no blooms at all on them this year. It's not that they haven't been prolific. Loads of leaves, just no flowers. Again I put that down to the heavy rain and lack of sunshine, but no. My poor hydrangeas are anaemic and need a good dose of fish meal.

I've given up on the fig though. Not even the best of experts would be able to convince me that it is only sleeping. By any definition, it is dead. It's hard to tell whether it suffered from frostbite or drowned. Either way, it is now just a stick.

This little trip down the garden path was prompted by Mrs. R. who was inspired by a superb photograph of a lovely blue caryopteris in one of the sunday supplements. It sowed two huge heads of blue trumpets with white hearts and long blue stamens. Inevitably I was instructed to get down to the garden centre and purchase one asap.

I think she will be sadly disappointed. Have you ever seen the flowers on a caryopteris? They are really tiny. To get the kind of image as that on the magazine you would have to use a lens the size of Mount Palomar. I came back with a new fig instead.

I'm considering sending my own question in to Gardener's Question Time and look forward to lying back, laved by Radox and bubble bath while they explain to me why seed catalogues and gardening articles are so full of misleading photographs which make plants look like something other than they are.

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I have to admit that I'm shocked by the bawdy comments about local shops on the Portobello High Street Facebook page. The last straw was Ms. Yates actually having the temerity to post a photograph of the Costcutters top shelf prominently displaying a copy of Practical Pigs.

In this part of the world we are over-run with these randy pink creatures. On some days we are down wind of them as well, a truly sensory experience. My mate Dave looks out of his cottage window at a landscape filled with little nissan huts all bulging with porcine flesh.

It makes it odds on, therefore that Practical Pigs is the top-shelf item of choice for many of my neighbours (filthy beasts!). It is published four times a year and claims to 'provide an informative and entertaining magazine for the domestic pig' with straightforward, down-to-earth content covering all the essentials. Each issue provides in-depth buying features from emporia like Sainsbury Local, practical articles on key aspects such as housing, feeding and welfare, owners' stories, readers' sows, a breeders' directory and much more.

The copy displayed on the Facebook page shamelessly features an article explaining the ins and outs of artificial insemination. Not only was the article tasteless, the pun that you have just read is atrocious.

So popular is this type of filth it even has its own website. Given some of the things people post on there, it is having a pernicious impact. Faithmead from the Carmarthenshire/Pembrokeshire border admits to curling up with it in front of the woodburner every evening and is so knackered that he can't concentrate on anything too technical. Oaklandspigs, from East Essex prefers it on the kitchen table, while Stonehead from Aberdeenshire notes that Suzanne sows put fat down extremely easily while boars from the Mermaid sows have the higher amount as they can tend to build muscle rather than fat.

Shouldn't be allowed.

So potent is this stuff that it was reported that during the rioting in Manchester last year chavs were looting all the copies they could as they searched for a suitable mate. (this is of course a joke ... after all, pigs are intelligent animals)

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Five times yesterday. I'm beginning to fall in love with her voice and am in danger of slipping into a real relationship. Which would be a betrayal of my wife and family. I try hard to resist, but it is getting more difficult day by day. Once she starts saying :” Our records indicate that you may be entitled to claim for mis-sold payment protection insurance....” I feel myself start to slip and have to put the ‘phone down before I fall.

Sometimes I just have to hear her voice again and dial 1471. It gives me her number: 08434103533. It takes real will power not to dial it. Instead I google it and it turns out that she's a flighty bissom. There are hundreds of other saps out there who have fallen for her charms and are trying to track her down. I'm amazed that she has the time and energy to make so many ‘phone calls and it must be costing her a fortune.

It's not as if I haven't tried to stop her. The telephone preference service tries its best, but she always manages to slip round them. What makes it all the more intriguing is the fact that my number is ex-directory and I have never, ever, had PPI. She must be really keen to get to me. Unfortunately, the only way I can get to talk to her is to press the hash key and my mummy always told me never to press the hash key with strangers.

She used to have a pal on 08434101843, but he was a real person and not just a sexy recording. One day I was distracted and got right through to the bit where he was actually speaking to me in person. He said he was offering me help in getting my PPI back and said I could trust him because he was working with the Ministry of Justice. At first I thought he said Ministry of Sound and hoped that I was going to be sent a free mix-tape. After he had corrected me I just said "in that case I will ring the Ministry of Justice and find out - what is your claims number" and down went the phone. I haven't heard from him since.

Actually last week was a bumper week for PPI calls. Between us Mrs. R. and I picked up the 'phone to over thirty of them. Apart from the nuisance, it is worrying to think of where they got our number from, and what other data about us is floating around out there. (Last year my details were used illegally to open a mobile 'phone account for which I got the bills, but not the 'phone! It took nearly three months to convince Orange that it wasn't me.)

On the other hand you can have some fun. The following was posted in the irrepressible Dadaist's facebook page:

“Tonight's PPI call was a scream. Emily & James took part. I did it in the worst ecky-thump / trouble down t' mill accent. The poor guy after they put me on hold made the mistake of asking how I was this evening. "DEAD EXCITED MATE, KIDS ARE GOING T' SUMMER CAMP AREN'T YOU KIDS - CAMP WONKY DONKEY" (Emily & James gave the rehearsed response "HEE HAW") - I then told the guy he was on speakerphone and got him to say "CAMP WONKY DONKEY" for Emily & James to shout "HEE HAW". He got things back on script but asked me if I was taking this seriously. "OF COURSE MATE PPI ITS TANTAMOUNT TO A CRIME" (I was sounding like a cross between Sean Ryder and Compo by this point) - he asked who my mortgage was with and if I had the paperwork. I said yes and it was all in the safe. Only when i said "KIDS CAN YOU REMEMBER COMBINATION T' SAFE?" did he put the phone down.”

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Well I thought the shed looked okay. It needed a bit of work just to actually get to it. My own fault of course.

For a start there was that whole stack of flower pots stuffed down the back between the shed and the wall. Who knew there were so many. These are the plastic ones that plants come in when you get them from the garden centre. There used to be a time when our local garden centre had a recycling bay where you could put the empty pots in and they would re-use them. Good recycling. Then they stopped doing that because it was cheaper for them just to buy more pots than it was to have somebody sift through the returned ones, clean them and get them ready for re-potting. Which left me with the dilemma of what to do with the pots. The council don't take them away and if you put things in the wheelie bins that the scaffies think shouldn't be there then they leave the whole of the rubbish to fester until you see sense. So behind the shed they went until a solution came along. They are still waiting.

Then there was the rosemary. It was almost as big as I am. Down to me again. I've been meaning to prune it back for the last two years. Once I had got it back down to a manageable size, it had revealed the next plant up (whose name I forget -- it's got yellow leaves and nice little pink flowerheads in May and June. That had to be cut back as well.

It was at that point I came across the roll of chicken wire that I had been looking for to put round the compost heap last summer. Well, at least that's something I can get on with over the winter.



Which finally revealed the shed in all its warped glory. It's one of those garden sheds with a timber frame and overlapping horizontal strips of wood for sidings. Since April it has been alternately soaked and baked. It is surprising just how destructive that process can be. About a third of the strips had warped and sprung, their nails being pulled right out of the frame.

At first I tried to hammer them back into place, but all that did was to make other ones pop off instead. So it was off to B&Q to purchase new planks. Then I spent most of one day sawing them to size, carefully removing the old warped ones and fitting the new ones into place and screw fixing them to the frame. Then I had to tackle the door which didn't fit into the frame properly anymore. That was really fiddly, getting it off its hinges, fixing the frame, changing the warped panels on the door and getting it back on to the hinges. That was another day gone.

Fortunately the third day was bright and sunny and I was able to paint the whole thing with wood preservative.

Mrs. R. came back from the Hospital. Did she say "Oh good, you've fixed the shed" ? No. She homed right in on the small blue splashes of preservative on the path. Then she noticed that the position of the padlock had been moved. It was now half an inch further over, which was inevitably going to inconvenience her because she could just possibly have to put one foot on the step in order to reach it now. And then she saw that the screws in new panels on the door were not in exact alignment. "I'll have to send to to carpentry nightclasses", she said before wondering why I didn't do the bay tree at the same time as I was cutting back the rosemary.

I'm putting it down to the residual effects of the anaesthetic.

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Though I was bemoaning the fact that my train into London yesterday had been replaced by a bus service, apart from the inconvenience of having to leave really early, it turned out to be a fascinating journey. All those stations that I usually whizz through without a second glance now had a whole town attached to them. In some instances it was a revelation. For example I have always envisaged New Southgate as a somewhat leafy middle class commuter suburb. It turns out to be a pretty run down, slightly schieie place. Then there was the childrens' playground next to the station at Turnpike Lane which was full of young guys in hoods (maybe a dozen of them) at 8:00 on a Sunday morning? You could envisage a book full of possible scenarios.

Anyway, the course I was on over the weekend was on website development. One of the most interesting parts was a talk by a lawyer about the pitfalls of running a site and increasing litigation against web managers and individuals. As some of what he was saying is relevant to what goes on here I thought I'd better share it.

The first area is copyright infringement (and this is something I, and almost everyone I know on Facebook, am guilty of). The most common types of copyright infringement on the web are images being taken from other sites and posted on social networks. It doesn't matter if you copy the image to your web server or point to it on their web server. If you use an image or quote text that you didn't create, you must get permission from the owner. If you're not sure if an item is copyrighted, it

probably is. Even if a document or image on the web does not have a copyright notice, it is still protected by copyright laws.

Increasingly people (particularly publishers) are tracking down infringements of their copyright and prosecuting. Because I usually post on here early in the morning I find that when I am logged in I am accompanied on the users list by a series of names in grey. You might have seen them as well. As I am writing this there are Bing, Bandwatch, Bot and Spider. These are programmes called "spiders" that search out images and text on web pages. If it matches the criteria are looking for they will flag that site for review and it will be reviewed for copyright infringement. These spiders are always surfing the net, and new companies are using them all the time. If they decide to prosecute, it is not just the person who posted they will go after, but the "secondary publishers" who make the information available to the public, such as website hosts or operators of website forums.

The other issue which is a litigation growth area is on-line libel. As we have discussed on here before, there are people who seem to think that the internet somehow allows them to say what they like. The courts don't hold that view. If you post something defamatory about another person which is likely to damage their reputation and which you cannot prove, that is libel and you can be sued. And, like copyright infringement, it's not just you, but the website hosts who are liable.

Interestingly (and scarily) if the web site moderators vet and edit material before allowing it to be posted, the law now considers that by interfering in this way they are demonstrating that the site is doing more than merely "storing" information and therefore they more likely to be held legally responsible for any defamation occurring on the website than they are if they don't moderate it!

The safest course of action for website operators facing what they think might be internet libel or copyright infringement is to take down all of the content immediately. If you delay or attempt to edit the material, then your risk of legal liability increases substantially.

I hope that doesn't sound overly alarmist, but it confirmed concerns that I have had for some time and I suggest that we all need to give some thought to what we post before we post it.

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Talking about finding time for things, I'm so relieved that research has confirmed that middle age starts much later than previously thought. For a while there I thought I was suffering from some sort of retarded senility.

According to official national data, there are now more adults over 65 than there are under-16s and a survey of those over 65s shows that none of them consider themselves to be old. In fact most of them consider that old age doesn't start until you are well into your 70s.

This contrasts with similar surveys in the 1950s when people thought that middle age began around 36 and you were into your old age by 60. (Just think of the 'old age pension'.)

To an extent this is due to most of us now living longer and staying healthier longer, but it appears to have more to do with attitude. More than half the people interviewed said they had more

confidence and experience than younger people and are less afraid of making mistakes. As a result they feel capable of doing things that their parents would have shied away from and that their grandparents would have been incapable of attempting.

Personally, it's not that I don't notice that I'm getting older. My eyes are now full of floaters, making reading and drawing a bit like watching a forest full of falling black leaves on an autumn night. The ears are much the same. I'm now at the stage where I only hear when I want to. When the conversation turns boring it's easiest simply to shake my head and claim I can't hear a word. Like most of my similarly aged mates I suffer from something we describe to each other as "Alzheimer's' lite", except we prefer to call it having CRAFT moments. Usually if someone comes up to me and says: "Hello, How are you? Long time no see!" I can't for the life of me recall having ever seen them before in my life. Selectively not remembering can make you more relaxed and happier.

Then there is the realisation that arthritis, blood pressure, warfarin, glucosamine sulphate, wobbly teeth, liver spots, acid reflux are all extremely interesting topics once you get to understand them.

Funny how it creeps up on you. Now that I'm older, I see all of life's charms. I can walk for miles, letting the views leak in. I love the rain, the sun, the seasons. And gardening, a chore I used to regard as outdoor housework, is now a pleasure.

At the same time, I also endorse the attitude once expressed in The Oldie: "Life should not be a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in an attractive and well preserved body, but rather to skid in sideways - Chardonnay in one hand - strawberries in the other - body thoroughly used up, totally worn out, and screaming."

So I'm going to join Hell's Geriatrics and blow this year's winter fuel allowance on something frivolous, like the electricity bill.

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As I was walking in to the town centre yesterday afternoon I passed a guy wearing a t-shirt that said: "No, I don't have Tourettes, you are a c\*\*t." It was like one of Frankie Boyle's jokes.

When I'd finished my shopping I popped in to Magda's for a cup of coffee. Dave was there with his daughter, Sky, who's delightful. She's just coming up for three, in to everything and has an amazing cheeky smile. She also has Down syndrome.

I mentioned Frankie and his sense of humour and Dave reminded me of the case back in 2010 when a couple tried to stop him from reeling out a series of jokes mocking people with Down syndrome. As parents of a daughter with Down syndrome they unfortunately became the centre of a media storm, with their, and worse their daughter's, privacy being invaded. In Dave's view it isn't worth it.

Though it's probably too late, he would like to see society come up with another name for Sky's condition. The reason for that is because Down syndrome is named after the victorian doctor John Down whose specialisation was the study "idiocy". Down thought he had identified the racial

characteristics of "morons and idiots" and likened the facial characteristics of those with Down syndrome to the "natives of Mongolia". He concluded that the syndrome must therefore be the result of racial degeneration, and dubbed people with it as 'Mongols'. It is a stigma which has stuck.

It is now understood that Down syndrome is a genetic condition where there is an extra chromosome 21, meaning those with Down syndrome have 23 pairs plus one extra chromosome. By bad luck this leads to neurological malfunction.

Whether we like it or not, the stigma of Down syndrome is deep. There was the case of John Pearson, who was born with Down syndrome with no significant complications back in 1980. After being rejected by his parents, rather than being put up for adoption, the baby was given only water and painkillers until he died three days later. Following a court case it was concluded that it was "ethical to put a rejected child upon a course of management that would end in its death".

As recently as the week before last there was an article on the BBC website about a man with Down syndrome who is suing an NHS trust over their decision to issue a 'do-not-resuscitate order' giving his disability as one of the reasons. His family had not been consulted and remained unaware of the 'do not resuscitate' decision until he had returned from hospital to his care home. He was admitted to hospital for a fortnight with pneumonia. When he was discharged, one of the carers at his home was unpacking his bag and found the Do Not Resuscitate form, to their horror. The reasons given on the order not to resuscitate him were: "Down's syndrome, unable to swallow, bed bound, learning difficulties". This is someone whom the article says has a really hectic social life, loves parties, discos and going to church. The assumption, however, appears to have been that his life was not worth preserving.

Sometimes the stigma comes through in indirect ways. Currently in England the education secretary Michael Gove is trying to change the law to remove what he calls "the bias towards inclusion" of children with Down syndrome in mainstream schools, effectively he wants increased segregation of children with special educational needs.

It happens with Tourettes sufferers as well. The Independent ran a story earlier this year about the experience of a woman with Tourettes who needed help on the London underground. When she asked a member of staff the best way to continue to her destination, she braced herself for the usual negative reaction to her tics. And he didn't disappoint, ignored her and turned his back on her. She decided to explain that her outbursts weren't meant for him, that she had Tourette Syndrome. His response shocked her. "I'm not giving you any fucking information," he said, without the slightest hint of irony.

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Memory is a peculiar thing. Why do we choose to file away certain incidents and not others? And why do we hold on to the most trivial of things?

I'm prompted into that thought by an e-mail I received the other day from one of the lurkers on this site. He started off by saying: "Having dipped into Rathbone's Ramblin recently I thought I should

bore you with a tale.” He then goes on to effectively apologise for an incident on a No. 26 bus, particularly “the unseemly way I barged you out of the way to get ahead of you as we went up to the top deck.” He is quite specific about the bus, the location (London Road) and the date (March 1968). Then he explains precisely what his motive was (He wanted to sit next to the girl who was in front of me in the queue).

What I find remarkable about this is firstly that something in these Ramblings prompted that memory, secondly that he has been carrying this around for forty four years and thirdly that something compelled him to explain it to me now.

Needless to say I have no recollection whatsoever of being barged past on the stairs of the bus. It happens all the time, particularly when everybody standing at the stop sees the bus is full and jostles to the front. Maybe the fact that he subsequently married the girl he was trying to sit beside has something to do with it.

But that doesn't explain the Wood Green Cat. This is the one where I have total recall of something that happened in October 1977 and Mrs. R., who was sitting next to me at the time remembers absolutely nothing. We were driving back from friends late at night along a main road in Wood Green when I saw a cat sitting in the middle of the carriageway, staring at us. The headlights were making its eyes shine. As there was a car coming the other way I could not swerve to avoid it. It was only a few seconds and then we were over the top of it. I have no idea if we hit it or if the car passed over it. There was nothing to see in the rear view mirror. That incident has stayed with me and recurs not infrequently, when others, including knocking someone off their bike, don't.

Of course there are lots of different theories as to why we retain memories of some things and not others. On the one hand you have people who say that we remember things that are emotionally important to us. Those emotions can be very basic: hunger, pain, fear, pleasure, etc. Or they can be much more refined: accomplishment, fulfillment, desolation, guilt, transcendence, etc. What's clear is that it's much more difficult to store and retrieve items that are not emotionally connected. On the other there are those who say that emotional content does not necessarily mean that events are remembered more accurately. In fact, there's a lot of evidence that all memories can be altered. It's a normal process — we're constantly taking our experience and revising it, even twisting it to our own benefit.

I like the concept of memory as a big net. And in between the big strands are smaller ones and on the smaller ones are threads. As we use a particular area of the memory the net becomes bigger and stronger. The threads are what catch familiar things. As you build up a thread it responds faster.

As an example, if I ask you to recite the months of the year as fast as you can, you hardly hesitate and trip over your tongue to get them out. You know the sequence before you can say it. If I say recite them backwards there is a definite slower process that goes on. Even though you know the same month names, you haven't recited them backwards before. You know the process and you consciously go through it, but it takes a bit of time. Now recite them in alphabetical order. What happens? You probably have to take a pen and paper to write them down and reorganize them. This is because usually you can keep only three to five things in your conscious memory at one time.

Having just read that back I can see that it has drifted some way off the point, which I had clearly forgotten.

Anyway, Alex, as Bob Hope said, “Thanks for the memories.”

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I was passing the time in the toilet yesterday reading the product labels. Three separate bottles of goo claimed to kill 99.9% of all known germs.

The immediate question was what are the 0.1% of germs that they don't kill. Is it the same 0.1%? If so, would killing off all of the other germs give it an unfair advantage and so will the toilet soon be overrun with hordes of the 0.1%? IF it isn't the same 0.1% in each case then why can't the companies get together, swap 0.1% and eradicate the lot?

You've probably noticed that over the last decade or so, what with swine flu, avian flu and H1N1, dozens of products have taken to bragging about their microbe-killing properties. Everything from hand-sanitizing liquids to products like computer keyboards, shopping carts and tissues tout that they kill 99.9%, or even 99.99%, of common bacteria and fungi.

One reason is that it is an advertising gimmick. The 99.99% message is more powerful among consumers than 'antibacterial' or 'germ kill' alone. Above all, it's just a legal ploy. Even if these things did kill 100% they wouldn't tell you. You might just be the one person who falls foul of a wee rogue germ, and then you can sue them for every penny they've got because their product which said it could kill 100% didn't.

The other issue is than in many of these products, particularly the ones for cleaning surfaces, they don't actually kill the germs, they just stop them multiplying, so that they die out over the course of about 48 hrs. In other words, the existing bacteria remain alive, but won't develop into a larger, more dangerous colony.

It's the same with hand sanitizer gels, like the ones they use in hospitals. JUst taking a little squirt and rubbing it on your hands is pretty ineffectual. Your hand will always have some bacteria in the crevices no matter how many times you try to clean it. In order to get rid of all of the bacteria on your hands you would have to immerse them in anti-bacteriological solution for at least an hour, and nobody's going to do that for visiting hour.

In fact, the very act of touching the mechanism to activate the squirt of gel transfers bacteria from your hand to it and then from it to the hand of the next person who uses it.

The other point to bear in mind is that these things are tested in laboratory tests that don't represent the imperfections of real-world use. Human subjects, or countertops, in labs are cleaned first, then covered on the surface with a target bug. That is a far cry from a typical kitchen or a pair of grimy hands. Independent university studies which testing three hand-sanitizer products found that they killed between 46% and 60% of microbes on the students' hands, far short of 99.9%. The germs that

weren't killed by the sanitizers aren't necessarily more dangerous than those that were. But the more that remain, the greater the chance of infection.

Legally To cite a 99.9% fatality rate, manufacturers don't have to kill 99.9% of all known bugs. Regulations don't require them to disclose which bugs they exterminate, just that the products are effective against a representative sample of microbes. For instance, many products can't kill clostridium difficile, a gastrointestinal scourge, or the hepatitis A virus, which inflames the liver. Yet by killing other, more common germs, they can claim 99.9% effectiveness. The standard test is run on 60 slides inoculated with a specific bug, and 59 of them treated with the product must exhibit the claimed rate of germ death.

If my mother heard about any other children with an infectious disease we were off round there like a shot and ordered to catch it. Presumably, she would be looking to save the 99.9%

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It was a big truck and he was a big man. The only available space to park was between him and another truck. Psychologically the space between the two appeared smaller than it actually was and I felt a bit intimidated.

We got out of our vehicles together. He was at least six foot, muscular and swarthy. We were in the car park of an industrial estate on the edge of St. Albans. I assumed he was making a delivery. I was heading for a warehouse which acts as a 'vintage emporium'. The younger Rathbonette's wedding is 'sixties' themed and the intention was to find possible bits and pieces which could be used to reinforce the theme at the reception.

As we crossed the car park I noticed that he was carrying a plastic Morrisson's bag with something in it. He got to the vintage emporium before me, so he obviously wasn't making a delivery.

The emporium is quite big, subdivided into areas for clothes, furniture, knick-knacks, records, books and so on. I started making my way round the knick knacks. The trucker disappeared into the clothes section. We seemed to be the only two people in the play other than the woman at the counter by the entrance.

About ten minutes later I turned a corner and found that I had a clear view down this aisle into the ladies clothing. There was the trucker, stripped to his boxers, holding up various dresses in front of a mirror. If he saw me he didn't acknowledge it. I carried on up and down the knick knack aisles. There wasn't much sixties stuff other than a few tea-sets, which wasn't what I was looking for.

I have to admit, my curiosity did get the better of me. I casually wandered down through the racks of clothes. He was now dressed in a black evening gown with jet and diamante decoration, a pair of court shoes, and was getting a blonde wig out of the Morrisson's bag.

He was clearly aware that I was there. He finished adjusting the wig, then took a pair of long black gloves out of the bag and put them on. Once he had finished he swung round nifty on his heels and

said :” How do you think I look” in a broad Geordie accent. “Um, fine”, I replied and moved off down the aisle.

And he did, apart from the swarthy complexion and the fringe of chest hair which filled his décolletage.

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Our garden backs on to the local playing fields which is surrounded by a tree belt. Every year we have to pick up about 8 - 12 garden bags full of leaves, so making an early start on the leaf clearance is usually a good idea.

Today was supposed to be dry but very cold. That’s not bad for leaf clearance. Just wrap up well and get out the rake and the plastic bags. The drive to the composting facility at the tip is also okay when it’s nice and sunny.

So I got up full of enthusiasm, raring to go and am now sitting here watching the rain lash the window. It’s coming down in torrents. So that’s leaf clearance out. Which is a problem because I’m otherwise engaged next weekend and the following one is the younger Rathbonette’s wedding, so that’s out as well. The clocks change tonight, so doing it in the late afternoon/early evening is out. It’s going to have to be first thing every morning, weather permitting, and soggy leaves are a delight.

The BBC on-line weather forecast for our area is still saying “Very cold in strong blustery northerly winds. For many, generally dry and sunny.” The hourly graph shows little sun symbols all the way up to 1700 hrs, when they turn into a cloud symbol for an hour and then clear again.

If you go looking for an explanation, they tell you that:

“the data observations from weather measuring instruments are collected and processed into a model that covers all areas and the change in weather over several days. Quite often not all data is available, but the models fill in the gaps. Complex mathematical equations are used to predict the physics and movement of the atmosphere and to determine the rates of change in the atmosphere over time. The rates of change predict the state of the atmosphere a short time in the future. The equations are then applied to this next atmospheric state to find new rates of change, and these new rates of change predict the atmosphere at a yet further time into the future. This is called time stepping. This time stepping is continually repeated until the desired forecast time in the future is reached. Computation time for a regional weather model is from a few seconds to a few minutes. Tiny errors in the initial data input, such as for temperature and wind, double for every prediction within numerical models. This means that a forecast for the next few hours is more accurate than a forecast for next week.”

Which presumably explains why the chart is showing sun symbol when it’s peeing down outside.

Mrs. R. has just come in and said : “I thought it was meant to be sunny today” and I’ve been able to reassure her that’s what the BBC thought as well.



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It's almost Halloween so I'd better go looking for the spare shoe under the bed. There's a paragraph in Frazer's *The Golden Bough* about Scottish superstitions, one of which is if you take a shoe by the toe and throw it over your house on Halloween, the direction it points when it lands is the direction you are destined to travel in the coming year.

I like shoe superstitions. In the main shoes are thought to bring good luck. This probably goes back to the Middle Ages when footwear was expensive and the common practice was to bequeath your footwear to members of the family. The saying "Following in your father's footsteps" is thought to have arisen from this custom and implied the good fortune.

Bare in mind too that in the Dark Ages, the strong smell of human odor was considered to deter the workings of the devil, and the smell of feet was particularly potent in warding off evil.

Throwing shoes after someone going on a journey was also thought to bring good luck. Tying old shoes to the wedding car follows from this, as it brings good luck to the couple as well as chasing off evil spirits.

Squeaking shoes are supposed to be particularly lucky. Good luck is also guaranteed if discarded shoes fall flat on their soles.

You've got to be careful when putting them on, though. Custom dictates the right shoe should be put on first and removed before the left shoe otherwise bad luck. Dressing the left foot first is bad luck with one exception and that is dressing the left foot unintentionally on a Friday morning, otherwise you are sure to have a quarrel. Putting shoes on the wrong feet will foretell an accident. Walking around with one shoe on and the other off will bring bad luck for a year.

Never place shoes higher than your head or keep shoes under the bed for both are bad luck. Slippers and shoes should never be put on the bed for the same reason. Shoes placed on a table are thought to be a bad omen and either a quarrel in the house, or a storm of thunder and lightning will come. Leaving shoes in the shape of the cross is also considered bad luck. To counter the bad luck another person must pick the shoes up. Tying shoes together and hanging them on a nail is also courting bad luck.

Which begs the question of how you do store them. In my case under the bed. (I'm not superstitious). It's just my luck if I can find two that match.

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This has been a day of distractions. I started off first thing writing about fish and chips. Not just any old fish and chips and not really chips at that.

As you come off the ferry from Likoni to Mombassa, if you turn sharp right, about 100 metres along Mama Nginga Drive there is a shack which does really great fried fish and freshly made potato crisps. I don't know what the fish is but it comes fresh from the Indian Ocean. It's lightly battered and tastes delicious. The best I've ever had (and that includes the chip van which used to park next to the tunnel between Niddrie Mains and Bingham).

I was reminded of it yesterday while rummaging through the underwear drawer looking for a fresh pair of pants. There it was tucked away at the back - a hat that I had bought at the stall next to the shack back in 2005. It's a small skull cap thing in a dirty white material with black embroidery. It didn't really fit me then and it doesn't now.

I'm not a hat person and I only own two. This one and a tibetan fur one that I bought in a street market in Nepal. I'm not sure where this aversion to hats came from. It's not that I mind my head being covered. I have a number of garments with hoods and actually quite enjoy the feeling of walking around enclosed in a little micro-room, especially if I'm listening to the i-pod at the same time.

That was the first distraction.

The next was a squirrel which was trying to poke the birds' fat balls out of their holder and getting quite frustrated in the process.

Then there was the e-mail from Amazon which came in asking me to rate an item which still hasn't been delivered. I took time out to go into my account. It should have been here over a week ago, so I dashed off an e-mail to the supplier.

Then the postman arrived with a load of letters for the two Rathbonettes, neither of whom live here but still use us as a postal address. Another couple of e-mails dispatched reminding them to let people know their change of address.

By this time Mrs. R. said that if I wanted to gather up the leaves before the rain started again I'd better get out now.

After that I went down to the town centre. At the roundabout a police car drew up along side me. When a silver BMV came round the roundabout the police car immediately put on the blues and twos and set off in pursuit. By the time I got further down the road the BMV was on the verge sandwiched between two police cars and two guys were being interrogated. I spent the next half hour working out a fantasy scenario while touring the shops.

So I got back here thoroughly distracted and not really interested in writing about fish and chips any more. Maybe another time.

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Who'd be a migrating bird in these changing times? At the moment we've got the flocks going over. I hope they reach their destinations. (I'm assuming that they didn't watch the BBC4 documentary on the South Atlantic Anomaly last night and so don't know what's happening.)

The anomaly is apparently the precursor of the expected reversal of the earth's magnetic poles. This happens every million years or so. The last time was 724,000 years ago.

Now our planet's magnetic field is vital to lots of wild life. As a tool for navigation, it helps bees find their hive, while eels, turtles, birds and butterflies use it to migrate over long distances. The magnetic field also acts as a protective barrier between us and some of the dangers of space, shielding us from radiation in the solar wind.

The Earth's magnetic field has been steadily weakening over the past 180 years. And in some places it is weakening faster than others. One of these is the South Atlantic Anomaly (an area about the size of Europe which straddles Brazil, Argentina and a chunk of the South Atlantic) it has already happened. When scientists mapped the Earth's magnetic field down to the level of the outer-core, they discovered that under the South Atlantic Anomaly the simple north-south divide we know at the surface has broken down. There are patches where the field has actually flipped and points north instead of south.

If these patches continue to deepen and spread, the entire Earth's magnetic field could reach a tipping point and flip. It is not something that would happen overnight - it could take thousands of years, during which period the magnetic field would be pretty confused. For us that could bring all sorts of problems, not least with the satellites on which our communications systems now depend.

The Earth is surrounded by a pair of concentric donut-shaped clouds called the Van Allen radiation belts which store and trap charged particles from the solar wind. They are aligned with the magnetic axis of the Earth. Above the South Atlantic Anomaly, because of the changed polarity, they don't work in the same way. Satellites and other spacecraft passing through this region of space actually enter the radiation belt and are bombarded by protons exceeding energies of 10 million electron volts at a rate of 3000 'hits' per square centimeter per second. This produces glitches in astronomical data, problems with the operation of on-board electronic systems, and premature aging of computer, detector and other spacecraft components. Astronauts are also affected by this region which is said to be the cause of peculiar 'shooting stars' seen when they close their eyes. (radiation hitting the back of their retinas) During a prolonged shift in the magnetic axis all satellites could become affected.

Back to the migrating birds. They use the Earth's magnetic field to help navigate their way on long journeys. It is already becoming apparent that some of them are taking extended migratory flights which may be due, in part, to the South Atlantic Anomaly. If their nesting islands are off southern Africa they would need to traverse the magnetic aberration. Too many left turns in that magnetic field along with altered winds for their flight feathers will make them consume a greater amount of energy for what was once a traditional flight path for these birds.

So I wish them well ( and I promise I won't start on the number of human airplane flights which have come to grief in the anomaly in recent years..... but there are a few!)

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Anyway, as I was saying before I was distracted, just off the Likoni ferry turn sharp right and about 100 metres along the road there is a shack which backs on to the sea and sells truly great fish and chips.

Most of the really good food I've had in Kenya has been in roadside shacks. These are where ordinary people eat. The restaurants in the centre of Nairobi or Mombasa are geared to tourists (i.e. watered down native fare and overpriced) and those in hotels are just tarted up western food.

The kitchen part of the shack is open and your meal is cooked while you watch. To an extent you take your chances with whatever fish you are served. That's because it's fresh off the boats and changes from catch to catch. My favourite is Tilapia which looks a bit like a herring. After being gutted there are slices cut into the flesh and stuffed with a mixture of garlic, black pepper and salt. Then a batter is whipped up with lemon juice into a thick dough which is smeared across the fish. It is then fried in a frying pan until it is brown on both sides, flipped out onto a plate and plonked down in front of you. You can't get much fresher than that and the taste is wonderful.

You can have it with Ugali or Bajias. Ugali is the Kenyan staple food ( a bit like tatties for us.) It is made by boiling up corn meal until it turns into the consistency of wallpaper paste then allowing it to solidify and cutting it up into chunks. Over the years I have offended many of my Kenyan hosts by declining the Ugali. That is because not only does it look like wallpaper paste, it tastes like it as well. Bajias are different. These are very thinly sliced potatoes, seasoned, battered and deep fried then covered in tomato salsa.

For a couple of shillings more you can add sukuma wiki, which is a sort of boiled kale and onions or Waliwanazi, which is white rice and grated coconut.

Unfortunately the shack on Mama Nginga Drive doesn't sell Mtuzi Wa Samaki, and of all the stuff I've eaten in Kenya Mtuzi Wa Samaki is the best.

Maybe I've just been spoiled. Whenever I go to Mombasa I stay at the YMCA in Nyali. The cook there is a lovely lady called Evelyn and it is Evelyn who cooks me Mtuzi Wa Samaki. This is her recipe:

Ingredients:

Oil -- 3 tablespoons

Fish fillets, cut into serving portions

Onion, chopped or sliced

Red or green bell peppers, chopped or sliced

Garlic, minced -- 6-8 cloves

Tomatoes, seeded and chopped -- 1 cup

Coconut milk -- 1 cup

Garam masala or curry powder -- 2-3 teaspoons

Tamarind paste or lemon juice -- 1-2 tablespoons

Salt and pepper -- to taste

Method:

Heat the oil over medium-high flame in a large skillet or pot. Season the fish with salt and pepper. Sear the fish fillets on both sides and remove to a plate.

Do not cook through.

Reduce the heat to medium and add the onions and peppers. Sauté until the onion is translucent. Add the garlic and sauté 1-2 minutes more.

Add the tomatoes, coconut milk, garam masala or curry powder, tamarind paste or lemon juice, salt and pepper. Bring to a boil, then reduce heat to low and simmer for 6-8 minutes.

Add the fish fillets, cover and continue to simmer until the fish is cooked through, 5-10 minutes. Serve with rice

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As someone who has considerable experience of changing flat tyres due to the overzealous DIY activities of a neighbour who likes to make things on his drive and scatter stray nails and screws over the road, I view with considerable concern the current trend for car manufacturers not to provide a spare tyre.

My current car is coming up for replacement and I have been flicking through the on-line brochures looking for a replacement. Of the mainstream car brands available in the UK, just Hyundai, Mercedes, Toyota and VW offer spare wheels in their current model range. At the opposite end of the spectrum, BMW, Chevrolet, Chrysler, Mini, Skoda and Subaru all don't offer a spare at all, instead opting for a puncture repair kit. The others offer a spare tyre as an optional extra for varying amounts of dosh.

I presume that there's now a lot of cars out there without a spare wheel, just an 'inflation kit'. Almost 23,500 of AA's callouts last year related to its members using tyre repair kits, with most phoning because they're not confident using them.

Like the in-car cassette player, winding windows and car alarms that squawked when you pressed the key fob, the spare tyre is vanishing. It seems that for the car makers, the necessity to offer anything that will get us home after a puncture is an evil one. After all, a spare wheel is heavy, rarely used, and takes up luggage space. The weight means more petrol use, which, as we all know, is bad for the environment. Our quality of life would undoubtedly be better without them. There could be a safety issue, too, as anyone who has changed a wheel on the hard shoulder will testify. The alternative, as you will know if you've delved beneath the boot floor of many new cars, is the diverse world of (in tyre industry talk) Extended Mobility Solutions.

This can work in two ways. Either you get a space-saver deflated tyre that takes up less room by needing an air compressor to inflate it. Or you get no tyre at all, only a kit that will inject foam to seal the puncture and use the compressor to reinflate.

Of the spare tyres which are still fitted there are 'Run Flats' which have a rigid sidewall which enables the driver to continue after a puncture. According to tyre industry research, they're 100 per

cent reliable. Then there is 'the space-saver', a narrow temporary wheel that takes up about half the room of the traditional full-sized spare and is about 7kg lighter. They might look spindly and faintly ridiculous but they have become common. Only slightly less successful is the new kid on the block, 'the self-sealing tyre'. This invention employs an airproof layer inside the tyre. The material inside the self-sealing tyre stops air escaping through the tread area. (Not much good, though, if you have a puncture in the side wall).

An Industry Spokesman has said: "we see the improvement in tyre repair systems as beneficial as they liberate even more luggage space and save even more weight."

Personally, I just want a good old fashioned spare tyre. With Renault I can have one ..... if I pay an extra £50.

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I had a cold last week which has left me with a tickly cough that comes and goes, but never quite disappears, so I go into the chemist for cough lozenges and ended up with Covonia double impact berry blast. They taste quite nice but don't appear to be doing much for the cough.

So I thought I'd see what the various on-line sources had to recommend.

The first site I went to said that tickly coughs used to be -simply written off as 'unexplained'. But doctors have recently -discovered that in some cases the problem is hypersensitivity in the upper -airways, triggered by a reflux of gas from the stomach. This gas is like a mist containing air, bits of food and stomach enzymes, which irritate the upper area of the throat. Once this hypersensitivity has set in, sufferers will have a coughing fit if anything such as dust or cold air touches their throat. Some antihistamines might help. For immediate relief, suck a strong menthol -lozenge, such as Fisherman's Friend.

Another said the most likely cause is stomach acid splashing up the -gullet. This affects about 25 per cent of the adult population. As the lining of the gullet is extremely soft and sensitive, this leads to inflammation, which triggers a coughing fit. Over-the-counter antacids can neutralise acid in the stomach.

Then there was the one which said the likely culprit is asthma. When someone with asthma comes into contact with something that irritates their airways, the muscles around the airways tighten. An asthma cough can be triggered by a cold, exposure to certain foods or irritants, such as pollen. The first line of treatment involves inhalers to open up the airways and make it easier to breathe. If inhalers are ineffective, inhaled steroids reduce the inflammation in the airways.

The next blamed post-nasal drip. Normally, we produce up to four pints of clear thin mucus every day from the glands which line the nose and sinuses. This usually drips unnoticed down your throat. However, when mucus becomes thick or if there is a lot of it usually due to an allergy or infection, such as a cold, it triggers a coughing reflex as it drips down the throat. A non-steroid, can give immediate relief by reducing -swelling in the nose and the post-nasal drip. However, it advises only

using these for a few days because if used for longer, once you stop you get a rebound effect and the condition gets worse.

On the other hand the cough may just be the aftermath of the cold and caused by increased inflammation in the airways. In most cases, it should go away by itself after a few weeks. Lozenges can help as they will promote salivation to help coat and soothe a sore throat. Symptoms might also be eased by leaning over a bowl of boiling water with a towel over your head, as moisture from the steam will soothe and lubricate the airways.

I'm taking no chances. I'm sitting in the bath with a towel over my head. I've got my inhaler, my steroids, my anti-steroids and a packet of fisherman's friends. With a bit of luck I should be clear in a few weeks.

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Become a gardener and if you manage to get your dahlias to bloom in the kind of weather we've been having this year, then have a stab at selling them.

You might remember that David Cameron asked the office of national statistics to carry out a 'happiness' survey last year to determine the quality of life in Britain, and the interim findings are now out.

The questions they were asking were things like: Are you satisfied with life?, Are you satisfied with your husband, wife or partner?, How satisfied are you with your mental and physical health?, Are you happy in your job?, Do you feel involved in your neighbourhood?, Are you happy with your personal income? Are you satisfied with your education?

Like most of these surveys, for some unfathomable reason they didn't ask me, but presumably the interim results are based on statistically accurate data from the people they did ask.

It seems that gardeners and florists are the happiest workers in the UK. Those in banking and finance said they were the least happy.

Almost nine in 10 florists and gardeners said they were happy in their job. Most said it was because they were able to manage their own workload and daily tasks. 82% felt that being able to use and hone their skills every day helped to boost their job satisfaction.

With the bankers, just 44% reported they were happy. IT and data processors came in second from bottom, with 48% saying they were happy. Despite the presumption that these professions are often well-paid, largely desk-based, high-pressure jobs do not appear to provide workers with job fulfillment.

Nor does earning loads of dosh. Only half of people earning over £60,000 a year said they had a good work life balance. This compared to 65% of those earning £20,000 to £25,000 a year. And three-quarters of those earning less than £15,000 a year said they thought they did.

The comments from the guy who supervised the survey are interesting: "At a time when both happiness and employment are high on the government agenda, we wanted to link the two areas and look into what affects levels of happiness at work and in life. Most people spend half of their time working, so we wanted to find out what makes people happy at work and how that differs by job role. It's particularly interesting to see that those who have taken the vocational route are happiest and feel the most pride in their work"

It ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it.

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I had to change a light bulb last night, an increasingly rare phenomenon. We now have just two old incandescent bulbs left in operation. I assume that they will go in the next year or so. The box that the new fluorescent bulb came in said it had a ten year life expectancy.

A few things occurred to me as I took the old bulb out its holder and put the new one in.

This first was about mortality. I can probably now count my life in light bulbs. With a bit of luck I should last about another twenty years. So I only need to buy two more bulbs for the upstairs landing.

The next was: will we get to the situation that as the time span between changing bulbs grows longer, children will grow up not knowing what to do when the bulb goes out? In fact, might that not already be the case? It may sound silly, but I decided to google that. It turns out that a survey by HomeServe and the Daily Mail found that 25 percent of people under the age of 35 aren't sure how to change a light bulb.

If you go looking for internet sites which will tell you how to change a light bulb you get 21,700,000 returns, which gives a whole new meaning to the old joke: how many internet sites does it take to change a light bulb.

Of course the sceptic in me doesn't really believe that these bulbs will actually last ten years. It does not make good business sense. Nor is it borne out by the history of the light bulb.

The original tungsten bulbs were designed to be everlasting. According to the Guinness Book of Records there is a bulb in Livermore California which has allegedly been burning for over a hundred years. It is now monitored constantly by a webcam. The bulb is in the fire station and was first switched on in 1901. It now has historic status and is protected by law. It is known as the Centennial Bulb and is cared for by the Centennial Light Trust. Nor is it the only one in existence. These bulbs were made by the Shelby Electric Company in the 1890s.

However in the 1920s the various companies who made light bulbs realised that if you make something everlasting, then you're not going to make any money from it. They came together as a cartel and colluded to make lightbulbs that would not last more than 1000 hours. This appears to be the first instance of planned obsolescence.



One cynical definition of planned obsolescence is “Instilling in the buyer the desire to own something a little newer, a little better, a little sooner than is necessary because an article that refuses to wear out is a tragedy of business.”

Now we take it completely for granted that our camera, a phone, lap-top or printer will konk out just outside the warranty period. We’ve all had the experience of taking something to a service centre, only to find out that it costs a bomb to repair it, and it’s cheaper to buy a new one.

Which is why I expect my virtually everlasting new bulbs to go phut faster than I think.

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I’m trying to give them up. For a start they aren’t good for my health. They are addictive. They take up a disproportionate part of my income and they are a source of friction between me and my wife.

We have an occasional table next to the couch. On it are a rather scabby potted palm, a bowl of oranges, usually a notepad and pen and a series of coffee rings where I have over filled the mug. Underneath the table they just pile up, accusing me.

They come in all sorts of varieties. There are ones on current affairs. There are ones on countryside matters, on architecture, on boxing and, mostly, on music. I buy them compulsively, flick through them glancing at this and that and then stick them under the table to be read later. They don’t get read.

Every time I come into the living room they are there staring back at me, a neatly stacked pile of knowledge and intellect that I haven’t touched in months, mostly because I’ve been busy watching Strictly Come Dancing or endlessly surfing the net. They’re a constant reminder of everything I could be if only I applied myself.

Even if I try to catch up it isn’t easy. Yesterday was a good example. It was absolutely pouring here yesterday, so gardening was out. The rain was washing the car without any effort on my part. Mrs. R was out shopping with the elder Rathbonette. I turned up the heating, put on some background music and curled up on the couch with the top of the pile. By the time she came back I had got through three and a half of the magazines, really complimenting myself on the breadth of my interests.

I was then accused of wasting all day reading magazines when I could have been changing the washer on the tap in the bathroom. Life isn’t easy.

I’m sure I’m not the only person who has this addiction. It would be interesting to find out how many of the magazines sold each year actually do get read. Perhaps we could set up a self help group.

In fact there may be one. On Facebook there’s a good page called Our Lady of the Liquor Box and Unread Magazines which is based in Minneapolis and will help poor addicts like me. Unfortunately I can’t afford the air fare.

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No broadband yesterday. That's happened before so I waited for it to come back on. Nothing by late afternoon, so I 'phoned BT. It turns out that they were doing work on the telephone exchange. Service would be restored at around 2.a.m. I could get details if I went on to the BT website. I didn't ask how I was supposed to do that without a connection. There was also the presumption that we all go regularly on to their site in order to check on 'scheduled outages'.

Maybe I should go down to the telephone exchange, take all my clothes off and protest.

I don't know if you picked up on that news report about the new law they've brought in in California to ban nude protesting. It seems that nude protesting was on the rise, as a way of drawing media attention to your cause.

No sooner had San Francisco's lawmakers voted to ban nakedness in public places than a lawsuit was filed. It argued that the free speech of nudists was being restricted.

Civil liberties campaigners are preparing to legally fight San Francisco's ban on public nudity. Does the US Constitution guarantee the right to walk the streets naked? Opponents of the move say that, by limiting the ability to express themselves, the law violates their rights. They cite the First Amendment to the US Constitution, which forbids the government from "abridging the freedom of speech". But legal experts say previous court rulings suggest that being nude does not, in itself, constitute an act of expression. It's also possible that the nudists could argue their nakedness was a political act.

Ken Paulson, president of the First Amendment Center, which promotes the study of free-speech issues, says he does not believe the legal bid is likely to succeed. But while the Supreme Court has been consistent that nudity is not in itself a form of expression, that does not mean that nudity cannot be expressive. "Even if the nudists could prove they were engaging in nudity for expressive purposes, the state has the right to regulate it, as long as the regulation is not about what's being expressed, but the side effects that expression has on the rest of the city - for instance, heavy traffic or lowered property values.

But all may not be lost for the naked protestors. One option open to them would be to move somewhere such as Oregon, where public nudity is legal so long as there is no "intent to arouse".

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I wonder what I got up to last night. At least I wouldn't have been sending texts for the simple reason that I don't go to bed with a mobile 'phone.

Apparently sleep specialists are now treating people who cannot be separated from their mobile, tuck them under the pillow at night and then find in the morning that they have been sending texts

to all and sundry. It is now being recognised as an official sleep disorder. Reassuringly, the texts people send when asleep often make no sense.

We're all reasonably familiar with sleep walking, but it seems that it is very common for people to do things in their sleep that they do repeatedly during the day. This is largely down to sleep disorders called parasomnias. These are unwanted behaviours that occur during sleep. They can be as small as singing while asleep to, at the very extreme end, driving a car while sleeping. Doctors have even treated someone who carefully dismantled grandfather clocks while asleep.

Sleepwalkers frequently get up to unexplained empty food wrappers and a messy kitchen. Snacking in your sleep is not a big problem, but in more extreme cases it is classed as Nocturnal Eating Syndrome (NES). In more complicated cases, someone might cook a whole meal. It is thought that in these instances the person is actually awake but will have no memory of what they have done. It's a type of amnesia.

Then there is sexsomnia, a condition where people have sex in their sleep, which can be disconcerting for the other person in the bed with them. As yet very little research has been done into it, say sleep experts, but more cases are being reported. It is most likely to occur in the "deep sleep" stage when the thinking and awareness part of the brain is switched off but not the part of the brain responsible for basic urges like having sex.

The only occasion where I have been affected by someone with a sleep disorder was about seven years ago in Kenya when I had to share a room with this guy called Frank. Frank suffered from Obstructive Sleep Apnoea which occurs when the throat muscles collapse and block the airways and stop people from breathing. It was quite disturbing. He was a snorer and then the snoring would abruptly stop and it was obvious that he was not breathing, then with a start he would begin breathing again after maybe half a minute. Apparently there is a break because the brain does not wake up as quickly as the body and so things don't start working again until it gets its act together.

Isn't it strange to think that I might have written all of this in a state of complete unconsciousness? (Maybe I do that every day.)

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It's that time of the year again when I will have to sneak off to the shops to get a present for someone who doesn't want one. For years now Mrs. R. has said that she doesn't want a christmas present. The problem is that the first year she said that I took her at her word. It turned out to be a miserable christmas. She tried to hide her disappointment that I hadn't found some ingenious way of salving her conscience without actually not giving her something. The trouble is, there are only so many sub-saharan donkeys we can buy, a limit to the number of wells sunk in foreign climes and sponsoring school kids is too close to home, so I've exhausted the altruistic oxfam option.

It's catching as well. This year already I've had other family members saying that they've decided not to give christmas presents after this year, and two close friends have said the same thing.

Secretly I agree with them. The whole thing is out of hand. (I'm sure the Victorians made that comment as well) Every year I see people running around buying gifts they can't afford for their husband's aunt, their son's teacher and their next door neighbours and I wonder: Why are you spending £50 on a scented candle for an in-law that you don't see from one end of the year to the next? Why pay £400 for a coat for your wife, then spend most of January in a cold sweat about your credit card bill? You could just buy it in the sales two days later.

The one that really gets me is this notion of 'Secret Santa' presents. Mrs. R. is currently in a funk about her obligations under that little regime. Somehow her social world will collapse if she's the only one in her workplace who doesn't drop an anonymous present in the box. And this from a woman who doesn't want a present herself.

Statistically each of us will give 23 gifts. So the idea that each one of those is going to be a stroke of genius is remote. When we buy things for ourselves, we generally acquire things only if they give us more in satisfaction than we are prepared to pay for them. If I buy a £30 jumper for myself, I expect it to give me at least £30 of satisfaction. Otherwise, I'm wasting money. When we buy gifts for other people, the likelihood of satisfaction outweighing outlay is likely to be zilch.

The irony of this, of course, is that we all end up giving each other presents that we neither want nor need. Our view of what other people will like is almost invariably wrong. Whose every waking moment is filled by a craving for a pair of half-size martini glasses, holding unpleasantly perfumed gel candles, embellished with a decorative vine? Who has stepped lightly through January, buoyed by the Christmas joy that is a purple glass bowl filled with silver spray-painted pebbles?

So maybe we should just change Christmas into an excuse for simply overeating rather than overeating plus economically disastrous present giving?

I'll mull that over while I'm on the bus into town.

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If I had finished washing the dishes just one minute later I would have missed him. As it was I didn't quite take it in the first time, but fortunately he came back at the commercial break. It was like meeting an old friend who had been away too long.

Barry Scott is back and this time he is swinging a solid lump of limestone through a bath of Cillit Bang to illustrate the speed at which it will cut through limescale. (I notice the little disclaimer along the bottom of the screen says 7 minutes). I'm not in the habit of swinging lumps of limescale through baths of extremely corrosive liquid, but it is great to see him back anyway.

All those adverts which slotted right into our synapses and stayed there:

"Hi I'm Barry Scott and I'm here with Jill who uses Cillit Bang Lime and Grime. So Jill what do you think?..... Give it a go. Bang and the dirt is gone."

The reassurance that we could get rid of all those nightmare stains and blocked drains

Look, the toughest toilet stains are no match for its supreme cleaning power ..... no job's too tough

The hardcore mix of "Do you have problems with lime scale, rust, ground in dirt" has had over a million hits on YouTube. "Look what it did to a penny... good as new"

And that penny is cleaned in only 10 seconds. In Canada the ad carries a disclaimer not to use Cillit Bang on copper pipes or utensils because it will destroy them. (which is ironic as the product is made by the Reckitt company)

Cillit Bang is so powerful that it was used to neutralise plutonium in the clean up of the Dounreay nuclear power station.

In fact it's so powerful that you can hardly use it. Just take a look at the list of exclusions on the back of the bottle: it's not suitable for use on zinc, copper, aluminium, marble, enamel, textiles, carpets, linoleum, rubber or wood. That means that it's not suitable for use on most things in your bathroom and kitchen. Whatever you do don't put on your marigolds to protect your hands either, it will cut right through rubber gloves.

In fact it is so deadly that it can be used as an offensive weapon. One of my favourite news stories of recent years involved Staffordshire Police. More than 100 armed police officers swooped on a house and engaged in a tense 19-hour stand off with a man armed to the teeth - with a bottle of Cillit Bang.

But despite his kitchen arsenal of bleach-based products, Richard Jablonski was unable to make a clean getaway. Instead, the crack tactical operations squad arrested him for possession of a dangerous weapon with intent to cause fear and violence. The Police refused to reveal the cost of the case, despite coming under pressure from their own police authority members. Estimates based on officers' overtime and the cost of an armed response team have priced the siege at around £30,000.

The case was later thrown out in court.

A police spokesman said that for the duration of the incident the police response was overseen by highly-trained and skilled officers who managed the situation in a measured manner and ultimately brought it to a safe and peaceful conclusion. Despite the outcome of the court case the police response was entirely necessary and proportionate.

Gives a whole new meaning to the phrase Bang and it's gone.

# ARTS AND CRAFTS

Mrs Rathbone and I set off for London with the firm intent of visiting the Picture of Britain exhibition at the Tate and instead went trawling along Oxford Street in search of 'plain winter boots' (don't ask).

Perhaps it was the transcendent state induced by hearing the mantra "do you have these in a seven" repeated several thousand times, but by the time we got to the Gallery I was in a particularly receptive frame of mind.

For those of you who watched the series but haven't been able to get to the exhibition, it's both a joy and an anticlimax. An anticlimax because many of the paintings featured in the series aren't here, but a joy because the painting have been supplemented by other works such as Wordsworth's notebooks (terrible handwriting) and Turner's sketchpads (these are sketches??)

However, my moment of revelation came not from the big famous Turners, Constables or Landseers, but in the form of a small watercolour of the Vale of the White Horse by Eric Ravilious. There was something about the quality of the thing which made me want to spend some time with it. Because the show closes next week it was the usual last minute packed throng and I had to push my way through to the front four times before I had intimidated enough people to get them to let me have enough space to even see it properly.

Beautifully done, with only three colours - yellow ochre, cerulean blue and paynes grey by the look of it. The skill is all in the cross hatching. As usual, things get lost in reproduction, but in the original it really does look like it is raining and you feel you could walk along that ridge and up the path in the distance, beneath the white horse. Yet none of this is naturalistic (just look at how stylised the grass is). Quite a difference from the big, famous, photographic victorian landscapes around it, and all the better for being so small, humble and perfectly formed.

Now, if someone could only make humble winter boots in a size seven.

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Talking about roots and problems, at last I've been able to get the potatoes in!

I think this is the latest that I've ever been in getting the annual veggies started. Short of scraping off the snow and using a pneumatic drill, things have had to wait this year.

There was a nice rain on Friday night, a sharp rise in temperature and a sunny morning on Saturday. Ideal. I was out there with the spade at the crack of dawn ( well... 9 o'clock) and hacking away at the vegetable plot.

The garden is all over the place again this year. By the time I had finished double digging and turning in the contents of the compost heap, the daffodils had grown about three inches and were showing buds. As I write this, two days later, the buds have opened into nodding wordsworths (... they don't hang around in this weather). The camelias are in bloom, albeit slightly brown from the frost and surrounded by flowering snowdrops. Given that I usually have the snowdrops in February, the Daffs in March and the camelias in May, you can gauge the way global warming has pushed everything off kilter.

Surprisingly the savoy cabbages I decided to let over-winter have survived the snows and look all the better for it. The celeriac is another matter. Out of the six I had left in I could only find two. One was a wrinkled little shrunken thing about half an inch across and the other a glorious, tumescent example which could be mistaken for a tumshie in a bad light. No matter, they all had to come out to make way for the Jersey Royals.

I wonder who it was that came up with the idea of crop rotation. I can never remember from one year to the next whether I should be putting in legumes, brassicas or what.

Digging away, I ruminated on two conundrums of the week:

(a) Why has our road been closed for three months with no visible signs of anyone coming to fill in the old mine workings which have kept us car free for the last quarter?

(b) Where did Epykat get her quote from that old third rate fellow traveller of Cabaret Voltaire, Francis Picabia?

(a) was answered yesterday morning when I walked down the hill to the newsagent to get the Sunday papers. In a nice, regular, metre square grid right down the street were shiny survey pins shot fired into the road and circled with bright yellow paint. Mrs. R., who is more observant than I am, says that two young lads with surveying tools spent most of Friday setting those out. I assume that someone will return in another three months to start drilling holes and pumping in concrete.

(b) was much more interesting. I hadn't come across that quotation from Picabia before and it seems eminently rational, which is puzzling.

Picabia is one of those people that I keep coming up against whenever I spend any time at all investigating nihilism and the quote is far from being nihilistic.

Given that Picabia, in works such as Rongwrong and The Blind Man was trying to demolish aesthetic standards, and that the man himself acted as the link between the various Dada groups in New York, Paris and Zurich, it is also hard to square it with Dada's stated principles of deliberate irrationality, anarchy and cynicism ..... and then I remembered that she changed her signature in response to the debate on the PHS thread. All was explained. Dada's technique to a tee.

During the increasingly frequent breaks in the digging, I noticed that a magpie is building a nest in the chestnut at the end of the garden. It was fascinating watching it scabbling around under the hedge for twigs and then heading off for the tree for a bit of construction work. In a few weeks the nest will be completely hidden by the leaves on the tree and, no doubt, the paving slabs around the

shed will be covered with magpie doo. Magpies and Dada -- both anarchic, cynical and life affirming. Ah, the joys of spring.

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Mrs. R. and I were off for a sunny Easter in Oxford.

As usual when we go visiting places, I dragged her round the bookshops (looking, unsuccessfully, for Jackson Priest's nomination for the current Big Read), and then she dragged me round Primarc and TK Max looking for socks.

Finally getting down to business, the queue at Christchurch Cathedral was out the door and up the street. From the sound of it, coach loads of french school kids on an educational visit. We shuffled forward with the rest to find that there was now a £4 admission charge to get into the cathedral. (Granted that also gave you access to the Great Hall which doubles as the Dining Room at Hogwarts, and the oak tree in the quad under which Lewis Carrol composed Alice In Wonderland.)

While we went off to look at the Burne Jones stained glass in the cathedral, the french kids all headed for the Great Hall. It seems that at Easter Harry Potter's dinner now takes precedence over the Last Supper.

Devotions over, it was off round the Pitt Rivers, the Ashmolean and the Museum of Modern Art.

The exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art was called Local Stories and consisted of seven areas, each handed over to a different artist, who had been asked to come up with a piece which would illustrate the concept of local stories.

Much of it was fairly obvious, verging on cliché: One guy had gone round taking photographs of illegal immigrants and asking them to tell him their stories. Another had taken photographs of a community of people in Port Glasgow who were living below the poverty line. There was a video of a child in Albania trying to outline the history of his country entirely in the context of aggressors who had tried to conquer them and whom they had successfully resisted..... interesting, but....

On the other hand, there were three really good pieces, all of them by women:

Laura Lancaster had devoted her space to very small paintings of images taken from family snapshots which meant something to her. The images were deliberately painted in a blurred fashion, which only came into focus if you were some distance away.... her point being that memories become blurred, but their context becomes clearer with distance.

Nalini Malani had a huge installation which took the form of a series of transparent drums on which she had painted a series of religious images, from the Bhagavad Gita, the Koran, the Talmud and the Bible. These rotated with lights projected through them, which threw the shadows of the images on the walls, onto which slides were projected showing world conflict from Hiroshima onwards. Very obvious, but very effective.



Of all of the exhibits, I liked that by Katarina Seda best and could immediately see how it could be adapted for a Big Thing On The Beach.

She was making the point that we take local life so totally for granted that we don't notice it any more. She wanted to reassert the importance of the local and the everyday, so she approached a village of about 300 people in Romania and studied what they did as everyday tasks and then persuaded them, for one day, to all agree a timetable so that everybody was doing exactly the same thing at exactly the same time. So at 6:30a.m. everybody got up and opened the curtains, At 10:00 they all went to the local supermarket and bought their groceries. At 11:30 they all swept their front step and so on until lights out at 11:00 p.m. Over 200 of the villagers took part. The resulting video was fascinating and according to the people in the village, it really brought the community together in a way that they hadn't envisaged at the start. A case of making the ordinary extraordinary.

I presume that is what has now happened to the Great Hall at Churchill College.

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The elder Rathbonette and I went off to Tate Modern to see the Yayoi Kusuma exhibition.

In keeping with the family tradition of artsy-crafty, the elder Rathbonette specialises in bricolage. She takes old furniture and covers it in collages of photographs and other personal memorabilia which personalises it for the owner. Some people like it, some don't, but she does it well. The reason we were going to the exhibition is because Kusuma did a lot of extremely good collages.

And they were extremely good. What was just as interesting were her bricolaged clothes. Dresses, jackets, shoes, bags all covered in plastic flowers and spray painted. We'll see where that leads the Rathbonette.

Then there was the room where all of the furniture had been covered in fluorescent dots and then displayed under ultra violet light. Mildly disorientating.

But nothing compared to the completely mirrored room. All four walls, the floor and ceiling were mirrored. The only illumination was a set of fairy lights. There was just sufficient light to see the reflections. Now that really was an experience to walk through. Your senses were telling you that there was nothing underneath your feet. Wherever you looked you were gazing into infinity. The layout was cleverly done so that once you were inside you could see neither the entrance you came in or where the exit was. One woman had to be rescued and led out. The rest of us just wandered around bemused until we found the exit. Inevitably someone felt that they just had to take a photograph. The flash was truly spectacular.

If you ever get the chance to experience this, do it. It is genuinely mind bending.

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How is the current economic climate affecting your creative juices? There has been a lot of hand wringing in some art circles about Arts Council grants being cut because of the recession.

I was reading a piece by Phil Poynter in *Dazed and Confused* where he said : “ Out of recession comes creativity. You’re pushed to find a way to present your ideas if there’s no financial support. People come together at those times and challenge each other, and that always turns into something.”

Fair enough, I will buy that as far as it goes, but I hope it wasn’t coming from some nostalgic view of bad times past. Nor will I accept the view that people only come together and challenge each other when times are bad. Creative collaboration goes on all the time. If a project’s worth its salt most people will get it to work some way, some how.

The vast majority of creative people are just like the rest of us. They struggle most of the time. Most artists, musicians and writers that I know are operating financially well below the national average wage. There are only a very few David Hockneys, Adele’s or J.K. Rawlings in this world. Being creative doesn’t recognise the norm. Inspiration doesn’t come along on a 9-5 programme, so artists’ work runs on its own timetable which isn’t conducive to making money. In my experience, and I’ve had lots, it’s a load of tosh to claim that trying to produce something to a deadline brings out the best in you and produces good work. It doesn’t. It leads to cut corners and compromise.

It’s also tosh to say that good art comes out of adversity. Some times it does but most times it doesn’t. For most people art is impossible without at least a degree of stability. You need the time to think and you don’t have that if all your effort is going into simply surviving.

Nor should we confuse the content with the source. *The Boys From The Blackstuff* didn’t come out of the dire economic conditions in Liverpool under Thatcher, it was inspired by them. It was created by people on comfortable BBC salaries. Good art comes out of good artists.

Art and money have always been closely connected, and there have probably been a few artists who have given up because their Arts Council grant has been stopped. But for most of them it won’t have mattered a jot. They never received subsidy in the first place.

Nor should we be deluded into thinking that the average man in the street gives a toss. Art rarely impinges on *Britain’s Got Talent*.

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Just following on with *Art and Money*, there was an article in this week’s *Observer* about Damien Hirst.

Now here is someone who has reputedly earned £215,000,000 from his art. Back in 2008 he made £111,000,000 in two days at Sotheby’s. That was him personally. He shrewdly decided to cut out the middle men, bypassing the art dealers and selling his work himself.

Let's just explore that phrase 'selling his work'. Once he realised that people would pay large amounts for his work, Hirst decided, a bit like Andy Warhol, that you could mass produce. He bought a big studio and hired an army of 'assistants'. It is estimated that these 'assistants' have now produced over 1,500 'original' Damien Hirst paintings.

He himself has recently announced that he is again working mainly on his own paintings, by which he means canvases on which he, and he alone, applies the paint. We will have to see if these fetch higher prices than those produced by the 'assistants'. Apparently he is currently painting parrots.

What is refreshing is that he openly describes some of his stuff as crap. More precisely he says: "Some of it is un-realised and didn't make it and some of it is just shit." He also makes it clear that his piece 'For The Love Of God' (the jewel encrusted skull) is "mostly about money".

The critic Peter Schjedal has written that Hirst will go down in history as a particularly cold-blooded pet of excess wealth. It's immortality of a sort. (You could also argue that it's immorality of a sort.)

In 1996 Hirst went on record as saying "Museums are for dead artists. I'd never show my work in the Tate. You'd never get me in that place." So next month he has a big retrospective opening at the Tate.

I will be going along to it, even though I'm not particularly fond of his stuff. The reason I will go along is because for a long long time I was very snooty and dismissive of Tracy Emin's work. Then, a couple of year ago, I went to an exhibition of some of her drawings and was completely blown away. She can do if she wants to. Maybe Hirst can too.

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There's a wonderful irony when you get to the top of the escalator at Tate Modern. There is a sign saying that this exhibition is the first major retrospective of the work of Damien Hirst and gives the viewer the opportunity to explore his artistic development.

Then you go inside and there is no development. Twenty five years of work and nothing changes, nothing develops, nothing gets better and, perhaps more telling, nothing gets worse. The only thing that changes is that the amount of money the pieces fetch go up and up and up until you reach the £50,000,000 diamond skull. It's some career trajectory.

It is probably the most boring exhibition I have been to in my life. The first two rooms are early works from his days as a student. You have a painting of coloured dots. You have a severed head. You have a glass cabinet with fag ends in it. You have a box full of live flies feeding on sugar. A ping pong ball being held up in a stream of hot air. So you go on.

Another room with bigger paintings of coloured dots. Lots of cases with dead things in formaldehyde swimming in them. A table covered in fag ends. A glass cabinet full of sleeping pills. Then an innovation: a canvas with dead butterflies stuck in gloss paint.

Then a room full of live butterflies feeding on sugar.

Then a room full of paintings of dots and cabinets full of pharmaceuticals and a beach ball being held up in a stream of hot air.

Then a room full of animals cut in half in vats of formaldehyde accompanied by paintings of coloured dots

Then a room of cabinets filled with surgical instruments and a large drum full of fag ends.

Then a room of cabinets full of diamonds and butterflies caught in gold paint.

Finally a black sheep in formaldehyde, a canvas covered in dead flies and a white dove in formaldehyde.

Inevitably you can't get out of this without passing through 'the shop' with its outrageously priced tat. Apart from the concept of painted dots make money so make more painted dots there was little in the way of 'message' here.

Equally inevitably, the exhibition was packed, to the extent that guides were going round telling us we had had our five minutes in that particular room and could we please move so that other people could get in.

The irony of this non event was compounded by the other exhibition which was running at the Tate. This was a retrospective of Alighieri Boetti. When Mrs. R. and I went in to that there were only the two of us and another woman with her teenage daughter. She said that she had come in because they got fed up waiting in the Hirst queue. In the whole exhibition we only saw six other people going round. Which was a tragedy, because this was really worth seeing.

Here was someone who had developed as an artist. Nothing was static. You could see him struggling with ideas and experimenting until he reached a resolution. Often you had to struggle with him to understand where he was coming from. He made you think and, thankfully, there was no-one telling you your five minutes was up and you had to move into the next room. For the first time in a long time Mrs. R. and I found ourselves actually stopping and discussing the work at length before moving on to the next piece.

Alighiero Boetti died in relative poverty in 1994 without becoming the darling of the art business. Damien Hirst is the wealthiest living artist on the planet. Draw your own conclusions.

The Boetti was a genuinely enriching experience, unlike Hirst with his diamonds and tat. If either of them come in your direction, I know which I'd go to.

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A genuine tale of a community working together for the greater good:

There is a tiny village in Surrey called Compton. In 1894 they had a problem, the cemetery in the churchyard was full. It had been in use for over 400 years and it was impossible to squeeze another body in. Unfortunately there was no available land to expand into and anyway they couldn't really afford to buy more land from any of the local landowners. For a while it looked as though they would have to spend eternity in a cemetery in Goldaming or Guildford, the two nearest towns. Centuries of family traditions would be broken.

Compton nestles in the north downs, surrounded by hills. One of those hills, Budburrow, has a flat top, but was useless for agriculture. The villagers asked the owner if he would sell them the top of the hill, and the path up to it, which he did, for £74 7s. It's quite a steep climb up there, especially if you are carrying a coffin, and they soon decided that they needed a mortuary chapel so the coffin and the mourners could have a rest before the internment. But they had no money to build one. What they did have was local clay, and a local woman with determination. She was the potter Mary Watts. Her husband was the painter Frederic Watts.

Mary Watts decided that if she could make clay pots, she could make clay bricks and if she could make clay bricks, so could everybody else in the village. Using her pottery kiln, every thursday night the villagers came up to the Watts studio and made bricks.

Then they set about designing their little chapel, and started building it on the top of the hill, carrying everything up by hand. It took them four years. Soon they were experimenting with decoration on the bricks. They designed terracotta angels, carved patterns into wood for the doors, fired tiles for the roof. Frederic Watts sold paintings to pay for the ironwork and stained glass.

Then they set about decorating the interior. Mary Watts and the villagers covered every inch of the interior with angels and cherubims. The village children stood on seats to paint the little flowers around the bottom.

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Back in 1987 I made a big error of judgement. During the Festival there was an exhibition called Vigorous Imagination which featured work by Steven Campbell, Stephen Conroy, Peter Howson, Ken Currie and Adrian Wiszniewski. Collectively they began to be called The Glasgow Pups.

Most of the work was for sale, though not much was in my price range. There was a box with loose pieces in it. Rummaging through the 'works on paper', there was an etching by Wiszniewski which I could afford. The trouble was I much preferred Howson's work to Wiszniewski's. I hummed and hawed, put it back and had another turn round the exhibition, hummed and hawed again and left for something else at the festival.

For the rest of the afternoon my mind was more on the etching than it was on the performance I was at. The same that night. The following day I went back to the gallery, but it had gone. There was nothing left that I could afford.

Ever since I've had this idealised image of this small work by Wiszniewski in my mind. I'm sure that what is lodged in my memory probably bears little relationship to the actual etching, wherever it may now be, but what is in my mind has grown more wonderful over the years.

The reason it has come back to the surface is because I've done it again. In a gallery in Harpenden I came across a Hockney etching for £600. It was one of the series illustrating the Cavafy poems, but it was unsigned. I hummed and hawed. Went out for a coffee. Came back. Hummed and hawed again. I was balancing Mrs. R.'s likely reaction to me spending that much with the sensation of owning a Hockney. A bit of googling indicated that the signed edition had been limited to 75 copies, which change hands for around £3,000. £600 was a reasonable price for the unsigned copies, of which there are 500.

The following day I went back and, inevitably, it had gone.

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I suppose that most of us are used to people paying ridiculous sums of money for paintings by Van Gogh, Picasso or Munch, but would you pay \$3,890,000 for a photograph?

Cindy Sherman's photograph of a woman lying on a kitchen floor went for that recently at Christies. It's not as if it's a unique print either, it's one of an edition of ten. I bet the people who hold the other nine copies are feeling chuffed.

Before I read about the Sherman I hadn't really thought much about the market in photographs. I have my own particular favourites, like Wolfgang Tillmans and Nan Goldin but didn't really follow how much they sold for. It turns out that neither of them appear in the list of the world's top twenty most expensive photographs. The Cindy Sherman turns out to be number two. The most expensive is Rhein II by Andreas Gursky (Who, I have to confess, I have never heard of.) It sold last year for \$ 4,338,500

It turns out to be a picture of the Rhine flowing horizontally across the field of view, between green fields, under an overcast sky from which extraneous details such as dog-walkers and a factory building were removed by the artist via digital editing. Justifying this manipulation of the image, Gursky said "Because this view of the Rhine cannot be obtained in situ, a fictitious construction was required to provide an accurate image of a modern river". Maeve Kennedy in the Guardian describes it as "a sludgy image of the grey Rhine under grey skies". I quite like it, but I wouldn't pay more than fifty quid.

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Time to get rummaging in the attic I think. Maybe you will too after the sale of the Peplow roses.

Peplow, like the rest of the Scottish Colourists went out of favour after the Second World War and you could pick up their paintings for a song. Most of their stuff was relegated to the attic, or, if it was really lucky, the back bedroom.

Which is precisely what happened to the pink roses that Sam Peplow painted. Back in the early 1960s the woman of the house wanted a painting of roses to go with her new decor and sent her husband out to find one. He went round various shops and came back with this painting of pink roses in a vase. The family can't recall how much was paid for the painting 50 years ago - but said it was "not significant enough to remember". Unfortunately his wife didn't like the painting and it was relegated to the spare room.

Now, in recent years the Scottish Colourists have been going through something of a revival and are back in fashion. Last year there was a sale of their work which made a total of £3m, which Bonhams' managing director in Scotland Miranda Grant described as "an amazing result".

Sam Peplow's piece The Coffee Pot took the record for the most expensive Scottish painting ever, selling for £937,25. His Flowers and Fruit sold for £512,800.

Which presumably is what prompted the family with the roses to go into the spare room and take another look at it. It sold last week for £225,000.

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Who'd be a curator? Mrs. R. and I went to the Pre-Raphaelite exhibition at the Tate yesterday. In some respects it is a very good exhibition. For a start it is difficult to think of any of the major works that are missing. It also includes pieces by the less well known artists of that movement, like Simeon Solomon, which made the visit worthwhile. But there was something unsatisfying about it. We both felt that and ended up discussing it while munching our sandwiches in the cafe.

Our conclusion is the way in which it was curated. Instead of presenting the work in chronological order, which admittedly is the conventional approach, the exhibition had been split into themes. History paintings in one room, religious paintings in another, Mythology in one, paintings of Paradise in the next. Instead of making you focus on the interrelated nature of the paintings in each section, it became impossible to work out when things were happening, who was influencing who and why that particular work was painted at that particular time.

That might not seem important, but with the Pre-Raphaelites it is. They were rebelling against the mores of their time. Paintings like Ford Madox Brown's 'Work' and Henry Wallis' 'The Stone Breaker' are making real social comment. Hunt's 'The Awakening Conscience' is doing the same for Victorian morality. All of that context was missing.

Unfortunately, tucked away in the middle of the exhibition was an aberration from the rest of the hanging. There was a whole room devoted to a single artist, William Morris. Here was the whole range of his work, from easel painting to wallpapers, painted furniture to embroidered bedcovers,

tapestry and stained glass, book design and sketches. Suddenly it all made sense, and you gained a real insight into Morris. Then in the next room you were back into a hotch-potch. Given the wealth of material by each artist, a room devoted to each might have resulted in something truly stimulating rather than the unsatisfactory muddle in which they had been shoe-horned into the arbitrary 'themes'.

I started by saying that this is a very good exhibition, and it is, but mainly because of the strength of the work and the chance to see them all in the one place. Some of the paintings have been brought over from American collections and it is the first time I've seen them 'in the flesh' rather than reproduction. Others are so familiar that it is like that phenomenon that you get with records you listen to over and over: you stop really noticing the detail. This was an opportunity to have another look. The Stonebreaker, for one, was worth a second glance. This man is dead to the world, in a sleep so absolute he does not even notice a stoat crawling on his foot. The beauty of the twilight landscape almost mocking him is cruel. That baby's hand poking out the woman's shawl in Ford Madox Brown's *The Last of England* is still genuinely touching.

So, a morning well spent, but one which could have been so much better if the art curators hadn't been so artsy fartsy.



# MUSIC

There was hardly time for anything else this week, what with this Radio Free Porty malarkey.

First there was the 'read us a story' idea. You've got Liz, Dave and Jimjam to thank for that. "What could be less in danger of infringing copyright than reading your own stuff", they said. "But it's a load of old cobblers", I replied. "No it's not", they insisted, so now you have it on the airwaves.

My apologies to those of you who have been listening in. I've never tried recording like this before and the editing leaves a bit to be desired. The elder Rathbonette says that I need to loosen up as well: I sound too much like an old vicar on Late Call. I need to be more like Desmond Carrington.

The first take was going along quite nicely and then a car alarm went off in the street outside, so I had to abort that. The second one was interrupted by the phone. The third by the gas man coming to the door and the fourth by Mrs. R. flushing the loo. I had just started on the fifth when the central heating switched itself on and the noise from the boiler firing up registered on the screen. So what you have is the sixth go. No wonder I need to loosen up.

The silly little jingle on the intro was made by taking random loops out of Garageband and overlaying them. (I chose them by using the numbers of the day, month and year of my birthday. I thought it would be a total mess, but it's only a little mess.)

Now that the thing is up and running, the same Liz, Dave and Jimjam have asked if I could post a little synopsis of what each episode is about, because they haven't yet been able to catch a full broadcast. (They always keep coming in in the middle) So just for them there is now a synopsis thread on the Radio Free Porty site.

Then came hunting down new music.

Thank you, the Copyright Police!! I knew there was a positive side to all of this. I've had a great time this week listening to all sorts of things I would never have heard if I'd stuck to the mainline sources.

Just to name two:

Catholicplanet.com offers christian mp3 downloads (from down here, not up there.) The Catholic Jukebox is a gas.

You Know Sean is also worth hunting down. Anyone that can produce songs with titles like: Bangladeshi Ladies' Deaf Club; Gimme Gimme Gimme Some Peace After Midnight and Keith You Need To Wash Now is definitely worth a listen. To judge from your accent, Sean, you're from around the Lothian area somewhere. If you're out there, come on, favour us with a set!

You can get carried away hunting for stuff.

[www.redferret.net](http://www.redferret.net) offers "1 Million free and legal music tracks, and it probably isn't kidding.

Eric Brown on [www.kittyspit.net](http://www.kittyspit.net) has a great site, with lots of obscure categories.

musik.agula.org is a weird and wonderful italian site catering for artists who want to have free distribution of their work. They think that there are enough people out there who want their music to be accessible to the widest audience possible without artistically limiting how their creations are spread around. They do a nifty little line in football songs.

[www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org) is an on-line library of live recordings available for royalty free, no-cost, public downloads. They only host material by artists who like the idea of non commercial distribution of their material.

Legal Torrents.com is a collection of Creative Commons licensed, legally downloadable, freely distributed, creator approved Jazz, House, Funk, Techno and Electronic music.

The outcome of all that is Cajun Corner, a collection of Cajun and Zydeco music which will soon be winging its way to Dada. As far as I am aware, everything on it is either Creative Commons, or specifically stated to be copyright free.

I'll end with a few quotes from some of the artists on Cajun Corner:

The Yard Dogs: " The internet has brought the music to the people!"

Chardoe: "I'd hate to sell out to The Man."

Alan Kerley: "Availability is awesome."

Bob Nation: "Frankly, I wouldn't sign a record contract. I do not play at a level that would justify that action."

Son Setz: "I probably wouldn't sign with a record company. I'll take my chances in the street, thank you."

Chairs: "The internet has taken power away from the music industry and people no longer have to put up with the options set by large record companies. We just make music for our friends."

Thanks again to the Copyright Police. You've broken my dependence on the major labels. I'm having a whale of a time listening to the music made by my friends.

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It was as if a big orange guy had come up to me, slapped my face and said: spladoosh - you've been tangoed.

There hadn't been much traffic and all the lights had been green, so I was early for my appointment at the Chiropractor's. Not that I minded because, unlike the dentist, Duncan the aussie chiro has a good selection of magazines.

Top of the pile there was an article on Gil Scott-Heron and in an instant I was right back into 1970, on my old pitch opposite Camden Town tube station, resplendent in my Red Mole t-shirt, peddling

left wing propaganda to the masses. It was after one of those (usually unproductive) sessions that I had wandered up to Compendium and discovered Gil Scott-Heron, or rather his novel *The Vulture*. (As an aside, I notice that *The Vulture* has recently been reprinted by Canongate, of all people. It's about the life of a murder victim as retold by four men who knew him as a boy and really captures what it was like to be black and american in the 60s - perhaps I should add it to the Big Read list.)

I found that I could relate to the polemic in the book, honed as I was on those long dadaistic evening in the Meadow Bar during the late 60s, arguing socialism with the university anarchist society (now there was a contradiction in terms).

As time went on and Scott-Heron began to issue his work on records with titles such as *Home Is Where The Hatred Is*, he spoke a lot of sense to me about nuclear proliferation, apartheid, the links between race-poverty-big business, and the machinations of Nixon, Ford, Goldwater and Carter. The man was uncompromising, enraged and, above all, articulate.

As he said:

The revolution will not be right back after a message about a white tornado, white lightning, or white people.

You will not have to worry about a dove in your bedroom, a tiger in your tank, or the giant in your toilet bowl.

The revolution will not go better with Coke.

The revolution will not fight the germs that may cause bad breath.

The revolution will not be televised.

In other words, Gil Scott-Heron was one of the formative forces on my personal political development.

So it came as a little bit of a shock when the article I was reading ended:

" Godfather of Rap in the 1990s, Gil Scott-Heron is now probably best known as the voice in the Tango Ads when he says - You know when you've been tangoed."

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Typical: he had to wait until the second pint to tell me. JimJam has been my best mate for forty years now and he still does that. You'd think that by now he could just come straight out with it.

And in the Champions as well. It made me wonder why we always meet in the Champions. Granted it's a great wee pub, but the choice of beers is pretty limited. If you don't like Sam Smith's, then you've had it. It's the kind of pub that came straight out of Dickens -- any minute now Nancy and Fagen's urchins will come dancing through singing *Consider Yourself Well In, Consider Yourself Part of the Furniture*. Surprising, then, that it was built in 1988. We seem to have an affinity for ersatz pubs. Before the Champions it was the Frigate, which was everything the name implied -- All figure heads and rigging and a hearty yo ho ho.

Jimjam is a man of projects, and when he has a project he usually carries it through. Diving off the Pont Du Gard, no problem. Snorkling off the Great Barrier Reef, easy peasy. Hiring a Harley and riding down from Seattle to San Fran -- a doddle.

So when he suggested going to Timbuktu, it was taken as read that he'd pull it off. And of course, because my injections were fully up to date after Kenya, then I would be expected to tag along.

The intention was to make the Festival Au Desert next January.

To get there we'd have to fly to the capital city of Mali, Bamako. That is about 1000 km southwest of the festival. The flight arrives at around 3 am and the airport is 10 or 20 km from the city. To get from Bamako to the festival we would have to ride in a vehicle that is hired with driver. (I have horror stories of that sort from Kenya) The ride from Bamako takes about 2 days. The first day is along the national highway which is paved. Around the middle of the second day we would reach Douentza and turn off the main highway onto a rough washboard road which the military built about 5 years ago. Towards the end of the second day we would cross the Niger river on a ferry. The landing point is about 10km south of Timbuktu. The festival site is located in the back of beyond, about 70 km from Timbuktu. The ride there is rough, there is no actual road, the vehicles just head out across the desert

During the day there are camel races and traditional music and dancing. There is a market area with stalls. The tents that are provided are of loosely woven cloth, similar to burlap, held up by a wooden pole in the middle and secured to the ground with stakes. There is no floor. At night the wind picks up and the sand blows in as a fine dust through the loose weave of the tent walls. By morning you are covered in a layer of dust. Food is served 3 times a day in a covered restaurant where everyone sits on woven mats to eat. The washrooms are disgusting. Peeing in the desert is definitely the preferred option.

The mainstage music takes place in the evening. The artists are mostly groups from Mali and neighbouring countries. The music starts at around 8 and ends after midnight. Everyone stands on a sand dune in front of the stage.

So you can imagine my disappointment to be told "Timbuktu's off."

The reason being that the only scheduled flights to Bamako mean that we would have to arrive a week before the festival started and leave a fortnight after it had finished. That's a lot of hanging around the desert looking for an oasis, and quite an excuse for time off work.

But..... and Jimjam always has a but..... his other big project is fixing up his Airstream. He bought this Airstream about three years ago and has been fixing it up ever since. He promises that it will be finished by January 2007 and then we can head across the Sahara in it from Morocco.

I keep my fingers crossed.

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Mrs. R and I, with the elder Rathbonette, went off to London on Wednesday to see Joan Baez at the Barbican.

Joan Baez was well worth seeing. On previous occasions I've seen her, her repertoire has been heavily biased towards Dylan. Now it is all Steve Earle and Elvis Costello. The audience consisted of middle aged hippies like us who had dragged their children along to show them what real commitment means.

Fortunately, on the train home (which was standing room only due to the Arsenal - Real Madrid match) we overheard the Rathbonette telling the person next to her that she had really enjoyed the concert. Thank heaven's for that.

(Just had to come in to edit this as the profanity filter seems not to like teams that it thinks are the bottom of the league.)

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The Rathbone wedding anniversary and Steve Reich's birthday co-incide, so what better for the anniversary celebrations this year than to go to the Steve Reich 70th birthday celebrations at the Barbican.

The evening started at 6:15 with a live performance by Brian Eno of Music for Airports in the Barbican foyer. The place was packed, with people lying on the floor, standing on the tables and hanging over the balconies. It was hard to believe that this piece is now 28 years old and that ambient started here.

At half past seven we trooped into the main hall. The main man himself, Mr. Reich, walked on to the stage and started to bang on a drum. Slowly, other people followed him on, taking up the rhythm on other drums lined up across the stage. Quarter of an hour in more musicians began to add to the rhythm on marimbas. Then people joined in on glockenspiel and flute. Then came the singers. An hour later and the audience was on its feet stomping along.

After that it was out into the foyer to recover and enjoy the highlight of the evening for me..... D.J. Spooky doing a live re-mix of the Kronos Quartet playing Reich's City Life. The Subliminal Kid was at his best.

Back in the hall, that was followed by Coldcut and Reich's Music for 18 Musicians.

The concert finished with an angolan band, Konono No. 1 playing Congotronics.

They finished at ten to eleven.

As Mrs. R remarked.... where did the night go?... a bit further for us as it happened. By the time we got to Kings Cross the weekend engineering timetable was in full force. There would be no train back to Rathboneland tonight! Instead we had to catch the suburban train to Alexandra Palace and

then get on the complementary bus service. It was well into Sunday before we arrived back home. By that time, the only thing to do was put on Different Trains and have a cup of cocoa.

I can't wait until his eightieth.

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When I was in the library this young guy, probably about 17 or 18, came down and sat on the other side of the table from me. He was wearing a white t-shirt with a big yellow smiley on it and the single phrase Ibiza 87 underneath.

I wondered what it meant to him. He obviously wasn't around for Acid House and at his age the last thing I would have been wearing was a t-shirt which advertised what my parents had got up to.

Then I thought, what did acid house mean to me and realised it was refuse freighters. Anybody who has gone over earlier ramblings will be aware that I live in a small country town in the south of England. What a big yellow smiley meant to the residents of our town in the late eighties was the horror of 'a rave' descending on them. As a result the Council paid for the refuse freighters to be out all night every night blocking off the entrances to the fields around the town. The dustmen were paid double time and thought it was a great laugh. This went on for months during the summer of 1987 and there was never so much as a murmured "aceeed!", far less the drug crazed orgies and loud raucous music that they expected.

Mark, the DJ at the youth club started mixing a few balearic beats into the chart fodder which posed as the local disco. A few of the more enterprising kids started turning up in t-shirts and shorts with whistles round their necks. By the time the first smiley turned up the rest of the country had moved on to breakdancing and the new panic was our children breaking their necks in the playground.

As he got up to go I was tempted to advise him to be careful if he met the dustmen in the street in case they tried to block his access on to the nearest field. Then his 'phone rang. His ring tone was from ABC's 'Lexicon Of Love'. It was almost touching. Here was someone thinking that he was being retro cool and getting it wrong. Just like the rest of us.

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I came across an article recently on the Least Collectable Records Of All Time, the ones that have been chucked out of people's record collections and which no-one else appears to want.

This was based on research that some anorak had carried out trudging round charity shops and noting down the records that were in those forlorn little cardboard bins at the back of the shops.

Nor was this just a small sample. After posting his findings on-line other anoraks across the country joined in. And then, as these things do, it went international and lists started coming in from around the world.

So far, so amusing. Where it stopped being amusing was when I saw how many records on the list were ones that I have bought myself : the Paul Young's, the Terence Trent D'Arby's.

If you're of the vinyl generation you might want to play the game yourself. With the rise of downloading and the demise of the CD you can play the digital version as well. Videotape opens up another dimension. Just visit your local charity shops, note what is in the boxes then go home and compare it with what you've got. Easy. Then go on holiday and do it all over again. You can have hours of innocent amusement.

In case you're interested, the American top five artists were Seals and Crofts, Styx, Chuck Mangione, Asia and Bob Seger.

The UK list was Chas and Dave, Mud, Bros, Geoff Love and Leo Sayer.

The international worst seller is Herb Alpert and The Tijuana Brass' "Whipped Cream and Other Delights", which seems to be a charity shop fixture around the world.

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There was an article in this week's Observer by Ed Vulliamy about losing his record collection in America. He was moving from London to Tucson, Arizona. In transit a number of his belongings were destroyed, including 3,000 books and 1,600 LPs.

The article was a touching account of what the records meant to him and how he preferred analogue to digital. He was equally touching about how friends have given him their copies of old LPs to get his collection going again. Then there was the saga of scouring those records shops I know so well : the Record Exchange in Notting Hill Gate, Record and Tape at Westbourne Grove ..... but it was at this point that my suspicions were raised, because he started going on about value. £298 for Axis Bold As Love. £200 for Live At Leeds. He ended up with a list of his 10 most wanted, with the clear implication that he would like you, the reader, to find these for him.

In reality it was a shameless use of his position on the paper to try to get people to give him replacements. But not just any old replacements. He was quite specific. The Hawkwind 'In Search Of Space' had to be the first United Artist pressing. Trees 'The Garden of Jane Delawney' had to be the orange label CBS. The Dylan 'Highway 61 Revisited' had to be the first UK pressing. The Son House 'Blues From The Mississippi Delta' had to be the Folkways original. Now I could let him have all of those, but I'm not going to because I am a music fan and he is a record collector.

By all forms of reckoning I have a ridiculously large collection of music. 4155 vinyl LPs, 4867 CDs, 64,628 MP3 downloads. I play them all the time. (As I write, 'Bleed American' by Jimmy Eat World on CD). I acquired them because I love music, not because of the value of the records, so it doesn't really matter to me if they are CBS Orange Label, or a Folkways Original. That is just incidental. But it clearly matters to Ed Vulliamy. Ergo he is more interested in the artifact than the music.

Coincidentally, the May edition of Record Collector magazine has a five page feature on 'Please Please Me' alone. It goes into minute (and, frankly, tedious) detail about the differences between various pressings, mother and stamper codes, slight differences in the colours of the inks used on the labels and minute discrepancies in the typography between print runs of the cover. To get what this means, the difference between a bog standard Black/Gold Label 'Please Please Me' and a Black/Yellow Label is about £2,000. If you can find a mint copy Black/Gold with all of the other key features, well one sold on e-bay in April 2011 for £10,500. With its 49 years worth of scratches my own Black/Yellow label copy is worth about 25p.

I wish Ed Vulliamy well in recreating his collection, but I fear he is in it for the money, not the music.

(I notice from the letters page of yesterday's Observer that someone else came to exactly the same conclusion that I did about Ed Vulliamy's record collection..... to avoid any confusion, I am not Ken Ward of Crewe)

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Some times there are pieces of music which just stop you dead in your tracks. Yesterday I was walking along minding my own business when the shuffle on my i-pod pushed a piece of music into my ear which had just that effect. "It's Grim Up North" by The Justified Ancients Of Mu Mu. It's a deadpan catalogue of northern towns, recited by Bill Drummond over a techno track of tweaks, blasts and pummels, which suddenly blossoms into a glorious version of Blake's Jerusalem.

It made me think of all those wonderful KLF and JAMMs tracks which were immediately deleted by Drummond and Cauty when they split up and how I would like to get my hands back on some of them now.

Of the JAMMs output none is probably more obscure than the Anthem Peace In The House album from 1994 which was dedicated to football and had such great tracks as 'All The Way To Wembley', 'Huddersfield Town FC' and 'The Now Sound Of The Future Kirklees Stadium'. Stupidly I never bought it at the time and have only been able to track down a couple of tracks on the internet. 'Huddersfield Town FC' starts off with an air raid siren and then has a child reciting the names of the players of the Huddersfield Town squad over some excellent weirdness which mashes up 'It's Grim Up North' with some brash brass.

I'm assuming that everyone reading this has a copy of 'The White Room' album. The holy grail for KLF and JAMMs fans is the unreleased 'The Black Room'. The first track on 'The Black Album' was meant to be 'It's Grim Up North'. Much of the rest of the album was intended to be a version of 3a.m. Eternal with Drummond and Cauty screaming the lyrics over a backing track provided by Extreme Noise Terror. The resulting piece was considered so extreme that the BBC refused to broadcast it. Like a lot of 'lost' albums, much of 'The Black Room' has been released on bootlegs over the years. In all, a little over twenty minutes worth of music is out there if you're prepared to track it down. None of it reaches the pinnacle of 'It's Grim Up North.'



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Recently I caught a photograph of Mick Jagger which really made him look like an old man. As a rapidly aging teenager myself, I know the angst which arrives when it starts taking the skin on the back of your hand five minutes to get back into place after you've pinched it.

The elder Rathbonette expressed surprise at the age of Adam Yauch of the Beastie Boys when she was reading his obituaries. It's as if these people aren't allowed to grow up. In some ways, I suppose, we treat them a bit like Dorian Grey's portrait in the attic. Rock stars fulfill our fantasies for us. They represent that part of us which wants to give free rein to all of our most childish feelings and not give a damn. Consequently we have invested a bit of our youth in them, so how dare they get older.

It's a trap that the groups themselves fall into, with the result that they either don't go away or else keep coming back. Take the Grateful Dead. Even death couldn't stop that lot from carrying on. It paid off. They kept on playing right through their own revival and ended up with the biggest seller of their career with the 'In The Dark' album, which was bought in millions by kids who hadn't even been born when the band started out.

Aerosmith seem to go on forever. David Johanssen of the New York Dolls just gets better and better. There are two versions of Yes currently touring. Despite the grim reaper having literally cut their numbers in half, The Who keep pounding away. At one time they would have been called rock dinosaurs, but no-one seems to use that term any more.

Sometimes it's the younger bands who bring the dinosaurs back on to the stage. You can make a strong argument that it was the Beastie Boys blatant plagiarisms of Led Zeppelin which brought Plant and Page out of retirement.

The Industry's response was to create AOR adult oriented rock. That was twenty years ago. What had been intended to target a cd buying baby boom generation is now downloading to their MP3 children. Roll on the Lady Gaga revival.

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I see that the closure of the Bongo club has made the national press, and under the absurd headline 'The heart of British rock music is under threat.'

Hardly. It also describes the Bongo as an 'iconic' venue. Again, hardly.

In comparison with most Edinburgh clubs Bongo has had a good run since it started up in 1996. It has been at Moray House since 2003 and the University has now decided to terminate the lease in August because they want the premises for their own use as a resource centre for community education students. Now, I know there is some argument as to when the lease should have been ended, but this sort of thing is run of the mill.

The same sort of thing happened with both The Roxy and The Forest in 2010 after the Edinburgh University Settlement charity collapsed. Arguably those closures were more damaging to the Edinburgh arts scene than the demise of the Bongo will be.

It is true that there has been a gradual erosion of venues in Edinburgh over the last decade. It probably started when Wilkie House lost its licence back in 2001 following police concerns about drug use. Then the great Cowgate fire in 2002 took out La Belle Angele and with it Manga. The Venue went shortly afterwards to the dreaded propeerty developers. The University Settlement bankruptcy took out The GRV as well as The Forest and The Roxy.

It is always sad to see venues closing but, frankly it's not the end of the world. Like everything else venues come and go. It's a cyclical thing, usually linked to the economy. Overheads go up while punters have less to spend. Result, greater competition and fewer venues. I could produce a 'where are they now' list of Edinburgh music venues as long as your arm. None of them led to the end of music in Edinburgh far less threatening the future of British rock music.

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The little slogan I use at the bottom of these pieces of ephemera (*I have nothing to say and I'm going to say it*) comes originally from John Cage, but it could equally have come from Mark E. Smith who is a man with only one thing to say and is determined to say it over and over again (usually indecipherably).

I dearly love The Fall but it has been a constant source of wonder that

- a) they are still around and
- b) b) that Mark E. Smith is still with us, both physically and mentally.

To use his own phrase, he now has a face like an un-made bed.

To say that they are still around is relative. Mark E. Smith is still around, as is a band called The Fall, but since they started in 1976 there have been 66 members come and go. The Fall has always been composed of transient line-ups whose common denominators have been venom, fist-fights and resentment.

Mr. Smith is notorious for the range of things that he doesn't like and the outspoken way he goes about telling the world he doesn't like them. He's not a man who suffers fools gladly. Legend has it that he once fired a sound man for having ordered a salad. The targets of his invective have included shit pubs, Alan Shearer, people who opposed the Falklands War, J.R.R. Tolkien and dogs. A tirade is his default position. If he had been in The Smiths he would have written 'heaven knows I'm miserable now'.

The positive side of all that negativity is the brilliance and range of the songs that spring from it. 35 years on we now have 33 albums to prove it. It's hard to describe the essence of the Fall's music. At the risk of being even more pretentious than I usually am, it's the aural equivalent of that scene with the night vision goggles at the end of Silence Of The Lambs, a bit monochrome, a bit spooky but you know it's just a device. It's intimidating, but knows that it's intimidating and knows that you

know that it knows. Despite his deadly cynicism and bile Smith's lyrics are, above all, in awe of and fascinated with playing with language.

The watchword of all those albums is repetition, repetition, repetition. (Let's not forget that the b-side of their first single back in 1978 was called 'Repetition' and did just that for five minutes).

It's usually Mark E. Smith who gets all the attention, but spare a listen to the drummer, Si Wolstencroft, who kept the beat through thick and thin for over eleven years, longer than any other band member. Before that he had been the original drummer in the Smiths. On the side he was quite a nifty songwriter as well ..... check out the credits on your old Ian Brown records. Brown and Wolstencroft appears more than once.

As John Peel once said, The Fall are always different, yet always the same.

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The youngest Rathbonette has this perverse idea that she will one day get me to stand up in the Town Inn and humiliate myself on the karaoke machine. As she says: There's thousands of great songs to choose from. It's almost too good to be true. Everyone thinks they can sing, however badly, and this is your chance to do just that.

I have never quite understood why people get off on making complete fools of themselves in public, yet it is undeniable that it only took an instant after Japanese restaurants in London first introduced their own karaoke machines for the pub chains to realise that the British were ideally suited to this particular form of reputational kamikaze. Clubs like 'I Lovee Karaoke Very Muchee' ( a genuine club - I kid you not) opened up for the hardcore devotee. Very briefly there was even a Karaoke t.v. programme on Channel 4 called Karaoke Klub where you could go on television and humiliate yourself in front of millions.

In the privacy of your own computer you can download karaoke from i-tunes at just 59p a pop. On You Tube you can access the Karaoke Channel and select the style of your choice. (Tourettes Karaoke is my favourite.)

And it can be dangerous. Apparently, murder has become such a common result after a poor performance of "My Way" in the Philippines, that it warrants its own subcategory of crime: "My Way Killings". The killings have produced urban legends about the song and left Filipinos groping for answers. Are the killings the natural byproduct of the country's culture of violence, drinking and machismo? Or is there something inherently sinister in the song?

Probably not. Most of the "My Way" killings have reportedly occurred after the singer sang out of tune, causing other patrons to laugh or jeer. Just like the Town Inn really.

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The youngest Rathbonette came round to collect her flute. Not that the flute was ever objectionable in comparison with other instruments. (I can remember when Epykat was learning the viola.) If you have ever wished you could make music without frightening the neighbours you should give the flute a try.

Anyway, after she had gone there was the usual usual post search devastation in her old bedroom which needed to be put back in order. Among the stuff which had to be put back on the shelf was the original primer for the flute. It was a fascinating read:

“ If you can make a sound by blowing over the top of a bottle you can play the flute. ....

The flute runs on air so you must breathe correctly to play it with satisfaction. Yoga breathing techniques are a help but you must use your mouth as well as your nose to inhale. Fill the lungs every time you breathe and use up each breath completely before taking another.....

.....Begin playing with the head joint or mouthpiece only. Make a small aperture with your lips without puckering or swelling them, drawing the lips into a slight smile. Rest the mouthpiece gently under your lower lip and blow both into and over the hole adjusting the position of the head joint and the airstream until you get a note.....

..... a common error is jutting the jaw out or pulling it too far in. Try to keep the lower jaw flush with the upper. Don't be afraid to blow hard and long. When you get dizzy, rest. Pretty soon you will not get dizzy.....

..... When you have mastered the head joint put the flute together. When putting your flute together avoid putting pressure on the keys. They bend. Don't clean it, you'll only bend the keys....

....Remember that the weight of the flute rests on the third joint of the left index finger and the right thumb. You will need your left thumb for keying so don't get it tied up supporting the flute....

.... play standing up for fifteen minutes at a time. Play every day until you acquire some strength.....

.....Keep the flute out of the case at home so it is easy to pick up and play when you feel like it. Take it with you in the case when you go places. When there is a lull you will want to play.....

..... The fingering is tricky so if you need help find a teacher in your local area.....

Blue Peter was never like this!

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There are better ways to learn about the death of a friend than to read it in Mojo.

Yesterday I bought this month's copy of Mojo and was flipping through, reading a letter moaning about their Spike Island article last month and an interview with Elizabeth Fraser of Cocteau Twins. The Mike Oldfield piece was a bit of a bore but the one on the 1970 Isle of Wight festival was good

(or was that only because I was there?) I skipped the article on Toots and The Maytals and turned over the page.

Lol Coxhill died on 10 July.

He was a lovely man. For a while in the seventies he lived in our town in what was, somewhat laughingly, known as an 'art collective'. I got to know him quite well.

Before we met I used to buy his albums, which, frankly, are a bit patchy, veering from the truly inspired to the incomprehensibly bad via the completely bonkers..... my kind of man.

Never a household name, Lol worked with so many bands that you might well find his name among the small print on your albums and CDs. If you've got early sixties blues by Alexis Korner or R&B by Dave Hunt, you probably have Lol as well. If you have late sixties and early seventies Canterbury prog by Robert Wyatt or Kevin Ayers then you are more than likely to have Lol and if you have anything by Caravan then you definitely have Lol, who was a member of that band. He toured with Jimi Hendrix. If you like punk, particularly The Damned, he's there as well. If you are into Jazz then you are more likely to know Lol by name. I won't list the many, many jazz musicians he worked with. Patchy they may be, but any of his 27 solo albums are worth a listen.

If you have a CD called 'Grown In The Garden', not only is it a valuable collective, it is also the only time that Lol and I worked together. About fifteen years ago I went through a phase of producing local bands. (If you ever come across anything on the Bloomin' Good label, then it was produced by me.) Some of these band you might never have heard of: Lavender Rose; The Bush The Tree and Me..... no, let's face it, all of these bands you will never have heard of. One of them wanted a sax on one of their tracks. I gave Lol a ring. He didn't hesitate. On the agreed afternoon he wandered into the studio, doodled brilliantly all over their music and then for a quarter of an hour just improvised this great little piece. It didn't have a name so we called it 'Freeform Piece' and released it on 'Grown In The Garden'. He spent some time chatting to the lads, gave a friendly wave and wandered out again.

There is a nice quote about life from Lol in the Mojo obituary: "You should be more busy doing it than worrying about it."

I'll miss him.

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I had hoped to come back from holiday all refreshed, bright and sparkling, full of bonhomie and ready to go.

Unfortunately, it was to find an e-mail from Brian Hogg in my in-box to tell me that George Gallacher collapsed and died after the Partick Thistle / Dumbarton match on Saturday. At least it was after the match, which meant that George would have been in a good mood when he died. He was a fanatical Partick fan and they won 3-0.

So, who was George Gallacher then, you ask?

George was another of my adolescent music heroes, the lead singer of The Poets. The Poets were a five piece, R&B band from Glasgow. They had a nifty line in clothes, wearing high-necked jackets and ruffled fronted shirts they allegedly took from a portrait Rabbe Burns (hence, also, the name) and were famous on Scottish the gig circuit for playing 12-string guitars, a real novelty at the time. The band were hugely popular in Scotland and were signed by Andrew Loog-Oldham. One of my favourite quotes which sums up George Gallacher's attitude is the following : "At the audition I remember poor Hume asking Andrew if he wanted to hear us do some Stones numbers and me saying "Fuck the Stones, he wants to hear our stuff." "

Between October '64 and January '66 they released three singles on Decca and two on Immediate. None of the band's releases apart from the first saw any chart action which is a shame since they're all well worth a listen.

Despite the minimal chart success they seemed set to scale greater heights but it didn't happen, as Oldham -- distracted by conflicts with the Stones and other business headaches -- withdrew from the band's affairs. He left the production reins in the hands of Paul Raven, later to become Gary Glitter and everything in the band just disintegrated ( a familiar story with Scottish bands, then and now).

It's difficult to say why the Poets did not become bigger. Maybe it was because they weren't primarily making music to dance to. As the music critic Brian Morton has said, "Unlike all others of the 500 bands in Glasgow at the time, whom people went to dance to, one went to a Poets gig to listen." Their stuff did not make for easy listening (which is probably why it appealed to me!). It was distinctly Scottish, full of old celtic self-pitying doom and gloom. There was no irony or humour evident, only unrelenting misery set to a swinging pop beat.

George's next group, the Dead Loss Band, was essentially a heavy rock band, very loud and self-indulgent and heavily aligned to far-left politics. I liked them as well. Regrettably they never recorded anything and are now lost to the mists of memory.

George himself eventually finished his university course, graduating in philosophy and literature, became a teacher and got involved in a number of theatrical projects with James Kelman.

Last year The Poets reformed for a couple of gigs, which I missed. At least I still have the scratchy old 45s to remember him by.

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Holiday reading was a light and fluffy book by Johnny Sharp called 'Mind The Bollocks', an anthology of bad writing about rock and pop, which he prefaces by misquoting Oscar Wilde: " We are all in the gutter, but some of us talk nonsense about the stars."

Just as a diversion I thought I'd give you a little quiz today. The following are all contemporary reviews of famous records. Have a guess at which ones. Answers tomorrow.....

1 The use of guest artists here reeks of desperation to cover the lack of inspiration in the music. X lays himself bare as a songwriter and the results are often acutely embarrassing. A barely developed artist being given too much artistic control.

2 This record is lousy. The singing is flat, the song is laughably naive and the overall feeling is of a third rate Who imitation.

3 So utterly confused with itself it was difficult to follow. It relies too heavily on taped sound effects of heartbeats, plane crashes and other insane utterances.

4 X has no discernible singing ability. His speciality is rhythm songs which he renders in an undistinguished whine. His phrasing, if it can be called that, consists of the stereotyped variations that go with a beginner's aria in a bathtub. For the ear he is an unutterable bore.

5 X are praised for being more ambitious than their peers. Possibly because there's nothing much to them but ambition. Pampered, pilfered piffle.

6 Dismal, muddy, thuggish trad rock that adds further weight to the notion that sub-pop is hype. These warhorse riffs are only fit for the knacker's yard.

7 This is quite good. Just. What could have been great instead merely bulges with promise.

8 Could have done with a more distinctive lead vocal.

9 Christ, so this is what John Leckie dumped the Roses for. Yet another anthemic chunk of fey verse riffola and big Marshall stack chorus action.

10 The kind of garage band who should be speedily returned to their garage, preferably with the engine running, which would undoubtedly be more of a loss to their friends and families than to either rock or roll.

The answers to yesterday's quiz:

1 Michael Jackson -- Thriller

2 The Sex Pistols --Anarchy In The UK

3 Pink Floyd -- Dark Side Of The Moon

4 Elvis Presley -- Heartbreak Hotel

5 Blur -- Parklife

6 Nirvana -- Smells Like Teen Spirit

7 The Stone Roses -- The Stone Roses

8 Dexy's Midnight Runners -- Searching For The Young Soul Rebels

9 Radiohead -- The Bends

10 The Clash -- Garageland.

Sometimes things happen which can't be rationally explained, and I'm not talking UFO's here.

I went into HMV yesterday and bought the latest Bob Dylan cd 'Tempest'. It came fully shrink wrapped and sealed.

I got it home, stripped off the wrapping and popped it on the machine and was blown away. "Hey", I thought, "old Zimmy's really getting into a groove here. Not what I was expecting at all." After about a minute it was clear that it really wasn't what I was expecting at all. I ejected the disc. It turned out that it was a cd called The Last Resort by someone or some group called Trentemoller that I have never heard of.

I had been enjoying it so I put it back in the machine and listened to it all the way through. What a really good album. It turned out to be basically electronica coupled with the sort of out of time sampled ambient quality which Boards of Canada specialise in. When it had finished I put it on again.

A quick google identified Trentemoller as a danish ambient artist. The Last Resort was released in 2006 and reached no. 5 on the danish album charts. Wikipedia describes it as "You can hear Trentemøller working out the equation between fantastical affect and floor-friendly functionalism at every step; obviously as influenced by film music and prog excess as he is the throbbing throng, he's married Balearic eclecticism to Scandinavian melancholy in a way that's often impressive and occasionally breathtaking. At the very least, it's consistently beautiful-- or at least pretty-- even when it fails to be properly engrossing"

I'd go along with that.

Anyway, I took it back to HMV. The guy behind the counter simply shrugged. As he said, how did he know how it got inside a Bob Dylan jewelbox. In fact, as he said, how did he know it was even there in the first place and I wasn't just trying to blag a second copy of the Dylan album? I decided not to argue. I was quite happy to keep the Trentemoller album, so I bought another copy of the Dylan and opened it in the shop just to make sure it was what it said it was.

Turns out the Dylan is very good as well, but he doesn't build his way through baselines and textural themes until the music breaks down into acoustic drumming with a march beat steadily building as layers are added behind the mix, lifting the volume until a blistering drop is unleashed. I like this so much that I'm going to have to search out more stuff by Mr. Trentemoller.

But for a once in a million cock-up at the packaging plant he might never have come my way. Now, if anyone's got a spare copy of "Gardyloo - an anthology of Edinburgh Detritus" on the Beatville label, I've been trying to get my hands on one for ages.

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Just listening to the radio yesterday I was struck by how many references to the Illuminati there were in the songs I was listening to. Tiny Tempah at one end of the spectrum, Fleet Foxes at the other. That also tied in with the incident in the run up to the Olympics when every motorway sign along the M4 from Heathrow to London was graffitied with the slogan Illuminati Scum. It isn't



since the heyday of KLF, whose songs were absolutely riddled with Illuminati references, that I have been so aware of the all seeing guys.

The Illuminati started as a real secret society back in the 1770s to combat what they perceived as the rise of catholicism. Since then it has become the spiritual home for every crackpot and paranoid conspiracy theory. 'They' have been blamed for everything from starting the French Revolution to the 9/11 attacks.

In recent years they have taken to killing pop stars who reach the age of 27. Brian Jones, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison and, most recently, Amy Winehouse all fell victim to Illuminati plots.

There are whole websites devoted to proving these links. The following is genuine, from the mediaexposed site. You can make up your own mind as to whether it is crackpot or not:

“Amy Winehouse was born into ritual, typical Illuminati abuse. Rehab is another word or code for reprogramming, so yes she was in her programmed state of mind (dissociation) when she died. Found 'dead' on 7/23/11, age 27 and 311 days. Obviously the masonic 311 stands for  $3 \times 11$  or 33 (degree). Since she is a member of the 27 club the amount of days after she turned 27 is important and counted. So exactly on the 311th day after turning 27 she is dead. The whole date together  $(7+2+3+1+1)$  is 14 and  $27 (2 \times 7)$  is 14.  $7 \times 2 = 14$   $3 \times 11 = 33$  or  $7 \times 2 = 14$   $3 + 11 = 14$  so 14/14 from the date:  $(7/2)(3/11)$  7/23/11. Now using the total 14:  $14 - 11 = 3$  and  $14 - 3 = 11$ . 2011  $(2+0+1+1)$  is 13.  $(2+3+1+1) = 7$  or 7/7. 14/14. Double digits or the same number repeated 77 gives power to the ritual. Add the numbers  $(7+2+3+11)$ , you get 23 altogether. Add  $(7+2+3+2+0+11)$ , you get 25 or 7. Artists are known to die on the date 25/age 25 or age 27. This is because 25 in the occult stands for 7 while 27 stands for 9. 7, 9, 11, 13, 23, 25, and 33 are occult numbers which are all used in the date. Her tattoos consists of a bluebird, ruby shoes and lightning The number 27 is a lunar symbol, for light in darkness or light itself. 27 Club consists of other artists specifically rock who also had problems with drugs, addiction, and substance abuse which led them to death or a ritual sacrifice. Note this. At age 27, there's the highest brain activity, and then it starts to deteriorate slowly. That's why it's called the "Forever 27 Club" or 27 curse. It is linked with Mk-Ultra- living "forever young". She was a blood sacrifice to Kelly Osbourne (most likely).”

We shouldn't worry too much though, because the catholic church's take on it is : “If there is indeed some truth to the Illuminati conspiracy, the Illuminati are nothing but pawns in the hands of Satan, tools to be manipulated in his conflict with God. The fate of the Illuminati will be the same as the fate of their lord, Satan/Lucifer, who will be cast into the lake of fire, to be tormented day and night, forever and ever (Revelation 20:10). In John 16:33 Jesus declared, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." For Christians, all we need to understand about the Illuminati conspiracy is summarized in the words of 1 John 4:4, "You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the One who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world."

Personally I still put my faith in Messrs. Drummond and Cauty. It was their belief that the Illuminati attempt to order and control mankind, and receive individual power (become illuminated) by causing mass deaths. Their arch enemies The Justified Ancients of Mu Mu (The JAMs), are "an organisation who are at least as old as the Illuminati and represent the primeval power of Chaos". Along with affiliated groups the LDD and the ELF (Erisian Liberation Front), the JAMs are

engaged in a secret war to prevent the Illuminati from bringing closer the end of the world. The JAMs were members of the Illuminati, but were expelled at the behest of a faction protesting "kick out the JAMs". The illuminati control all the record companies, which is why all mainstream music is very dull. The JAMs started their own company to bring out good music, and combat the Illuminati. When Drummond and Cauty decided to "kick out the old" and attack the music industry, they named their group the Justified Ancients of Mu Mu and their record company the Kopyright Liberation Front (The KLF). Much of their recorded output features chants of Mu Mu! And their recordings are allegedly the sound of Mu. As I said above, their work is absolutely riddled with Illuminati references. You might want to spot them yourself.

Me, I'm off to dig out What Time Is Love and Last Train To Transcentral and have a good wallow in paranoia before they come to get me.

Let's just stick with the Illuminati for a bit longer. While checking out the 27 Club before yesterday's post I came across a blog by someone called Nikki, a 20-something woman who lives in Philadelphia. Nikki believes that shadowy forces, the real power behind the power, are at play to overthrow the American government: The Illuminati. In her view they are a conspiratorial organization of cultural elites with unspeakable wealth who control world affairs through governments and corporations. Nikki says that President Obama was "selected, not elected" president by the Illuminati, and that he's now carrying out its homosexual agenda by "appointing more gays to his Cabinet than all the other presidents combined."

Nikki happens to be young, black and a huge fan of hip-hop and she believes rapper Jay-Z is a part of the Illuminati too. "Everybody know that," she says. Presumably the "everybody" she's referring to is people like herself: mostly young, black and deeply embedded in hip-hop culture.

Instead of acknowledging the wild success of someone like Jay-Z, a growing number of hip-hop fans attribute his rise into the mainstream elite to him getting in bed with extreme right wing forces. Search "illuminati jay z" and the accusations and theories about Jay-Z and his associations will wash over you like a tsunami. "I think illuminati killed Micheal Jackson, Tupac, Kanye's mom and Biggie ... Jay Z practically said so in The Song Most Kings". Talk of the man's supposed Masonic ties dominate the comments section of virtually every hip-hop blog post or website. Jay-Z worships the devil. Jay-Z took a blood oath with a secret society. Jay-Z is in the occult. Jay-Z sold his soul to evil forces to acquire power and influence heretofore unseen by a black entertainer. Jay-Z is in the Illuminati. The evidence is everywhere, hidden in plain sight. It's in his videos. It's in his lyrics. It's in the pyramid-shaped sign he makes with his hand, which you foolishly believe represents his Rocafella label.

For all Jay-Z's ridiculous net worth and cultural influence, I don't think he or any other rapper have enough power to enact the kind of negative social change people think secret society leaders are capable of. To be sure, Jay has been part of some truly unscrupulous stuff during his tenure as the world's most influential rapper. I'd give him the benefit of the doubt and say he's evolved some since spitting "D'evils" in 1996. And even if you think he hasn't, he's probably not going to usher in the apocalypse. Nor is Obama. I'd put my money on Netanyahu if he gets re-elected in January.

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Back in the 1970's I was fond of rummaging through the imports section of a little record shop in Nottinghill Gate which has long gone the way of most record shops. One day I came across the only record I have ever bought on the strength of the cover alone. It was a young guy with fashionably curly hair smiling out at me, blood streaming down his face from the bullet wound in his forehead. The title of the album was A Lot Of People Would Like To See Armand Schaubroeck Dead. On the back it simply said Armand Schaubroeck Steals. On closer inspection it turned out to be a triple album. There were no track details. Intrigued, I thought about buying it, but didn't. The next time I went to the shop it was still there. Then the next and the next. Eventually I succumbed.

It's a very strange, very autobiographical LP. Most people I have played it to over the years either like it or love it. Fortunately I fall into the latter category. I have never ever seen another copy, nor is Armand Schaubroeck a regular feature of the music magazines I buy. I have never seen his name in any of those, nor does it feature in the index of any of the books I have looked at.

Until now. Yesterday I was having a long browse in Waterstones through Julian Cope's latest tome, Cependium. There, in the index, was Armand and there, in the text, a long article on the man.

It was uncanny. This is a direct quote from Cope: "Amongst all those weirdos, one album always stood out as being even weirder. For a start, it was a triple album in a gatefold sleeve, and the front showed a photo of a smiling, curly-haired Lou Reed-ian late-20s punk with a poorly executed fake bullet hole right through the centre of his head, and fake blood cascading down his face. Turning it over, the handwritten lettering pronounced: "Armand Schaubroeck Steals." What the hell was this all about? Even if I'd had the money, I was no way about to pay over seven quid to find out. And so, every Probe visit, this mysterious album passed through my hands until I was desperate to know what it contained. No one at Probe knew, and neither would they open the shrink-wrap to unlock this mystery." Of course, he succumbed as well.

Turns out Armand has released quite a few albums, all of which sold zilch.

He runs a guitar shop in Irondequoit, New York, which he set up in 1964 in the basement of his mother's house. It's called The House Of Guitars and, interestingly it has its own Wikipedia entry when Armand does not. It seems from Wiki that House Of Guitars is something of a cult among musicians. The Ramones, Motley Crue, Bon Jovi, Aerosmith, Metallica and Ozzy are all regular customers.

But back to my own cult interest. I have lived with A Lot Of People for almost forty years now. To describe Armand Schaubroeck as over the top hardly does him justice. In twenty two scenes combining songs and dialogue, it tells the story of Schaubroeck's teenaged incarceration in Almira prison for robbery. While powerful and impressive, the subject and treatment is far too personal to be of general interest, and the length makes complete listening a real challenge. This catharsis may have been necessary for him, but it's more an accomplishment than an entertainment. Hasn't stopped me listening to it over and over though.

It turns out that he has released others as well, so I can see that I'm in for a major tracking down session over the Christmas break. I Came To Visit But Decided To Stay; Shakin Shakin; Ratfucker, and Live At The Holiday Inn are out there somewhere and I'm going to get them.

# POLITICS AND OTHER HEAVY STUFF

Paul is creosoting his side of the fence and the nostalgic whiff is taking me back to my childhood..... much as the cups of Tetley and the Malted Milks served in the boycott bunker took me back to those heady, revolutionary days of 1968.

As is well documented, the 1967 summer of love slowly transmuted into the autumn of discontent and the winter of wondering what next. What next turned out to be 1968.

I was in the Art College drama group in those days, busy preparing our version of Brecht's Mahagonny for that year's fringe.

As the mood changed, so did our choice of play. We initially switched over to Brecht's The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui, but that foundered as no-one wanted to play Hitler, and finally, after absurdly wasting a fortnight on Ionescu's L'Avenir Est Dans Les Oeufs, we settled on some 20s Russian adgitprop thing which I've forgotten the name of. (A load of old tosh for the main part.)

As the Vietnam demonstrations in London grew closer, the fervour grew more intense. For a whole couple of days the student body at the Art College went on strike, demanding ..... well, we didn't really know what we were demanding. We occupied the canteen, ate all the sandwiches, painted spontaneous banners which were closely copied on those we had seen in newsreels of what had been happening in France and, strangely, sang lots of Jacques Brel songs.

In those days a revolutionary idea wasn't really a revolutionary idea if it hadn't been thought up in the Meadow Bar. After downing numerous revolutionary ideas that Spring, it was decided to hire a mini-bus and take a delegation of comrades down to the demo.

For some reason (probably because I went out for a pee) I was given the role of official photographer. I was thrilled, though it wasn't my usual job: I wrote the music reviews in Student. Ian usually took the photographs, but he couldn't get away that weekend.

The journey down to London was fairly uneventful. Nobody was 'accidentally' left behind at any of the stops and we did find a parking place at Walter's mate's in Turnham Green. Once all sixteen of us had piled out of the bus we decided to split into smaller groups and to meet the next day in Trafalgar Square.

I went off with Merv, Alan and Steve. After getting off the tube in Piccadilly, we wandered round for a while, mostly drinking guinness in pubs off the back of the Circus. Steve bought a carry-out, but had nothing to carry it in, so picked up a touristy union jack bag at one of the pavement stalls. Then we went to the pictures. (I can't remember what the film was, but it might have Isadora starring Vanessa Redgrave).

A few more pints after the film and then our thoughts turned to somewhere to sleep for the night, so it was into a taxi and off to the LSE. Smart thinking..... of course the LSE was occupied and anyone could doss down in the corridors and lecture rooms for the night. There was only one problem: Steve's carrier bag. We could bring the booze in, but the bag had to stay outside. Union Jacks were not permitted. NLF flags - that was different.

Come the morning, it was a case of wandering around again until it was time to meet up with everyone else. We had a good breakfast in a greasy little cafe off the Aldwych and then made our way roughly towards the meeting place. The last of the carry-out was consumed sitting on a park bench in Soho Square.

Needless to say, we didn't meet up with anyone we knew in Trafalgar Square.

I was busy snapping away with the two ton zenith single reflex slung around my neck.

When the crowd moved, I moved with it. I eventually washed up in Grosvenor Square, feeling frightened, buzzy and 'grown-up important' all at the same time. It was one of those situations where you just had to let yourself go with the flow, or else you would come to grief.

Eventually I bumped into Merv and Alan again. We decided to spend the rest of the day rowing on the Serpentine.

Back on the mini-bus it turned out that I was the only one who had come within viewing distance of the American Embassy. Most of the guys hadn't even started off on the march, using the time to sleaze round Soho or get pissed in overpriced hostelryes.

None of the photographs were good enough to use.

The revolution came and went. We went back to Mahagonny. It played in a little hall off Lady Lawson Street. Seven people came the first night. The average after that was three, but the tea and biccies were good!

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I suppose there are worse things than spending the week in a corset factory.

I spent last week at the former Spirella Corset Factory in Letchworth, where the Government is carrying out a Public Inquiry into the proposed East of England Regional Spatial Strategy. This is the unelected Regional Assembly's plans for growth on an enormous scale, including 478,000 new homes by 2021, and no fewer than 67 road schemes.

The argument, put forward by the Government, is that the only way to address high house prices in the East of England is to built more, hence reducing the pressure on the market and bringing prices down.

Not everyone is convinced:

The effects on the countryside and quality of life in the region could be devastating, with development of large swathes of Green Belt land, especially around Harlow, Luton and Cambridge, causing irreparable harm to the character of historic cities, villages and towns and widespread damage to recreation and tourism assets. Light pollution in the region jumped by 21% between 1993 and 2000 and would increase by a further 12% under these proposals. Water resources would become over stretched: the region is already the driest in Britain. There would be vastly increased levels of road traffic, worsening already bad congestion and contributing to climate change and worse air quality.

You get the gist.

As this was a public inquiry there was lots of lively vox pop interventions. My favourite was from the chap from the Campaign Against Stevenage Expansion who made the point that as a layman, he had sat all morning not understanding a single thing that was being said. Everyone was talking about RSS this and RPG that. The Chairman tried to explain some of the terms, to which Mr. Case replied that he couldn't understand the explanation either.

I pity the poor Inspector who has to make sense of all this and then explain it to John Prescott.

Perhaps he should take heed of the following guidance for the sellers of Spirella corsets:

To be ready to take advantage of every opportunity, you must always carry with you a sample of the Spirella stay, as a chance acquaintance may give you an opening for a new client. Make a list of all the corset wearers in the section of your district in which your own home is located and work this section thoroughly before beginning another. Plan your route before you start; leave your home every morning at a regular hour, nine o'clock if possible, because the morning hours are the best in which to secure the first interview with your client. At this time present the merits of Spirella through your sales talk which should secure the order. If there is a logical reason why the order cannot be taken at this time, make a definite appointment for an early date.

The Spirella museum was the highlight of my week. I stopped working on my proofs of evidence and began trying to work out how many people in the room were potential corset clients.

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I've never been very good at estimating the amount of enthusiasm that can be whipped up among the members of our local community. Last Thursday night I put out thirty chairs in the village hall, hoping against hope that we'd get about two thirds of them filled.

As the community council convenor for the environment I've been trying for some time to get people to take an interest in looking after our trees. Everybody takes the trees for granted and assumes that they'll live forever. Of course they don't and people come bleating to the community council whenever one of the trees disappears (usually to make way for development).

Last year, just out of curiosity, I stopped people at random in the street and asked them how many trees they thought there were in the town. Answers ranged from a couple of hundred to a couple of thousand. Through the Environmental Forum we went out and actually counted them. There are 26,892.

So, the purpose of the meeting last Thursday was to try to recruit some tree wardens to look after them.

The tree warden scheme is run by the Tree Council and consists of local volunteers who will gather information about their local trees and undertake practical projects to do with trees and woods.

The information gathering involves recording where the trees are, what species they are, the condition they are in and whether they appear to be under any threat, whether that is from developers or from vandalism. The information is then passed on to the Council's arboricultural section and practical projects set up to resolve the problems.

The tree wardens can also act as the local community's liaison point, telling people what species are best to plant, how to deal with damaged trees and how to obtain grant funding for tree planting. They might not have all the answers, but they will be part of a larger network which knows how to find them. Above all, they can act as a pressure group to ensure that trees are not removed needlessly, or just because they prevent a developer adding that vital additional residential unit.

The wardens work with schools, setting up tree nurseries, creating conservation areas, organise guided tree walks and giving talks. In other places it has been found that this sort of work with school children and youth groups has substantially reduced vandalism. Everyone who becomes a warden goes on a series of training courses run by the Tree Council, to teach them tree recognition, how to record tree condition, and how to look after trees. There are also grants for schools to allow them to participate.

As I said, I put out thirty seats, hoping for twenty people to turn up, so I had a problem when over seventy arrived. The Pilates class next door wasn't too happy when I had to invade their space to get another forty chairs out of the store room.

People's enthusiasm was overwhelming, most of them saying they had only been waiting for someone to set something up (.....typical).

At the end of the evening fifty two people signed up as volunteers and another ten said they would, provided the training courses didn't clash with other things. All of the starter packs I had went and I've had to order more.

I notice from the Tree Council's website that there is an Edinburgh branch of the Tree Warden scheme, but it doesn't say whether there are any wardens for Portobello. If there are --- Hi there, keep up the good work. If there aren't, try counting how many trees there are in Porty and then contact the Natural Heritage Service at 1 Cockburn Street to see what can be done about ensuring that there continues to be that many.

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Adrian, Christie and I are working on a Carbon Pledge.

What we want to do is to get everyone in the District to sign up to reducing their carbon use over the next decade. Fat chance. Of course we won't get everybody to do that, but if we even get 10% prepared to have a go then we will have made some sort of impact.

There can be few people ,now, who are not aware of Global warming, and who don't know that if we want to contain it we need to reduce our emissions of greenhouse gases.

However, despite brave words, at the moment the UK is increasing emissions every year - we are going in the wrong direction!

It is important to understand why we not progressing on climate change initiatives. There are two main reasons:

Firstly: Denial.

There are intelligent, educated people who tell us that climate change is an exaggerated threat. This opinion is promoted in the media by individuals and corporations who stand to lose financially if energy consumption is reduced. Crucially the US Government refuses to accept the evidence and its implications.

Secondly: Evasion of Responsibility.

Why is it always the responsibility of someone else to do something about it? It isn't all down to Local Authorities, Government and Big Business. The log jam needs to be broken. Working together everyone can make a difference and this is where we are starting from:

Through the Community Council Environmental Forum we want people to build awareness and action around the following pledge:

Over the coming years I will take individual responsibility, empower my neighbours and enable this area to become a Low-Carbon district. Accordingly I pledge to

\* Calculate my own carbon dioxide emissions

\* Reduce these by at least 5% per year

\* Influence others to take similar action.

About two years ago the eldest Rathbonette was made redundant. She and all of her colleagues were called to a meeting where they were informed that their company had been taken over by another one and as part of the rationalisation of the business the new owners had decided to close down their area. In other words, it was an asset stripping exercise. Her boss seemed very upset. He was very sympathetic to all of them. After all they were all in this together. He was losing his job as well. More than that, he was losing the company which he had spent most of his life building up.

The eldest Rathbonette initially took it in her stride. She used the relatively modest redundancy payment to clear her debts and invested in a training scheme to get some transferrable skills.



Nevertheless, she was out of work for over a year, had to come back to live with us and first depleted her savings and then started on ours. Like most people in that situation she became depressed and ended up on regular trips to the doctor.

She was lucky. She managed to find another job. Not all of her former colleagues have managed that and some of them are still on benefit, with little sign of things improving in the near future.

Last week there was an article in our local paper about our County's Rich List. There at number two was the Rathbonette's former boss. His company had been sold to a competitor for over £1 billion and he had personally made £340 million out of the deal. It's nice when you're all in it together.

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I walked out of a conference yesterday and felt guilty in the car on the way back home.

Down here the Government have set up Local Enterprise Panels. These have taken over almost all the functions of the old Regional Assemblies, but instead of being made up of local politicians they consist almost exclusively of business men appointed by the Government instead of councillors elected by us.

This conference was meant to be about the rural economy. I was there in my capacity as vice-chairman of our county branch of the Campaign To Protect Rural England.

The keynote speaker, who is a big-wig in a multi-national company, spoke for twenty minutes and didn't mention the countryside once. Instead he went on and on about economic growth.

He was followed by another big-wig, this time from a large spanish bank, who went on and on about economic growth.

Then there was someone from a large film company who explained how it was going to be necessary to build all over the Green Belt if we were to get the economy on track.

It went on like this until the coffee break.

Then came the plenary session.

One brave woman stood up and asked why there was this constant focus on economic growth. It might do everyone a bit of good if we just flat-lined for a while. There was nothing wrong with breaking even. After all, what they meant by economic growth was just making more and more profit. I have never seen such universal incomprehension on the faces of a top table for a long time. They just couldn't grasp the concept she was putting forward.

Then a man got up and asked why none of them had addressed the issue of small and medium enterprises in the countryside. Mr. Multi-National answered that by saying that there were very few SMEs in the countryside. The questioner then said that he was a farmer, and as such he was a medium sized business. In fact 60% of the countryside consists of farms and all of them are

businesses. Mr. Multi-National then attempted a bit of damage limitation and said that it went without saying that farms are SMEs.

And so it went on. It was clear that these people, who had been put in charge of the countryside, knew nothing about it. To them it was a bit of green space that you could visit at weekends.

After lunch we split into workshops. My workshop was on representation. We were joined by Mr. Spanish Bank. It turned out that everything we were discussing today would be taken into account by the LEP, but under their terms of reference they were not bound by it or had to take action on it. I had the temerity to ask what actual representation the rural community would have on the LEP. I was reassured that there would be a rural voice because one of the appointees had been give the 'rural portfolio'. When I asked who that was I was told that it was the head of a computer software firm who lived in London.

The second workshop was on 'maintaining the rural economy'. I decided to give that a miss.

Then I felt guilty in the car for effectively just rolling over and letting this travesty happen.

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Having had their planning application for a second shopping mall in our town, less than a mile away from their existing store, turned down Tesco have said that they are not going to appeal. It made me wonder if this is an indicator that the shopping mall bubble has burst on the sharp point of austerity.

One of the biggest and most insidious cultural changes over the last twenty years has been the rise of shopping as an 'experience'. First we had out of town supermarkets (Tesco led the way) and then 'retail parks' then those parks were roofed over and called malls. You can trace that development through from the utilitarian Arndale Centre in Manchester in the late seventies to huge malls like Bluewater and Lakeside in the past few years.

I can remember Brent Cross opening. It was hailed as cutting edge. Now it looks pretty banal and a little tatty. It was soon overtaken by the rise of shopping fantasy, with themed designs. The Metro Centre in Newcastle was essentially a fun fair when it first opened. Our local mall was originally decked out as an Egyptian temple. A year or two ago it was given a makeover and is now covered in stars like the inside of a planetarium.

It was the world of make believe being built with make believe money combining to encourage a carnival of dreamlike consumption superimposed on a vision of a free market future where there was nowhere else to go but the shops. It was the panacea for all modern ills. There was nothing that couldn't be cured by a bit of retail therapy. All you had to do was spend.

Now we don't have the ability to spend. I accept that through the nineties and naughties most people were spending fantasy money they didn't have. They no longer have access to that fantasy.

We also seem to have reach saturation level. Take Maryhill. Last christmas Tesco Express opened near the top of Queen Margaret Drive, just minutes from the door of the 24 hour Maryhill superstore that opened in late 2010 and the arrival of another, smaller Tesco Express opposite the Community Central Halls on Maryhill Road. While I can understand competing with your rivals, it seems a bit odd to be competing with yourself.

Back at our mall a good third of the shops are closed. The town centre, which it devastated, has over half of its shops closed. No wonder Tesco are having second thoughts about investing in yet another retail paradise.

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In some ways I'm sad to see Ken Livingstone bowing out of London politics. It's easy to forget what a force he was. At the height of his powers the only way that Margaret Thatcher could get rid of him was to abolish the Council that he led and, as soon as that Council was reinstated the electorate immediately re-elected him mayor.

While Boris Johnson depends on buffoonery to keep his profile up, Ken Livingstone has always gone for radical cheek.

He almost made it again this time, despite all of the hoo-hah about how much tax he was paying. The whole of the last London elections was reduced by the tabloids to a debate about Ken and Boris' tax arrangements. The campaign never became a focus or comparison of policy Any hopes Livingstone had that he would win on the basis of detailed costings and help for the poorest were soon dented by revelations about his tax arrangements. For Livingstone once again, a painful truth was exposed: enemies gained, stances adopted, conflict pursued over a lifetime of political activism combined to bring him down.

Some of the media coverage was really underhand. The London Today t.v. programme revealed that Livingstone has fathered five children by three different women. As well as two young children by his partner, he has two adult children by one woman and a boy with another. "I don't think anybody in this city is shocked about what consenting adults do," he said. "I guess I'm just very fertile. When I was younger I liked to put it about a bit, no one cares now do they?"

The real shock to Ken came when London Today TV reporter, Katy Kay revealed the results of a recent DNA profile. All candidates for the position of London Mayor have to register on the national DNA database, ironically legislation which Mr. Livingstone himself introduced. The results revealed that Boris Johnson is in fact Ken Livingstone's love-child. Boris Johnson himself was unavailable for comment but later released a statement saying "I have known for some time that Ken Livingstone is my biological father, there have always been clues; my interest in politics for example, my love for amphibians and my desire to bed every hot young filly I come into contact with."

In his most recent interview Ken was asked if politics was anything like newt conservation. He answered "Yes, but the world of politics I now frequent is full of lizards who aren't as friendly as the lovely newts I knew in the 70s, and they're a lot slimier too."

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Interesting to see that the American presidential campaign has brought the moral majority creeping out its cave for another fling. Obama pitched for the gay vote, so the dinosaur rises.

It's been a little while since it stirred in quite this way. Killing people who ran abortion clinics, if I remember correctly.

The Moral Majority (with capital Ms) was founded by Jerry Falwell in 1979 to act as an umbrella organisation for the American religious right. It started as a pressure group which sought to impose its views on teenage pregnancy, abortion, divorce, pornography and the need for daily prayers in school.

It was quickly embraced by the Republican party and it has been argued that it was the moral majority vote which led to Ronald Reagan being elected to the presidency, which is presumably why it is now back on the scene. Romney needs all the votes he can get.

After Reagan's second term Jerry Falwell announced that the religious right was solidly in place and that religious conservatives in America were now in for the duration. That wasn't strictly true (thank God), but their pernicious influence has pervaded American politics ever since.

The whole thing took a knock when t.v. preacher Jim Bakker's affair with his secretary was revealed amidst much scandal and handwringing. But there are still estimated to be fifty million Americans who consider themselves to be born again fundamentalist Christians who have a direct line to God and speak on his behalf.

Campaigns by the moral majority keep popping up on a regular basis, usually accompanied by placards saying "XXXX you are going to Hell" or "God Hates XXXX".

Probably the most bizarre has been their campaign against the Batman films and comics on the basis that Batman's sixty years of sex free crime fighting with only young Robin by his side condones homosexuality.

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Disasters come and go. The hall radiator has sprung a leak and soaked the carpet. When Mrs. R. pointed it out my response was "Well, it's hardly Chernobyl, is it.", which went down well.

Every year there are disasters and it made me wonder why some of them stick in the consciousness and others don't. Most people can still remember Chernobyl and most will probably be able to remember the Japanese Tsunami in twenty years time, but the Indian Ocean Tsunami already seems to be slipping away and the Pakistan floods hardly register at all.

On a practical level the effects of Chernobyl are still being felt. Radiation levels in Wales are still elevated and while the sheep may no longer be glowing in the dark, they are walking around with something toxic floating around in the grass they eat.

Unlike the tsunamis and floods, Chernobyl was entirely down to human error and was subject to human cover-up. While the explosion occurred in the early hours of the morning of 26 April 1986, the Soviet Government chose not to say anything. It was only when the Swedish authorities detected a huge plume of radiation passing over Scandinavia two days later that suspicions were raised and by the end of the week, when the whole of Europe was now covered by radioactive fallout, the Russians were forced to admit that there had been an accident in which two people had died immediately and a further twenty eight over the following couple of days.

Italy, West Germany and Greece were the countries most heavily contaminated by the radiation, though readings in Britain were also high. When the issue was raised in the House of Commons Margaret Thatcher denied that there was any problem. In fact the British Government adopted the same position as the Soviets, not warning its citizens about the radioactive fallout and taking no action until the last possible minute.

In fact milk was contaminated by iodine-131 and slaughtered sheep were found to contain high levels of caesium. It took the Government until 20 June before they decided to do anything about that. Even then they announced that the necessary bans on the consumption of milk and lamb would only last three weeks. Meanwhile gallons of contaminated milk and tonnes of meat had found their way into the food chain. In actual fact the bans had to stay in place for almost two years before the levels of iodine and caesium dropped back to acceptable levels.

Now, quarter of a century later, the long term effects of the radiation from Chernobyl is still not calculable. Because of the continuing disinformation from the Soviet government it is impossible to say how many cancers were caused in Russia. Estimates are 500,000. In Europe it is easier to calculate and there the figure is around 25,000.

Given the response of the British Government to Chernobyl and to various events since, I wouldn't rely on them to respond any better to any future event. Me, I've just 'phoned the plumber.

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I was doing my regular stint of voluntary work in the YMCA and listening in to two young lads sharing their tribulations in the coffee bar when one of them came out with the remark that the problem with the Tories is that they have a policy of no jobs for the yobs. Doesn't that just sum it up.

You can peel away the weasel words and skewed semiotics, but underneath it all there is still that assumption that if you are not working then it's your own fault. While Cameron & Co. carefully try to avoid direct comparison with the Thatcher administration, you just know that someone (probably Oliver Letwin) is just itching to say that it is time to get on your bike and pedal off to some entrepreneurial fantasy job of your own making.

Wasn't that called 'The Enterprise Culture' the last time round? Now it's called 'The Dragons Den'.

The assumption is that there are all these cheap 'starter' units all over the country just waiting to accommodate everything from pizza delivery services to mobile children's entertainers. Round our way, if we are not careful, car valeting will become the nation's biggest growth industry.

All of this is Mickey Mouse business, of course. Most of these enterprises are providing non-essential services to people who can't afford to buy them. An economy can't run on balloon shops, kissograms and nappy services alone.

George Osborne may hail this surreal approach as 'growth' when in reality it points to a complete failure to provide the employment opportunities that remain the Government's responsibility.

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I was reading in the Liverpool Echo about a recent Labour party fund-raising event which was attended by both Alistair Campbell and Derek Hatton. From the platform Campbell advised the gathering that "Derek Hatton shook my hand. The last time I saw him I think he spat in my face."

Who remembers Degsy, the ex fireman who had his fifteen minutes of fame sitting on breakfast t.v. couches telling the nation about marxism as he knew it?

Back in the 80s Derek Hatton was a councillor on Liverpool City Council. He held that position as a member of the Labour Party, but was actually a leading light of The Militant Tendency, who were a Trotskyist group. By 1985 he was deputy leader of the Council, though it was clear that he was manipulating the leader, John Hamilton, and calling the shots. The council deliberately set an illegal budget some £30 million in excess of their income, which led to huge redundancies from the council's work force, with officials notoriously driving around Liverpool in taxis handing out redundancy notices. There was a big dust up at the Labour Party conference and Hatton was expelled from the Party.

In 1993 he went on trial accused of corruption during his time on the council, but was found not guilty.

Undaunted, Degsy wooed the media, becoming a celebrity on a whole range of television programmes and a commentator on BBC radio. He currently works as a motivational speaker through his company Rippleffect.

It seems that he now wants to get back into politics, hence the attendance at the fund raising event, but is giving out mixed messages. In one article he says that he is still firmly on the left and that Labour needs to back away from capitalism. In another he is going on about his various companies (apart from Rippleffect, he is into property development) and the fact that he has just spent £60,000 on a car. In a third he comments that he intends to stand as deputy leader of the Labour Party and says that he is no longer a trotskyist.

As the Liverpool Echo recently pointed out, he shares his birthday with Al Capone and Keith Chegwin.

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There was an interesting argument put forward by Patrick Ness at the Edinburgh World Writers' Conference the other week. Namely that instead of bringing people together in a multi-faceted discussion, the internet has actually made sectarianism the default position.

What that actually means is that instead of joining in genuine debate, with rational discussion of various viewpoints, modification of opinions in the light of counter argument and movement towards consensus and resolution, the anonymity of the internet leads to polarised positions, with responses becoming increasingly fragmented and bitter.

As examples he cites recent 'debates' on Syria, Julian Assange and people pontificating about what constitutes rape.

This issue has subsequently been taken up by Peter Beaumont in an article where he points out that initially it was claimed that the internet would empower people by giving everyone a voice, not just those who had access to the media and that this, in turn, would lead to greater democracy. (What the definition of democracy might be in this context was never clearly explained.) Instead what has tended to happen is that it has led to a proliferation of special interest groups who reinforce each other's like-minded opinions and gang up on those who hold opposing views.

The virtual communities which develop out of this tendency end up being organised around their own confirmatory bias which results in the participants confusing emotional response for rational thought and being supported in that position by the others in their network.

Added to this is the psychological effects of anonymity. Because people subconsciously assume that they are 'hidden' from others, self censorship goes out the window and they say things in cyberspace which they would never do in a face-to-face situation. This is compounded by the assumption that the people against whom they are directing their invective are somehow 'unreal' because they only exist on-line. As a result the 'discussions' become increasingly toxic and aggressive.

Today's game, children, is to go through the threads on this site and see how many posts you can find that fit this description. Whoever finds the most gets to object to a planning application of their choice.

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We were talking about Frankie Boyle, as you effing do, when I said that I didn't think he was obscene, just puerile. I was then asked what I did think was obscene, and I replied "Israel's attitude to Palestine". I was immediately jumped on, being accused of anti-semitism.

I did not refer to Jews. Nor did I refer to the Israeli people. I was making a comment on Israel as a political entity and was decidedly not lumping the Israelis together as though they formed a monolithic entity with a single view and agenda. Nor was I commenting on Israel's right to exist or questioning the fact that it is the only functioning democracy in the Middle East or, come to that, defending the equally obscene response of its neighbours to Israel's existence. It should go without saying that criticizing Israel is as appropriate as criticizing any other country. Israel deserves no special exemption from critical examination.

The act of criticizing Israel does not by itself make one an anti-Semite. Criticizing Israel's policies is legitimate and often necessary. But attacking Israel's existence is quite another matter. Applying double standards to Israel is very common, and it is also not rational. It is fair to criticize Israel as severely as other nations when Israel does things that warrant criticism as severe as that given to other nations. But severe condemnation of Israel that passes over or even excuses worse behavior by other countries makes no sense.

Which takes me to what has been happening in Edinburgh over the last couple of weeks, which I also find obscene.

I'm referring to the behaviour of people at the performances of the Batsheva dance group at The Playhouse. Every night people attending the show have had to run the gamut of a heckling group of anti-Israel protestors outside the venue. Every night the show has been stopped by the same protestors invading the performance and making it impossible for the performers to carry on. The Police have not intervened because the protestors 'were not doing anything illegal'.

You may have seen the letter in The Herald, which called on the Festival to withdraw the invitation to Batsheva "even at this late stage", which was signed by Liz Lochhead, Iain Banks, Tom Leonard and A.L. Kennedy, among others. Lochhead said that "Having seen how Palestinians are treated like non-humans, I believe we must use sanctions in the way they were used to bring apartheid to an end in South Africa".

You might think from that that Batsheva are an official national company. They are not and have even stated in public that they are against Israeli policy over Palestine, and they have been condemned in Israel for doing so. Their 'crime' has been to accept a grant from the Israeli Ministry of Culture.

I wonder if Liz, Iain, Tom and A.L. would be happy to be classed as supporters of the British Government just because they are British artists. If every British artistic endeavour which has received grant funding was similarly boycotted because of our involvement in Iraq there would be very few productions without a picket line outside it.

I think I know what Frankie Boyle's response would be to that .

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Just carrying on the theme of obscenities, it's salutary to note the response of the extreme right to the decision of the Norwegian court that Anders Breivik was sane.

It was a brave decision of the court because it opens up the can of worms which is islamophobia under the surface of Norwegian society (just as it is under the surface of our own.) It would have been really easy to have said Breivik was insane and swept all the difficult issues under the carpet of Planet Wacko. It hardly seems coincidental that the one witness in the Breivik trial who received death threats was Muslim. It will no longer be possible for extreme rightwing Islamophobes to deny that Breivik was in fact inspired and motivated by their ideals, fabrications and distortions.

Stephen Lennon, the leader of the English Defence League is now on record as saying that by finding Breivik sane the court has : "given credibility to what he had been saying, and that is that Islam is a threat to Europe and the rest of the world."

Philip Horn, of the British National Party has said on Facebook "I take my hat off to you, sir. You proved you were not insane, and that you are just one of many like myself who wish their country to return to the way it was before it was invaded by the Muslim population. Respect to you."

Order 777 (the self titled Christian Resistance Movement) which is run by Nick Greger and Paul Ray, both themselves founder members of the EDL, has posted on Facebook that Breivik deserves a medal for his "groundbreaking performance in blowing up his marxist traitor government building". Ray however vigorously denied having anything to do with the Norwegian attacks after Breivik claimed at his trial to have been inspired by Ray's on-line blogs. (Both Greger and Ray now live in Malta because in this country they would be arrested for inciting racial hatred.)

Also on Facebook is a petition from Darren Clift in support of Breivik. Clift finds Breivik "truly inspirational. He sacrificed his life so Europe may be free again from the clutches of Islam .... I see him as my role model, what every European man needs to be in order for Europe to survive."

In France Richard Millet has written that "Anders Breivik is without doubt what Norway deserved."

Note that none of them make any mention of the 77 people whose lives Breivik sacrificed for his own ends.

Joel Yossi, another member of the EDL has announced that he is now in communication with Breivik in prison and that "he is in high spirits".

Apparently Breivik has already started writing his autobiography, which will reportedly focus on his life from 2002, when he began his 'crusade', and a blow-by-blow account of his attacks. Breivik's lawyer Tord Jordet says that there has been a lot of interest from publishers.

Now, that is obscene.

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Naughty boy of the week (allegedly) : Grant Shapps, the new Conservative Party Chairman.

I don't know if anyone else picked up on this, but I thought it was a wonderful example of the openness and transparency which epitomises our national government.

It seems that someone has been fiddling about with the Wikipedia entry for the new Tory Chairman, removing the less flattering bits and beefing up the good ones, deleting information critical of him and adding laudatory quotes about his work with the homeless. It also seems that this someone was none other than Mr. Shapps himself, acting completely in contravention of the Wikipedia code of conduct.

Now, self-editing is forbidden in order to stop self-promotion and the reason he contravened the code was because he did all of this in secret and was only tracked down by the Wiki administrators through his I.P. address.

Some of the stuff he changed was fairly trivial, like increasing his number of 0-levels, but some of it was more sinister. Bear in mind that before last week's re-shuffle he was the Housing Minister. He deleted the fact that he had received large donations to his private office from two on-line mortgage brokers, an estate agent, a commercial property developer, and a firm of solicitors specialising in conveyancing. Not much conflict of interest there then.

It also transpires that he has an alter-ego called Michael Green. Michael Green runs a web sales business called HowToCorp. The company specialises in selling online self-help packages, and can enable you to "Achieve the Swing in Golf", "Find Happiness", "Create and Make a Presentation", or even "Bounce Back from The Recession". It also sells a programme that boosts websites' hits by "spinning and scraping content from other sites to attract advertising from Google." As a result Google has blacklisted a network of websites run by Shapps' family for breaching its rules on copyright infringement. A string of at least 19 sites run by the wife, sister and 75-year-old mother of Shapps have been banned from carrying Google's adverts and been relegated to the bottom of its search results. According to Shapps he only set up these companies as the pseudonymous Michael Green in order to keep the business separate from his political work.

According to newspaper reports (The Times, Telegraph and Guardian) he also has a way with Twitter, allegedly artificially boosting his Twitter followers so that it seems as if he has tens of thousands more than his political rivals.

Sometimes he does come unstuck, though. The Times records that "in the Ealing Southall by-election, he appeared to have logged on to the Liberal Democrats' local YouTube page and pretended to be one of them, commiserating on their impending defeat, and seemingly forgetting that he was logged in through his own YouTube account, under the login name "GrantShapps". Following much ridicule, Conservative Central Office now insists that Shapps was innocent and his account was hacked." I'm sure it was.

And I am also sure that there is always complete integrity in the highest offices of state.

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This week's obscenity is the Save The Children Fund. I mean, how can this so called charity justify asking for money to feed economically unproductive kids in this time of austerity when we all have to tighten our belts?

As Douglas Carswell M.P. said: " Save The Children don't know what really needs to be done about the welfare system." His fellow Tory, Brian Bingley said that its fundraising was doing "awful damage" to the economy. (After all, giving money to charity stops people spending it and consequently is stopping growth.) Christian Guy, the director of the Centre For Social Justice has expressed the view that the poor are poor not because they have no money, but because of our culture of welfare dependency and that Save The Children should be targeting their efforts at resolving family breakdown rather than fund-raising and feeding the poor. After all, the poor could manage perfectly well if they did not waste their money on booze and drugs and stopped having children they could not afford to bring up.

Not that I'm a fan of wee Eck and his cronies, but in Scotland things have been relatively cushioned by the devolved parliament. In England the breakdown caused by the coalition's cuts is becoming increasingly noticeable. Even in comparatively wealthy communities, such as the one I live in, there are visible pockets of real deprivation developing. Food banks are opening up faster than Sainsbury Locals.

One newspaper article said that in London there are now 13,000 children who are dependent on charitable food kitchens for a meal every day. Chris Mould of the Trussell Trust, the charity which is feeding them, has made the point that "Hunger is not relative. Hunger is the same the world over. A British child who hasn't eaten for three days is no different from an african child who hasn't eaten for three days. They are both starving."

Which is why Save The Children collect money to alleviate that situation, and why it is obscene of the Telegraph to print statements like the following: " .....saving the children has nothing to do with it. The explanation has more to do with the moral, financial and political corruption of our charity sector, in which employment grew by 19 per cent between 2001 and 2010, while employment in the private sector fell by 4 per cent. .... British children are by far the fattest in Europe (three times as many of them as in France are truly obese), and even among the fattest in the world. A very high percentage of them never, or only very rarely, eat a meal at a table with other members of their family – or perhaps I should say household. Indeed, there is often no table at which they could eat such a meal if it ever occurred to anyone to provide them with one."

..... As David Cameron continues to tell us, this is the face of 'compassionate conservatism'.

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I have to admit that I can't get too worked up about kids having a furtive drink or two, provided they're not making a real nuisance of themselves (and in most instances they're not. They are usually just socialising in the way they know best.) When I was about 14, I was particularly adept at nicking bottles of wine out of off-licences. It was one of my specialities which guaranteed my

acceptance into the gang of lads I hung around with. (Usually it was a bottle of cheap sauternes and we would go off to the Joppa salt pans to drink it.) Nothing much changes.

If the Police want to they can go after the shops which are selling the booze. The offence of persistently selling alcohol is committed if, on two or more different occasions in a period of three consecutive months, alcohol is unlawfully sold on the same premises to a person aged under 18. The law even allows the Police to make a sting -- they can send someone under 18 into the shop to attempt to buy the alcohol. The maximum fine for the offence is currently £20,000. but ( and it's a big but), the proprietor can claim mitigating factors . These may include situations where: a negligent staff member had not followed the premises stringent standard practice/age verification scheme despite good and established training schemes; the sale of alcohol forms a large part of the business and a closure period would cause financial hardship or threaten the survival of the business; and prosecution may not be required where the licensee could not be expected to know that the child was under age unless it can be proved it was obvious that the licensee must have known that the person was under-age.

Much more invidious is the increasing paranoia in the shops. A quick google throws up a plethora of stories about people being asked for ID, some of them amusing but most of them just plain silly.

There was the 72-year-old who was unable to buy two bottles of Cabernet Sauvignon at Morrisons in Blackpool because he could not prove his age.

The 68 year old woman who is regularly asked her age at the local Spar shop despite shopping there every day for over 20 years.

The 60-year-old being asked for proof he was over 21 when buying glue in B&Q.

A mum who demanded an apology from Asda after staff refused to sell her alcohol for her son's christening party - despite her being 39.

Kay, who at 36 is twice the legal age to buy alcohol and who is asked for her ID every time she tries to buy wine in Tesco.

Then there were the two sisters aged 20 and 23 who went to their local Tesco to buy some wine: "On arrival at the checkout we took out our IDs which were our driving licences and showed the young boy. He looked at them and laughed and said that they were "fake". We asked to speak to the manager. After I said "surely you should phone the police if you think they are fake", he examined the licences and accepted they were real. We were happy with this result but as we took the alcohol back to the till, the manager came up and refused us saying that because we had already been refused, we had to be refused no matter what!

(You will have noted that these witnesses have been getting younger and younger. I've saved my favourite for last):

John D, Nottingham: " I'm 15 and I've never been ID'd buying alcohol. Ever. What do you want?"

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The Andrew Mitchell Plebs row rumbles on. He says he didn't say it. The full contemporaneous Police records published in yesterday's Telegraph say he did. He now admits that he did swear, but still insists that he didn't use the word 'plebs'.

The report describes Mr Mitchell speaking to a female officer and "demanding exit through the main vehicle gate into Whitehall". He was told that it was "policy" for cyclists to use the pedestrian gate. "Mr Mitchell refused, stating he was the chief whip and he always used the main gates," the report goes on. "I explained to Mr Mitchell that the policy was to use the side pedestrian gates and that I was happy to open those for him, but that no officer present would be opening the main gates as this was the policy we were directed to follow. Mr Mitchell refused. Repeatedly reiterating he was the chief whip. After several refusals Mr Mitchell got off his bike and walked to the pedestrian gate with me after I again offered to open that for him. There were several members of public present as is the norm opposite the pedestrian gate and as we neared it, Mr Mitchell said: 'Best you learn your \*\*\*\*\* place...you don't run this \*\*\*\*\* government...You're \*\*\*\*\* plebs.' The members of public looked visibly shocked and I was somewhat taken aback by the language used and the view expressed by a senior government official. I can not say if this statement was aimed at me individually, or the officers present or the police service as a whole."

The log states that the officer warned Mr Mitchell that he could be arrested for swearing. "I warned Mr Mitchell that he should not swear, and if he continued to do so I would have no option but to arrest him under the Public Order Act, saying 'Please don't swear at me Sir. If you continue to I will have no option but to arrest you under the public order act'," Mr Mitchell was then silent and left saying 'you haven't heard the last of this' as he cycled off."

One of this issues here is that Mitchell was not arrested. But was that because of who Mitchell was? What he did was a breach of Section 5 of the Public Order Act which makes it an offense to use "threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour...within the hearing or sight of a person likely to be caused harassment, alarm or distress thereby."

Go back to last year's riots. One guy in Manchester was jailed for 4 months for swearing. Another got 10 weeks. Someone in Hackney was fined £50. In the latter case the swearing wasn't even directed against the police. When the guy was arrested they searched him for drugs and he said: "Told you, you won't find fuck all". I'm not sure that the average policeman would find that caused him alarm or distress.

Over the course of 2011 2,124 cases are recorded of people being arrested for swearing at police. So why not Mitchell?

The on-line version of The Guardian has been full of good quotes including this from a senior police officer: "No-one should be arrested merely because there is a power to do so; the arrest needs to be necessary, appropriate and proportionate. If I had been the Custody Officer and he had been brought in to me on those grounds I would have bailed him pronto and handed out bollockings all round. No doubt he has committed an offence, but there is more than one way to skin a cat and arrest was not the way to deal with this set of circumstances. Just because someone is a pompous shit (which the Honourable Member clearly is), that doesn't automatically give the Police the right to deprive him of his liberty." The Guardian doesn't comment on whether 'pompous shit' constitutes swearing or not.

Most of the press interest seems to be on his use of the word pleb. The Telegraph defined it as a member of a despised social class, a commoner, a member of the plebs of ancient Rome. Also low-born, undistinguished, vulgar. The Sun, perhaps more usefully, defined it for their readers as Scrut, Townie, Kappa-Slapper, Rude-Boi, Scum, Greb, Scav. (What? No Schemie?)

The BBC probably got closest to the real issue on their web page: “In public school parlance, a pleb was a pupil who was not a member of the landed classes. As these public schoolboys left school to run the British Empire, it seems they took the word with them to describe the lower orders.”

Or to describe the people who have to hold the gate open for you as you ride away from the centre of power.

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I happened to be driving around yesterday listening to Jeremy Vine on Radio 2. One of the topics under discussion was the case of Colin Farmer, the blind man who was tasered by the police in Chorley.

I’m sure that you are aware of the case because of all the publicity, but just in case you’re not, there were reports to the police of someone going round Chorley armed with a samurai sword. Some over enthusiastic policeman saw Mr. Farmer’s white stick, assumed it was a samurai sword and, allegedly without giving him any warning, tasered the poor man who, naturally, couldn’t see it coming. He had to be taken to hospital for treatment. Chief Superintendent Stuart Williams of Lancashire Police said, without a trace of irony: “it became apparent that this man was not the man we were looking for and officers attended to him straight away.” What he doesn’t mention is that before the ambulance arrived the officers had already handcuffed Colin Farmer. Presumably they had already realised by that time that his white stick wasn’t a samurai sword, that he was blind and that he was now both traumatised and injured through their actions, so what did they think he was going to do that required restraint?

Now one the face of it this seems like a bizarre sort of incident which can’t be that common, but as the programme progressed and people phoned in it turns out that it isn’t. In fact there is quite a record of the police having to pay out compensation for in one way or another duffing up people with disabilities. This year they have had to pay out for being over-zealous in restraining a 16 year old disabled boy, forcing him into hand-cuffs and leg restraints when he couldn’t have fought back anyway. He had a neurological condition which they misinterpreted as ‘anti-social behaviour’. Then there was Jody McIntyre who was dragged out of his wheelchair by the police when he was protesting against tuition fees. That was also held by the courts to be an assault by the police.

I have no doubt that the police are facing an increasingly complex role when it comes to people with disabilities. Just because someone is disabled it does not mean that they are incapable of criminal activity. There are probably some criminals who actively use their disability to further their business. I suspect that the police, like the rest of us, are more likely to conceive of disabled people as the victims of crime rather than the perpetrators of disorder. The script for how to behave and react to them has not been properly written.

I'll be interested to see what the Independent Police Complaints Commission make of the Farmer case, but more interested in what training in both dealing with disabilities and the use of tasers is put in place.

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I was watching a documentary on Ken Loach last night when one of the people being interviewed came out with the phrase 'the remembrance of commitment'. The context was looking back to a golden age of trade union involvement. Now I've been actively involved in trade unionism since I first joined a union at the age of eighteen and there was always a golden age somewhere in the past. During the 1980s I was secretary of the local Trades Council and, as such a member of the TUC. This was during the Thatcher era. I read something a few months ago which was referring to trade unions and their fight against Thatcher in glowing, nostalgic terms. It wasn't like that. It was depressing, debilitating hard work.

In England there is still a certain nostalgic 'remembrance of commitment' within the Labour party. (In Scotland it's a little different because things are distorted by the independence issues) Attitudes to the unions within Labour fall into four broad categories. Sentimentalists are nostalgic about the party's roots in the labour movement. Critics want to cut the union link. Ignorers accept it but see the unions as an interest group to be managed. Corporatists want the unions to play a more mature, constructive role in the economy.

My own position is that crucial elements of the party's economic agenda—workplace democracy, vocational training and state-backed lending to businesses—make a good relationship with organised labour essential.

However, the Labour party's current policy seems to be to distance itself from the more belligerent union leaders, and hope that the awkward squad pipes down. It might work. Over the past four years union membership has fallen by 400,000, to its lowest level since the 1940s. Union bosses are competing for a shrinking pool of workers willing to pay subscription fees. In these conditions, protest and bluster function as marketing tools. Assuming that the party holds its poll lead, the prospect of invitations to 10 Downing Street for beer and sandwiches could have a calming effect.

Part of my difficulty with looking back is that what I see is that the link between Trade Unionism and Socialism (which is what I believe in) is actually pretty tenuous. The key flaw of trade unionism is the flaw of all representative politics. A top-down structure develops almost of necessity, and the leaders learn to understand the capitalist's position just as well as the worker's position. Consequently they try to mediate. That mediation means that they are not the voice of organised labour, but have the duty to regulate class conflicts and to secure industrial peace. In effect they are trying to moderate capitalism into something 'nicer'. Thus, turning a trade union into a revolutionary union is a near-impossibility, given the interests it develops as an entity.

It is those single workers who are important. They are part of the wider working class, whose interests lie not in a better managed, 'nicer' capitalism, but beyond it – in a free, classless society. I realise that by saying that I can be accused of being an anarcho-syndicalist seeking to promote mass participation and collective decision-making. The limits of such activity are, ultimately, up to

individual discretion. As an arbitrary measure, I would say that they correspond to the limits of rank-and-file influence within the unions. So, quite obviously, a full-time official who is answerable to the bureaucracy and who makes decisions with no democratic mandate is beyond these limits.

Which take me perilously close to to the moral of Ken Loach's film Land and Freedom, in which the Spanish Civil War is lost by the socialists because they start fighting among themselves about who has the correct ideology instead of fighting their common enemy. It's a scenario which has been played out over and over again since Pierre Leroux first coined the term socialism back in 1827. Nothing golden age about that.

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Isn't it interesting how corruption becomes pervasive and we have to keep using the word allegedly in order not to be caught up in it?

Allegedly Denis MacShane broke the law in his abuse of parliamentary expenses. The investigating committee found Mr MacShane had submitted 19 false invoices "intended to deceive". He has repaid the money, all £7,500, and was keen to stress that he had not gained personally, but wanted to take "responsibility for my mistakes". However Commons authorities insisted that damning letters from Mr MacShane to the standards commissioner could not be used against him in court, as they were protected by parliamentary privilege. In other words, because he is an M.P. he can get away with things the rest of us would be locked up for.

You wouldn't get that in other countries. Allegedly you would get it on a much bigger scale. Take China for example. Prime Minister Wen Jiabao takes great pride in having come from a very humble background. His father tended pigs. Now his widowed mother is reported to have a personal fortune of \$120,000,000.

The details of how she accumulated this wealth have not been disclosed, but it appears to have happened over the ten years that her son has been in power. Allegedly she is not alone. In fact most of the Prime Ministers relatives have become extremely wealthy. It is thought that between them they now have some \$2.7 billion.

They have controlling shares in most of China's banks, telecommunications companies, infrastructure projects, and manufacturing. Official statements from the Government insist that all of these businesses (including those by his 90 year old mother) have been personally built up through the personal efforts of the individuals concerned and that the Prime Minister has played no role whatsoever.

There is a certain irony in the fact that the son of the leader of the world's leading communist nation is the head of one of the world's leading private equity companies, New Horizon Capital, which in itself is worth \$2.5 billion.

With all of the election action focussed on Obama and Romney it's easy to overlook the fact that it is also election time in Beijing (not quite so open a process). Wen Jiabao's second term is coming to an end. As part of his campaigning for re-election he has called for new measures to fight



corruption, particularly among high-ranking officials. I suppose that will depend on the definition of how high is high.

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As Margo Channing said in *All About Eve*: Fasten your seatbelts, it's going to be a bumpy night.

I'm writing this while watching the television news about Obama's victory in the American elections. While the focus seems to be on the fact that he is the first president re-elected with fewer electoral votes than he won the first time, I think it's an achievement that he won at all.

Conventional wisdom says that you shouldn't win an election when your country is going through stubbornly high unemployment, painfully slow economic growth and widespread unease about the country's future. Currently Obama has 303 to Romney's 206. In any other election that would be described as a landslide. The fact that it isn't says more about the size of Obama's majority last time.

Obama was more than just the better campaigner, he actually had a good record. He earned re-election by keeping the country from falling into a depression and persuading Congress to enact vital reforms to healthcare and the financial industry. The path forward he laid out was far more reasonable than Romney's too-good-to-be-true promise to shrink the deficit while cutting tax rates and pumping more dollars into the Pentagon. What caused him problems and clouded the issue was the persistent actions of a Republican House in blocking what he was trying to do.

Unfortunately he still has a Republican Congress. The immediate challenge facing Obama is to defuse the time bomb that's set to go off at the end of the year, before the next presidential term begins. That's when more than \$570 billion worth of tax increases and spending cuts are scheduled to kick in automatically, potentially sending the economy back into recession. This "fiscal cliff" is the product of that Congress' repeated failure to come up with a credible long-term plan for closing the enormous federal budget gap caused by the recession, two wars and the Bush tax cuts.

It's not going to be easy. In fact it's probably going to be well nigh impossible. The Congress is heavy at the extremes and light in the middle. The result over the last four years has been a breathtakingly inept Congress, one that flirted repeatedly with shutting down the government. It's likely to be even more extreme in the coming four.

As Margot said, a bumpy night.

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I've been following my nephew's adventures in Dubai on his facebook page. He's out there allegedly working but, if he is to be believed, seems to be spending his time either lounging with a beer next to a pool or else in a nightclub with a beer ogling scantily clad girls.

I've been to Dubai four times now. It's probably the most disgusting display of excess that I've ever seen. It starts with the gold topped palm trees inside terminal 3 and carries through to the artificial islands and completely over the top hotels. It already has three of the world's largest buildings, the world's largest shopping mall, the first underwater hotel, an indoor ski resort, the world's largest theme park along with those two artificial archipelagos in the shape of a palm tree and the world map. It also has the world's only 7-star luxury hotel and is building the world's first spaceport. As a result Dubai currently employs 15%-25% of the world's cranes.

It's the perfect example of what you do if you have too much money. First you decide to rebuild the world by casually knocking out a bunch of islands from scratch, and then chucking them into a lagoon in the shape of planet earth. Not content with that, you follow up by erecting the world's tallest tower, the unnecessarily soaring Burj Khalifa. Burj Khalifa stands proud at 829.84 m – that's nearly 3 times the size of London's Shard.

And yet still not satisfied, they are constantly dreaming up more schemes to fritter away their wealth. All well and good you might think, if they want to fritter away, let them fritter away. Actually it's maybe not so much a case of frittering away their wealth; I mean they've got to have somewhere to put it, you can't just stuff it under your pillow can you? Without reinvesting it, your dosh depreciates, hence money breeds money, and more money, and you can use that to leverage more money, and what do you get? Really, really big towers and super show-off underwater hotels, straight-out of a Bond villain's wackiest and most decadent megalomaniac fantasies.

Unfortunately, and this is where I find all of this disgusting, this eye-popping luxury was built on the backs of foreign workers who are paid a pittance. Over a million men and women from India, Bangladesh, Nepal have turned Dubai from a sleepy village into a shimmering Arabian Las Vegas – and have been rewarded with next to no rights and meagre pay. They sleep in labour camps, each one crammed with 3,000 or more people. In the strict hierarchy of the emirate, their role is to serve the expats and wealthy natives. It is all but a slave society.

On top of that Dubai, like the rest of the emirates and the other Gulf states, has not used its enormous wealth to develop its own people, they just import what they need ready-made. So the oil-rich Gulf states buy in the architects and the chefs who might present the glitzy front of a westernised society – skipping out the awkward intermediate stage of nurturing the talents of their own people. A choice example is Qatar, which solved the problem of sporting achievement, not by training its children in athletics, but by paying foreigners to become Qataris. It worked a treat when Saif Saeed Asaad won an Olympic bronze for weightlifting. Only the pedantic among us pointed out that Asaad was actually Angel Popov of Bulgaria, competing under an assumed name.

For me Dubai is a symbol of everything wrong with our present culture. Rooted in a finance and real estate bubble, planned as big for the sake of bigness, artificially opulent, and only saved from disaster by unsustainable oil revenues.

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I know that place, I thought. After a bit of contemplation I had it fixed. I used to have a client whose office was just a little bit further down the street, maybe a couple of doors away. What had come up on the screen was an innocuous whitewashed gabled building in a typical street in an East of England market town. Strange to think that it was, allegedly, the hub of a multi-million tax avoidance organisation.

Not that there was much alleging going on on Panorama last night. They were naming names and showing pictures. What they were investigating was whether the Sark Lark was still thriving. The Sark Lark is the use of sham company directors to cover other people's cash. It takes its name from a case back in the 1990s when it was discovered that between them, the 600 inhabitants of the island of Sark held 15,000 directorships. Most of them didn't even know that they were directors of these sham companies. Sometimes, just by signing up to something like insurance they were then used to be legitimately appointed to run companies on behalf of others. In fact they would not be running anything at all. They wouldn't even know that they are a director. On company business the directors' signatures would be provided simply by using a stamp.

Tax evasion costs the UK taxpayer an estimated £4bn a year. The programme secretly filmed corporate service providers offering services that would ensure that they could create false companies with fictitious directors through which you could transfer your money to off-shore tax havens. One firm said the odds of getting caught by the UK tax authorities are roughly equivalent to winning the lottery.

An undercover reporter posing as a businessman with £6m in undeclared income sitting in a Swiss bank account is advised to move his money into a complex structure involving an anonymous foundation in Belize, which he would control in secret. The guy fronting up this firm assured the undercover reporter that his company already had 10,000 of these structures up and running with secrecy guaranteed.

For all we know you and I might be company directors in Belize or Mauritius and worth billions.

And all of this from that little office in a sleepy country town.

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As an Architect I am regulated by an independent regulator under the terms of the Architects Registration Act 1938. That doesn't mean that there is someone sitting next to my drawing board all the time waiting for me to cock up. What it does mean is that if any of my clients have a beef there is someone independent that they can complain to and who will investigate on their behalf. It keeps me in check. As the trustee of a charity I have the Charity Commission looking out for my slip-ups. Similarly my doctor is regulated. My solicitor certainly is because I complained to the SRA about him earlier this year when he 'couldn't find' my legal documents. Teachers are regulated. The Care and Social Services Inspectorate take care of social workers. The Financial Service Authority is supposed to regulate bankers. Then there is the various Ofs. Ofgem, Ofsted, Ofwat, Ofcom et al.

What is so different about the Press?

I watched the Commons debate on the Levison Report live yesterday afternoon in its entirety. David Cameron spent more time going on about how the Conservative Party had been vindicated and his right honourable friend Jeremy Hunt exonerated and wasting a huge amount of time attacking Labour, than he did on the actual substance of Levison's recommendations. Those he dismissed as creating a a vehicle for politicians, whether today or some time in the future, to impose regulation and obligations on the press, which he considered to be a Rubicon which should not be crossed.

At that point one of his own backbenchers got up and said that rather than a Rubicon, wasn't it a Brooke that he didn't want to cross, which I thought was quite witty and, coming from his own side, rather damaging.

Labour's position we knew in advance and Milliband's endorsement of Levison came as no surprise. Much as I have little time for Nick Clegg, I have to confess a modicum of admiration that he had the guts to stand up and effectively rubbish Cameron's position. Some Conservatives also got to their feet to say that there is a strong case for new laws.

It is hard to see how the three party leaders can resolve their differences over new laws. Miliband has said he wants a vote by the end of January. As things stand the odds appear stacked against Cameron who could be defeated by the combined forces of Labour, the Liberal Democrats and some Conservative MPs.

He is also up against the victims of press intrusion and celebrity campaigners who want tough new measures to rein in the newspapers. I doubt that the public will side with Cameron on this one, even if the Press will. As Levison put it, most people believe that newspapers should not be allowed "to mark their own homework".

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I see there's a move afoot again to make it compulsory for kids to learn poetry by heart in school. This is something that comes around from time to time. I have mixed views about it. Michael Gove is said to be determined to make the teaching of English at primary school "far more rigorous" than it is at present. Children as young as five will be expected to learn and recite poetry by heart in a major overhaul of the national curriculum for schools in England. At the age of five, they will start to learn simple poems by heart and practise recitals. Pupils will then continue "to build up a repertoire of poems learnt by heart and recite some of these, with appropriate intonation to make the meaning clear".

As anyone who follows these rambles knows, I am passionate about poetry, but this is the best way to put children off poetry for life, unless the poems are chosen by the children themselves and not by well-meaning adults.

I remember being forced to learn Wordsworth's Daffodils when I was at primary school; the class was united in condemning it as soppy. I was lucky, I happened to like poetry (for reasons which have never been analysed by me or anybody else - it just happened that way). But the vast majority of the class didn't and this just put them off poetry for years, if not life. If kids like the poetry they will learn it. I cannot see any advantage to force learning poetry.

At secondary we didn't have to memorise it, but were fortunate in having a teacher who read it to us. Classic stuff like The Lady Of Shallot, Goblin Market, The Rime Of The Ancient Mariner, The Charge Of The Light Brigade etc. and we read along as she read out loud. I believe that instilled more of an appreciation than associating the verses with a chore. There is nothing like forcing someone to do something to make them resentful and put them off for life.

Poor Wordsworth. Most people I know had to learn his bloody Daffodils off by heart and it's stayed with them all their lives:

I wandered lonely as a cloud  
That tum ti tum o'er vale and hill,  
When all at once I saw a crowd  
Something something daffodil.

To be fair to Gove perhaps he really does believe that getting kids in the habit of regurgitating what others wrote is a valuable life skill. I'm sure that given time and a patient teacher I could be taught to recite some Japanese poetry by heart. I wouldn't understand a word of it, but I could still recite it.

Instead of teaching children about the literary traditions of different cultures, or giving them the skills to approach contemporary writing confidently, we'll just be preparing yet another generation of children to associate poetry purely with sentimentality and plodding rhythms, pre-arming them with fatuous arguments about how it has to rhyme.

Now what poem did I learn completely by heart when I was a kid?

Let me see:

There are holes in the sky,  
where the rain comes in  
But the holes are very small,  
and that's why rain is thin.  
- Spike Milligan.

# BOXING AND OTHER SPORTS

I had decided on a bit of ancient culture, but, as the cognoscenti know, just along from the British Museum is a great little barber who will trim your number two, treat you like an intelligent human being and engage you in interesting conversation at a slow pace, all for a fiver, so I popped in there first.

The day's topic was the gentle art of pugilism. To be more specific, the Calzaghe and Lacy fight, which, I have to admit, I enjoyed immensely. For some reason neither the Rathbonettes or their mother have ever been able to understand why I like boxing. I'm supposed to be a mild mannered, aging hippy, not a primeval throwback.

What that theory doesn't allow for, however, is my Uncle George and Ingemar Johansson. Uncle George had been a bit of a fighter in his youth and I used to go round to his house a lot, to listen to his 78s of obscure american bluesmen, to drink what seemed like endless glasses of cherry brandy and listen to him talk about boxing. When I was 10 Ingemar Johansson was at his peak and I developed one of those irrational fits of adulation that young boys get for sports stars.

Johansson had it all: The looks, the class and the cool. By all accounts he didn't train particularly hard and was often seen at night spots with his attractive secretary. Understandably, nobody thought that he could become world champion. The first two rounds of his title fight with Floyd Patterson saw him retreating from the champion, only flicking light left jabs. When he threw a wide left hook at Patterson in the third, Patterson parried it with his right. That left him open for a powerful right to the chin from Johansson. Paterson went down and went down six more times in that round before the referee stopped the fight. I thought it was great.

I had the same sort of feeling watching the Calzaghe - Lucy fight. So had the old geezer who was cutting my hair. (He must have been all of three years older than me.) He remembered the first Johansson -Patterson fight as well. Then he asked if I logged on to Calzaghe's website. I said that I didn't. It seems that someone with great perception posted the following on the site's message board on 20 February: Professor Calzaghe invites all to attend his upcoming fistic lecture on the noble art of self defence to be held at the Manchester Evening News Arena on Saturday March 4th. Professor Calzaghe will be joined by second year student Jeff Lacy, upon whom the Professor will apply his patented lightning fast southpaw technique. Those interested in the come forward roundhouse style of attack and its resulting negative consequences will undoubtedly be interested in observing student Lacy, who will ably demonstrate all the stages of dismantlement, including collapse.

I hope he also placed a bet.

My haircut took all of fifteen minutes.

Despite the sleet and snow the British Museum was chock-a-block with tourists and the print gallery, which is where I wanted to go, was closed for renovation.

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It would appear that after over thirty years, my marathon days are over. That is if I take the advice of Adam, my chiropractor. It really started last summer when Bruce, my running mate, started complaining that he was having to slow down in order to keep up with me, rather than me having to run faster to keep up with him. My race times peaked when I was in my thirties and have been declining by about a minute a year ever since. We decided that from now on Bruce would run at his own speed and I would rely on my ipod for company on the country lanes.

Gradually I found that my right knee was starting to play up while I was running. This was nothing new (I've had the cartilage in both knees done in the past) so I went through the usual ritual of the bag of frozen peas and strapping. But it didn't go away, so off I went to Adam who specialises in sports injuries.

All the poking and prodding resulted in a close study of my running shoes and then a closer study of my buttocks. His conclusion was that the right knee was now almost completely worn out and that I was subconsciously compensating for that, which was now putting extra pressure on my left leg. That in turn was probably leading to damage to my hip joint. He referred me to another doctor in the next town who also specialises in sport and his diagnosis was the same.

As I've never particularly relished coming out the crematorium furnace as a pile of ashes with a gleaming stainless steel ball joint in the middle, I asked what they thought I should do about it. The suggestion is that I give up running and take up power walking instead. Fortunately in our county there is an annual walking half-marathon, so I might give that a go in June.

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I caught myself refereeing a heavyweight boxing match on Saturday night. To be more precise, the Irish Heavyweight title in Belfast.

To be even more precise, I caught one of my many google doppelgangers refereeing the Irish Heavyweight bout. If you enter my name in Google you get 4,650,000 matches. The real me appears at about 4,649,000. I have namesakes who are lawyers, authors, film directors and holocaust deniers. And boxing referees.

The bout was one of those which could have come from a film script. Tyson Fury was up against Martin Rogan for the Irish heavyweight belt.

I've admired Marty Rogan for years. I think he is a good, classic boxer. The only problem is that he is now 40 and slowing down. At 6ft 2in, he's usually pretty dominant in the ring, but Tyson Fury is

the unbeaten British and Commonwealth champion, 6ft 9in and 23 years old and this had all the markings of a set-up with the young turk pitched against the old has-been.

To give Marty Rogan his due he came out battling and undoubtedly took the first two rounds on points. Fury was tentative and sluggish. But, like Mohammed Ali used to do, he was just making Rogan work. He was also confusing him. Usually Fury leads with his right but tonight he was working as a southpaw.

Rogan did all the work in the opening round, coming forward and landing a series of decent right handers just before the bell. Rogan also had the upper hand in the second round, but in the third Fury started upping the pace with a series of strong jabs and then a left hook that put Rogan briefly on the canvas.

Fury dominated Rogan in the fourth and then, early in the fifth round, landed a body shot which left the other boxer gasping for breath. He was down on the canvas again, but got back to his feet before the count. It was obvious that he was in difficulty and couldn't get his breath. Before my namesake could intervene, Rogan's trainer had pulled him out of the contest.

The win brought Tyson Fury's total up to eighteen straight wins and no defeats. He is clearly one to watch.

In the post match interview he said that he found it comfortable to lead with his left hand. He wanted to experiment. "I'm a world class heavyweight and I'm going to try different things."

The really interesting post match comments, however, came from Marty Rogan. He slammed into Mick Hennessy, Fury's promoter. It was quite an altercation, with Rogan hurling plenty of obscenities and Hennessy returning in kind.

Rogan went out of his way to shake Fury's hand and offer him respect for a well fought bout, but then went on to say that he had been shafted by Hennessy, who, after the contracts had been signed, had arranged for the bout being changed from the usual ten rounds to twelve. That, Rogan charged, was designed to ensure that whatever happened, the longer fight would advantage the younger, fitter, Fury. Hennessy shrugged off the accusation, saying it was just business, but if what Rogan was saying is true, then it does stink.

I presume that this will be the end of Marty Rogan's career. If so, then I'd like to thank him for all of the pleasure he's given me over the years. Meanwhile, I look forward to Tyson Fury's next outing.

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Ah, real butchers. It's been years since I've seen a real butchers. The ones that you had to join the queue which went out the door and along the front of the window on the Saturday. Every cut of meat displayed with pride.....



Talking of meat, I was watching Jules Dassin's film 'Night And TheCity', at the centre of which is a wrestling match between Gregorius and The Strangler. It reminded me of how much I missed my mother-in-law and her Saturday afternoon wrestling.

Mrs. R.'s mum was the archetypal little white haired lady who enjoyed nothing more than shouting 'Rip his head off' at some big hulk in a leotard. When she used to come and stay with us we would go off on Saturday afternoon to the wrestling. She was in good company. There is considerable documentary evidence that the Queen is an avid wrestling fan.

When I was growing up there was wrestling every Saturday afternoon on television, dominated by people like George Kidd, Mick McManus and Jackie Pallo and covered by the dulcet tones of Kent Walton. "Greetings grapple fans".

There is a good chance that Kent Walton holds a unique position in British television. He was the sole commentator on televised wrestling for the entire thirty three years that it ran on the box. Despite popular belief to the contrary, he always maintained that none of the bouts were fixed and kept to that position until his death in 2003.

My Dad used to claim that he knew George Kidd, which might be true. They were both about the same age and came from Dundee. Kidd was a serious wrestler and for a time Scottish lightweight champion, then British lightweight champion, European lightweight champion and finally World lightweight champion, a title he successfully defended for twenty years.

McManus made his name as the man you loved to hate. His speciality was fighting dirty. He would take things as close to the edge of being disqualified as he could. He was only defeated twice, once allegedly throwing the match himself because it was becoming apparent that he couldn't win against Peter Preston, and the second time when he hilariously submitted to Gary Catweazle Cooper after Catweazle started to tickle him!

Jackie Mr. TV Pallo was McManus' great rival. He was probably the first to create a distinct image for himself. Bleached hair, a pigtail tied with a velvet ribbon, and what were then seen as outlandish striped trunks meant that he couldn't be missed. The rivalry between the two started in 1962 when Pallo ran to the ringside and challenged McManus during a live televised match. While the in-ring hatred was pure hype, there was professional competition between them as they vied for the top of the bill.

In 1988 professional wrestling disappeared from our TV screens because advertisers considered it to be irretrievably down market and stopped sponsoring it. Some went on record to say that it was a sport watched only by the working class who didn't have the money to spend on what was being plugged during the commercial break. Perhaps it deserved to go. Wrestling always lacked substance and the demise of such TV favourites as Mick McManus and Jackie Pallo meant that it had also long lacked style. Even my mother in law would ask how many times could you watch Big Daddy beat Giant Haystacks just by sitting on him?

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In the build up to the cup final, there was someone on the radio the other day talking about football fanzines, by which he meant 'Match' 'Shoot' and 'Four Four Two'. Those aren't fanzines. Those are industry rip-off magazines.

Now 'When Saturday Comes', 'Off The Ball', 'Not The View' and 'Elmslie Ender' were the real McCoy.

'Off The Ball' and 'When Saturday Comes' were probably the first to use the old pop fanzine format to discuss the problems of football. And with football there is always much to discuss: Asset stripping, the squalid facilities outside the premier league, professional fouls, racism, dodgy haircuts and the indifference of the football authorities to all of this.

What was quickly apparent as football fanzines started to spring up at almost every club was just how many grass root fans there were who had the necessary intelligence, irreverence and wit to make these things both relevant and worth reading.

In their heyday there were an estimated 200 football fanzines being churned out every week. Some of them, like Celtic's 'Not The View' had a circulation of over 10,000. Some, like Wealdstone's (Vauxhall Opel League) 'Elmslie Ender' something under a hundred. (Elmslie Ender achieved the distinction of being banned by the FA for publishing a defamatory article about Dagenham prior to a match between the two and thereby inciting violence.) Strangely, the sales of Dulwich's 'Champion Hill Street Blues' often exceeded their attendance figures.

Football Fanzines, like so much else, have been overtaken by the internet. Most of them have now long gone, but if you are prepared to google, you will find that they are still alive and well, but now masquerading as on-line sites with such wonderful names as 'hibeesbounce' and QPReport. (You can surmise which teams I follow)

And, of course, 'When Saturday Comes' can still be found at [www.wsc.co.uk](http://www.wsc.co.uk).

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It turns out the the Olympic flame will, literally, pass the end of our street. In the run up to the Olympics I've been thinking about who my favourite olympian has been. It's not easy to make a choice, particularly with Mohammad Ali being in there, but in the end I think I'm opting for Carl Lewis.

Lewis was first picked for the Olympics in the days when they were still genuinely amateur. That was the 1980 Moscow games. At that time he was an accountant by day and a sprinter by night. His father had been a sprinter before him and his mother a hurdler. Unfortunately those were the Olympics that the USA decided to boycott, so he didn't compete.

It was not until Los Angeles in 1984 that he could show what he he was made of. He won the 100 metres in a convincing 9.9 seconds. Then he took gold in the long jump. His third gold medal came in the 200 metres and a fourth in the 4x100 relay, setting a new world record.

Then at Seoul in 1988 he was beaten in the 100m final by Ben Johnson. However Johnson tested positive for drugs and was stripped of his medal. The Gold was give to Lewis. By that time he had won the long jump gold again, and silver in the 200m.

At Barcelona in 1992 he again won gold in the long jump and set a new world record to take another gold in the 4x100 m relay.

Finally at Atlanta in 1996 he again won the long jump gold, becoming the first athlete to win gold at four successive olympics. He retired from track and field after the games

Tot that record up: He was member of five American Olympic Teams, winning 10 medals, nine of them gold. With unsurpassed talent in the long jump and speed in the sprints, he has gone places where no other track and field athlete has ever visited.

(To be fair, I suppose that has to be balanced against his admission in 2003 that he had taken drugs 3 times in the run up to the 1988 games and his stated ambition that he only wanted to be a millionaire and didn't ever want a real job.)

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Caught an interview the other day which referred to Nigel Benn. Now there was a great boxer who wasn't a very good boxer. He looked the part, heavily muscled for a middle-weight and flamboyant with it and kept himself hyped up to the hilt. What he was was a boxer who talked a great fight.

I suppose for me the bout with Michael Watson at Finsbury Park in 1989 summed up Benn. He entered the ring to a fanfare that would have done Zsa Zsa Gabor proud. Flounced around in front of the crowd showing off his physique and then proceeded to get pasted, finally being knocked out in the sixth.

He did recover after the fight and went on to win the WBO middleweight championship from Doug De Witt and the WBC Super Middleweight from Mauro Galvanos. He lost his WBO title to Chris Eubank in 1990 in a fight which was stopped in the ninth round and the rematch resulted in a draw on points.

In 1995 he beat Gerald McClellan, but had inflicted so much damage on McClellan during the fight that the other boxer collapsed after the bout, was rushed to hospital with brian damage and ended up blind, deaf and confined to a wheelchair. It was probably the most brutal fight I have ever watched.

The impact on Benn was traumatic. He fought a few more matches before throwing in the towel, becoming a born again christian and taking up a career as a DJ. Now he is a preacher and motivational coach for ex-squaddies.

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One of the weirdest experiences in my life was sitting in a mud hut in a remote part of the Kenyan Rift valley watching a Newsnight interview with David Blunkett on a widescreen t.v. with half a dozen Masai courtesy of a petrol driven generator and a satellite dish perched on top of the thatched roof. While we were watching the Olympics opening ceremony, Mrs. R. and I were asking each other how this would go down in the Masai Mara.

So I decided to take a quick trip round other cultures to see how it had played out:

Take the Tories for a start: "The most leftie opening ceremony I have ever seen - more than Beijing, the capital of a communist state! Welfare tribute next?" wrote Aidan Burley, the Conservative Party MP who was fired as a ministerial aide after revelations he attended a Nazi-themed stag party in France last year. "Thank God the athletes have arrived! Now we can move on from leftie multi-cultural crap. Bring back red arrows."

So much for our own endangered species. What did the capital of a communist state make of it:

"London's opening ceremony was a far cry from Beijing's. Even the director of the London Olympics ceremony complained of the budget being too small, having only 27 million pounds," Haluo-yuan wrote on Sina Weibo, the largest blogging site in China, (where state censors block Twitter).... "There's no comparison with the formidable China." London's Olympic opening ceremony certainly was interesting, but it can't be said that it was superior to Beijing's. It can only be said that each had its merits," wrote Zhang Yiwu.

Given that the current concept of the Olympics ( a bit of sport sandwiched between two overblown extravaganzas) started at the Los Angeles games, I thought I'd check out the L.A. reactions:

"It's hard to imagine any other nation willing to make so much fun of itself on a global stage, in front of as many as a billion viewers. It takes nerve to look silly; the cheesy, kaleidoscopic history lesson that took Britain through its past, from pasture through the workhouses and smoke stacks of the Industrial Revolution to World War I and, of course, "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band," was like a Bollywood version of a sixth-grade play." ..... "If there is a through-line to be untangled from its \$42-million, cast-of-thousands, higgledy-piggledy progress through modern Britain, it might be something like, "Sorry for the unintended consequences, but we did give you steam engines, great pop music and comedy and the roots of social networking. It was ugly there for a while, but we're all right. and everybody dance now." ...."overwrought pageantry, stuffed unnecessarily with symbolism and mushy sentiment, most of which I cannot identify, much less comprehend."

The New York papers thought that:

"It was really a parade of British whimsy: sheep and milkmaids, factory workers, the Internet, Mary Poppins, the queen and a snippet of the Sex Pistols' rendition of "God Save the Queen," and, oddest of all, doctors and nurses jitterbugging on hospital beds in a tribute to the National Health Service.....But with the production tossing out historical and cultural references at a rapid rate, even the most ardent Anglophiles in the audience may have felt some allusions whiz over their head like an airborne nanny.....a display of humor and humbleness that can only stem from a deep-rooted sense of superiority."

Then there were your average punters on the usual chattering sites having a moan:

“How do you do four hours of anything in England and not include Elton John? If I could pick three Britons to have dinner with, Elton John is on my short list, right behind Victoria Pendleton, the Olympic cyclist. An entire tribute to the history of British pop music, right down to an East London rapper, and no mention of Elton John? David Bowie, but no Elton John? Annie Lennox, but no Elton John? Isn't he Sir Elton John? I'm not asking for a medley by Sir Elton, but the man can't get a mention? The man who rewrote "Candle in The Wind" for Princess Diana gets shut out? That, boys and girls, is intentional.”

“ If I ran the Olympics, regardless of where they were held, the opening ceremony would be capped at 90 minutes. There would be a flyover (go ahead, I dare you to find someone who doesn't like a flyover), the march of the athletes into the stadium, some contained artsy presentation that accurately reflects the host country's primary passion (in England's case, it could be a reading of Shakespeare, a mini-concert by the Stones, David Beckham bending it or a James Bond car chase; I'd take the latter), then the lighting of the torch. That's it. Cue the band, get everybody home safely and start the damn Games already.”

“It was an everything-but-the-kitchen-sink sort of event, and I may have just blinked and missed the sink.”

I'm sure my friends on the Masai, who don't have a kitchen sink, but do have a satellite dish, enjoyed every minute of it. What they made of hasty references to EastEnders and the NHS, to Gregory's Girl and Mr. Bean, is anyone's guess.

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Little did I think when I was writing in June about the Mutoid Waste Company making a comeback that just a couple of months later their work would form such a prominent part of the Paralympic closing ceremony. Wasn't that fish with the hub-cap scales something else?

And now the parade has passed by I'm already suffering from withdrawal symptoms. I have never seen so much great sport as I have over the last month and a half. And probably won't again. (It's unlikely that we'll get the same in depth coverage next time round either.) I'm sure that everybody will have different high spots, but for me, in no particular order, it was:

Mo Farah, what more is there to say?

For the Rathbone family, the only event we (well, the eldest Rathbonette and her partner) were at was the Archery. The Mexicans who turned up in full national dress and had a fiesta were brilliant.

Ellie Simmonds winning the 400m freestyle with a world record. Over those last 50m she was like a little torpedo streaking away from the rest of the field. To use a very over-used word at these games, it was awesome.

The Wheel Chair rugby match between USA and Canada. Talk about a needle match. Enough to make the murder ball epithet stick.

Tom Daley jumping in the pool after his last dive. That was a smile of pure joy, beaten only by that of Sophie Christiansen's after winning the gold at the paralympic dressage.

Alex Zanardi sitting laughing and legless on the racetrack, one arm punching the sky and the other holding up his racing bike.

Greg Rutherford's long jump gold. As he had already won it, it meant Rutherford's final jump was effectively a leap of honour and he was roared down the runway by an emotional crowd. He did not make the jump, running through the pit. In a funny way it was more fitting than jumping and possibly coming short.

Which one of the wheelchair races to choose? 800 m, 1,500 m, 5,000m or marathon? They were all great races and David Weir won them all. Oh, go on then, the 800m final.

Richard Whitehead's storming through the field from the back with that astonishingly ungainly style on his prosthetics to win the 200 M gold, just so that he could tell us: "I am living proof, that with enough desire and determination, any obstacle can be overcome,"

However, if I have to choose my top three they are:

Anthony Ogogo beating world number one Ievgen Khytrov - much more impressive than his bronze medal fight. The British boxer was under pressure from the start of the fight but he defended well and, after landing some good combinations on the No1 seed, he found himself 5-3 ahead at the end of the first round. In the second round, Khytrov came out strong and landed some heavy punches. Once again, Ogogo defended well but a late onslaught from Khytrov saw the Ukraine fighter win the second round 7-6. Ogogo still had the overall lead, however. The final round saw more of the same from Khytrov, who kept Ogogo close to the ropes for much of the three minutes. The final score was level on 18 points each and when the final scores of the five judges was added up, both boxers were level on 52 each. It really was a cliff hanger. When the five judges then pressed the button to decide who won and it was Ogogo, I actually punched the air. I haven't done that for years.

If something epitomised the olympic and paralympic spirit, it was Houssein Omar Hassan completing the 1500m seven minutes after everyone else, to a standing ovation. Finishing in 11 minutes 23 seconds, Hassan may have recorded the slowest 1,500m run ever witnessed at a major championship and yet 80,000 people recognised his courage and were on their feet cheering him to the end. This was nothing to do with incompetence but everything to do with pride, courage and determination. To fight through the pain barrier just to complete the course as the only representative of his country, Djibouti, sums up what the Games are all about.

And David Rudisha's 800 m race was probably the best race I have seen in my life and I have been watching and taking part in athletics for over fifty years. He destroyed that field. He challenged the rest of the runners so much that Andrew Osagie, who came in last, ran a time that would have won him the gold medal in Beijing. Rudisha's kick on the back straight was nothing short of

phenomenal. To be able to do that at the speed the pack was going is amazing and the fact that he just went faster and faster was more amazing still.

It was touching that afterwards he dedicated his race to Seb Coe, who held the 800 m world record for longer than any one else (16 years) and it is perhaps fitting that he became only the second man to run faster than Seb Coe at the games for which Coe was responsible.

At 23 Rudisha is still at the start of his career. I know the area of Kenya that he comes from quite well and have been running myself on the dirt tracks round Kilgoris. Who knows, perhaps one of the young lads who passed me on those morning jogs on the Mara seven years ago was Rudisha. I'd like to think so. I look forward to watching him run in Rio.

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Two contrasting fights on Saturday night. One I wanted to watch and couldn't and the one I did watch and was really glad I did.

The first one was the David Price - Audley Harrison bout in Liverpool. This was being shown exclusively on BoxNation and I was too stingy to fork out £20 to view it. Which was just as well because Harrison was knocked out in 82 seconds. Not much return for your money. There was a right cross from Price followed by a right left right combination on the ropes and that was it. Harrison was on the canvas with a broken nose and it was all over. With my luck the computer would still have been buffering by the end of the match.

Over on Channel 5 it was much more interesting. James Degale defending his European title against Hadillah Mohoumadi. I usually try to catch Degale fights, more out of sentiment than anything else (we share the same birthday). I find Degale a lazy fighter and this match was no exception. I haven't paid Mohoumadi much attention in the past. He's not the best, technically, but he can give and take a few hard knocks and is probably worth keeping an eye on for the future.

Where it was interesting was watching what happened to Degale. Now, Degale is a good boxer. Technically, at times he is a superb boxer. But his forte is fighting from a distance and whenever he kept the exchanges in the centre of the ring he was superb. Mohoumadi had been well coached by his team, however, and kept forcing Degale over on to the ropes where he could, and did, give him a good pummeling.

The opening round was tentative, but Degale landed the more telling blows with some penetrating combinations. In the third he managed a whole series of blows which had Mohoumadi in trouble. In the fifth he landed a left hand on Mohoumadi's head which caused some real damage. The seventh saw him catch Mohoumadi several times with crunching left hand blows.

The problem was the rounds in between, every one of which saw Degale pushed back on to the ropes and pummeled. There was nothing sophisticated about it on Mohoumadi's part. He had discovered that he could manoeuvre Degale into that position and so he went for it every time. And Degale let him do it. From the fourth round onwards you could hear his team shouting from their corner to get off the ropes. But did he? Which is what I mean about laziness.

The match went to the full twelve rounds, which is fine if you enjoy looking at people slugging it out, but Degale could have finished this long before if he had stuck to the centre of the canvas.

The link between the two fights was Tyler Fury. David Price has made no secret of the fact that he wants to fight Fury and Fury happened to be ringside at the Degale match. Inevitably some commentator stuck a mike in front of his face and asked him for his reaction to the Harrison knockout. His response summed up everything that is wrong about boxing. Turning directly to the camera, presumably addressing David Price, he said: "You see you, you plumber from Liverpool? It's personal between me and you, and I'm going to give you some serious harm, you big stiff idiot. Also, you're going to need 10 plumbers to do you when I've got finished with you. Also you are getting it. For sure. Call me out. Call me any names, and you are getting it. And you know your gay lover Tony Bellew?". It was at that point that the commentator grabbed the mike away and apologised.

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I'm not a Rangers supporter but I am enjoying the Ticketus story. Perhaps more accurately I'm getting more and more amused by the accounts of Craig Whyte's alleged shenanigans.

Whyte, you will remember, bought Rangers from Sir David Murray for £1 and paid an £18m debt to Lloyds Bank by selling three years of season tickets to finance firm Ticketus for £25m.

One month after Rangers entered administration in February, an SFA-commissioned independent inquiry, led by Lord Nimmo Smith, concluded that Whyte was "not a fit and proper person" to own a football club. He was subsequently fined a total of £200,000 for a range of breaches of the association's rules and banned for life from "any participation" in Scottish football. Referring to the fines totalling, £200,000, Whyte said: "There's no chance of paying. They haven't written to me officially, they haven't asked for any money - but I've made it very clear that I will never pay the SFA £200,000."

Craig Whyte has laid the blame for Rangers' financial meltdown at the door of former owner Sir David Murray and the old board of directors. Murray's decision to use Employee Benefit Trusts, which saw the club hit with a multi-million pound tax bill, was "ruinous" according to Whyte, who says that he was only "driving the train when it crashed" and did not set it on its path.

Rangers operated its EBT scheme during the period 2001-2010. This provided more than £47m in payments to players and staff in the form of tax-free loans. HMRC contends it has proof, in the form of documents and emails, that the payments were contractual in nature, which would make the scheme illegal. In that context, Craig Whyte is probably right in saying that he therefore wasn't to blame for Ranger's bankruptcy.

But he was responsible for the selling of the season tickets to Ticketus. The condition attached to his purchase of the club for a nominal £1 was that he pay off the outstanding £18m debt to Lloyds. It was assumed that payment would be his own money, as the new owner. In fact, by using the



season tickets, the debt was paid off with the club's own assets ( and, it can be argued, higher ticket charges which would be paid in future by the fans).

Whyte claims that the fact that he was not using his own money to fund his purchase of Rangers had been laid out in sale documents. "There was also mention of third party funds. So, it wasn't me somehow pretending that I used my own money when I wasn't. It was clearly documented. All the advisors on my side of the table knew about it, the takeover panel knew about it. It was not a secret. The only people who were misled were the media and the fans. I wouldn't say that I lied but I maybe wasn't as open as I could have been"

After HMRC rejected proposals for a creditors agreement that would have allowed the old club to continue, Duff and Phelps negotiated a sale of assets to a consortium led by Charles Green for £5.5m. Craig Whyte now claims he introduced Charles Green to Duff and Phelps as the administrators searched for a buyer for the club. Green says that Whyte "paints a misleading picture of what actually happened". He said his team contacted Mr Whyte as it thought his shares might be needed.

Whyte also claims that the Administrators, Duff and Phelps, who were appointed to wind up the club, knew all about the ticket deal. Duff and Phelps say Whyte's claim is "false, malicious and without foundation".

Whyte responds that "Duff and Phelps knew everything, they attended meetings, they were copied into all the emails, they were there on the day of completion. They knew from the start."

Duff and Phelps come back with "The allegations should not be given any credibility given the source. It should be remembered that Mr Whyte's takeover of Rangers is now the subject of an ongoing criminal investigation and we have provided evidence to that inquiry."

It's all good punch and judy stuff.

Maybe Whyte is the man to negotiate a school on the park.

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Would you have played it? I would.... it was too good an opportunity to miss.

I held back on forming a final view on the 'Taxman' debacle until I had read Hibs official statement. Instead of clarifying things it was couched in language that just added to my disquiet. There seems to be more than a little of the thought police about all of this.

Just in case there is anyone out there who hasn't been following this or, heaven forfend, does not know anything about football, towards the end of the half-time interval at Hibs' 2-1 win over Dundee United on Sunday – a result which took them to the top of the SPL – the stadium announcer played The Beatles' track 'Taxman'. Fairly innocuous you might think, but then Hearts are currently suffering serious financial difficulties, having been served with a winding-up order over unpaid PAYE and VAT bills. So while Hearts desperately attempt to get their fans to invest in a share issue

and buy up tickets for upcoming matches, Hibs supporters were revelling in a joke at their expense. After the game, Hibs announced that the stadium announcer who had played the track, Willie Docherty, had been terminated for what was described as “a breach of contract”.

So how have Hibs justified sacking the DJ for something that was firstly quite witty and secondly entirely in the long tradition of team baiting?

“The action has been taken because the individual chose to willfully disregard specific instructions given in the pre-match briefing which itself was consistent with guidance given during the week in the run-up to the match, which was broadcast live on television... The club was left with no option but to take the course of action it did... This is not an issue about having or not having a sense of humour.”

No explanation of what these specific instructions were, how they were willfully broken and why that led to dismissal, not a warning. Personally I would like to know the answers to all three of those questions. (And I do think not having a sense of humour comes into it.)

I could see the point of not antagonising Hearts fans, but this was not a match against Hearts and it is highly unlikely that any of their supporters were in the ground.

So the guy played 30 seconds of a song mocking the Merricks. It put a smile on the faces of fans at the game, including visiting Arabs I suspect. It's not as if he read out the report in Uncyclopedia that “there is no financial turmoil, cause we are a bank, and we owe the debt to ourselves and Mr Romanov says that he can come ashore in his submarine anytime he wants with loads of big bags full of money, cause he lives in a house that is made out of gold bricks and the windows are diamonds and he has a pond that is just filled with Tennent's Super, he plays poker on a tuesday with bill gates, warren buffet and richard branson and they all support hearts and they are all going to put 1 trillion pounds each into hearts and we are going to buy a 25 storey stand that has got a hotel and a swimming pool and a foyer and the players will all have jetpacks to land down on the pitch for kick off.” The word ‘gunt’ was not used once. (All of the above I consider deliberately offensive and would expect to be disciplined for.)

I was once at a match between Watford and Middlesborough where the Watford DJ played Embarrassment by Madness as the Ref walked off after the match. That got a few laughs as the fans realised what was being played. He wasn't sacked.

One has to assume that there is more to this than meets the ear.

I only hope that it is not an attempt to suppress football rivalry, which is one of the reasons for the game in the first place. If you can't mock your rivals when they're in trouble who can you mock? Perhaps the Hibsheid yins think it's wrong to mock a lonely Hearts club and if you do you get banned.

I just hope that next week the Hibs fans start singing Money For Nothing by Dire Straits, or even Little Willy by Sweet:

Cause little Willy, Willy won't go home  
But you can't push Willy around

Willy won't go, try tellin' everybody but, oh no  
Little Willy, Willy won't go home.

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Okay, so maybe I got a wee bit partisan about Hibs firing their announcer last week, but that's what it's all about, isn't it? It's being partisan that makes football work.

I can even get partisan about teams that I have no involvement in. I will be cheering on AFC Wimbledon when they meet MK Dons on 2 December and I sincerely hope that they give the Dons a right kicking.

It probably doesn't mean too much to people in Scotland, but the AFC Wimbledon story is inspirational and should be studied by every Rangers and Hearts supporter.

Wimbledon FC were an old established club (founded 1889). They had their ups and downs in the English league, winning the FA Cup in 1988. In 2002 they got into financial difficulties and some guy with more money than sense offered them dosh to move to Milton Keynes where he would build them a new stadium if they changed their name to MK Dons. The Wimbledon board agreed to the deal. So did the FA. The fans were not consulted. To get this into perspective, that was like Hearts relocating to Inverness and expecting their fans to remain loyal.

The Wimbledon fans got together and formed a Trust and set up their own club, AFC Wimbledon, wholly owned by the supporters. The AFC stands for "A Fans Club". With over 75% of the old Supporters Club putting money into the trust and a number of sympathetic sponsors also chipping in, they took over the lease of the old ground, held player trials (230 players applied for the team) and set up their own, supporter owned team in June 2002.

AFC Wimbledon started off playing in the Combined Counties League (i.e. 'division' 9). Since then, over the last decade, they have won promotion every season and are currently in the English League Division 2. This is a record for the fastest ascent of a club through the English League.

They are still owned by the Supporters Trust and last year announced that they now had enough money in the fund to rebuild the old Kingsmeadow stadium.

They deserve to win at Milton Keynes on 2 December.

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I was looking forward to the Tyson Fury / Kevin Johnson fight tonight, and it was nice to see that Freddie Flintoff won his first professional bout.

I have to admit that I didn't rate Flintoff's chances and had Richard Dawson down as the dead cert to win that one. For a start Flintoff is getting on a bit in boxing terms. 34 is not the ideal age to be

taking up the game and then his motivation wasn't the most convincing. Saying that you "needed something after cricket" doesn't indicate a burning desire to box. Then there is the fact that Dawson is eleven years younger and two stone heavier than him. Dawson has been boxing for a while and has wins behind him.

Overall Flintoff has had four and a half month's training and one has to question the level of technical boxing skill he has developed in that time. By all accounts the match was scrappy and Flintoff just made it on points (39/38) despite being knocked to the canvas by Dawson in the second round.

It seems that there was a certain lack of sportsmanship with the crowd constantly baiting Dawson with chants of "You Fat Bastard". Those additional two stones were noticeable then.

Personally I question the motives behind this. I've no doubt he is sincere in wanting to take on a challenge after giving up cricket, but what was behind having a film crew following him around all the time making a documentary about it all? All over the boxing sites on the internet people are speculating that the fight itself was a fix so that the film could have a happy ending. Apparently the thing is going out as a three part mini-series on Sky with the cheesy title *Lords To The Ring*.

I suppose the answer will be if Flintoff gets in the ring again.

I'd pay to see Freddie Flintoff against Richard Dawkins, but last night it was Fury / Johnson

And Fury won, though not to my eyes with the points margin awarded to him by the judges.

What was most interesting to me was the large section of the crowd who started booing around round eight and kept it up for the rest of the bout. They had obviously come expecting to see fireworks and they didn't get them. Fury, sensibly against a more experienced opponent (who has gone a full twelve rounds with Vitali Kilitschko,) kept it slow and steady. It ensured he didn't open himself up to rogue shots or inadvertent slips.

So it was a satisfying fight to watch even if the adrenalin didn't flow.

That now makes Fury No.3 in the world ranking, one step away from a fight with Kilitschko for the title. Not bad for someone who just six months ago was describing himself as an obese fat pig. And at 24 stone, he was.

Up until that point he was undefeated, but when his son developed a viral illness which threatened his immune system and ended up in intensive care, Fury spent almost two months sleeping in a chair every night at the hospital, and getting depressed and stressed. To compensate he just ate and ate, causing his weight to balloon.

So how do you lose six stone in six months: He's done nothing but train, eat, sleep and drink water. He stays in a spartan training camp in the middle of a forest, away from anyone else. Trains six days a week three times a day. Apparently there have been a lot of fighters who have tried to train with him but they left after a couple of weeks because they couldn't hack it. It was just too hard. "We do nothing apart from eat chicken, rice and vegetables. We train, and we sleep. It's just pure, hard graft, and that's it. Nothing else." Maybe the Fury diet will catch on.

I hope Fury's son recovers and goes on to become a boxer. It would be a shame if one of the great boxing dynasties came to an end. It started with Fury's grandfather Tiger who fought over 90 heavyweight bouts. Tyson's father, Gypsy John Fury was a good boxer whom I saw fight in Leith when I was young. His brothers Pete and Hugh Fury have also handled themselves well in the ring. So it would be fitting if Prince Fury carried on the tradition

Mick Hennessy, Fury's promoter, says that talks are under way with the Klitschko management team for a world title challenge next year. I look forward to that.

# THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF OZ

One of the people who contacted me wanted to know what this OZ magazine was that I kept referring to. So I did a straw poll of the boys in the bar-room. Nobody under 55 had a clue, so it probably follows that most of you reading this don't know either.

I used to buy OZ regularly throughout the sixties and early seventies and, unlike so many other things, didn't throw them away. Consequently I still have 44 out of the 48 issues. For something that cost 2/6 (15p) at the time they have been a good investment. Some of them now change hands for several hundreds of pounds. Just out of interest, I read through them again over the holiday period and was struck by

- (i) how good the quality of the writing was and
- (ii) how relevant much of it was to today (or looking at it the other way, how little things really change).

Fortunately none of it was copyright. The actual wording in the magazines is "The contents of OZ are not copyright. They may be reproduced in any manner, either in whole or in part, in any publication whatsoever, without permission from the publishers". If only all publications were so accommodating.

So I'm going to bombard you over the next few weeks with some creative hippy writing.

Anyway - OZ

Oz magazine was originally started up in Australia by Richard Neville and Martin Sharp in the mid sixties as the Australian equivalent of Private Eye. Then, in 1967, they both moved over to London and decided to publish it here.

I don't have a copy of OZ 1, but have seen it in reproduction. It was just like Private Eye. It had a small print run and didn't sell all that well. As a result there are very few copies about. In fact over the last decade only two copies have come on to the market. One sold for £1,300, the other for £1,500.

I started buying it with OZ 2. It was obvious that they had realised that they couldn't compete with Private Eye. The driving force for change was clearly Martin Sharp, who was a talented graphic designer.

OZ 2 is a bit of a hybrid, with most of it being fairly conventional, but the last eight pages folding out into a psychedelic portrait of Harold Wilson by Sharp.

One of the main articles is by Malcolm Muggeridge, who at that time was Rector of Edinburgh University: "I intensely dislike the way the world is going. Putting it in its simplest terms, the world is going in the direction of what is called the American way of life. This is what everyone wants and what the whole world is going to have. It's not the higher standard of living itself. It's the method whereby it is achieved and sustained that makes

people's lives spiritually less rich, the method being primarily to subordinate everything to production, to accept this mysterious thing, the gross national product, as a sort of deity and then to build up this terrible structure of advertising and mass communication to ensure that the pot is kept boiling. There is a great fallacy of our time, that if you can raise the standard of people's consumption you automatically enrich people's lives. Not so. The most barren and wretched place in the world I've ever visited is California, which also happens to have the highest standard of life and education."

With OZ3 Sharp decided that there was no reason why a magazine should be a set number of rectangular pages stapled together. From now on every OZ would be in a different format with no two alike. Some were glossy mags, some were newspapers, some were loose sheets, some were posters. Some were square, some were oblong, some were very large and some were tiny. Typically each issue, one way or another, was about 48 pages in total.

OZ 3 and OZ 4 are my biggest frustrations because I have neither and I have never seen either of them come up for sale. I've no idea what happened to my copy of OZ 3. The graphics in OZ 4 were printed in gold ink on purple paper and were so beautiful that they were cut up and pinned on the studio wall. I've often cursed myself for destroying that copy. Ironically, our local museum here in Rathboneland has two copies of OZ on display in their '60s' section. They just happen to be OZ 3 and OZ 4. Perhaps a late night break-in .....

## OZ 5

This was perhaps the strangest OZ. It just kept folding out and out until it was a giant poster (think of 16 A4 sheets stuck together) by Martin Sharp, with the magazine printed on the back. As a result it is very fragile and not many of them have survived. Those that have are now quite valuable. (One sold last year for £600) My own copy is devalued because while I was at Art College it used to be pinned up on the studio wall beside the cut up OZ 4 and has holes where the drawing pins were and a tear where it got caught once. At one time the tear was repaired with Sellotape. Doing that has taken a couple of hundred pounds off its value.

The magazine side was entirely devoted to what was called "The Great Alf Conspiracy".

The Alfs were a bizarre cult of grey short-haired nine to fivers who were sweeping the country. They worked as accountants, journalists, bank managers, doctors, lawyers.... in fact they could be anyone.

The aims of the Alfs was to make Britain a fit place for their children to live in. (Not anyone else's, only their children. Few Alfs would admit they were Alfs, That's why they were so difficult to help.

Some of the great achievements of the Alfs were custard, Post Office Savings accounts, North Sea Gas and life insurance.

Some Alf do-gooders, called "entrepreneurs" had started shops which stocked basic Alf gear and quaint accessories which were given away to needy Alfs at 'bargain prices'.

You could answer a questionnaire to determine if you were an Alf, but it did come with the caution that if you attempted to answer any of the questions then you were undoubtedly an Alf. Among the questions was:

Despite this country's present economic difficulties and the precarious state of sterling, we shall soon be back on our feet. True or false?

OZ 6 By this time OZ had found its stride. It looked like no other magazine on the stands and the editorial content had moved completely away from Private Eye territory and was firmly promoting an 'alternative' lifestyle.

What was refreshing, however, is that it could also see through all the hippy bullshit:

"What, really, is the flower-power craze all about, apart from being an excuse to act mad and have a good time (which you can do without subscribing to any half-formulated philosophies from America). There are no manifestoes or even clear declarations and aims to argue about. If people want to escape from an ugly world and attain a level of consciousness in which mundane conformity, policemen and politics do not exist, then good luck to them. However, you don't get change in the world if you attempt to escape from it all the time. If the sincere among the flower people want to establish a loving, beautiful society, the light shows and weird dancing will not help."

By OZ 6 they were also taking advertising to support the increasing publication costs. The first one was for 'Suifan's Kwang Tze' Solution which was guaranteed to be specially beneficial to men who suffered from premature ejaculation. It was the first time this sort of advertisement had appeared outside porn magazines. This was ultimately to get them into deep water.

OZ 7 It was with OZ 7 that they hit the big time. Martin Sharp's cover drawing of Bob Dylan, printed in silver ink on a black and yellow background, became a cult, must have item and magazine sold in its thousands and went into reprint. Even today this edition changes hands for upwards of £250 a copy. Fortunately I didn't cut this one up, beautiful though it was.

With OZ 7 the magazine started taking on big issues which were not being covered by main stream journalism. The central feature was an article on Michael Abdul Malik and Black militancy.

It was also the start of the negative letters following the Suifan Kwang Tze ad. OZ made a habit of publishing their negative correspondence without comment:

"Dear Sir, I should be glad if you would cancel the subscription to your magazine OZ which my son who is away at school has apparently been foolish enough to order. I hope I know my son well enough to think he did not know the contents of this periodical were quite so money wasting and also that he does not choose to read obscene publications. Please refrain from forwarding any further copies. Yours truly, F.M. Norman-Butler."

Now, up to this point there had been nothing which could, even remotely, be construed as obscene. But if that was the reputation they were getting .....

OZ 8 featured a large nude of Richard Neville's girlfriend Louise Lesser on the cover and had the strapline 'Playboy's Dirty Flics'. Cheekily it was sold as a "Double Issue" and charged double the price. In fact the price was the only thing which was double.



OZ 8 was the beginning of the deliberately unreadable phase. Martin Sharp's graphic approach had become so complex that there were frequently four different images superimposed on each other before you even got to the text. And when you did get there, the printing was orange on pink, or green on blue. Just trying to decipher what you were reading could take the whole month before the next issue came out.

There were two main articles, one on the current state of Russia and how Russian communism had failed, and the other by R.D Laing on lateral thinking.

In the advertising columns the Chinese elixir had now been joined by Ravensdale Products wonderful 'Magnaphall', and a range of items from Pellen Personal Products, along side the ads for Afghan Coats, Lapel Badges and Posters.

OZ 9 is one of my favourite Martin Sharp covers. As might be deduced, that issue focussed on UFO's. Much of the content focussed on quotes and extracts from Exodus through medieval, ancient Chinese and Mayan records, to Victorian, Edwardian and contemporary accounts of UFOs and Aliens, all of which have a remarkable similarity despite the fact that the authors, until recently, could not have known about each other's work. I particularly like the quote from Charles Fort that "In the topography of intellection, I should say that what we call knowledge is actually ignorance surrounded by laughter."

Given the over the top graphic style which now overwhelmed every page, it was amusing to note from the letters page that Bob Perlongo, School of Journalism, University of Iowa thought that "As a free-lance writer and, at the moment, also an instructor in magazine journalism, may I say that rarely have I seen a more confused, confusing, botched looking, noxious, sloppy, tasteless or incoherent magazine than yours."

OZ 10 saw a radically different approach on the front cover, graphically violent. It provoked a lot of complaints and some outlets like Menzies and W.H. Smith refused to stock it. The issue was devoted to The Pornography Of Violence. Specifically, it devoted over ten pages to atrocities being perpetrated by America in Vietnam, almost the first time criticism of this kind had appeared in the British press.

Someone after my own heart called John Powers wrote to the letters column: "I am writing to you, or rather to all John Peel supporters on an extremely important matter. Radio Luxembourg is planning to completely change its line-up of DJs, giving them much longer shows. Anyone who has ever experienced the ecstatic joy of exiting with the Perfumed Garden will, of course, immediately realise the possible mind blowing consequences of this. Every single person who supports John Peel must write to Radio Luxembourg asking, begging, pleading or demanding John Peel has a regular late night spot, and if all the beloved are faithful to the Perfumed Garden and write, Radio Luxembourg will have to sit up and take notice, and we may well see the return of the Perfumed Garden to the radio! The importance of writing cannot be sufficiently stressed. The Perfumed Garden must return."

The sex aid adverts and the politics were starting to catch up on OZ. "Safe behind their anonymity, little men inflict their prejudices upon the reading public. These are the men who purchase magazines on behalf of newsagents or wholesale distribution companies. Abel Heywood & Sons Ltd. refuse to distribute OZ to provincial retailers because 'We don't deal in dirt'. If you can't get OZ in Exeter, blame SurrIDGE, Dawson & Co. who were outraged that OZ gave space to Michael Abdul Malik."

OZ 11 is another victim of my folly and regret. It came in the form of a book of perforated stickers, with Martin Sharp graphics on one side and the editorial on the sticky side. Inevitably these were ripped apart and plastered on the walls of the college. Equally inevitably, copies of OZ11 are now worth a small fortune.

OZ 12 was another big fold out poster with a pull out newspaper stapled into the middle. You had to remove the staples to get the newspaper out and be able to open up the poster, which was another Martin Sharp classic, a very dark depiction of violence in the black community. Remarkably, I have managed to keep both the poster and the newspaper intact.

Most of the issue was devoted to a long essay by Raymond Durnat on the relative merits of the Conservative and Labour parties' definitions of Freedom, which were interestingly similar, namely that freedom is meaningless unless defined in terms of power.

It was after this issue that Richard Neville famously remarked that there is only an inch of difference between Labour and Conservative, but it is in that inch that we must live.

It is interesting that even in 1968 Durnat could note that "Conservative rhetoric about Britain's economic crisis comes down to 'the workers should tighten their belts out of patriotism while the bankers get their expense account lunches to give them more incentive.'"

Dear OZ, after being subjected to shocked and dirty looks from shop assistants and witnessing the ripping up of my OZ by my enraged father and disgusted, incredulous mother, I am writing to say that I am still an OZ reader.

Dear OZ, I am at present considering whether your magazine is sincere, or just a superficial load of old rubbish. I am at an experimental stage in life and as in any experiment one allows for mistakes, I hope OZ is not one of them.

OZ 13 Was described as the Agit-Oz edition. It was the edition which came out immediately after the attempted student and workers May revolt in France which had had a ripple effect in the UK, with college occupations and the anti-vietnam demonstrations. Most of the magazine was taken up with essays on various aspects of revolution and political subversion. "It is not only the conscious hypocrites that uphold and defend the bourgeois lie that the state is free and that it is its duty to defend the interests of all, but also a large number of people who sincerely adhere to the old prejudices and who cannot understand the transition from the old capitalist society to socialism." On page 15 there was a call to loot Harrods. There was a two page, somewhat unflattering, report on the Queen's state visit to Australia.

There was also detailed coverage on the way the Police were reacting to the demonstrations: "In an anti-vietnam demonstration outside Gloucester Guildhall, 21 year old Paradise Hartley threw a toilet roll, which happened to go through an open window. Hartley was immediately arrested and charged with using threatening behaviour. In court he was tried for the crimes of (i) throwing a toilet roll and (ii) singing protest songs. The magistrates found him guilty and fined him £100. That turned out to be £85 more than the total fines imposed on 3 men with prior convictions for grievous bodily harm who had rolled a drunk outside a pub and £15 more than a drunk driver who killed a four year old child, sentenced in the same court on the same day by the same three magistrates."

It was probably with this issue that the Government, MI5 and the Police began to take notice of OZ.

Oh, and the cover and format are particularly nice.

OZ 14 was the first without a graphic on the cover, instead it was a full page advert for The Doors Strange Days LP. It was also the first OZ to feature a review section, something which would become a regular feature.

For the first time, as well, there were articles on the environment and on alternative life styles. In the former case this was possibly the first article I'd read on the need to recycle domestic waste because "there's too fucking much of it! It's completely out of control!" Succinctly put and at least thirty years before the Government started to do something about it, and on the latter there were three pages on how to build your own geodesic dome.

Perhaps the most disturbing article was a long exposition (5 pages) explaining the lengths that the authorities were prepared to go to get a school boy, Fabian Douglas, to cut his hair. He was 15 and his hair had grown to just above the collar of his blazer. His headmaster ordered him to get it cut. He refused, so his father was summoned to the school. When the father asked what harm the boy's hardly excessively long hair was doing, the headmaster's response was "I will make this boy conform for his own good. I am doing him a favour". The boy was told "Don't come back to school until it is cut". The boy had his hair cut, but began to be bullied. The father took that up with the Headmaster, who referred the boy to an educational psychologist. When the father protested that it was not his son who had a problem he was told "Obey my lawful order or I will suspend the boy. Your views are irrelevant to the case, which is obedience to me alone without question."

The headmaster then suspended the boy. The father appealed to the Education Authorities, who, perhaps not unexpectedly, supported the headmaster. The father wrote to the Minister for Education. He declined to intervene in what was a matter for the local education authority. The father went to the Council For Civil Liberties who advised that he could take civil action, so he took the Education Authority to court. At that point the Minister of Education intervened, writing to the father to demand that he obey the authority of the headmaster. Ultimately the father had to threaten an appeal to the United Nation's Court of Human Justice before the headmaster would allow the boy back, and even then the father had to sign a document that he would obey the authority of the headmaster. It is telling that none of that made the mainstream press.

Neither did what was happening in Vietnam. Page 7 was particularly shocking, being a photograph of four american soldiers proudly displaying the heads of two vietnamese peasants whom they have just decapitated.

OZ 15 saw the start of a campaign to legalise cannabis. This was becoming an issue because the Police, keen to up their arrest rate, were finding pot users a soft target. Among the examples were

(i) a party which was raided. There were 29 people on the premises at the time. The police managed to find a very small amount of cannabis. Nevertheless they proceeded to arrest 28 of those present. The 29th was a Russian Orthodox priest, who they allowed to leave. The charges against the rest were dropped at committal hearings five weeks later. As the

magistrates pointed out, it was technically impossible for all 28 of the people arrested to have possessed the rather small piece of cannabis involved.

(ii) This was the case of Chris and Alfred who were stopped on the street one afternoon and searched by the police, who found nothing, got back in their car and drove away. A few minutes later the police were back and stopped the two boys again, charging them with possession of cannabis resin. In court the police stated that even though they had found nothing on the boys another officer, who just happened to be on the roof of the cinema opposite, had seen Chris drop something on the pavement. When he went over to investigate, he found the cannabis. The magistrates, however, went up on to the roof of the cinema and found that the view of where the boys had been stopped was obscured by a tree. That case was dismissed as well.

How to describe OZ 16? This was the most extreme of all the 48 issues. It was fifty pages of complete collage, made up of photographs, newspaper clippings, cartoons and text, all intermixed and overlapping. Depending on how you viewed it, it was either entirely meaningless or there were at least a dozen different narratives going on at once. As it said on the cover, entrance was not for everyone. It sold really badly and, in my view regrettably, they did not repeat the idea.

In the following issue there were a number of letters:

“Dear OZ, In reference to your magazine of November, we think it was an out and out con. So far we have enjoyed most copies of your magazine, so we would be very grateful if you would refund our money. Luv, Linda and Jerry.”

“Dear OZ, What a bloody con. What a take. Give me my precious 3/- back. If I were a subscriber I would divorce you. The chorus of rage and incomprehension that greeted Martin Sharp’s ‘Magic Theatre’ must have gratified everyone on OZ except the accountant.....(and so on for a full page) ....

“Dear OZ, In your last edition you said more visually than you could ever have done otherwise. What matters, and makes the ‘Magic Theatre’ the only first class issue of OZ in the last sixteen, is that at last it has broken the mould in a lyrical and decisive way. Yours, John Christopher.”

I’m with John Christopher.

The inflation factor had already started by OZ 17. In the back issues column they were already charging £1 for the ‘rare’ Oz 1.

This issue saw the start of a regular cookery column: Get to Sainsbury’s early one morning and ask for half a dozen cracked eggs - they sell them cheap and are usually sold out by the afternoon so be warned. Re-crack three of the eggs into a cup and whip with a half cup of milk until creamy. Add a half teaspoon of salt and a quarter teaspoon of pepper. Pour this mixture into a hot frying pan which has been greased with a little marg, stirring with a fork until nearly set, then fold over and slide out of the pan. Don’t leave too long before eating - 45 seconds to a minute at the outside. This is called an omelette. Omelette has countless variations: Bacon omelette, Herb omelette, potato omelette. You’ll find you can put almost anything into an omelette, even marmalade.

The main article was on the rising number of homeless and how the Government was doing nothing to address the problem, depending on Shelter and other charities to pick up the pieces. It was estimated that there were at least 12,000 people either sleeping rough or in charity shelters in London alone.

Among the LP reviews was one for 'Disposable' by The Deviants. I have to declare an interest here because the lead singer of The Deviants was Mick Farren, who turned out to be my next door neighbour when I moved into the flat in London. I never asked what he thought of this review which said that "The lyrics are for the most part pretentious, artificial, clumsily metered and badly sung".

Page 4 was the winner of a poster competition they had announced a few months before. By Ron and Karen Bowen, it showed the US Marines on Iwo Jima raising a giant flower rather than the American flag. The poster caught the public imagination and it went on to sell hundreds of thousands of copies.

OZ 18 was a newspaper and it's quite miraculous that my copy has survived the last forty odd years. Having said that it does look a bit brown and tatty and the outer pages are pretty fragile. I shall have to invest in a pair of those special white gloves that conservators wear.

The lead item was an interview with Andy Warhol in which he manages to say nothing, beautifully.

Among the other items I particularly like the following election speech by a leading politician: "The Streets of our country are in turmoil. The universities are filled with students rebelling and rioting. There is danger from within and without. We need law and order. Without law and order our nation cannot survive. Elect us and we shall restore law and order and be respected among the nations of the world." ..... Given the date, clearly not David Cameron. Not even Margaret Thatcher, but actually Adolph Hitler in 1932.

Crucially, there was a piece on the News Of The World, which had started a campaign against OZ the previous October, focussing on the adverts for sex products, the 'dirty' pictures included in the adverts, and the fact that some of the other small ads were for 'drug paraphernalia'. As a consequence OZ's printers refused to print any more copies of the magazine. OZ threatened legal action for breach of contract, pointing out that it had never been prosecuted for anything and always paid its bills promptly. The printer agreed to print the current issue, but would not print any more. "Which will be difficult because most other printers seem to think like our present lot, which is why we'll probably come out late next time".

The front cover of OZ 19 shows Germaine Greer unzipping Viv Stanshall's fly. Germaine Greer had been a regular contributor since OZ 3. In this issue she had four pages on the phenomenon of Groupies. "You might think it's a load of old cock, but that's your hangup."

Probably the most interesting article is on food production.

"There is too much food in the world and the surplus is growing at a terrifying, uncontrollable rate. Governments try to tackle this crisis by all sorts of restrictions on agricultural output, the most famous of which is the practice of paying farmers to leave their land uncultivated..... When other means fail, the last resort is destruction. Milk is poured down mine shafts, fields of sugar cane are burned, crops are ploughed back into the ground and fruit left to rot..... Every year there are 350,000 tons of excess butter. ....

of course, we all know that there are quite a few hungry people in the world, and for this reason talk of too much food being a problem seems ludicrous and bizarre..... In a buying and selling world, a world which produces for the sake of cash, human needs can go and get stuffed. Money talks. Hunger is dumb. People are starving alright, not because there isn't any food for them, but because the markets can't make a profit out of selling it to them."

No change there then.

OZ 20 was the Hells Angels issue. Though the bulk of the magazine was still focussing on social and political issues, what had started as one page of record reviews in OZ 14 had now expanded into 11 pages, almost a quarter of the whole edition. Another 8 pages were taken up with advertising, much of it for LPs. It was clear where the money was coming from to keep OZ afloat.

Four of those music pages were devoted to an interview with The Incredible String Band, (which made a curious contrast with the interviews with Hell's Angels" only a few pages before).

At one point Robin Williamson observes that : "There's no reason why a city should not be a garden of joy, but it's down to thoughts. A city is the colour of the minds that build and use it. A year ago I'd have said I was in touch with the Spirit which wrote all the songs. I would have said I wasn't responsible for their existence. There is much in Scientology. It is an applied philosophy to make the able more able through the restoration of awareness. It has released the pain in me so that now I am able to play instruments on stage which frightened me before".

All of which sounded a long way from the Robin Williamson I used to know playing on Portobello beach.

The Hell's Angels defined self expression a little differently:

"Loser Pete went up to Heston Services on the M4. He got a raw egg, rolled it around on the floor with his nose. Then he broke it, reached up, put salt and pepper on it and sucked it up off the floor. Now that was a mind snapper. It's a sort of free expression. Showing class is a very little part of being an angel."

OZ 21 This was the second (and last) time an OZ cover featured an advert, this time for Elektra records.

As far as I'm concerned this was the most disposable of the OZs. Over a quarter of the issue consisted of cartoons, which were amusing the first time, but don't bear repeated viewing. An article on black revolutionaries didn't add anything to the ones which had appeared in earlier issues and, apart from the front and back cover, another ten pages consisted of adverts. The only really interesting part was a lengthy interview with Pete Townshend on the development of free form music.

OZ 22 is definitely one of my favourite Martin Sharp covers.

Under the heading Visual Wank there was a long article about television - the bankrupt medium. The thrust of the argument was that television didn't cater for young people. Unless you were a child or over thirty five, there was not a single programme which even acknowledged the existence of the counter culture. "Be very careful when people speak to you about quality in television, especially if they are critics or programme controllers. They

are nearly always referring to something that looks good , not on the screen, but in print. When they talk about quality programmes they are actually talking about programmes which they think ought to be on television; that is very different from good television, which is almost impossible to legislate for.”

To go with this there was a report on a remarkable new piece of equipment from Japan. This was a shoulder-pack videotape recorder weighing 13 lbs and a hand held TV camera weighing about 5 lbs which worked off its own internal batteries. A microphone mounted on the camera picked up sound and synchronised sound and vision were recorded on a half inch wide videotape with a running time of 20 minutes. The batteries lasted about an hour and were rechargeable. The cost was £575. “Can I go to a shop and buy this equipment? No. The UK electronics lobby pushed a restrictive law through Parliament to protect the sale of their own inferior equipment. Well, what do you expect from a country whose economy is on its last legs?”

In the music section there were a series of quotes. I particularly like:

“I don’t know anything about music. In my line of work I don’t have to” - Elvis Presley.

“ In the old days you’d drag your old man out on the lawn and you’d kick the shit out of each other and he’d say “ Be home by midnight” and you’d be home by midnight” - Frank Zappa.

“ I had banana in high school” - Bob Dylan.

“ When I perform am I producing art? Am I fuck.” - Terry Reid.

OZ 23 broached another taboo. This issue was devoted to gay rights. To get that into context it is important to remember that at the date this issue was published homosexuality had only been legalised in England the year before and was still illegal in Scotland.

“When you start encouraging people to be themselves, that is natural for mankind as a whole, you find that homosexuality becomes something natural. You have, in fact, got a cure for “homosexuality”. Whereas most young people have very open minds, when it comes to homoeroticism their homoerotic drive or instinct has already been suppressed by the time they start verbalising and talking about freedom and so on, so that the whole range of erotic freedom tends to be neglected. There is in fact a considerable amount of self consciousness about this even among ‘underground’ people. Almost to a man the possibility that they might be queer has crossed their mind but they’ve just brushed it aside. Men just can’t admit that they love other men. And quite obviously if man is not allowed to love his fellow men it’s easier for him to kill them.”

The music pages were devoted to an interview with Phil Ochs, which was of interest to me because Phil was a mate of mine. Just before the interview Phil “had been tramping the streets of Edinburgh looking for a hotel. To buy. To own. To be master of an ever changing community of one night stand salesmen and their whores, Glasgow Rangers supporters, whisky freaks, haggis heads and assorted kilted fantasies.”.....”The idea of violence has been happening off and on for God knows how many years. So it stands to reason that within the next two fucking years some schmuck in fucking Wall Street is going to start marketing violence.”

OZ 24 was “the OZ freak show, a gallery of beautiful people whose wildly original world view flows into their life style. Freaks are anti-hypocrites who abolish the barriers between theory and action, fantasy and reality, politics and play, sanity and madness. With the media turning the world into the global village, plugging us into the same experiences, we all risk growing into the same person. In such a world, freaks restore the individual.”

Almost from the start OZ ran a medical advice page called Ask Dr. Hippocrates. This issue the question was :” Whenever I eat in a chinese restaurant the upper part of my body feels numb. I feel weak all over and my heart seems to pound. What could be wrong?” “Chinese Restaurant Syndrome came to light when a Yale gastroenterologist found a connection between chinese food and headaches. Most of the people affected noticed headaches, numbness of the face, palpitation of the heart, sweating and flushed faces. The culprit seems to be monosodium glutamate. Don’t worry too much about it. One or two hours after you stop eating the symptoms disappear and you’ll be hungry again.”

It also contained a large fold out poster of Jailbait Of The Month, the delectable Miss Honeybunch Kaminski.

OZ 25 was all about Hippy Atrocities. At least, that’s what it said on the cover. Inside there was a truly great article on Sam Phillips and Sun Records, and another, almost as good, on the Bob Dylan Great White Wonder bootleg.

There was also a two page spread extolling the virtues of this pretty little place in the sun that was out of touch with the rest of the world. “One little post office, a general store, a couple of bars, maybe one bus on the whole island so that you have to walk. Very much your beautiful people scene. It’s a bit crazier, the hair is longer, the dressing’s a bit freer, naked swimming , not many tourists. The peasants have a nice thing going - they fill your skirts with almonds and things.”.....this was Ibiza, and we all know where that led.

Probably the best article was a tour round Scunthorpe. “Scunthorpe’s the only town I’ve ever cased thoroughly in four and a half hours. It took a lot longer to get there.....” What they were trying to find out was what a normal weekend was like for young people who lived outside London.....” There seemed nowhere to eat. The cafes were shut. The rockers, bored out of their heads stumbled across the road bumping cars, or sat on railings outside the pub waiting to be moved on by the cops who obviously went through this ritual every weekend..... ‘How about live groups?’, I asked the girl in the fish shop. “Well we had the Seekers, or is it the Searchers? And someone very famous last week but I can’t remember who.’.....In a doorway I talked to a kid waiting. He worked as a moulder in a factory, was 17 and grooved on soul and blues. Didn’t have his own pad. Hardly anyone did. Everybody lived with their parents. Went part time to the technical college. ‘Any activities there?’ ‘Not that sort of college, you just walk in, do your course and split.’ He was keen to leave Scunthorpe and live in London. Said kids like him were called mods - still.”

All of it was so familiar and it was salutary to realise that Portobello and Scunthorpe were the norm, not swinging London.

OZ 26 focussed on Women’s Lib. “Men are the enemy. They know it. At least they all know there is a sex war on, an especially cold one. They have no perverse desire to remain enemies, but sexual assemblies vote overwhelmingly in favour of a new definition of women’s role, for if women liberate themselves, they will also free men of their neurotic dependence and the fearful inauthenticity of sexual relationships.....The 1969 second wave of women’s liberation movements were very much a manifestation of those sinister



forces in our society which we call the media. While pulling in millions of pounds by brainwashing women into demanding the emulsified fats, perfumed deodorants and disinfectants, liver corroding analgesics and other consumer products which are as necessary to keep our economies on an even keel as the threat of war or anarchist insurrection, the newspapers kept up their circulation by inventing a new sensation, Women's Liberation."

Dear OZ, My friend and I are baffled with regard to OZ 25. You have added yet another gem to your sick, sadistic publication. We feel that a trip to the local psychiatrist for sadistic tendencied people is called for. I hope and I know my friend and many others would agree undoubtedly that you should be sued until this 'underground' shit is no more. Please don't get the idea that I am an aging fuddy duddy spinster with hang ups about the underground press. I am a 19 year old, perfectly healthy reader and enjoy most of the current progressive bands. I am, and I speak for my friend, thoroughly and utterly disgusted. Your record reviews were good. Hippocrates was interesting, small ads were informative, but we now will stop reading your toilet paper which would be an insult to our arses and wish you every downfall in the new year. I have deleted my address from this letter as I am not quite sure if you can take action for such insulting behaviour via me and my pal. P.S. I agree entirely with my friend. You lot are sick, just sick. It was just filthy, barbarism, shit and I hope you wallow in your own sick. Sadists! Irene.

Tucked away in the issue was an advert asking young people under 18 to get in touch if they would like to produce a copy of OZ.

OZ 27 concerned itself with LSD, including long extracts from the Psychedelic Convention.

"A few years ago heroin was a medication of choice to which many adolescents looked for an anaesthetic revelation of their desires. We hypothesised that these young people sought from heroin a temporary relief from the falterings of an imperfect civilization. The situation was relatively uncomplicated. Quickly a much younger population seized on the inhalation of glue fumes and similar substances for the relief of their special turmoil, forcing a modification of prior hypotheses. One could still adhere, however, to the view that drug misuse was the predilection of a relatively small number of deviants in our society without risking professional scorn. Then, as everyone knows, LSD use spread among middle class youth, across ages, classes, ethnicities, cities and subcultures. The 'problem' reached epidemiological proportions. ....

The difficulties in judging the dangers of acid arise partly from the fact that acid does not have intrinsic effects. A bad acid trip may be due to bad acid and it may be to due to the extreme difficulty of estimating the dose .....

It is very misleading to suggest that LSD is a cause of violence. The evidence points in the opposite direction. I would like to have comparative statistics for violence and self destruction on LSD and alcohol."

OZ 28 turned out to be the nemesis issue.

In actual fact it was the Schoolkids issue. OZ had advertised for people under the age of eighteen to produce an issue of the magazine. The 'kids' had complete editorial freedom.

The issue they produced isn't, by a long way, the best OZ issue, but it became the most famous. It is all you would expect from a bunch of adolescents. The thirteen boys and four

girls focussed on running exposes on what was happening in their schools, exam blues, what they got up to at the weekend, pop music, smut and a spot the ball competition.

The damage was done by the Headmaster Of The Year profile on page 12 and the cartoon on page 14

The headmaster in question was Mr. Robinson of Bradford Grammar School. Needless to say this was a negative profile, which I won't summarise for reasons which will become apparent. The reason for Mr. Robinson's success was his efficiency at expelling any pupil which he considered to be a corrupting and subversive influence. Mr Robinson did not bask in the glory of his win. Instead he sued the magazine for defamation.

The cartoon was the work of 16 year old Viv Kylastron. It showed everybody's favourite childhood character, Rupert Bear sporting a somewhat unfeasibly large erection. This proved too much for the Director of Public Prosecutions, who charged Richard Neville, Felix Dennis and Jim Anderson, the directors of OZ, and Viv Kylastron of producing material of gross indecency. At the resulting trial they were found guilty and sentenced to a year's imprisonment.

OZ 29 came courtesy of Inspector Luff of New Scotland Yard. It was another Women's Lib issue, with a very easy to follow crochet pattern for a willy warmer on page five, and lengthy articles by Germaine Greer, Anais Nin and Kate Millet.

Tucked away in the middle was the announcement that Neville, Dennis and Anderson were also going to be charged with the corruption of minors.

" If this means giving kids an effective means of self expression; enabling them to ridicule everything from headmasters to the Schools Action Union; to attack exams, the combined Cadet Force and the Underground; to defend love, Jeff Beck and Rupert Bear, to create cartoons, collages; learn a little about magazine production, if it means to discover other possible futures than the one offered by the school careers officer, to share in the vision of a generation experimenting with new ways of living, and being victimised for doing so, then we admit it. OZ corrupts minors. We just hope it sometimes reaches adults".

Dear OZ, The schoolkids issue was just like smelling a flower. Fresh and just natural. That's what OZ was. It really done something to my mind. It was true expression. You should do it more often. The article by Allan Clayson called Xam Blues was so good. It put in words what I've been thinking about exams. I will lift it out of OZ and use it. Love, Al.

OZ 30 This is the tattiest of my copies, badly creased, torn at the top of the cover and loose on its staples. I've no idea why it has had such a bad life.

There was an interesting interview with a guy whose real name was not Jim.

"American technology has developed and manufactured small aircraft equipped with sensitive instruments which can spot things from an altitude of two or three thousand feet. These aircraft are capable of destroying on detection. They have already been used in Mexico and will be used in other parts of the world soon, if they're not already being deployed as you read this.....machines are being installed at international airports in America to detect things in luggage at customs control..... The CIA make few direct arrests, operating instead through local police forces in a delicate relationship in which the cops take the blame.....when an American agent on a secret assignment needs cash in

any currency he goes to an unspecified government office and identifies himself with a code, telling the clerk how much money he needs. No explanation necessary, and agents do not carry identification for obvious reasons. The money is put on the counter. (We would like to know the code and if we ever do.....) .... You are being used as an American political pawn. It doesn't matter if you are English, French, German or Dutch. America plays international politics and is going to have its way..... I am going to be watching you. We are going to be watching you. We are going to find out who you really are". Good luck to them. It's a question I've been trying to solve for years.

Meanwhile, back in the real world:

Dear OZ, I read the letter about the skinheads wanting the same goal as us long haired intellectuals. The night after, we went to a disco and the skin head bastards proceeded to beat the fuck out of five of my long haired friends and I. To clinch it the bouncers threw us out for causing trouble. Yours painfully, E. Grindle.

OZ 31 In case you can't read the fine print on the cover, it says "He drives a Maserati. She's a professional model. The boy is the son of the art editor of Time magazine. Some revolution!"

This issue dealt with the hypocrisy of people who took the 'alternative' life style and exploited it for gain.

"In the formative stages of the counter culture it was possible to draw inspiration from the behaviour of Albion's children. It was tempting, if naive, to hope that a qualitative change in the conduct of human relationships might develop. But now affectation suffocates reason and arguments lose their conviction. The advertising campaign has been an abounding triumph, but there is nothing inside the wrapping paper."

"Mick Jagger was on television the other night and said he was an anarchist. An anarchist? Mick Jagger is currently staying at the Georges Cinq hotel. If he wants caviare the waiter says yes sir Mr. Jagger and sends someone off to Russia..... We can't rely on the stars to change the system for us any more..... The kids at the Isle of Wight were being totally controlled and manipulated. They had to pay exorbitantly for their own music and they became completely exhausted, sleeping in the lavatories, hungry, so weary they were pissing over each other."

"One of the promises of the new lifestyle was the abolition of false criteria for judging human beings. Today hip symbols and fashionable rituals count for more than ever. Venereal disease may even be a new status symbol, but the gonococcus germ unfortunately hasn't heard of women's lib."

"One night, on arriving at Newcastle station, I noticed two artsy laby types surrounded by British Rail authorities. The uncomfortable pair caught my eye and asked for help. British Rail were refusing to accept their proffered cheque. Naturally I accepted it and purchased tickets on their behalf. A few days later the cheque bounced."

"Who represents the greater threat to the power structure of England, the Kray Twins or the White Panthers?"

OZ 32 Just before this issue the OZ offices, Jim Anderson's flat and Richard Neville's house were raided. Consequently the letters column began with : " Several letters were

seized by Inspector Fred Luff during his celebrated pre-Christmas raid on the OZ offices and do not therefore appear. If you want your letter back, call on Fred. Then again, he may call on you.”

Three pages in the magazine were devoted to a blow by blow description of the raids .”Having just stepped out of the shower, I was baby powdering when Detective Frederick Luff burst through the bathroom door. After a strained exchange of courtesies, I hurried to dress and to admire the calm with which six other plainclothes men and two dogs were ravaging my home. “What’s your name”, I asked the man who was disabling the telephone. “Get stuffed”, he replied..... The labradors were hilariously hopeless. While these ill trained hounds gnawed needlessly through the back of a decaying harmonium, their masters ransacked my library, my personal letters and files. Few, if any of these objects are likely to be returned. No receipt has been forthcoming. I will probably never know in detail exactly what was commandeered.... I produced a sony cassette and began recording the mounting pandemonium. It was immediately wrested from me and taken apart ‘ to search for drugs’. They even confiscated the hand written notes which Louise started making to keep a record of what they were taking. .... I have no previous convictions yet Frederick Luff categorised me (at the court) as a dangerous criminal, resulting in me being refused bail and banned all visitors.....This means that our editorial hand is forced. If the magazine is to survive we are now compelled to conduct editorial decisions in a way which we have always previously avoided. Until we defeat the charges we must strive to elude a further prosecution. Oz has never been solely sexual, but just as few girls remember the face of the man who exposes himself on a train, likewise, out of a 48 page OZ our more repressed readers will recall only the two pages of small ads.”

p.s : Today is my birthday and I've just treated myself to a copy of OZ11 (the one with the stickers) off e-bay, so that will feature, out of sequence, in the near future.

OZ 33

“Let’s take for granted that socialism is preferable to capitalism, for no-one among us could argue that inequality is better than equality. I want to ask : How can we be sure that capitalism is digging its own grave? Will socialism be ready to step in and take over? And is it helpful to be told over and over again that this is what should happen without telling us how? The great depression of 1929 was said to herald the end of capitalism, but as Roosevelt pointed out, it was his administration which saved the system of private profit and free enterprise after it had been dragged to the brink of ruin. The end of the second world war was going to usher in a new age, yet never has capitalism flourished as strongly as in the countries that defeated fascism. Undoubtedly things are getting worse. Unemployment is going up along with inflation. The quality of everyday life in general is declining as steadily as the purchasing power of money. The number of poor and disaffected people grows daily.”

That was 1971, but still resonates in 2012.

So does the article on The Anarchist’s Cookbook, which was all about making home made bombs. “Just as the first duty of the revolutionary is not to get caught, the anarchist’s first duty is not to blow himself up” consequently there are lots of safety rules for storing, making and handling your dynamite, gunpowder and plastic bombs. In the highly unlikely event that I would want to make a pressure plate detonator or sabotage a suspension bridge I don’t think I would rely on this.

Mary Twissell got off today. She had bumped into another woman when coming out of the Albert Hall. 'Piss off!' said the other woman, making a rude gesture. 'Fuck off!' responded Miss Twissell, who was immediately arrested for indecent language. Presumably the arresting officer made a value judgement between the two statements. The case was dismissed.

OZ 34 The front cover was a parents guide to drug abuse. This was a ruse. Almost the entire issue was given over to a discussion of the way in which multi-national companies were proliferating and the pernicious effect they were having on the development of third world countries.

In Britain today we have a crisis of identity. We don't know who we are, where we fit into world history, or what we should be doing politically. The social identities that define the immediate horizons of our daily life are more and more the only identities we have. Without a wider view, or an interpretation of existence beyond this immediate horizon, we become prisoners of the present, captives to our immediate surroundings. The implications are profound because without a wider interpretation of the meaning of our lives, we lack the perspective and the ideas that alone can enable us to make coherent criticisms and real changes.

The hard financial core of world capitalism is composed of not more than 60 firms, partnerships or corporations, owned or controlled by 1000 men. In fact recent forecasts claim that in 25 years 200 multinational firms will completely dominate and account for 75% of the total corporate assets of the world.

Uganda, for example, threw out the British in 1962 and then proceeded cautiously to build a new nation. But the British skillfully rearranged their relationships with Uganda. Instead of having a direct political and economic stranglehold, the British entered the phase of neo-colonialism where their bankers and businessmen began to infiltrate. Uganda became the East African headquarters for large British firms like Barclays, Grindleys and other insurance, manufacturing and construction companies.....as a result the people became poorer and poorer at the expense of the country's natural and labour resources. Historic events don't occur by accident; they are the product of historical forces. In Uganda's case they were the result of the designs of imperialism.

Dear Germaine,

Having been recently bombarded with news of your exploits and theories in various woman's magazines and newspapers, I feel prompted to ask if it is really true. Whatever happened to the sweet young girl I once knew. Monica and I are still happily married and now have five children. My brother Denis was finally married three years ago and to date has produced only one masterpiece! I work as a plant pathologist where I am researching on various diseases of stone fruit trees. I worked for 14 months at the University of California in 67/68 and our youngest son was born there. Since we returned to Australia, Monica has returned to school teaching (it's the rising cost of living) at the local parish school, about 400 yards from our home. I spend most of my Saturdays helping with cleaning the house and specialize in cleaning toilets. Monica gets very tired at times, but we survive .....

OZ 35 Was a special pig issue in commemoration of the Obscenity Trial which started at the Old Bailey on 22 June.

The subscriptions page noted : "Subscribe to OZ, the magazine of fun, trouble, adventure and court cases. OZ is mailed in plain, flat, brown envelopes. Subscribers' names and addresses are protected from the interest of the Special Branch and other police agencies by a coded, computerised retrieval system. (Apologies for late deliveries of the last issue - the GPO are claiming OZ is not registered as a newspaper and insisting on extra postage."

Special t-shirts were on sale for £1.25p each. One sold on e-bay last month for £2,900.

As part of the defence fund initiative, numerous high profile members of the counter culture donated either money or items for auction. These included David Bailey, Alan Aldridge, Michael English, Terry Gilliam, Richard Hamilton, David Hockney, John Lennon, Yoko Ono, Andy Warhol, Gerald Scarfe, Ralph Steadman and many others.

On the other hand:

Dear OZ, Your magazine is getting fucking worse, filling it with bullshit about the wogs and niggers abroad rather than the fuck-ups in this country. You would think it was our fault that the fucking GIs were fighting. If you feel so sympathetic with the vietcong why don't you fight with the motherfuckers? In Bradford the scene is so far under that they warm their hands off the core of the earth, so why can't you come up here and do your fucking preaching and leave the wogs and niggers alone. Perhaps that will help the scene. Yours, Jack the Ripper, Bradford.

As a supplement there was a very full and detailed wall chart on drugs, including nicotine and alcohol, covering how you use them, what the short term effects are, what the long term effect were, physical dependency, psychological dependency, what the mode of death would be from overdose and what the antidote is.

OZ 36 This issue came out at the beginning of the obscenity trial and, understandably, devoted a fair bit of space to the issues involved.

What is obscenity? What is pornography? The great debate goes on and it's boring. Sterilized, polite, predictable arguments about the right of artists and playwrights to say fuck in public, in an ethical manner of sociological importance. The vast majority of working people have been saying fuck in public in an entirely unethical way for years. They don't have to go to the theatre for that.

The judges who presume to weigh our actions in the scales of justice are known to take a very serious view of obscenity. In our society the ruling values are always the values of the ruling class, based on the familiar double standards traditional to British rulers. Holier than thou attitudes about depraving and corrupting innocent people.

Power is not deterred by the sight of a bare nipple. In fact they know, and we know too, that the whole obscenity rap is really a highly convenient camouflage which they are using to stalk the menacing and illusory ghosts of freedom of speech and of the press. (Freedom being defined here as anything that doesn't agree with them.)

A direct and total attack on all the conditions that oppress us should have clear goals, otherwise our protests will remain what they are already, a permanent sore on the arse of an equally permanent establishment. In demanding the right to live our lives unexpurgated by any authority except our own, we have to demand this right, not just for ourselves, but for everyone who wishes to lead a free life.

OZ 37 The Angry OZ was the first after the trial.

They published the headlines from the mainstream press, who seemed to realise too late that the precedent set by the prosecution of OZ could also apply to them:

Fury Over OZ Jailings. Angry MPs join the wave of protest -- The Sun.

Outcry As OZ Editors Are Jailed --Daily Telegraph.

OZ: Obscene! But Why The Ferocious Sentences? -- Daily Mirror

OZ Sentences - MPs Sign Protest -- Daily Express

MPs Condemn OZ Gaolings As Establishment Revenge -- The Guardian

Demonstrations And Protests Against OZ Jail Sentences -- The Times

Storm Over OZ Sentences -- Daily Mail

The page containing these pretty hypocritical and self serving articles was headed "God Save Us".

The OZ Obscenity Trial at the Old Bailey was the longest and most expensive trial of its kind in legal history. It encompassed more than a million spoken and recorded words and cost the British taxpayer in excess of £75,000 (probably several million at today's rates).

With Richard Neville, Jim Anderson and Felix Dennis now convicted, there had to be a new editorial team. In fact 44 people were listed as editors, including "Detective Inspector Luff and all the boys on the squad."

Among the many articles on other prosecutions of publications and organisations that the Government didn't like, there was one on Upper Clyde Shipyards, which was in the process of being wound up by the Department of Technology. The Government report into shipbuilding actually said "We could put in a government butcher to cut up UCS and to sell, cheaply, the assets of the UCS to minimise upheaval and dislocation." As OZ pointed out "Glasgow, after all, was a working class town, used to poor housing, poor recreation facilities, poor education, a high alcohol problem, a high suicide rate. Racial and religious problems were acute. Street gang warfare was at an emergency level. And, of course Glasgow has always been an invincible Labour stronghold." The implication being what damage would a little more misery make to a Glasgow which was obviously disposable to the Conservative Government. In the event, orders worth £90 million were blocked by the Tories, contracts placed withdrawn and given to shipyards in England and 20,000 jobs lost, 8,000 directly in UCS and a further 12,000 in the ancillary industries which served the shipyards.

OZ 38 led on Survival.

" This planet is dying fast. In the last three decades man has changed the delicate patterns of life on this planet in ways which would have taken millions of years to occur naturally, not the most of them would ever occur naturally. These changes have been executed bit by bit with absolutely no consideration for life. It is hardly surprising that already life on this planet is on the way out. Evolution has been thrown into reverse..... Whole species are becoming extinct at an absurd rate. The variety of living things is being reduced..... The news gets worse and worse every day. Because our slide to extinction is reported in such a piecemeal uncomprehending fashion it is difficult to realise just how far up against the wall we have pushed ourselves. The media are interested in local rather than global catastrophes. Cute furry animals rather than the more critically important phytoplankton..... Some seas are at death's door right now. Vast areas of the Baltic Sea contain nothing longer than an inch. They used to be rich in fish..... The entire atmosphere

is fucked. It's far more serious than local, visually obvious messes such as the Los Angeles smog might indicate..... Man has removed two thirds of the planet's forest cover. Together with the phytoplankton these are the planet's main source of oxygen....The dinosaur plods on regardless of its pending doom. Bits of it mutter about dirt, filth, blue whales, the cost of cleaning up pollution and so on, but it seems to have no complete conception of the gravity of the situation or any plans for remedial action.... It seems that the dinosaur would do anything rather than die quickly and quietly. It will drag on slowly, messily and stupidly until we get something better together.”

Dear OZ, I don't know if I am writing this letter to the write place, but your dreadful magazine does not say where to write letters to. I hope if you have any feeling at all that you will print my letter so that some young children may understand what you and people like you are doing to them. At least give them a chance to realise right from wrong. I have not given my address and refuse to give my name because I don't want to be related to people like you in any way. If young people were kept to their religion others would not be pregnant 16 year old girls and nineteen year old long haired layabouts who have no idea of life at the age of even nineteen. There should be no such thing as sexual intercourse until the age of 21 and then it should be in the laws of matrimony. I should like to know what I am going to do about my daughter's baby and what I am going to say to my friends and the rest of my family. This is something that my wife and I are never likely to forget. I would be most grateful if the letter has not been addressed to the write place that it is put into the proper hands, thank you. Please excuse the writing and spelling. Yours truly, a struggling parent.

OZ 11 arrived yesterday, so here it is, out of sequence. Given that it is 44 years old it is remarkable that all of the stickers are intact, even if the adhesive has gone funny.

It raises the question of who was the rebel, the person who bought this copy or me? On page three is the clear instruction "The cover is perforated and gummed. Please help us by posting your OZ stickers prominently." I was a good little rebel and did just that. The original owner of this copy was even more rebellious, and didn't.

Most of this issue is focussed on politics, particularly the upcoming American Presidential elections. However, I found the following most interesting:

“ It's ironic that the Conservative party, which proclaims itself as the party of individual enterprise and freedom, appears to the ordinary person as the authoritarian party, while the left, which advocates planning, control and bureaucratic centralisation, is preferred by the majority of libertarians. The paradox is resolvable, of course. The Conservative idea of freedom is freedom for power and money to have full rein. It stands for freedom for top people. The others must be kept disunited and weak and other power structures must be discouraged. Conversely the Socialist argument is that in a democracy bureaucracy enables top people to be controlled by those below. Thus more control of the powerful few means more freedom for the many with less power. So the great battle in British politics is for the centre, for those who can't decide. Before 1800 the Tory party had a monopoly of political power. They were challenged first by the rising industrialists, the Whigs, and then a second major adjustment in the present century when the workers formed the Labour party. Now we have the pattern that Labour get in to power, struggles to change things, then an economic crisis arrives. The Conservatives take over, makes Labour carry the can for all the problems, loses its nerve before it can reap the conservative success it has sown, and gets booted out by an angry populace until just before the next big financial crisis, when everything happens all over again.



One of the most enjoyable parts of OZ was the medical column, Dear Dr. Hipocrates:

I am 45 years of age, unmarried, an in excellent physical condition, which I maintain by working out weekly. My problem is that every so often while doing chin ups I have an orgasm. This prevents me from finishing my workout. Is this physically harmful?

Aside from being unable to continue your workout, no physical harm seems possible, but you should consult your own physician who may wish to refer you for psychiatric consultation.

OZ 39 The cover of No 39 was a big mistake. The issue didn't sell well and the feedback from the distributors was that most punters took it at face value and assumed that it was, indeed the first edition of Thrilling Murder Comics.

Inside it was a real mixed bag, with pieces on the trial, on Lenny Bruce, Morocco, Vietnam and the Greening of America.

"The idea of greening involves colour, flowering, freshness of spring and, above all, respect for what is organic and vegetative as distinct from the mechanical and metallic. As things are now going there is a real possibility that intelligence may survive on this planet only in the form of self maintaining and self reproducing steady state electronic mechanism, having no need for atmosphere and no feeling or emotions to obstruct their relentless efficiency. In such forms, abstract thought, logic, mathematics and physics could continue to flourish on the planet, and some would see in this a triumph of purely spiritual principles over the trammels of the flesh....."

The Vietnam piece was an interview with a GI called Ronnie Allen who was 20. "Hard to say how many friends I've watched die. Depends on what you mean by friend. I can say anything from 50 - 100 - 150. Both GIs and South Vietnamese. I've had four really personal friends killed and there have been about eight others maimed for life. They've lost a leg or an arm or their eyes.....They throw people out of helicopters to get them to talk. They all take two of them up in a helicopter and tell the first one to talk. If he doesn't, they'll get him by the door and tell his friend if he doesn't talk they're gonna throw him out. They're trussed up, hands and feet tied together with hands behind backs. A lot of them will talk and a lot of them won't. They get him up to ask him a question. He won't talk. They'll hit him a couple of times. Ask him to talk. He won't talk. They'll take him to the door of the chopper and sort of hang him out and hold on to him. He still won't talk or make any moves likely to give us information so they'll throw him out the helicopter ....."

As Phil Spector pointed out in the piece on Lenny Bruce: "Lenny was the only truthful philosophical genius of our time. He died from an overdose of Police."

OZ 40 This was a bumper edition 5th Anniversary issue.

The lead article was : "Never Trust Anyone Over Thirty..... It is one thing to boast 'We are all Vietcong', and self flattery to believe it. Recognising that violence is the first law of Gross National Product does not necessarily justify its use as a revolutionary weapon. Fighting fire always with fire ultimately leaves nothing worth saving.....Not that the achievements are nil. The campuses crackled and smoked for a while, until everyone settled back down to their PhDs. Thousands have been given the courage to go their own ways, sidestepping toil for unworthy ends, risking their pensions for a life of poetry and

adventure.....Lives, relationships and preconceptions have been shattered and reborn by the movements of liberation for blacks, gays, women and children. And even if the mass of society grind on, maybe shuffling to a new kind of music but bowed down by the old kind of motives, then while carving inroads isn't as exciting as blowing up the fortress, it's still better than not even bridging the moat.....After five years of OZ thousands have been affected by the surfaces of counter culture, but who by the essentials? OZ has, alas, slackened its search for new talent, leaning too heavily on its special effects, mistaking the tradition of editorial eclecticism for sloppy standards, tolerating sometimes hysterical propagandish rubbish..... There are enough radical reactors to begin a fourth world, but everyone's still fighting over where to put the flag. "

There was an interview with John Peel which got things into perspective: "My reaction to music has always come from the small of my back and crept slowly up to the nape of my neck into my hair. I'm consumer, not a critic, and when I'm asked what my interests are outside music I reply immediately 'Liverpool FC', and there the list ends."

Dear OZ, OZ has lost it's guts. Your articles have become very acceptable these days. The magazine that once spanned all strata of thought and ideas is now exclusively middle-brow. Most of the features could have been written by one man. (They're not are they?) Yours faithfully, C Newcombe.

OZ 41 "Like most women, I have never been free of the fear of rape. From a very early age I have thought of rape as part of my environment, something to be feared and prayed against like fire or lightning. I never asked why men raped; I simply thought of it as one of the many mysteries of human nature..... But though rape and the fear of rape are a daily part of every woman's consciousness, the subject is so rarely discussed by male intellectuals that one begins to suspect a conspiracy of silence.....When I was young my image of the sexual offender was a nightmarish amalgamation of the bogey man and Captain Hook. He wore a black cape and he cackled. As I matured so did my image of the rapist. Rape, I came to believe, was only one of many unfortunate evils produced by sexual repression. Yet though the theory that rapists are mentally ill is a popular one, this belief has no basis in fact. Studies indicate that sex offenders do not constitute a unique or psychopathological type, nor are they invariably more disturbed than the control groups to which they are compared.....Every man I meet wants to protect me, I can't figure out what from."

The Night Assemblies Bill, if it becomes law, will enable a local council to break up, by force if necessary, any unauthorised gathering of people after midnight. Permits for gatherings must be applied for 4 months in advance. As if that wasn't enough an amendment to the Bill states that wherever a local council decides any gathering is endangering public order it can disperse that gathering, no matter how small. This Bill is intended to end rock festivals.

Dear Readers, In an effort to encourage readership participation, we intend to increase our letters column in forthcoming issues. Note: We reserve the right to cut, chop, mutilate and edit any letter that we find offensive, boring, libelous or more than usually insulting.

OZ 42 Did you hear about Mrs. Blackaller, who was recently convicted of seven charges of wasting police time during the OZ trial? She is the wife of some pathetic Old Bailey clerk who no-one had ever heard of until she began to write herself anonymous letters. She invented a pile of monstrous lies involving death threats from the OZ gang. A suspicious policeman noticed that the anonymous letters were all written on the same stationery and,

despite unconcealed pressure from the authorities, an intrepid Sussex desk sergeant traced it back to Mrs. Blackaller and decided to prosecute. Mrs. Blackaller was convicted of all seven charges, notwithstanding loyal testimony from her husband, who has now presumably resigned from the Old Bailey in disgrace.

There was also this from Jimmy Reid of Upper Clyde Shipyards: " Most people, most of the time, accept things as they are, that work is not satisfying but a means to make money to satisfy other needs. That they have little control over their lives. That they are lucky if they stay out of the clutches of the landlord or the law. That life is made bearable by a bit of sunshine, the cup final and the kids. People get so used to being bottled up, trod on and ordered about that they don't notice it's happening after a while. Except that the very conditions of work and the unsatisfied needs of everyday life continually force people into conflict with things as they are. And in every conflict people see new possibilities which they call their rights, their dignity, their freedom. A rat race is for rats. We are not rats. We are human beings.

Did you know that the British Standards Institute accepts defective product up to 0.5%? Which means that of Britain's total output of 100 million condoms a year, half a million have holes in them.

OZ 43

There was a fascinating copy of a letter from Vincent Van Gogh to his brother Theo, with some equally fascinating graphics from Martin Sharp. " It is true that there may be moments when one becomes somewhat absent minded, somewhat visionary. Some become too absent minded, too visionary. This is perhaps the case with me, but it is my own fault. Maybe there is some excuse after all. I was absorbed, preoccupied, troubled for some reason, but one overcomes this. The dreamer sometimes falls into a well, but is said to get out of it afterward. And the absent minded man also has his lucid moments in compensation. He is sometimes a person who has his reasons for being as he is, but they are not always understood at first, or are unconsciously forgotten most of the time, from lack of interest. A man who has been tossed back and forth for a long time as if on a stormy sea, at last reaches his destination; a man who has seemed good for nothing and incapable of any employment ends in finding one and becoming active and capable of action. He shows himself quite different from what he seemed at first."

As many of you will know, OZ has agreed to pay substantial damages to Mr. Robert Goldie Butler, a school teacher referred to in OZ 28, the Schoolkids issue. Although the sum of money which is to be paid the Mr. Butler is indeed substantial, the total legal costs incurred could perhaps best be described as astronomical. We have met hip lawyers and we've met pigs. We've met lawyers who cursed the magistrate and lawyers who shook our hand. But now we come to think of it, we've never met a poor lawyer.

Dear OZ, Why have the early experiments with different formats, such as the flowerchild poster (No.5), the fold out cover (No.4), the stickers (No.11) and the Magic Theatre (No. 16) given way to such a standardised presentation? I'll still keep reading you anyway. (I can't forget the feeling of liberation I got when I read No. 6 and found the underground, but think it over. Fraternally, Rod.

OZ 44 contained probably my favourite cookery column. It was about .....

” an ordinary restaurant in northern London. Maybe a dozen tables, good cutlery and glassware, bright table cloths, rather inviting pictures of chateaux and provincial France on the walls. A menu offering the staples of French cuisine at reasonable prices. It’s called The Gadabout. An ordinary restaurant? On the surface certainly. But another glance at the bilingual bill of fare and you’ll notice one particular specialite de la maison that tops the lot for originality: Cassoulet De Grand Souris - or to put it another way, Rat Stew.....

Mrs Starr is a cheerful, earthy woman who has spent many years in the Languedoc area of France from where she derived most of the inspiration for her cooking. She saw nothing remarkable about this particular item on her menu and in fact pointed out that the Terrine De Campagne was made herself from the same sources. “Mostly we catch them ourselves out the back. Islington is literally overrun with rats and mice and they’re a completely free source of good animal protein. Nobody has complained. It’s only been on the menu since last October. I know of no law that I’m breaking, but if I’m eventually told to stop these two items, of course I will.”

As far as catering premises are concerned which come under the provisions of the Food Hygiene (General) Regulations 1970 even if a cafe proprietor has a kitchen or even dining room crawling with rats and mice, there is no way under which his premises can be shut down. All that can happen is that he is disqualified and the average fine that such proprietors have been awarded in the court is £11. He then simply bypasses the law by signing the cafe over to his wife, brother or whoever. Profits remain, customers still come in and the rats make sure they continue well fed.”

OZ 45 Apart from the fold-out poster issues, OZ 45 was the largest of the magazines. It is too large to hold comfortably in the hand to read, and is best put down flat on a table.

Most of it was devoted to alternative consciousness or “ The Art of contemplating your navel”. There was a lengthy interview with Timothy Leary and extracts from Baba Ram Das’s book “Be Here Now”. The latter had a profound affect on me. I bought the book and have been largely living by its tenets for the last forty years.

Probably more influential was an article titled “Don’t Just Stand There, Spray Something”. Up until that time graffiti had been done with a can of paint and a brush. This article advised that things were much easier if you used the cans of spray paint sold by car repair shops. It outlined half a dozen different ways of making graffiti. Though the article was signed by Mao Tse Tung In Cheek, thousands of people took him seriously and graffiti turned into street art overnight.

Dear OZ, This is about a happening in my home town, Edinburgh. This is a town which is pretty well a straight’s paradise, but there are more and more good heads rising out of the idealogical excrement. And it so happens that these people gather at a place called the Harness. This a big cave of a room above a sports car and babycham type disco in East Fountainbridge. On Saturday the doors flew back and a half dozen or more nattily suited motherfuckers trucked in. They snuffled around, poking their snouts into a few drinks, found nobody stupid enough to let themselves be hassled, thought for a moment and said “Everyone not in a seat, get out.” The much busted Johnny Sutherland and his killer three-piece took the stage and played the pigs out with a heavily amended version of ‘Jailhouse Rock’. Now you know the score, let the heads of Edinburgh know that they’ve got to pack themselves into the Harness and by their very presence shove the pigs noses up their own arseholes. Power to the people. Keith Leadbetter.

(For those who can remember, this was the raid on the White Elephant, which resulted in it losing its licence and re-opening as Valentinos.)

Welcome to OZ 46, a rich, juicy, bumper stew, which won't win friends or influence anyone, but tastes fingerlickin' fantastic. It spans 1930 to, well, eternity. You can sing along with Cole Porter while trudging through the long line of little red bookshops with John Hoyland. You can squat in it yourself, with our street talking guide, and increase your word power with our lexicon for screaming queens. What else? There's the cut out sensation to end them all (save it and make a fortune), a sad inside account from PROP, the prisoners' union, a true confession put down of prick priggery, a portrait of Paris for those who think the Commune will make a comeback, Richard Neville on his favourite subject, himself, a call for an amnesty for all dope offenders, and a full colour flashback to the Great Moments of Rock. Who says that OZ has lost its sting? And there's all the stuff we haven't even told you about.

Are you sick of paying rent to some thieving bastard who won't lift a finger in return? Maybe even worse, you haven't got anywhere to live at all. If so, Stop looking for a moment. Why not Squat? In London and all over the country there are many thousands of houses standing empty. Mostly they're gonna be knocked down. Councils, landlords, speculators all have their greedy eyes on the land on which old houses stand, land which they feel could be developed much more profitably. Whole neighbourhoods are being cleared. Pity about the people of course.

#### OZ 47

As can be seen from the cover, OZ 47 covered many of the regular subjects: Women's rights, the Environment, American and British politics, the Third World, even how to blow up a satellite.

For me, though, it was most memorable for an obituary of Derek Elm, a name now sadly almost all but forgotten. As you may have picked up from other of my posts of this forum, I have a thing about poetry. Derek Elm was a poet. Through my adolescence he became one of my favourite poets. What makes this issue especially poignant for me is that after it I gave my copy of Derek Elm's only book of poetry 'The Common Cause' to a guy called Sheugie Gilchrist, who had been prompted to borrow it by reading this obituary. Sheugie promptly went off to Japan and the book went with him, and I have never been able to get another copy. It's one of those on the mental list that I hunt for in vain in second hand bookshops, Amazon and Ebay.

'The only way to reach the working class', Elm said, 'is through the standard of culture that they've been educated to accept and, whether you choose to accept this or not, the working class has been educated to accept a very low standard of culture.'

His poetry was all about ordinary people:

"The chip shop ladies stand around

In overalls, not lace

While steam and grease and unwashed hair

obscure their simple grace".

As he expressed it 'Why be so contemptuous of common people's experiences? One of the traditional art forms of the common people is poetry. These art forms have been

usurped by a handful of academics and it is our job to return them. The artist's task is to inform, not administrate.'

Derek Elm died in a house fire just after Christmas 1972. He was 29. He once wrote "I am pleased to be called a crank. A crank is a small instrument that causes revolutions." Oh, how I empathise with that.

And suddenly with OZ 48 it was all over. Quite simply, the money ran out. The last interview was with Timothy Leary. The last article was on building your own quadrophonic sound system. There was no last letter because there was no last Dear OZ page.

As a final flourish, it contained Wanker's World, a special five page supplement of pure filth. "Newsagents are reminded that this magazine is of a strictly adult nature. Please keep it well out of the hands of minors. After all, the obscene publications act could put you away for a twelve stretch. Keep it clean or keep up those payments. You have been warned."

"No space. No time. History repeats itself. The clock on the wall gives me four p.m. October 31st 1973. At five o'clock the printer's final deadline comes into effect. How does one phrase an obituary in two hundred words for a magazine (damn it, OZ was more than a lousy magazine) that has eaten up the best part of the last five years of my life, and a lot of other people's lives besides. For many of us working at OZ it was the focal point of our daily existence. A hideous form of marriage between humans and an inanimate concept. And as in all marriages, the energy feedback remained a continual, occasionally terrifying, two way process with a dynamism and tension that alternately sapped and sustained each partner. We used and abused OZ for our own purposes. We hurled it bodily from one editorial extreme to the other. We left it and came back to it a dozen times. We cursed it, passed it around and grew jealous of it. We treated it like a baby and it kicked us in the teeth. We shat on it, spat on it and wasted it. And now that it's an adolescent and leaving home, none of us can believe it. It's getting late and I'm not sure how to finish. History repeats itself. No space. No time."

# COMICS

I collect, Mrs. R. hoards. At least that's the argument I use when we're tussling for more space. In practice we've got things allocated between us. I have the living room and the dining room. She has the study, both of the Rathbonettes' old rooms, our bedroom and the garage. A pretty equitable split.

Mrs. R. collects childrens books. We, quite literally, have thousands of the things. She throws nothing away.

I, on the other hand, am not sentimental and do have regular clear outs (hence the discarding of poor Martin Buber the other day.

I used to have a large collection of comics but ditched them a few years ago to make space for a complete set of Domus (the italian architecture and design magazine).

I said that I'm not sentimental, but there must be an element of that: I kept all of the Silver Surfers, all of the Nasty Tales and all of the Alan Moores.

Silver Surfer because there aren't that many of them, he's my favourite, and there is a large mural of the Silver Surfer adorning the wall of our upstairs toilet.

Nasty Tales because there was a time when I worshiped Edward Barker. Poor Edward, now all but forgotten except by real anoraks like me. Where are The Largactalites and their latest hysterical pranks now? The Largactalites were little creatures with pointy noses and no arms who walked around saying "Meep Meep." Nasty Tales was published by Meep Comix. Then there were The Demented Waving Bros. who were smily blobs with buck teeth and a single hand on the top of their head which they used to ....well, wave. Or you could chuckle along to our old chum Om who spent boring nights down the pub with his un-named mate who always wore shades indoors.

Like so many things in the late sixties, after seven issues, Nasty Tales fell foul of the law and Edward was hauled up in court for publishing Filph. After a nine day trial at the Old Bailey he was found not guilty.

Nasty Tales didn't come back, but another one, called Edward's Heave did. I've kept that as well. There were loads of great new characters like Fred Quimby Ace Of The Spaceways, The Galactalites (who were Largactalites with arms), The Gaberdine Cowboy (who liked whipping it out) and the Hog Riding Fools.

The Alan Moores were kept because I'm still susceptible to a bit of hero worship and for my money Alan Moore is the top of the pile when it comes to comic book art. Just run through his achievements:

Future Shocks

2000 AD

Halo Jones

Captain Britain  
V For Vendetta  
Marvelman  
Saga Of The Swamp Thing  
Watchmen  
The League Of Extraordinary Gentlemen  
From Hell  
Brought To Light.  
Promethea  
Most writers would kill to have produced any one of those.

And those are just a fraction of his output. I was struggling to omit Judgement Day, A Small Killing, the Tom Strong books, the Bojeffries Saga or Maxwell The Magic Cat from that list.

Moore discovered Marvel Comics when he was about 8 and started collecting. That was much the same as me. It was my Marvels, D.C.s and other classics that I offloaded. The Fantastic Four, Thor, Sub-Mariner, The Justice League Of America and others of that ilk. Not without some regrets, but I'd rather that they were being used and enjoyed by someone else rather than taking up space in my cupboard. (Now, that does sound sentimental!)

I suppose for most of us the most famous comic book character is Superman. When I was around ten I started collecting Superman comics. It didn't take long to discover the 'bloopers'. The first edition of Superman was published in 1939 and was written by Jerry Siegel. Over the years there have been dozens of writers and some of them have lost track of the back story.

A few examples: Right at the beginning, back on Krypton, Superman's mum and dad are called Jorl and Lora. By the late fifties they had become Jorel and Lara. Even his adopted parents on earth went through this transformation. Back in 1939 they were George and Mary Kent. By 1942 they were Eben and Sarah.

Then there was his job on the Daily Star with its editor George Taylor which mysteriously turned into a job at the Daily Planet under Perry White, with no explanation.

It's also good fun tracking his superpowers. In the early 1940s he is only super strong and able to leap prodigiously from place to place. Suddenly in 1945 he is able to fly around in defiance of gravity. Artillery shells bounce off his chest and he has developed x-ray vision. Through the 1950s he adds heat vision and microscopic vision to his range and adds the powers of freeze breath and super-ventriloquism. By the 60s he has a photographic memory, can speak every known language and can withstand an atomic blast. In 1970 he is so strong that he can alter the Earth's orbit just by pushing on it. As we know, all of these can be set at nought by the effects of Kryptonite.

Kryptonite first made its appearance in 1943. There has never been a proper explanation as to why kryptonite has such a devastating effect, or why the different colours of kryptonite have different effects. Most people know that green kryptonite causes superman the temporary loss of his powers and, if he is exposed to it for long, it can kill him. Less well known, but equally devastating are red kryptonite, which causes unpredictable mental changes; yellow which causes permanent loss of powers; black which splits him into two entities; blue which causes pain and white which kills all plant life.



Have you ever noticed the number of characters with the initials L.L.? Linda Lee; Lori Lemaris; Lana Lang; Lois Lane; Lex Luthor.

Ah, Lex. In 1939 he had a full head of red hair. By 1941 he was completely bald. In those early days he was slim and athletic. By the 1950s he was fat and dressed in business suits. By the 1970s he was slim and athletic again and wearing a fetching green and purple jumpsuit. Then, in 1981, he invented the extraterrestrial combat suit which enabled him to take on Superman on equal terms. What took him so long?

Lex is the archtype villain, but Superman's a bit of a baddy himself. That super-hero persona conceals a nasty interior. Take what he did to his cousin Kara: 15 year old Kara has just lost her entire family and everyone she has ever known. Superman comes to her rescue and whisks her off to his ice palace on Earth. "I promise to take care of you like a big brother, Kara." he tells her. The overjoyed girl throws her hands round his neck. "You mean I'll come and live with you!" "No," he says, "You see, I've adopted a secret identity that you might jeopardise." Instead he drops her off at a hell hole of an orphanage where she's forced to wear a disguise and to deny any relationship with him under threat of dire consequences. What a bastard!

Unlike Superman, with Batman for me it was the flying machines he got to play with. Everybody knows the Batmobile, but don't forget the Batgyro which was a peculiar hybrid of helicopter and plane. Not to be confused with the Batplane, which started life as a regular passenger plane but eventually morphed into a streamlined jetliner. The Batcopter was introduced in the 1950s only to be followed by my favourites, the Whirly-Bats. These were collapsible one-man helicopters which Batman and Robin kept stored in the boot of the Batmobile. Finally the Batmissile could be used for suborbital flights.

Batwise nothing much happened on water. There was only the Batboat and the Batmarine.

For a lot of people their attention was drawn by the svelte black tights, the bat-hood with its stylish ears and the bat-cloak with its oh so subtle scalloping. For me the real interest was that often overlooked utility belt. A leather belt with a solid steel buckle and numerous metal compartments placed along its length, the utility belt was one of the foremost items in the caped crusader's arsenal against crime. Working along from the buckle the various compartments contained: an infra-red flashlight; smoke capsules; fingerprint dusting kit; a miniature camera; lockpick tools; tear-gas pellets; a micro processor power source; a micro cassette recorder; the batline reel; a laser torch; plastic explosive grenades and finally breathing apparatus. The buckle doubled as a two way radio and the bat-boomerang fitted snugly into a compartment on the back of the belt. For a kid growing up in Portobello it was lust at first sight.

The Batman villains were a much better rogues gallery than Superman's. The Joker was just the personification of sheer insanity. The Riddler was all that his name implied. The Penguin, with his spats, tuxedo and umbrella disguised a deadly interior. Cat Woman (the wily Selina Kyle) had a way with jewel heists and Mr Freeze just wanted to cover everything with ice. Even the minot characters were brilliant. Poison Ivy (Pamela Isley) who was immune to all poisons and irresistible to men. Two-Face Harvey Dent with his horrible facial scars and Ras Al Ghul the ecoterrorist.

Whatever the villain, we were safe in the knowledge the Bruce Wayne would strike back with lethal force against anyone who caused harm and pain to his extended family. In doing so he would venture into situations which Superman never dreamed of. Who could forget issue 314 where Gotham City was terrorised by a giant mechanical version of Moby Dick? You never got that in Metropolis.

Did the lovely Diana Suprema ever fall for Captain Steve Trevor? I wonder.

Diana, of course, is Wonder Woman, the only one of the classic comic book characters who is genuinely rooted in the classics.

Let's go back to that first episode in All Star Comics no. 8: Captain Steve Trevor crashes his plane on a remote, uncharted island. There he is discovered by a tribe of beautiful women, who just happen to wear very little and turn out to be the ancient Amazons.

Captain Trevor is nursed back to health by Diana, the daughter of Hippolyte, the queen of the Amazons. It turns out that the Amazons are on this island because earlier they had been taken into slavery by Hercules, who had defeated them by trickery. Hippolyte had pleaded with the goddess Aphrodite to help them and she had vanquished Hercules and freed the women. In return the Amazons had to agree to leave the world of man and live on the island.

Suddenly Aphrodite appears to them and declares that it is forbidden that Steve Trevor remains on the island and that one of the Amazons must return him to America and remain with him to defend America, the last bastion of democracy in a troubled world.

It is ultimately decided that Diana will accompany Steve Trevor back to America. Aphrodite presents her with her special costume and the diadem and bracelets with their magic powers. In a totally implausible plot line the plane is magically repaired, Diana flies it to Washington and drops off Steve at the hospital, all without detection by the American military.

Exploring this new world she foils a robbery, the bullets from the robbers' guns being deflected off her magic bracelets. She then befriends a nurse who just happens to be working in the hospital where Steve is. The nurse says that she wants to leave nursing to join her boyfriend in South America but doesn't have the cash. Miraculously Diana does. She gives the nurse the money and they swap personas. Diana starts working at the hospital and assumes the name Diana Prince.

Now, you may have noticed the discrepancies here. What happened to the intervening 3,000 years between Ancient Greece and 1940's America? When did Diana learn to fly a plane? Where did the money come from. How come Diana can speak perfect English having been brought up by Greeks? Why does no-one in the hospital notice that she is (a) new and (b) has no training as a nurse.

Never mind. With her magic diadem and bracelets and the lasso of truth she took on the corruption of the modern world. Over the years she would be regularly tied up, chained, shackled, gagged and otherwise restrained hundreds of times and overcome it on every occasion. The suspicious among us might detect a writer (William Marston) working out his domination fantasies here. (The red high heeled boots are a give away.)

No longer a household name, The Flash is one of the longest running of the classic comic book characters, having been around since 1940. He was born out of unrequited love.

The object of his affections, Joan Williams, was one of those frustrating, females who wouldn't look at a man unless he was some sort of big shot athlete, which poor Jay Garrick certainly wasn't. What he was was a chemistry student. One night in the lab he decided to have a fly fag. As he leaned back to take a drag he accidentally knocked over a shelf of chemicals which smash and he inhaled their mingled fumes, which rendered him unconscious, When he woke he had developed a super power: he was now the fastest man alive. After impressing the, let's face it, frankly shallow Joan, by succeeding on the athletics field, he decided to use his new talent to fight gangsters and criminals.

Remarkably D.C. comics killed him off in 1951 and then had to revive him again. To get round the fact that Jay Garrick had died (and kids notice these things), they came up with an ingenious twist. Police forensic scientist Barry Allen likes reading comics. One day he is flicking through an old copy of The Flash in his lab when a bolt of lightning strikes through an open window, smashing the bottles of chemicals. Barry inhales them and acquires the same powers as poor old Jay.

Barry decided to take on Jay's identity, except this time he creates a special costume for himself. It is what looks like a lycra jump suit years before lycra was invented. Red top and blue bottoms with yellow lightning flashes on the sleeves and legs. He had a helmet which looked like an enamel pudding basin with wings attached to it and a pair of red boots with wings on the heels.

The great innovation of this second incarnation of The Flash was the cosmic treadmill. Barry discovers that he can now run at the speed of light, but if he does so then time goes backwards. He builds a treadmill and discovers that by running on the spot he can control the direction of time and goes into the future and into the past to discover villains to conquer.

Along with Batman The Flash has some of the best villains in comics. We have Abra Kadabra, a magician from the 64th century; Mark Mardon the Weather Wizard; Mirror Master a reflective character; Captain Cold; Professor Zoom; Captain Boomerang; James Jesse, the trickster and, my favourite, Gorilla Grod, the super intelligent ape.

Then D.C. did it again. In 1985 Barry Allen was whizzing around the 30th century when he was mysteriously killed. Meanwhile back in his lab his nephew Wally West happens to be there when, through mind-boggling co-incidence, another bolt of lightning comes in through the open window, smashes just the right combination of chemicals and Kid Flash is born.

Initially Kid Flash appeared in the Teen Titan series along side of characters like Robin, Wonder Girl and Aqualad, but soon took over his uncle Barry's old strip, where he has been running at phenomenal speeds ever since.

Hundreds of years ago a meteor fell to earth in China. As it's often the way of things, it was carved into a lantern by a sorcerer. The lamp changes hands many times over the course of the centuries until it reaches America, where it is reshaped into a train lantern and is put to work as a green lantern on the back of a cross country express.

One day, as it is crossing a bridge the bridge collapses and all aboard are killed except for engineer Alan Scott. In the wreckage (presumably concussed), he imagines that the lantern is talking to him,

instructing him to take a piece of its metal and form a ring. He does this and discovers that the ring allows him to fly, to pass through physical objects, and generate a force field which protects him from danger.

Inevitably he makes himself a costume of red shirt, green tights and purple cape and goes off to find villains to vanquish.

In what you might notice is a recurring pattern in D.C. comics, at the end of the fifties he had a complete change of character. Without much explanation Alan Scott suddenly started being called Hal Jordan and, instead of being a railway engineer he was now a test pilot. (Did the powers that be think that we kids wouldn't notice minor details like this?)

There were some great characters in Green Lantern. The Weaponers of Qward, who were evil scientists. Ch'p the alien chipmunk. Medphyl the walking vegetable. Kilowog of Bolovax Vik and Chaselon the rock man who was made of pure crystal.

Then, in the 1980s, it was decided that there were many Green Lanterns. In fact they were a crime fighting syndicate. Hal Jordan was joined by John Stewart (an architect from Detroit), Guy Gardner (who was a school teacher) and Kyle Rayner (an artist).

Still on the go, the various Green Lanterns recite their sacred oath every day: "In brightest day, in blackest night, no evil shall escape my sight! Let those who worship evil's might beware my power - Green Lantern's light!"

I'm not sure if jumping out of a helicopter would have qualified the Queen for membership of The Justice Society of America.

The Justice Society of America is not to be confused with The Justice League of America

The Justice Society was founded in 1941 and comprised The Flash, Green Lantern, Hawkman, The Atom, The Sandman, The Spectre, Dr. Fate, Hourman and Johnny Thunder.

The Justice League did not come into being until 1959 and comprised Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, The Flash, Green Lantern, Green Arrow, Aquaman and Jonn Jonzz the Martian Manhunter.

I was never much into either series. I suppose for historic value the Justice Society is the more important of the two, but who remembers any of them apart from The Flash and Green Lantern? In fact characters kept coming and going. At one point Hourman dropped out to be replaced by Doctor Midnite. Green Lantern was replaced by Starman.

A lot of the work for The Justice Society was in the war effort during World War II. They were always using their super powers to aid U.S. forces in the Pacific or embarking on missions to deliver dehydrated food to starving civilians behind Nazi lines in Europe.

The Justice Society kept going into the 1990s.

The Justice League was an altogether higher level of super hero. The only one who never made it big in comics was Jonn Jonzz. The Martian Manhunter was from the red planet, accidentally teleported to earth by Professor Erdel. He is super strong, can fly and read minds.

Most of the time The Justice League was engaged in the humdrum struggle against evil, often against the equally stereotyped Crime Syndicate Of America. I found it all pretty boring, unlike the Olympic opening ceremony. (Just a pity they had to drop the action featuring The Clangers.) The League were dropped about twenty years ago.

Time to get back to some real superheroes I think.....

In the lands of the North, where the Black Rocks stand guard against the cold sea, in the dark night that is very long the Men of the Northlands sit by their great log fires and they tell a tale.....

That was the introduction to the only superhero to appear on a british stamp, back in 1994.

Noggin, king of the Nogs was a gentle king who liked a quiet life. He ruled the land of Nog with kindness and a well meant but sometimes inconvenient desire to improve the lot of his people.

Noggin disliked magic and preferred to solve problems and right wrongs with a mixture of courage, of which he had plenty, and common-sense, of which he had not a lot. He had a loyal retinue of guards, led by the redoubtable Thor Nogson and a group of friends and advisers including Graculus, who was a big green bird, Groliliffe the ice dragon and Olaf the Lofty who was a mad inventor.

All was not sweetness and light for Noggin, however, as his evil uncle Nogbad the Bad desperately wanted to rule the Land of Noggin his place, and would go to any lengths to do so. (Actually, we should be grateful to Nogbad as his dark plots seem to be the only interesting things that happen in the Land of Nog

In one saga, Noggin, Queen Nooka and Ronf the dwarf went out for a walk, and met Nogbad who seemed to be a reformed character, as he had mended his castle and was growing a lovely garden. Since Nooka was interested in gardening, Nogbad gave her some seeds to plant back at Noggin's castle. Obviously, this was all a despicable plot, and the seeds once planted grew into enormous, fiercely destructive creepers, which began to destroy the castle and all of the town. Noggin was ready to hand over his crown and throne to Nogbad, in return for removing the terrible flowers. While all this had been going on, Ronf, a keen gardener himself, had been investigating the plants back at Nogbad's castle. Although he was put in prison by Nogbad, he escaped, and returned in the nick of time with the information that the plants were really kindly by nature and would give up if asked nicely. Noggin's castle and city were saved, and Nogbad forced to flee.

In another, Olaf the Lofty invented a new game called Hnefetafl, which swept the nation in a massive craze, at least until everyone realised that Noggin was better at it than them. Eventually Nogbad faced Noggin in a showdown to see who was the better player, but inevitably it was just another Nogbad trick to try and win the crown...

What I like about that is that the game of Hnefetafl does actually exist, and is based on a real game played by the Scandanavian people before chess was introduced into Europe in the twelfth Century. There are game pieces and boards found in grave mounds as early as 400 AD, and there are many references to the game in Norse and Icelandic Sagas. The rules for Nog's Hnefetafl are based on two

accounts, one written by Robertap Ifan in 1587 and another by Linnaeus writing about the old Icelandic peoples. (Thor Nogson's game in which the pieces move like the knight in chess is an accidental invention by Oliver Postgate and Peter Firmin, based on their misreading these accounts!)

No such basis in fact for Sub-Mariner. He is Prince Namor, a water-breathing strongman who claims to be the rightful king of Atlantis.

I've always found Prince Namor a real pain in the arse, the strip only saved by Bill Everett's great graphics which are full of subtle detail. Come to think of it, the plot lines are equally interesting.

Princess Fen of Atlantis is sent to the surface of the Atlantic ocean to investigate the scientific vessel the Oracle. She falls in love with the captain, Len McKensie and they have an affair. However the Atlanteans attack the ship but are repelled and killed. The now pregnant Fen returns to Atlantis and in the course of time Namor is born, the only man who can live on land and in water and can fly through the air. (Historically, he is the first genuine mutant in comics.) Once he grows up and is told his history, he vows vengeance on America and sets out to right his wrongs. Not only is he the first mutant, he is the first anti-hero.

Right up until the moment America entered the Second World War he was rampaging through the states destroying all that americans hold dear, even attacking the Statue of Liberty and throwing tourists off the torch. All fascinating and unexpected stuff. Unfortunately, with America's entry into the war he stopped all of that hooliganism and turned his attention on to fighting the Nazis. He degenerated into being just another superhero, albeit one with annoying habits.

By the 60s he was one of the Fantastic Four and by the 80s one of the Avengers. Still around, he remains one of the least endearing of comic book characters.

I suppose with Sub-Mariner on the rampage across the country Marvel comics had to come up with a counter force. Enter Captain America. Actually he didn't come along until after Prince Namor had seen the error of his ways and was happily chasing Nazis.

Weedy young recruit Steve Rogers was transformed into a perfect specimen of fighting muscle by Professor Reinstein in a secret military experiment. No sooner has he done so, however, he is murdered by a nazi traitor and the remaining supply of the serum destroyed. In a rage Steve Rogers kills the evil nazi, dons a fetching red, white and blue uniform and becomes Captain America.

In what might now be considered a suspect move, when he is observed getting into his uniform by a young boy, Bucky Barnes, he swears Bucky to secrecy by offering to make him his own special uniform and stay with him forever.

Captain America was a deliberate attempt to personify the notion of America defending the world against fascism. His nemesis was The Red Skull, who was actually Hitler's bellboy. Throughout the war the comics were a real success, but after it sales dipped badly. In a final mission Cap and Bucky are guarding a missile when it suddenly takes off. The intrepid pair leap after it and hang on, attempting to steer it away from populated areas.

Unfortunately, over the pole Captain America loses his grip and plummets to the icy wastes below. The missile explodes (presumably killing poor Bucky). Captain America becomes frozen in suspended animation on the ice floe.

In 1964 Sub-Mariner happens to pick a fight with some eskimos and in the process of beating them up he throws a chunk of ice into the sea. As it makes its way drifting along the gulf stream it slowly melts to reveal Captain America. He is conveniently picked up by Iron Man, Thor, Giant Man and The Wasp in their submarine, which just happens to be passing. Together they form The Avengers.

From there on in Captain America became really interesting, which was mostly down to the quality of Stan Lee's writing. The captain didn't adjust well to the way the world had changed whilst he had been frozen. It took him a while to catch up with technology. Steve Roger's personal life was well thought out and plot lines involving racial equality and other topical issues were refreshing.

Unfortunately in 2007 Marvel comics killed him off, with Steve Rogers being assassinated in the March issue. However, there are rumours that Bucky didn't die in the missile explosion. He also fell on to the arctic wastes and was cryogenically frozen, found by the Russians and became an unwitting tool of the Soviet Union. Only recently Bucky has regained his memory and his free will.....

If any group of super heroes were out to save the world it was The Avengers.

It all started when a radio message to The Hulk was intercepted by the evil Loki and diverted to his brother Thor. What Loki didn't realise was that the frequency he was using could also be accessed by Iron Man, Ant Man and The Wasp. Soon they all met up at the clubhouse of Rick Jones's group of radio hams. (Rick, of course, being the young boy who hung out with The Hulk.) Of course the whole thing was a ruse so that Loki could wreak vengeance on Thor for some sibling misdemeanour. Loki was swiftly overpowered, but when Ant Man suggested that they all make a great team, they agreed to band together.

The Hulk didn't last long as a team member and dropped out by issue three. In the next issue Captain America drifted by on his iceberg and the rest was history.

That history included the first anti-hero collective The Masters Of Evil who consisted of The Melter, Radioactive Man, The Black Knight and Baron Zemo.

One of the things which make The Avengers so good is its fluidity. A pretty loose collective, the members come and go. Some of them, like Hank Pym, transmute into a variety of personas. Depending on circumstances Hank can be either Ant Man, Giant Man or Yellowjacket. In its time the group has included Hawkeye, Quicksilver and the Scarlet Witch as well as the original core. It's the same with the villains, especially after Baron Zemo's son (confusingly also called Zemo) recruits Goliath, The Absorbing Man, Wrecking Crew and Mr. Hyde.

My own favourite villain is Ultron. Ultron is a robot who was created by Hank Pym in his Ant Man persona and who turns to the bad. Ultron in turn creates another android called The Vision and a robot mate for himself called Jocasta.

It all gets very complicated. Ultron falls in love with Hank Pym's wife Janet, who just happens to be The Wasp. He uses Wonder Man's brain waves to create The Vision. Meanwhile Ultron allies

himself with the evil Grim Reaper who happens to be the brother of Wonder Man, but the Grim Reaper won't work with The Vision because the latter has Wonder Man's brain waves. (Are you following all this?) The Vision then decides to go straight and joins The Avengers. He falls in love with, and eventually marries the Scarlet Witch. His ongoing search for humanity is truly touching.

I suppose there is an Edinburgh connection with The Avengers. Nobody could look at The Hulk and not notice the similarities with Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

The Incredible Hulk was one of the shortest lived of the classic comic book heroes. His magazine only lasted six issues from May 1962 to March 1963. After that he popped up from time to time as a bit player in other people's story lines. So why did he make such an impact? I think it's because he got angry easily and almost everybody can relate to that.

He didn't just get angry, he got furious.

Dr. Bruce Banner is a nuclear scientist. He specialises in weapons of mass destruction. Unfortunately, when rescuing a young boy, Rick Jones, who has wandered into the test area, he is caught by a blast of gamma radiation. At first it seems that they are both alright, and then Bruce loses his temper and turns into a seven foot high green monster. The angrier he gets, the stronger he becomes.

At the research plant one of the cleaners also accidentally gets a blast of radiation and they, too, turn green. Presumably pre-disposed to evil, they call themselves The Leader and start on a career of world domination. Also at the plant is another worker called Emil Blonsky, who just happens to be a soviet spy (the name is a bit of a giveaway). Yet another blast of those gamma rays turns him into The Abomination.

None of the three of them are particularly pleasant characters, but their motivations, particularly The Hulk's, are unusual for comic books. We gradually discover that Bruce Banner's anger comes from witnessing the abuse which his father used to inflict on him and his mother when he was a child. As a result he is emotionally repressed, but capable of deep love as well as anger.

What really projected The Hulk into the big time was when it was made into a t.v series in the 1970s. There were 82 episodes between 1977 and 1982. And then in 2003 the film and in 2008 the remake. For once the remake is better than the original and is well worth seeing for Tim Roth as Emil Blonsky.

If there is one message to take away from The Hulk, it's the one Stan Lee made right at the beginning: "As long as we're experimenting with radioactivity, there's no telling what may happen, or how much our advancements may cost us."

Iron Man was probably the most political of all of the classic heroes.

In Vietnam Tony Stark is severely injured by a booby-trap bomb and is captured by the Vietcong. In the same prison hut where he is held is Professor Yinsen, the greatest physicist of them all. It just so happens that Tony Stark himself is a bit of a dab hand as an inventor. Realising that Tony's wounds are life threatening, the pair set about building a special suit or armour that will keep his damaged heart beating. Now don't ask how they managed precision engineering in that hut, far less where the materials came from, or how Tony Stark was even able to work on it with his life threatening



injuries. Suffice it to say that once fully armoured (complete with concealed weapons) he manages to escape from the prison and go forth to win the Vietnam war virtually single handed.

Which is fine as far as it goes, but leaves us wondering what happened to the good professor and how come, with IronMan on their side the Americans ended up losing the war.

With the end of that war, it was necessary to introduce new adversaries. The chinese war lord The Mandarin was one, the russian Titanium Man another. He continued the battle the red menace throughout the cold war. When that, too, ended, he took on corrupt big business. No act of corporate intrigue or industrial sabotage was too small.

It is around this time that a little humanity enters into that steely frame: Tony Stark becomes an alcoholic. Iron Man's reputation is in ruins. He hits rock bottom. For over three years Marvel had the courage to run a strip in which the 'hero' was battling against alcoholism, and usually losing. If you ever come across a copy of Iron Man no. 128 from 1979, snap it up, there are life lessons in there for us all.

I suppose that currently the most well known of the super heroes is Spider Man, if only because a whole generation of kids have grown up with the films.

But Spidey goes all the way back to the 1930s. Once Peter Parker had been bitten by that radioactive spider he started climbing walls and has kept it up for nearly eighty years. When he finally changed out of black and white and into the iconic red and blue spider suit in 1962, the world rejoiced.

For once the film versions are remarkably close to the originals, which probably says more about the strength of the concept than it does about the Hollywood system. Or maybe it means that Sam Raimi is a true comic book fan.

Unlike so many of the super heroes who are driven by some impulse to save the world, Peter Parker is driven by guilt: he stood by and did nothing while his Uncle Ben was murdered. He could have stopped it and saved his uncle, but he didn't. Everything that follows is atonement.

The love interest in the films is the beautiful Mary Jane, but over the years he's had a few women. To begin with there was Betty Brant, the secretary from the Daily Bugle. (What is it with these superheroes and newspapers?). Then there was Liz Allen and Gwen Stacy. Gwen was Pete's girl for years and years before Mary Jane came on the scene.

Gwen came to an unfortunate end in 1973. There she was, falling to her doom after the Green Goblin had thrown her off the George Washington Bridge when Spidey sends out a web strand to catch her, but unfortunately it gets tangled round her neck and throttles her to death. Who said comics were funny? This was genuinely shocking. Super heroes don't cock things up, do they?

Mrs. R. and I will shortly be going on holiday (which means, paradoxically, there will be a break in the rambling). After what happened to Donald Blake we've decided to give Norway a miss.

While casually exploring the fjords, Blake comes across a band of alien stonemen, from Saturn, who are the advance force of an invading army. When he is spotted and they start to give chase he takes refuge in a cave. Stumbling through the semi-darkness he accidentally hits a hidden trigger and finds himself inside a secret chamber. The only thing inside is a stick.

But this is no ordinary stick. When Blake picks it up there is a flash of lightning and he is instantly transformed into the mighty Thor and the stick has become a huge hammer. On the hammer head is the inscription: Whosoever holds this hammer, if he be worthy, shall possess the power of Thor.

Of course, he also instantly realises all of the other super powers which come with the hammer, like the ability to fly and, usefully, the ability to control the weather. (He's not the god of thunder for nothing.)

In a mere couple of frames the invading force is sent packing back to Saturn.

As time progressed Marvel began bringing in the other gods of Norse mythology such as Balder the Brave and the evil Loki. Asgard soon became a battleground. Which is why Mrs. R. and I will not be going there on holiday.

Funny how much trivia comes spilling out when you least expect it, like when you're watching Pointless.

Last night they had a question about Hanna Barbera characters. As usual with Pointless there were all the obvious ones with the high scores, like Yogi Bear, The Flintstones and Scooby Doo, but I would have won it with Quick Draw McGraw. What was more interesting were the ones that were missing from the possible answers: Pixie and Dixie with Mr. Jinx; The Banana Splits; Wacky Races; Hong Kong Phooey. I was expecting some of the obscurer ones to be in there for that elusive pointless answer, but there was no Ruff and Reddy, no Snagglepuss, no Squiggly Diddy.

If you don't remember them, Squiggly Diddy was an octopus who lived in an aquatic theme park called 'Bubbleland'. Snagglepuss was really The Pink Panther without the wit and Ruff and Reddy were a dog and cat combo who went around solving mysteries on a green scooter.

Pixie and Dixie with Mr. Jinx; Judo Jack, Jiggers and Little Bird-Mouse; The Banana Splits; Fleegle, Drooper, Bingo and Snorky; Wacky Races; Red Max, Rufus Ruffcut, Big Gruesome and Little Gruesome and Blubber Bear; Hong Kong Phooey:- Penry, Sergeant Flint, Rosemary and Spot.

And don't get me started on Top Cat.

How many brain cells are used up remembering the names of the less well known characters? It really is disturbing the amount of my internal hard-drive which is loaded with this stuff, and once it starts down-loading you can't turn it off ....

...and now here they are!!!! The most daredevil group of daffy drivers to ever whirl their wheels in the WACKY RACES. Competing for the title of worlds wackiest racer. The cars are approaching the starting line. First, is the Turbo Terrific driven by Peter Perfect. Next is Rufus Ruffcut and Sawtooth in the Buzzwagon. Maneuvering for position is the Army Surplus Special. Right behind is the Ant Hill Mob in their Bullet Proof Bomb. Then there's ingenious inventor Pat Pending in his

Convert-A-Car. Oh! Here's the lovely Penelope Pitstop, the glamour gal of the gas pedal. Next we have the Bouldermobile with the Slag Brothers, Rock & Gravel. Lurching along is the Creepy Coupe with the Gruesome Twosome, and right on their tail is the Red Max. And there's the Arkansas Chug-A-Bug with Luke & Blubber Bear, Sneaking along last is that Mean Machine with those double dealing do-badders Dick Dastardly and his sidekick, Muttley.....

# BOOKS, FILMS AND OTHER CULTURAL ARTIFACTS

I had intended to devote this ramble to trains, the steam variety, but had to go off for my monthly poke at the chiropractor's first.

June, the receptionist, was in a real tizz. Duncan the Aussie has absconded. He went off to Woolamalong for the christmas holidays and never came back. It's not that a dingo got him or anything, he just realised that he preferred the outback to here, so he decided to stay put. They only found out at the weekend, so none of us patients knew anything about it until today. So this morning I had my limbs caressed by a nice young lady called Kavita Singh.

All of a tingle, I will return to the steam railways.

For reasons I won't bore you with, yesterday I found myself watching an old Ealing comedy, the Titfield Thunderbolt.

The film charts the efforts of Titfield villagers to fight the closure of their local branch line. They exploit the fact that 1947 Transport Act had only nationalised existing railways, not branch lines, so they can take over and run their branch line. Each of the villagers takes a role in running the railway. The Vicar becomes the engine driver, the local squire acts as conductor, the barmaid runs the buffet car and so on.

Unfortunately the local Coach Company "Pearce & Crump" have other ideas, blocking the level crossing with a load of bricks; ramming the train with a steam roller and finally succeeding in destroying the engine by removing a stretch of track just prior to a Whitehall inspection of the line.

Inevitably the villagers rally round in order that the inspection can go ahead. With less than twenty four hours to spare they steal the "Titfield Thunderbolt" (alias a real historic steam locomotive) from the town museum and press it into service. Of course it fires up straight away and, apart from some difficulty in coupling it to the carriages (which they do by means of a bit of rope) everything goes according to plan. The train appears to run without brakes and, for a machine the age it is meant to be, makes very good time.

In the last sequence, some men are playing cricket as the Titfield Thunderbolt makes its winning run to Mallingford. Abandoning their game, they rush to the embankment to see the train go by. The scene shows the batsman at the crease being distracted as the train appears in the distance, and being clean bowled as a result. However, although the bails on the wicket fall to the ground, the ball bowled by the bowler clearly sails more than a foot above the wicket.

Needless to say, the train passes its inspection and the villagers have struck a winning blow for local democracy.

A bit like trying to save your local shops from the onslaught of the Supermarkets, I thought.

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I was rummaging around in the elder Rathbonette's old bedroom trying to work out how to fix the wardrobe door, which has fallen off again (don't ask), when I came across a couple of books I haven't read for decades. One was Muriel Spark's 'The Prime Of Miss Jean Brodie' and the other 'Blood And Guts In High School' by Kathy Acker. Inevitably, I have now re-read them. Both about young girls going to school in big cities. Both about lies deception and sex. One is an incredible work of literature. One is a brilliant piece of plagiarism.

If you live in Edinburgh and have never read Miss Jean Brodie, then shame on you. If you live anywhere else and haven't read it, the same applies. Apart from being really funny and really easy to read, the writing is almost perfect. There isn't a word or a comma which hasn't been thought about and placed with a jeweller's precision. And it's all done so modestly and quietly. Take the following: " All of the Brodie set, save one, counted on its fingers, with accurate results, more or less." Doesn't that 'more or less' speak volumes?

The last thing that Kathy Acker could be called is modest and quiet. She rode in on the back of punk and I first read Blood and Guts in High School when it came out in 1984.

Blood and Guts in High School describes the plight of Janey Smith, a ten-year-old girl who is spurned by her father, with whom she is sexually involved, when he takes a new lover. Fleeing to New York, she joins a gang and is kidnapped by a Persian slave trader who locks her away. When Janey develops cancer, she is released and travels to Tangiers, where she wanders the desert with Jean Genet until they are imprisoned.

Unlike the clarity of Miss Jean Brodie, it seemed like a jumbled mess of largely plotless narrative progressing through disjointed, jump-cut sequences that incorporated fantasy, personal statement, and the juxtaposition of excerpted texts from various sources. Nearly thirty years later it still seems like that. In fact, because it is now stripped of its post-punk radical feminist context it can't even fall back on some sort of ideology to give it merit.

At the time Acker was hailed as breaking through the barriers of literary form. I wasn't convinced then and I'm less convinced now. This is an exercise in juvenile and moderately pointless self indulgence with a little bit of crap porn thrown in.

To give her her due, she was prolific, with over thirty books published before her death in 1997. It's just a pity that most of them are like this.

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As someone with no real need for them, I've always had a strange fascination for hair styling products, none more so than Black And White Hair Grease.

Black and White started life in Memphis Tennessee in 1922, so it is now in its ninetieth year. It became popular in the American black community because of its ability to 'tame the frizz'. In this country it started being imported in the sixties by barbers in traditionally afro-caribbean areas such as Brixton and Dalston.

It was virtually unknown in this country before the 1980s, when it was picked up by guys trying to emulate the then trendy rockabilly revival. No self-respecting quiff could hold its own in a sweaty club without the assistance of a dollop of B&W. The 90's saw Black & White go from strength to strength, with the high accolade of being included in The Times 'Top 40 Products of All Time'.

As its adverts say, Black and White Genuine Pluko is not for the faint-hearted. The thing about B&W was the fact that it is waterproof and so keeps building up in your hair until your coiffure takes on a life of its own. To get rid of it you have to buy Black and White's special deep cleansing shampoo. In 2001 B&W Lite was introduced, which is easier to manage.

Nowadays you can buy it from Boots. It's worth it for the smell of coconuts alone.

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I was working my way along the aisles in Sainsbury when I began to wonder just when we started being inundated with crap drinks.

There was a time when the epitome of sophistication was a babycham, or, if you were really trendy, a snowball. Now there are rows and rows of multicoloured concoctions all claiming to be the next best thing in intoxication.

Maybe it was those early, pre-mixed bottles of egg nog. In my mind I can only trace it back to the Eighties when you started to see people ordering things in bars like a mixture of white wine and lemonade with just a hint of orange brandy. Clubs started making up names just to embarrass their customers. "I'll have a Slow Comfortable Screw and a Tibetan Monkey's Gonad for the lady.

So it was perhaps inevitable that the drinks industry would start putting the stuff in bottles and selling it through their off-licences. Then we started being able to buy Bezique, Mirage and Taboo in the supermarkets.

Bezique was rum, lemon and lime.

Mirage was much more exotic. It combined vodka, pineapple, lemon and strawberry.

Taboo was white wine and vodka, which was used as a mixer with anything else you wanted to add.

Then the alcohol industry started experimenting. What we ended up with was a process where they produced a fermented base of beer from malt and other brewing materials. This is then treated using a variety of processes in order to remove the malt character from the base. They remove the colour, bitterness, and taste generally associated with beer. This leaves a base product to which is then

added a small amount of distilled spirit such as rum or vodka, various flavours and colouring, and, voila, we have the alcopops: Smirnoff Ice, Bacardi Breezer, WKD and the rest.

Just walking along the aisle, I counted twenty different types, all looking as if they were selling well. Not bad for a brewery industry con.

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What pops out your mouth when you are asked to name the greatest living writer in the English language? In my case it was James Kelman. At least it was when I was asked that question last night. I'm sure that Kelman would quibble about 'english' language, but there you go.

For a brief flicker Agnes Owens had passed across the synapses, but she was the only other contender.

So what brought those two to my mind? Probably the fact they they rarely leave it. For me a indication of great writing is if it stays with me, locked away in my subconscious, to come back, usually unbidden, and illuminate my current thinking.

To give two specifics, there are short stories by Agnes Owens and James Kelman which I frequently think about. The Agnes Owens one is called 'Bus Queue'. It's about people standing at a bus queue when a young lad is stabbed to death by another two. The people in the queue don't take any notice, oblivious to the gratuitous violence going on around them. It finishes: "Someone peering out of the back window said "There's a boy hingin ower the fence. Looks as if he's hurt bad." "Och they canna fight for nuts nooadays. They should be in Belfast wi' ma son." "True enough". The boy was dismissed from their thoughts. They were glad to be out of the cold and on their way."

When I first read the five pages that make up Bus Queue I was devastated by its impact. This is ordinary death and ordinary response and it's an inditement on us all. It was years later that I read an interview with Alice Owens in the Scotsman and discovered that her youngest son had been murdered. "He was stabbed," said Owens. "It was just before Christmas, 1987. He was 19. It took all your time just to get through the day. You weren't ill, no, and you never became ill, but you would have loved to have died." It take courage to translate that into art.

The Kelman short story is called "Acid". It's the shortest of short stories. A single paragraph of nine sentences made up of 140 words, yet they have stayed with me since I first read them in 1983. In a factory a father sees his son accidentally falling into a vat of acid and, grabbing a pole, pushes him, screaming, under the surface to more quickly end his suffering. It is haunting in its straightforwardness and its brevity.

What made Kelman come out of my mouth first, however, was the whole volume of his work. He is not an easy read, not because of the prose style, but because of the things he writes about. There is nothing sensational in Kelman. It is all so ordinary that its is verging on boring, but it compels us to confront the brutality and the banality of the common life that we all lead. There are times when his grasp of humanity is breathtaking. 'Greyhound For Breakfast' and "A Disaffection" are well night

perfect. 'Kieran Smith Boy' is perfect. The best piece of writing I have read this side of the millennium.

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I was reading an article about computer animation in the paper the other day and it was accompanied by a photograph of Max Headroom. Remember him?

Max was the world's first computer generated TV host. How we gasped in admiration at the technical skill which went into the production. Those rotating wire frame cube backgrounds were quite something, and as for Max himself ..... This was in the days when pac-man was the most advanced computer graphic that you could find outside NASA. How we empathised when the sound track and the image went out of synch. How we envied the pair of Ray-ban Wayfarers which Max wore. You couldn't get hold of those for love nor money in Cockburn Street.

Once he had had his fifteen minutes of fame, the novelty had worn off and the ratings were dropping, it all came out. Max wasn't computer generated at all.

Max was an actor called Matt Frewer who had to undergo four and a half hours of prosthetics and make-up. The wire frame cubes had been nowhere near a computer and were produced by standard cartoon cel animation. Even the stutters and sticking of the soundtrack were all carefully scripted.

What a swizz. I have never trusted computer animations since.

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I first caught the National Theatre of Brent at the Edinburgh Festival in 1981 when they performed Zulu, the legendary incident at Rourke's Drift and the Zulu war enacted in its entirety. This was quite something given that the entire cast was two somewhat manic and dishevelled men who argued all the time. Rumour had it that during their debut the previous year (The Charge Of The Light Brigade) an audience participation section saw the entire audience of three getting up on the stage.

The following year saw the whole dreadful story of the Indian Mutiny, in its entirety, performed at the Drill Hall in Forest Road. Then there was Wagner's Ring Cycle, four magnificent operas in 1 hr 15 minutes. 1983 saw them on television with The Messiah

By 1993 they were performing the complete works of Shakespeare in one evening. By 1998 it was Love Upon The Throne, the Charles and Diana story as done by two men. 2004 saw The Complete and Utter History of the Mona Lisa and in 2007 The Arts And How They Was Done. Most recently (September 2011) saw the production of Giant Ladies That Changed The World, the complete and utter story of the Suffragettes in its entirety.



The leading light and mainstay is Desmond Olivier Dingle, who has been ably assisted over the years by Wallace, Bernard and, currently, Raymond Box. Desmond used to be entertainments officer on a third-rate cruise liner, organising deck quoits and the fancy-dress parade, but he's also interested in history and art, and is hugely pretentious. Box, who sports a hypnotically unconvincing toupee, is Dingle's long-suffering stooge. When he's not performing (unpaid) for the National Theatre of Brent, he works at the World of Foam in Croydon.

You can catch their collected works on You Tube. There's also a typically atrocious web site where you can enter their fascinating virtual world simply at the push of a number of buttons and experience the very best in inter-global interweb macrobiotic cybertechnology on a scale virtually unparalleled probably on any of today's virtual global byways.

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I was trawling the net for something on Ray Petri when I came across an interview that Mark Hooper conducted with Judy Blame in 2004.

If you haven't come across him, Judy Blame is definitely worth seeking out..... rubber bands, feathers, champagne corks, pill bottles, stamps.....

Judy Blame used to be called Fred Poodle. Before that he was Chris Barnes from Leatherhead. He is classic example of how to transform yourself. If you were to make a movie of his life, it would definitely be a trashy, low-budget affair. In the late 70's and early 80's, London was the centre of the night-life world, and Blame, who ran away from the Devonshire countryside at 17, penetrated its core. "Well, if you're talking about attitude, I ran away from home when I was 17. This was '77. I didn't know what running away entailed. It started with the music and the visuals of punk rock. I just saw people with pink hair playing in mad bands and just went for it."

"I couldn't afford a new outfit every week, so I had my David Holah chemise -- a long plain muslin dress -- and just used to make a new piece of jewellery each week. When I hadn't got the money, I had to use my imagination. I used to go and scavenge around the River Thames. I didn't have any fear about using something that wasn't classic jewellery material." As time went by, these jewels became increasingly over the top -- and so did their creator. Blame took to transforming himself, from ghostly pale aesthete (a latter-day Jean Cocteau, all beret and pan-stick makeup) to a wild, hairy Buffalo Bill character.

As the host of his own nightspot called Cha Cha's, he wasn't so much a party animal as a party monster: a catty hard act with a forte in withering looks and lines to match, fueled by a cocktail of amphetamines and "All About Eve" repartee. Part diva, part demon, he was also the creator of divine accessories that had the New Romantics swooning.

Thirty years later, Blame's personal appearance is tamer, but his creative ingenuity and irreverent attitude are still going strong. In essence, his designs are little more than a muddle of everyday objects. "It doesn't have to be diamonds and gold or bling," he says. "I see beauty in everything." Everything has included industrial chains, rubber, ropes and a Coca-Cola can run over by a car. "One necklace when I first started I literally made out of string. Just a ball of string dyed in different colours with a few wooden beads in it."

I suppose I first became aware of his work through the pages of iD. He seemed able to take anything..... cigarette packets, bits of string, coat hangers, wrapped chains, buttons, badges, drinks labels, brown paper bags ..... and make something magnificent from them.

Last year he was one of the judges of the Scottish Style Awards, which struck me as a little ironic because, as he says, “Me and the general public have always had quite a dodgy relationship.”

But, if you're struggling to spend that spare five thousand quid you have lying around you could do worse than.....pearls, wooly pompoms, stars, shells, plastic six-pack holders, teddy bears.....

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Talking of Judy Blame, there used to be a wet fish shop in London's Beak Street. It was taken over by Chris and Sue Brick, who renamed it Demob. Overnight it became the leading outlet for Northern Soul fashion, particularly the really baggy kind of casual wear., black denim workwear jeans and check anoraks.

Sensibly, they kept most of the shop interior intact. The clothes looked great against the old tiled walls. If you're ever in a charity shop and see a garment with a diamond logo with the lettering XLNT on it, snap it up. It's by Willie Brown and worth a bob or two.

Personally I used to visit Demob because it did a good line in tailored suits, dungarees and checkerboard shirts. At least once I gave their in-house hairdressers, Demop, a major challenge by going in with my extremely tonsorially challenged barnet and saying :”What can you do with that?” Not a great deal as it happened.

In March 1987 Demob burned down, casting its young designers, Stephen Linnard, Willie Brown, Elaine Oxford and Richard Ostell literally out in the street. The fire sale held in Camden Market was quite something. A thousand check hooded jackets went in the first morning.

Willie Brown is still producing quality stuff. He's now based in Norfolk and produces about 50 hand made garments week. XLNT.

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Stuck for something to watch last night I dug out Mona Lisa, which I haven't watched for years. What a great film.

If you haven't seen it “Mona Lisa” is the story of George (Bob Hoskins) a small time crook that just got released from prison. Once he's released he travels to meet his old boss Mortwell (Michael Caine). George expects to be compensated for his silence while he was in prison but Mortwell keeps giving him the brush off. George's persistence forces Mortwell to give George a job as the driver for one of his “tarts”, Simone (Cathy Tyson).

The film explores the dirty and disgusting underworld of pornography and sex and it gives you a queasy and unsettling feeling as we watch George wallow the depths of London's filth to search for

a young girl that Simone needs to find for reasons which we're not told. Mortwell tells George to stop searching for the girl and problems arise when George becomes overly protective of Simone and doesn't stop searching.

Michael Caine turns in a great performance. He plays a character that is sadistic and very underwhelming, with a lot of subtext. Caine glides in and out of scenes so perfectly. We are told so little, but we are shown so much. He's a master at this sort of thing, and this film brilliantly displays it.

It's Bob Hoskins, however, who gives the performance of his career in this film. He brilliantly portrays a man who has lost touch with society – and is trying to find his way in this strange and turbulent world that he's been thrown back into. He has an extreme dark side that seeps out but we don't see to the climactic ending. Maybe it's because he has the look of someone with a heart of gold underneath.

So, how did a squat, balding man with a resonant London accent and an ability to nut people become a star? By standing at a theatre bar minding his own business. At the age of 25, having garnered a lifetime's worth of unusual experiences, Hoskins got into acting. It started because a friend was into amateur dramatics. They were on the way to a party one night and his friend said: 'Do you mind if we stop somewhere because I have to do an audition?' Hoskins waited for him in the bar and this guy came up and said: 'Right your turn.' Hoskins did the audition and they gave him the lead in the play.

Having left school at 15, he worked as a porter, lorry driver and window cleaner, as a Covent Garden porter, a member of the Norwegian Merchant Marines, a steeplejack, plumber's assistant, banana picker, circus fire-eater, trainee accountant, and even spent time working on a kibbutz in Israel.

My favourite story about Bob Hoskins was one he told himself: "People don't actually see me as a celebrity, they think they know me. I had a bloke come up to me and say: 'I'm glad I met you, you've got to talk to my Maureen, she's well out of order.' And he asks me. 'Could you could go round and give the girl a proper talking to?' Then he realised he's never met me before and says: 'Ooh, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry.' And I'm like: 'That's OK, where's Maureen? Let's go and find her.'"

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With all the hype which surrounds Irvine Welsh (and yes, Skagboys is a good read), Martin Millar has slipped into the shadows. Which is a great pity. 'Milk, Sulphate and Alby Salvation'; 'Lux The Poet'; and 'Ruby and the Stone Age Diet' did it for the neds and schemies long before Irvine put pen to paper.

I can remember my cool factor rising noticeably with the Rathbonettes when they started getting into Jamie Hewlet and Tank Girl and they realised that the novelisation was by Martin Millar and that there were lots of Martin Millar books on our shelves.

Part of the problem may be his predilection for introducing fantasy, which, regrettably, pushes him into a niche which a lot of people find nerdy. In the early books there were moments of magic realism and those just grew until he was writing fantasy novels. (There are parallels here with Iain Banks). “Two fairies were sleeping peacefully on his bed. Dinnie was immediately depressed. He knew that he did not have enough money to see a therapist.” The title of 1999’s “Lux And Alby Sign On And Save The Universe” more or less captures it all. In 2002 he won the World Fantasy Award for ‘Thraxas’ and that probably cut off a whole audience who think that fantasy is beneath them. He began publishing the fantasy novels under the name Martin Scott (again parallels with Iain M. Banks)

I’m tempted to read ‘Kalix, la loup-garou solitaire’ in the french translation, just to see how they managed it.

Personally I believe we have a partisan duty to support good Scottish writers, so check him out. Martin has a good website ([www.martinmillar.com](http://www.martinmillar.com)) with an interesting blog which frequently gets interrupted by his incessant games playing, and he regularly tweets: “*I sit and feel lonely. Sitting and feeling lonely is something I am a spectacular success at. I can do it for hours. Everyone is good at something.*”

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Following the piece I did about Martin Millar I decided to read Tank Girl again. A comic character with an armoury of tanks, bazookas and foul language, she was a shero who had a solution for every eventuality.

Like so much good stuff, Tank Girl first started out as a comic strip in a fanzine. This was Atomtan, which Jamie Hewlett and Alan Martin produced in Worthing in the mid 1980s. It was picked up by the magazine Deadline, where it ran until 1995. Poster and t-shirts began to be produced with Tank Girl on the front and she quickly became a role model for liberated young women in Thatcher’s Britain, prone to random acts of violence, nose picking, flatulence and more than occasional drunkenness. She was picked up by the lesbian community, who started having Tank Girl nights at various clubs across the country. Not bad for a character who had a sexual relationship with a mutant kangaroo called Booga. In 1996 she became pregnant (though whether to Booga or not was never made clear).

Penguin books picked up the strips and began publishing them as graphic novels. Soon there were Tank Girl clubs in Spain, Italy, Germany, Scandinavia and the USA.

Jamie Hewlett stopped drawing Tank Girl in 1996, and moved on to Gorillaz. Alan Martin moved to Berwick on Tweed and continued to work on Tank Girl with a whole series of illustrators. She still hits the streets regularly.

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I saw a Sinclair C5 yesterday! The first time I have ever spotted one in the flesh, as it were. Presumably owned by some nerd at the University, it was creeping slowly up the hill towards the Campus. It was definitely struggling.

There was a time when Clive Sinclair was being hailed as the apotheosis of British technological enterprise. Up in the loft I still have my Sinclair ZX Spectrum computer which gave me many endless hours of enjoyment, plugged into the back of the tv while I tried to feed it data from a cassette recorder.

The C5 remarkably sold nearly 20,000 at £399 a time. It had a top speed of 15 mph and, if you were going flat out, the battery tended to overheat ( which is more than could be said for the occupant.) A couple of years ago I remember reading about someone who managed to beef one up with a honda motorbike engine and reached the giddy speed of 40 mph.

Production lasted only ten months before the press laughed it into receivership. I'm surprised that it was never relaunched as a mobility scooter which, in hindsight, it basically was.

Looking at the feeble little machine fighting its way up the hill just underscored the mixture of madness and brilliance that was Clive Sinclair. How he could every have convinced himself that this thing would revolutionize traffic and travel is beyond belief.

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I don't smoke, but I do have a thing for Zippo Lighters.

Let's face it, the Zippo is an authentic piece of Americana which has survived the passage of time and technology.

It is the lighter of fantasy. Just imagine you are Humphrey Bogart: Late night at the bar you see these two attractive women who step out on the balcony. You strike up a small conversation with them. After a while one of them pulls out a cigarette. you say "Can I give you a light ? "... she says, "oh do you want a cigarette".. You say "no, I don't smoke, but I believe a man should always carry a lighter, in case he meets a woman who smokes"... she says "Really? wow I admire a man like that, you are a gentleman!"... You pull out the zippo and light her cigarette.. she says "Oh and you have a zippo too? thats totally cool".. to which you respond "You know those guys who carry a cheap Bic, I dont want to be that kind of Guy" and she responds "No, you sure are not..." .....

I know that it has a tendency to leak, making you smell faintly of petrol stations and putting you in danger of spontaneous combustion. And there is the annoying tendency to rub its way out of the back pocket of your Levi 501s.

There are cheaper, more reliable, less messy alternatives, but that isn't the point. From lighting up a cigarette to starting a camp fire you cannot do better than a zippo.

If you ever happen to be passing 932 Zippo Drive, Bradford, Pennsylvania, there is the world Zippo museum. (Ironically, it's non-smoking), with the world's largest collection of Zippo lighters. Or, if

you are musically inclined, sing along to Phil Kline's 'Zippo Songs, Airs of War And Lunacy', CD. For the really adventurous, you could drive there in your Nascar 200, which is a jeep wrangler modified to look like a giant Zippo Lighter.

As for me, just the ideal of calling something 'Zippo' in the first place gets my vote.

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Mrs. R. and I were in a queue for coffee the other week when the couple behind us started talking in a manner which meant that everyone else had to pay attention. It turned out to be Andrew Logan and Zandra Rhodes.

It's hard not to miss either of them. She always has bright pink hair and he is about nine feet tall and lanky. Both of them are just the right level of bonkers to appeal to my sense of the bizarre.

Having said that, I've never really rated Andrew Logan's sculpture much. A bigger contribution to the culture had come from the Alternative Miss World competitions which he has run, on and off, since 1972.

Alternative Miss World is a competition for everybody - housewife, teacher, taxman and vicar; whether gay or straight; whether animal, vegetable, or mineral, anybody, or anything, can have a shot at the title. Previous winners have included a 75 year old Russian woman - (hobbies: smoking, drinking and dancing), and a robot.

The running order is loosely based on a normal beauty contest with the usual categories of daywear, swimwear and evening wear with what Logan calls the "oh-so-important interview" ("What I really want is world peace..."), but rather than measuring the contestants on their vital statistics and where they are on the fake-tan richter scale, the whole thing is judged on just three elements: poise, personality and originality. The contestants just arrive. The stage is already set, and they just walk on and do their thing.

David Hockney judged the first one, David Bowie couldn't get into the second and Derek Jarman won the third. Costumes have been designed by the likes of Vivienne Westwood, Alexander McQueen, Mary Quant and Grayson Perry.

The reigning Alternative Miss World is a man who called himself 'Miss Secret Sounds of Sunbird Rising'. For his evening wear he had on this dress with a big cage with live birds in it and he sang falsetto. The luck winner was presented with his voucher for a one-night stay in a caravan at South Shields by Amanda Barrie.

They don't happen every year, only when Andrew Logan can be bothered to set it up. Hopefully there will be one this year.

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Writing about Andrew Logan reminded me of Leigh Bowery. I first came across him when he had a stall in Kensington Market selling glamorous concoctions and glitzy accessories.

A few years later Mrs. R. and I started frequenting productions by Michael Clark's dance company, for whom Bowery was designing the costumes. Then I got heavily into The Fall and discovered that it was Bowery who was all over the videos. At 6ft. 3 in and 17 stone, he often emphasised his size with viciously cinched corsets and enormous gaffer taped 'cleavages', finishing the 'look' by popping on a fake vagina that made it impossible for him to urinate all night.

At the Taboo Club he regularly tottered about the premises in anything from baby-doll nighties, elephant ear collared disco shirts, kilts with frilly underwear, blouses and tights, above multi-coloured patent leather platform-soled shoes. There were always extremes of makeup, wigs and hats, from a curly yellow-blond coiffure with face painted in huge red polka dots, to a tiny policeman's helmet perched above a face made up to resemble a herpes scab infestation. Making the most of his very oversize girth and height, Bowery shaved his head, poured black molten wax over it, wore two-inch white false eyelashes, and painted his face and cheeks in grotesque imitation of a kewpie doll.

All of this culminated in him becoming the 'face' of Pepe jeans in t.v. commercials..

No wonder the world couldn't decide whether Leigh Bowery was a genius or a prat.

Now he is mostly known as Lucien Freud's fat model. Working for Freud introduced a strange dichotomy into the Leigh Bowery oeuvre. Up till then he had displayed this bizarre, camp, construction which most people assumed was homosexual at base. However, that analysis had to incorporate his wife Nicola who, quite literally, was often incorporated into his current outfit. Freud presented him as he was, tall, bald, fat and with legs like tree trunks.

That probably suited Leigh Bowery down to the ground. After all his art was all about contradiction, outrage and challenging the idea of the normal.

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One of Mrs. R.'s passions is contemporary dance. When we first got together she would drag me off to this theatre and that theatre to watch people leaping about. If I'm honest, while I didn't mind it, I wasn't overly engaged either. A lot of the time I sat there wondering if the music really was intended to drown out the clatters and thumps from the stage. It was all a bit fusty, all leotards, leg warmers and sub-standard Nureyev impersonators.

Michael Clark put an end to all that.

He'll be fifty next month and started dancing at the age of 3. He left Aberdeen when he was only 13 to join the Royal Ballet School. Quite quickly he was getting into trouble for wearing 'inappropriate clothing'. By his final year he was on the verge of being expelled for sniffing glue. He turned down a place with the Royal Ballet Company and joined Ballet Rambert at 17.

At 20 he became the choreographer in residence at the Riverside and at 22 he left Rambert and formed his own company. He was soon trying to fuse his choreography with the other influences in his life. He started forming pieces around Stravinsky, the Sex Pistols, Wire and The Fall. And then he met Leigh Bowery and everything got really weird. A series of great works followed, culminating in I Am Curious Orange. By 26 he was a heroin addict and the work began to go a bit wobbly.

Someone once described his technique as ‘choreography between the cracks’, which I think is a really good description. In some respects he’s like a joiner trying to fashion something from the junctions between music and movement, dance and space.

After Leigh Bowery died Clark fell into deep depression and stopped dancing for years. In 2006 he started dancing again. Some of the critics were positively vitriolic.

Last year there was a piece in the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern featuring untrained members of the public who had volunteered to dance. There were people of all ages, body shapes and ability, all dancing along to music by Jarvis Cocker. Right in the middle was Clark himself.

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We were having the annual wardrobe clear-out this weekend and I was surprised by how little denim I now own. There was a time when half of what I wore was denim. Now I’m down to two pairs of jeans. I wonder if it’s a subconscious propriety thing. Something about the way we see older people: that it’s not cool to flash your bus pass if you are wearing distressed jeans and a cut off denim jacket over your Mastadon t-shirt. Or is there another reason why I’m usually in check shirt and beige chinos these days (albeit with the occasional hoody over the top?)

Even the shops that specialised in denim seem to have disappeared along with the fetish of selvedge colour. If selvedge is something you have never noticed before, you can date Levis by the colour of the stitching. In the 1950s and the early 60s they used yellow thread. From the mid 60s through the 70s it was red and from the 80s it was orange. To some fanatics these minor details mattered. I have some friends who will no longer admit that they once wouldn’t have been seen dead in orange selvedge jeans.

Then there were the other sought after artifacts. The Stormrider jackets with the corduroy collars and blanket lining. Those early Levi jeans with the extra rivets. The smaller pockets on the yellow selvedge jackets. Then there were all those, frankly artificial, finishes which the market was flooded with: Stonewashed, snow-washed, bleached, marbled, stretched to dyed. All of that malarkey culminated in the cult of the distressed. People were actually paying for rips and holes.

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Had to buy a new stanley knife at the weekend as my old one finally fell to bits.

Looked at as a piece of design, Stanley knives are well nigh perfect. Two simple cast pieces and one tooled slider all held together by a single screw. The user can adjust how far the blade extends from the handle. When the blade becomes dull, it can be quickly reversed or switched for a new one. Spare or used blades are stored in the hollow handle and can be accessed by removing the screw and opening the handle.

There was a time when stanley knives were the weapon of choice. They took the violence out of hurting and maiming because they were so efficient the deed was over so quickly. Five inches long, one inch wide with a two inch retractable blade that you could claim was intended for use on your shag pile. Britain never had so many carpet fitters.

Just googling Stanley Knife this morning brought up the following:

In Adelaide, Australia, a man armed with a stanley knife robbed a bakery. He threatened staff and fled with an undisclosed amount of cash. He was described as caucasian, about 168cm tall with short black hair and wearing green shorts and a dark t-shirt.

A 13 year old boy has been charged with possession of a stanley knife at a Barnet school. He was arrested after the school alerted the police that he had the knife hidden in his sock. He was released on bail.

In Inverness a teenager who was caught carrying a stanley knife was ordered to carry out 100 hour unpaid community service and had a curfew slapped on him as an alternative to a custodial sentence. His defence solicitor said the lad had been working as an apprentice bricklayer but after being laid off work had too much time on his hands and had fallen into bad ways largely because of "boredom".

A man appeared in court in Aix-En-Provence after he cut off his love rival's penis with a stanley knife. According to the defendant, Blaise Fragione, 38, his rival came to his home and declared "I'm with your wife. If you're not happy with that, it's tough". He said he then knocked out the man with a punch, removed his trousers, cut off his penis and threw it in the toilet. "Everything that I had refused to believe came to the surface and I just lost it".

Please note that this knife is not for sale to people under the age of 18. By placing an order for this product, you declare that you are 18 years of age or older.

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I had a phone call from Archie Foley the other night. He's currently working on a book about Portobello during the First World War and wants to use some of the research material that I gathered for the piece I posted here on the Local History thread.

His request threw up something which is a real problem on the internet. What Archie was after was citations. On this site I didn't list citations for the items I was posting because to do so would have

been tedious for the reader, but it is different if you are producing a definitive work such as the one Archie is working on.

I went back to my notes and started calling up the various websites which I had consulted in order to give him the url citations, only to find that some of them had disappeared since I took the information from them.

Unlike 'traditional' research material, on-line content can be frustratingly ephemeral. Sites come and go. I'm sure a number of readers here have tried to call up Duddingston Arcade recently only to get the message: 'Sorry, the website [duddingstonbooks.com](http://duddingstonbooks.com) cannot be found.' Then there are sites which do come up but won't let you log in, sites that just hang or, worst of all, sites which have just disappeared off the face of the ether leaving no trace behind.

Fortunately for Archie and I, most of the stuff he needs for citation came from the Scotsman Archive, which is currently down for maintenance and they have the courtesy to tell you that.

I'm not so lucky with the book I'm working on at the moment. This is a history of the Edinburgh music scene from 1951 to 2011. It's on its penultimate draft and I've reached the stage where I am going through it pulling together all of the citations, only to discover that huge swathes of sites which I consulted have 'disappeared'. (Incidentally I always like to get objective criticism of my stuff in draft before I stick it out in public, so if you'd like to help by reading the work in progress, let me know.)

At first I thought it was mostly a case of groups which had split up and taken down their own websites, or their MySpace and Facebook pages, but it goes further than that. One of the many cul-de-sac that I got sidetracked by during my researches, was exploring the career of my namesake who used to be the bass player in Dean Ford and The Gaylords forty years ago. There was a really good website covering the band. Now it has completely gone. That can't be because the band split up! And it's not the only site which has vanished in this way.

Sometimes sites vanish because the host has packed up. (I run an on-line fanzine called Bimbo which is hosted by Mobile-Me. Mobile-Me ceases to operate in July and I'm currently looking for a new host.)

I've been doing this sort of stuff for long enough to know that a lot of the time the information hasn't actually vanished, it's just hiding somewhere else on the web. Google and other search engines regularly clean out old addresses and update them with the current state of the web. Often the url has merely changed (there are many reasons for this), and with a search for the item in Google using the exact title in quotation marks you can normally find the item. A lot of missing information has found its way on to the Internet Archive at [archive.org](http://archive.org). (something that most people don't even know exists.) Since 1996 they have been archiving the web. They have over 85 billion pages stored. The only problem is that you need to know the original url of the site you are looking for. If you do have that, and they have archived that site, they will call it up for you. If you don't have it, you're stuffed.

Disappearing websites is something that the internet community have not addressed. Given that most of our global knowledge base is now digital, if websites continue to disappear, perhaps exacerbated by the current economic climate that is killing off the companies that run host servers,

our collective memory disappears too. There is a strong possibility that historians of the future will find a black hole in the knowledge base of the 21st century and we will all have to go back to books in libraries.

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I'm having a book clearout and finally decided to ditch the Baudrillards.

Jean Baudrillard was a writer who had 'cult' scribbled all over him. Pick up any text and the words 'implosion', 'signification', 'semiotics', 'simulation' etc. spill out on to your eyeballs. At least his books were easier to read than those of Derrida.

The problem I had with them was probably the piecemeal way in which his work initially came out. Complete texts were hard to come by, with extracts cannibalised for anthologies, so you had to more or less piece them together from a number of different sources. Even when *The System Of Objects* and *The Consumer Society* were published in their totality there seemed to be problems with the translations.

It appeared that, in his view, we were constantly searching for a sense of meaning that kept us in a fruitless search for total knowledge which led to a kind of delusion. He argued that a complete understanding of the minutiae of human life is impossible, and when people are seduced into thinking otherwise they become drawn toward a "simulated" version of reality. I could empathise with that. Just consider these daily dollops of trivia which I deludedly think might be of interest to others.

He was wonderfully pessimistic: "The end of history is, alas, also the end of the dustbins of history. There are no longer any dustbins for disposing of old ideologies, old regimes, old values. Where are we going to throw Marxism, which actually invented the dustbins of history? Yet there is some justice here since the very people who invented them have fallen in. Conclusion: if there are no more dustbins of history, this is because History itself has become a dustbin. It has become its own dustbin."

So what, ultimately, did I glean from what he was saying and did it actually amount to anything? On the latter point yes and no. On the former: Capitalism will not be defeated by its contradictions so long as it can keep making a media spectacle out of them. Society will become dominated by media spectacle and that will not be undermined by scandal so long as it is used as a vehicle to make people consume. The consumer economy will not be subverted by irony so long as it can make a fashion out of it and if you think you can escape the judgement of fashion, forget it.

Look back over the current News International debacle and see how true that is.

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I've mentioned before that I am somewhat thin on top. In fact I now only need to go to the barber's quarterly for a quick spray and polish.

Our local barber is a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses and I was sitting waiting my turn and flipping through the Watchtower when this young guy came in and asked if they did hair extensions. The barber shook his head and suggested that he tried the ladies hairdresser in the arcade.

When it was my turn in the chair, rather than chat about the state of the premier league or where I was going on my holidays, I asked him about the hair extensions. It seems as if there is a little fad at the moment for young lads with braids. It is not something that either of us have seen mentioned in the press and assumed that it might be a local thing. These kids are all about fourteen.

Inevitably, once I had been alerted to it I began to notice it everywhere. It was a bit like the fad a year or so back for young lads to go around wearing rosary beads. Once you spotted one you saw them everywhere.

According to the barber, though, they may be storing up problems for the future. Permanent hair extensions must be attached tightly near the base of the boy's own hair where they are woven tightly into the natural hair. It is this way in which the extensions are attached which causes later problems in the form of unexpected bald patches. Although some hair loss is perfectly normal (the average person typically loses up to 100 individual strands of hair every day), hair pulled by the extensions can cause significant ongoing problems. The person's own hair is pulled taut by the weight of the extensions and the binding method which places great strain on the hair follicle in the scalp. When this strain is applied all day, every day for weeks or months at a time, the follicle can become deformed, stretching into an oval shape, and preventing future growth.

So maybe in a few years time I will have company on the spray and polish bench.

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Bingeing on Jim Jarmusch. 'Strangers in Paradise', 'Down By Law' and 'Mystery Train' all in one go. Not bad going by anyone's standards.

What is it about Jarmusch's films? They're cool, deliberately so. They are nonsense, deliberately so. I've seen one critic describe them as cinematic jazz. That's probably deliberate as well.

Almost everything Jim Jarmusch does is deliberate and he is a great source of inspirational quotes.

Try:

"Don't let the fuckers get ya. They can either help you, or not help you, but they can't stop you. Carry a gun if necessary."

"The production is there to serve the film. The film is not there to serve the production.

Filmmakers who don't understand this should be hung from their ankles and asked why the sky appears to be upside down."

“Treat all collaborators as equals and with respect. A production assistant who is holding back traffic so the crew can get a shot is no less important than the actors in the scene, the director of photography, the production designer or the director. Hierarchy is for those whose egos are inflated or out of control.”

The biggest contribution Jim Jarmusch has made to my life, however, is the following quote he gave to Moviemaker in 2004:

*“Nothing is original. Steal from anywhere that resonates with inspiration or fuels your imagination. Devour old films, new films, music, books, paintings, photographs, poems, dreams, random conversations, architecture, bridges, street signs, trees, clouds, bodies of water, light and shadows. Select only things to steal from those that speak directly to your soul. If you do this, your work (and theft) will be authentic. Authenticity is invaluable; originality is non-existent. And don’t bother concealing your thievery - celebrate it if you feel like it. In any case, always remember what Jean-Luc Godard said: “It’s not where you take things from - it’s where you take them to.””*

You wouldn’t believe how much I’ve stolen from Jim Jamusch over the years.

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I notice that Lynx Attract is the official partner for the panda mating season at Edinburgh Zoo. I’ve heard that the Lynx Effect is kicking in.

Aren’t the adverts for Lynx Deodorant something else?

Take the ‘Unleash The Man Leather’ one. That was where all of these naked cave men accidentally discover a can of Lynx Instinct in a rock. One of them sprays himself with it and is instantly transformed into a leather clad hero with sabre tooth accessories who can ride around on the back of wooly mammoths picking up nubile cave girls.

Or the Dark Temptation one where the guy sprays it on and turns to chocolate, only to have women stealing bits off him and eating them, to their obvious satisfaction.

Or the Inca boom shakalaka one which ends up with Jennifer Aniston ironing the guy’s shirt for him after he has wowed her by sticking chips up his nose.

Or the Lynx Effect one where the guy is being double crossed by the Mafia, but a quick spray under the armpits brings all the sicilian girls running to his rescue.

Then there was the Lynx Jet mile high club with all of the scantily clad air hostesses crawling over the passengers to get to the guy who was using Lynx.

And who could forget the whole series of Lynx Rise adverts with their wake up calls: The guy who slips into the kitchen to see the woman leaning over the sink and slaps her on the bum, only to hear the voice behind him saying “I see you’ve met my mum”. The guy who sheepishly tells the girl in bodice and whip that when she said role play he thought she meant board games. The guy cooking a

fry up when the girl says wasn't last night wonderful, especially when she found out he was a vegetarian too.....Wake up and stay alert with new Lynx Rise.

And remember, premature perspiration can be controlled with Lynx Dry antiperspirants.

I hope those pandas realise what they've let themselves in for.

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Our local bike shop is closing own - overheads too high, custom too low. Adrian who runs it blames the quality of the bikes. They are now just too well made. He gets hardly any back for repair and they just last and last so fewer people are replacing them.

I suppose the boom in mountain bikes is also over. I'm using the term mountain bike loosely. What I actually mean is the trend towards bikes for riders who don't want to be seen as 'cyclists'. There was always something a little over the top in seeing tractor tread monsters being ridden through the city streets instead of across the Grampians, where their extravagant features at least had some practical application. A triumph of image over need, summed up in the contention that my Ridgeback was better than your Muddy Fox.

History has it that mountain bikes developed out of the old clunkers that we used to ride because some guy from California moved to Spokane and found that his big tire, one speed bike with coaster brakes did not work so well. The hills in Washington State were steeper and he had to walk up them. He became frustrated and the idea of fitting the old one speed with a ten speed drive train came quickly, but left just as quickly, as he would have had have no way to stop. Coaster brakes and derailleurs do not mix and no wide caliper brakes existed. Then he found out that a company in Japan sold a ten speed bike with a Shimano disk brake.

The brake was cable operated, had replaceable pads, and although very heavy by today's standards, stopped quickly and smoothly even in wet conditions. He ordered and purchased the brake from Spokane's Wheel Sport bike shop and rebuilt the wheel with the original 2.25 inch rim from the one speed bike and the Shimano brake hub that included threads for a ten speed freewheel on one side and special threads for the brake disk on the other side. He finished up by installing double chain rings, the derailleurs, and the cables. The lowest gear, a 39 tooth small chain ring and a 34 tooth freewheel, was an "alpine" gear in those days (29.8 gear inches). Now he was free to ride in snow, climb hills, and soon to discovered the joys of dirt roads in the mountains. The mountain bike was born. bike provided "road hugging weight" like the big cars of the fifties. It had the feel of the old cruiser bikes, but with the new gears didn't bog down on the slightest It's those gears which make all the difference. It iss always good fun driving behind cycle couriers in London watching them furiously turning the pedals of their mountain bikes as they fail to find the right gear.

There is something amusing about the fact that the vast majority of mountain bikes never go anywhere near a mountain and all that effort to get up the hills around Spokane turned into a fashion statement. Ponder that the next time you are whizzing along Fishwife's Causeway.

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I suppose rucksacks as we know them came along with mountain bikes. We currently have five between the two of us. Mrs. R. takes two to work with her every morning, one on her back and one carried by its straps. Just looking out the window just now, the kids next door are off to school with fluorescent pink ones on their backs. Walk down any street and you'll see small ones, massive ones, leather ones and canvas ones, ones with logos on, ones shaped like animals and ones that are just plain ridiculous. Or rather you won't see them because the things are now ubiquitous and we take them totally for granted. It can be argued that they are the most popular accessory ever, yet twenty years ago they were simply something that you used if you were going camping or on a biking holiday.

I used to have a Wright and Teague rubber lined one which went to some exotic places and had some hair-raising adventures. The latter mostly took place on buses in Nepal. If you get off the main routes between Katmandu and Pokhara things are basically single lane dirt tracks. Passing an oncoming truck requires careful manoeuvring, particularly on hairpin bends where there's a drop on one side, a deep ditch the other and not an inch of road surface to spare. Larger vehicles have to advance slowly towards each other as each driver gauges just how much width is available to him. At the same time cars opportunistically, cheekily, squeak through the narrowest of gaps between the two while 'negotiations' are going on. More than once our bus leaned precipitously over the edge as we jerkily eased past. We saw one casualty – a car about to be hauled up from about 300 ft below. Probably it had gone off the road some while before as there was no sign of either driver or passengers. Fortunately our small bus could fit underneath the arm of the crane. Just.

The scares were usually worth it to get the rucksack to the next monastery. If we were lucky we would catch the tail end of a procession around the monastery with the monks chanting, banging drums and blowing long trumpets. Two of them blowing helmet conchs at each corner in turn. Inside we would be plunged into a cornucopia of colour. Vivid murals covered the walls (some with alarming cracks), vibrant designs painted on doors, window shutters, pillars and ceilings, richly coloured silk hangings, golden statues, silver bowls filled with rice and bank-notes, a seven-tiered wooden model of Guru Rimpoche's heavenly abode, complete with rainbows, angels, buddhas, bodhisattvas, incredible in its detail.

The old Wright and Teague perished in the rift valley of Kenya (quite literally. The rubber lining finally crumbled into dust). It's only when you have to carry your stuff around in plastic bags that you realise how much you can pack into a rucksack. Which is why Mrs. R. has two.

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Julie Burchill seems to be growing old disgracefully, which is appropriate. I've often wondered if she actually is the miserable cow that she presents herself as, or if that is just a persona that she hides behind.

I can remember when she first started out on NME I looked forward to everything she wrote. It was opinionated, I didn't always agree with it, but at least it was honest. Her work with Tony Parsons sparkled. 'The Boy Looked At Johnny' is still a great read. Then she and Parsons split up amid much bitter, even vitriolic dirty washing in public. She literally left Parsons holding the baby, their son Bobby and struck off on her own. As she said : "I don't care much for families. I adored my mum and dad, but to be honest I don't miss them much now they're dead." Still, her new column in The Face was almost as good as the NME stuff.

Unfortunately, it was too good. She was wooed by Rupert Murdoch and ended up on the Mail On Sunday. Her second marriage, to Cosmo Landesman, sealed her into that world. Her focus moved away from rock and on to shopping and fucking. She developed a well honed line in back stabbing. No-one was safe from her bile. It made her pots of loot and lots of enemies. Over the years there can't have been much that Julie Burchill hasn't said that she hated.

Then she decided that she was a lesbian, left Landesman, again holding the baby, their son Jack and started living with Charlotte Raven. When she met Charlotte Raven's brother Daniel, she decided that she wasn't a lesbian after all, left Charlotte and married him, she wrote the novel Sugar Rush about a lesbian couple.

One of the highlights for me was back in 1993 when she got into one of those 'wars' which journalists sometimes wage in their columns, this time with Camille Paglia which featured such ladylike exchanges as : "I'm not nice. I'm not as loud as you, but if push comes to shove I'm nastier. I'm ten years younger, two stone heavier, and I haven't had my nuts taken off by academia. Are you SO insecure that you can't get one critical review without throwing a temper tantrum ?"

Twenty years later she was still at it, tearing strips off Lilly Allen on twitter, which culminated with Lilly calling Julie "A self-loathing, ignorant and bitter old troll" and Julie coming back with "Lilly dear, I loathe you. And by the way, being called self loathing by you is like being called fat by Dawn French." ..... a classic example of hitting two birds with one stone.

This, of course, is the woman who wrote : "Readers are invited to come and spit at me. I will, of course, welcome the attention. "

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There was someone at our local craft market trying to sell furniture made out of old pipes and plumbing fixtures as if this was something new. Come on. Tom Dixon and Ron Arad were doing that sort of stuff thirty years ago. It was one way to screw cash out of the recession. They would rag pick their way through scrapyards, stripping down old cars and recycling the parts into 'cult' objects with names like the Rover Chair and the Aerial Light.

You could quite easily trace what they were doing back to Punk. Punk unleashed a DIY ethic where anything was up for grabs. I'm thinking here about the trend for attaching anything and everything to your ripped t-shirt and calling it punk. Badges, buttons, bottle tops, beer mats and bus tickets, I've seen them all stapled to clothes in my time.



Tom Dixon took the whole idea one step further when he set up the Drive In Demolition Derby in 1984. These were 'normal' warehouse club nights where in one corner he would stand making junk sculpture armed only with his welding gear and copious amounts of beer. It was probably the first time that clubbers risked being blinded if they stood too close to the DJ.

Someone with no formal training, Dixon had learned how to weld in order to fix his motorbike and at the time was better known as the bass player in Funkapolitan. To his surprise people bought the stuff he made, so he opened a shop selling his own stuff and that made by friends. By the end of the millennium he was head of design at Habitat. He now runs the Design Research Studio.

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I came across my old MA1 Flight Jacket the other day, in a suitcase in the loft. I originally bought it in an army surplus shop which used to be half way down Leith Walk but is now long gone. I'd got it to wear at an Art College dance, and sprayed it gold. Most of the paint has worn off over the intervening years, but you can still make out traces in the creases. I might start wearing it again.

The MA1s were the genuine article, developed during the second world war to keep fighter pilots warm on their bombing sorties. Long after I bought mine they became fashionable with the skinhead fraternity and after them the ersatz mods of the quadrophenia revival. It was around that point that they moved out of army surplus into the mainstream.

They quickly became part of a uniform that included black DMs, black Levis and white t-shirts. It was as if Marlon Brando had never been away. B-Boys, Retro-trendies and ex-Soul Boys grabbed the style and began to customise it with soviet emblems, cartoon characters, car emblems and slogans. You could go into any steaming club on a friday night and watch them half kill themselves because they refused to take off their N2B heavy duty MA1 jackets with the coyote fur lined hoods and the button down wind flaps, no matter how hot it was.

John Paul Gaultier started dressing his cat walk models in MA1s and the whole thing spiralled into nonsense. The jackets evolved in ever more dazzling shades and imitations, each copy adding different fabrics and colours and by the time Brother Beyond had appropriated the jackets they were the only ones still wearing them.

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The youngest Rathbonette and my soon to be son-in-law spent the weekend up to their eyeballs in mud at some festival or other. I wasn't particularly interested in the mud, the discomfort, the escape into booze to deaden the pain, or even the music. Been there, done that, far too often. What I wanted to know more about was the big sculptures made out of bits of old cars. It sounded as though the Mutoid Waste Company was back.

For a while I was getting worried that the Mutoids were disappearing off the scene.

In the days when I used to sit in muddy fields the Mutoids became famous for building giant welded sculptures from waste materials and for customising broken down cars, as well as making large scale murals in the disused buildings where they held their parties. I have really fond memories of Car Henge – a towering artwork built from scrapped cars.

And those parties were something else with the inevitable result that after a number of police raids they were forced to leave the country and travel to Germany where they became notorious for building giant sculptures out of old machinery. Soon a giant Robot sculpture made from a VW Beetle towered over the Berlin Wall. In Italy they set up a scrap village called Mutonia and continued working, displaying and performing.

Then they started to live on the road as authentic urban gypsies, selling their mutated junk art to galleries. It began with a convoy to Amsterdam, Paris and Berlin. Europe wasn't prepared... the Mutoid invasion was victorious and their positive party message spread Europe. Soon you could find Mutoid artifacts from Pilton, to abandoned warehouses in Kings Cross and from Berlin to the deserts of Arizona.

The LS Diesel Crew and others kept the West London connection strong by building sculptural floats for the Nottinghill Carnival, as well as a host of other scrap artworks that the Mutoids drew together. The most audacious was a MiG 21 Fighter Jet which was 'liberated' by the Mutoids in their guise as 'The Lost Tribe of MiG'. They took the jet plane on a rave tour.

Last I heard of them was in 2001 when they were exporting their unique style to Japan, so I am glad to hear that they may be back.

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I started the Poem of the Week thread last September because I love poetry and hoped that other people might as well. I know that a lot of people have difficulty with poetry. Partly it's because we are indoctrinated at school into believing that there is 'deep meaning' in poetry and that we have to work out the poet's metaphors and symbolism. Bollocks. Just take any poem, read it the way the words are written on the page, and leave it at that. If it resonates with you, brilliant. If it doesn't, then it doesn't. So what?

Apart from one sarcastic comment at the start, wondering what medication I was on, I've had no feedback, so I have assumed that the thirty or so people who look at it every week are getting something out of the poems I put up there.

So, when things do resonate and prompt someone to give me feedback, it's gratefully received. Thanks Andy, glad you liked the Tony Harrison.

Tony Harrison is a good example of just reading the poem and taking it for what it is. Resolutely working class, he was born in Leeds. His father was a baker. Tony was bright and became the first in his family to go to University. A lot of his poetry is about the conflict that inevitably arises between maintaining working class roots while pursuing the aspirations that social mobility forces on you.

What I like about his poetry is that it is absolutely direct. That sometimes gets him into difficulties. His 1987 poem 'V' about the Miners' Strike drew howls of outrage from the tabloid press, some broadsheet journalists, and MPs. Gerald Howarth M.P. said that Harrison was "Probably another bolshie poet wishing to impose his frustrations on the rest of us". When told of this, Harrison retorted that Howarth was "Probably another idiot MP wishing to impose his intellectual limitations on the rest of us". The whole thing led to an early day motion to have the poem banned being proposed by a group of Conservative MPs in the Commons, probably the only time this has happened to a poet.

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I'm not much in the habit of writing obituaries, unlike the eldest Rathbonette. Her facebook page is verging on a form of necrophilia. There is hardly a week goes by without a reference to someone who has popped off.

However she missed Victor Spinetti who died last month. I was reminded of him by Dennis' chat about italian prisoners of war. Victor Spinetti's dad, Giuseppe, was an italian national who ran a fish and chip shop in Wales. When war broke out Victor was 9. Because the family was classed as potential combatants, they were interned on the Isle of Man.

After the war, having proved to have no aptitude for working in the fish and chip shop, he enrolled at the Cardiff college of music and drama. Among his first jobs after graduating was in the chorus of a provincial tour of South Pacific. On his first night he found himself competing for the dressing room sink with a naked actor who badly wanted to have a pee. This turned out to be Sean Connery.

He went on to have a great stage career, particularly in Oh What A Lovely War and Brendan Behan's The Hostage. (During the New York run of the latter he and Brendan Behan got in to trouble for holding a memorial service for King Kong on the top of the Empire State Building. One of my prized possessions is the original cast album for Fing's Ain't Wot They Used T'be in which he appeared as Tosh.

Not everything he was in was a hit. There is the great anecdote of when Tennessee Williams came back stage to see him after one particular disaster and remarked; "Victor, I'll come to see you in anything, but don't be in this again."

Spinetti not only acted in plays, he wrote them and directed as well. I saw both his production of Jesus Christ Superstar and that of Hair. He was also a pretty good poet as well.

He clocked up over 30 films, of which Under Milk Wood with Richard Burton was probably the best, but it is his collaboration with The Beatles which is probably what he will be remembered for. He first appeared in A Hard Days Night and formed a close friendship with John Lennon. George Harrison apparently said, "You've got to be in all our films ... if you're not in them me Mum won't come and see them — because she fancies you." And he did end up appearing in all of their films and carried on with regular appearances in Paul McCartney's videos. Fittingly his very last screen

appearance was in a documentary to celebrate 50 years since The Beatles first recording session at Abbey Road.

If you get the chance to read his autobiography, it's a good laugh. It also contains some good advice: "I'm a person who gives away. I don't keep anything. I give it away. If you've got the talent, give it. If you've got the joy, give it. If you want happiness, give it. These are the important things in life. You have to give yourself away."

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One of Mrs.R.'s more endearing qualities is asking for explanations in the middle of television programmes, usually ones relating to science. We can't get through an hour of Brian Cox without the need to discuss the minutiae of the moons of Jupiter and please do not get her started on plate tectonics.

One of her current areas of fascination is the Large Hadron Collider at CERN. It only needs an announcer to whisper large hadron and we're off..... What's a God Particle? Why Higgs Boson? Where do Quarks come from? ..... I used to think that all of that would finish when the kids left home.

So, taking it from the outside and working in: Every object we know about is made up of matter which has mass and is made up of atoms. Atoms are made up of protons and neutrons surrounded by electrons. Protons and neutrons are made up of quarks and gluons.

The problem comes when you try to work out the weight of atoms. For a start there is a huge difference between the weights of the various particles. The heaviest (the top quark) is about 350,000 times heavier than the lightest (the electron). Logic would dictate that the top quark should therefore be bigger than the electron but it isn't, it's smaller. Similarly, if you add up the masses of all the particles you would expect to get the mass of the atom, but you don't. Say each particle weighed 1g and you had 6 particles, you would expect the atom to weigh 6g, but it doesn't, it weighs 500g, so where is all that additional mass coming from?

Professor Peter Higgs' theory is that the universe is filled with an invisible force field. As particles move through it they acquire greater mass. It 'sticks' to them using another particle called the Higgs Boson. Some particles, like the Top Quark attract more Higgs Bosons than others like the Electron and so gain more mass.

The trouble is that no-one has yet been able to isolate a Higgs Boson, which is where the Large Hadron Collider comes in. It accelerates two beams of protons to 99.999999999% of the speed of light and fires them at each other. In theory, when they collide the particles themselves should break down releasing the bosons. The trouble is identifying them among all of the quarks and gluons that are also released.

The trick is to keep repeating the experiment over and over again. When the physicists think they have a reading which they think might be a Higgs Boson, they repeat the experiment and look for the same reading again. The more times they get the same result the chances of it being a fluke are

reduced. They carry on until there is only a one in a million chance of it being a fluke. This is known as Five Sigma.

In December last year CERN produced data which reported a 2.9 Sigma reading and then another which gave 3.1 Sigma. It seems that it won't be long before the Higgs Boson will have been identified, and the Mrs. R. can focus on something else.

[Oh, by the way, I had no advanced knowledge of what was happening at CERN yesterday when I posted that piece on the Higgs Boson on Tuesday. (honest!)]

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For reasons I won't bore you with I have been trying to get hold of a copy of John Waters' Pink Flamingos. (That's the one where Divine eats the doggy doos.)

There are some things in life that you wish you could undo and watching Pink Flamingos is one up them. Unfortunately it is literally true that once seen never forgotten, more's the pity.

It is virtually impossible to describe the plot of this film without being offensive yourself, but I'll give it a try:

Divine plays Babs Johnson who is trying to claim the title of the filthiest person alive. Her main challengers are the Marble family of Baltimore. The Marbles run a baby ring out of their basement where they kidnap lonely girls, get their man servant Channing to impregnate them by injecting them with his semen and then selling the babies to lesbian couples. The Marbles decide to spy on Babs by getting their daughter Cookie to seduce Babs' son Crackers. This involves a scene with Crackers and Cookie tussling naked with a live chicken.

Babs' response involves a burlesque stripper, a cortortionist who whistles through his arse, a butcher's cleaver and dried vomit on a napkin. When the poilice arrive they are chopped up with the cleaver. Babs and her son Crackers have graphic sex. Mr. Marble ties a chicken head to his penis and goes off exposing himself to young women. The mother marries the egg man and gets carted off in a wheelbarrow. And so it goes on.

At the end a large transvestite actually eats dog faeces as a fitting denouement to this intentionally disgusting movie. This is a truly tasteless film. Is this art? It this necessary? Are you better for having seen it? Why would you subject yourself to this? I don't know the answer to any of those questions. What it is is truly unforgettable.

It has just been re-released in a special anniversary issue with deleted scenes! The mind boggles at what could have been so bad that it was removed from the original cut.

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It's years since I cast the I Ching. There was time when I used to do it quite regularly, usually when I couldn't make up my mind which direction to take.

I don't know what prompted me to take it down from the shelf, but there it was, three books along from the dictionary I had intended to consult. More importantly the three nepalese silver coins, now slightly tarnished, were still wedged down the spine.

I asked my question, threw the coins and drew my hexagram. Five broken lines and one solid: Po.

Po is also known as 'Splitting Apart'. The hexagram indicates the yin power pushing up and about to supplant the yang altogether. It represents the image of a house, the top line being the roof and, because the roof is being shattered, the house collapses.

The Judgement is "It does not further one to go anywhere. The right behaviour is that one should submit to the bad time and remain quiet. It is not cowardice but wisdom to submit and avoid action."

Now, the question I had asked was this: I have been approaching various people I have quoted in 'Ain't No Surf In Portobello'. One of them has come back to say that he objects strongly to the use of the quote and so will not give permission for it to be used. My question was should I argue with him or just accept the situation.

Given the answer from the I Ching I decided to take its judgement. I e-mailed him back, confirmed that I would remove the quote and apologised for any offense I may have caused.

Yesterday I got an e-mail back from him saying that he hoped he hadn't upset me and, rather than use that particular quote, if I was to interview him, he would be happy for me to use anything which might come out of our discussion.

I thought I try the I Ching again. This time I got Po transmuting to K'Un .....: "There is an excellent option to continue with, which hasn't been used yet. Taking that chance allows one to get somewhere, not taking it means losing what one had." So the I Ching says yes and I'm now busy thinking up questions to ask him.

In case you're wondering, I've never approached the I Ching with due solemnity. Basically it gives your four answers: Yes, No, Don't Know and Push Off. These are all wrapped up in flowery language (the wise man hiccups when the wind lies south) which condenses down to: Randomness, Entropy, Statistics and Cobblers. The true meaning is obvious by hindsight alone.

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While I was hunting around in the nether regions of the internet the other day for the Virtual Twinning thread I was sidetracked by a thread back in 2005 called Sweet Memories which all about rare delights which have, mostly, now disappeared off the sweetie counters of the world. I know that it is meant to be smells like creosote which transport you back in time, but just the thought of a parma violet does it for me.

Ecm started the thread off by reminiscing about Queenie's sweet shop in Royal Park Terrace. In my case it was Molly Hood's. This was a little wooden shop half way down Bath Street, which had been built on to the front of one of the villas. It was one of the really old fashioned sweet shops, with big glass bottle of goodies stacked up to the ceiling.

This was still when we had post-war rationing and the sweets you could buy were restricted by the number of points in your ration book. For some reason, while most sweets required two points, Spangles only required one, so it was mostly Spangles that we bought.

Spangles were basically boiled sweets which came in a paper tube with the individual sweets wrapped in cellophane. In shape they were a rounded square with a circular depression on each face. To begin with they were fruit flavoured: strawberry, blackcurrant, orange, pineapple, lemon and lime, but by the late 50s they had introduced acid drop, barley sugar, liquorice, peppermint, spearmint and tangerine as well. At one point a mystery flavour was released where the wrappers had question marks on them and you were invited to guess the flavour. I never knew anyone who managed to guess the flavour and a quick google suggests that it was never officially revealed. (The cynic in me suggests that it was the scrapings of all the other flavours boiled up together). For some inexplicable reason Spangles were discontinued in the early eighties. Obviously there are plenty of people like me who are nostalgic about them because in 2008 they topped a poll of the discontinued brands which British consumers would most like to see revived.

In the thread people started listing the sweeties who did it for them: Sport Mixtures, MB Bars, Apple Stroodles, Space Dust, Gob Stoppers, Lucky Tatties, Sherbet Dabs, Soor Plooms, Jubilees, Curly Wurllys and Texas Bars. (I used to like the advert for Texas Bars. It featured this cowboy who had been captured by mexican bandits wearing big sombreros. One of the bandits asks the cowboy, "A last request gringo?" The cowboy asks for a Texan bar and it takes him so long to eat it that the baddies fall asleep and he escapes!)

Nobody mentioned my own favourite, the Penny Whopper. If you're not familiar with Penny Whoppers, they were bars consisting of a soft chocolatey fudge-like substance.

However, Bellybabe had posted a link through to a site called [aquarterof.co.uk](http://aquarterof.co.uk), which specialises in hard to find sweets. So I called it up and there they were, at £3 17p for five. I haven't bothered to work out the inflation rate, but they certainly can't call them penny whoppers anymore, so now they are called Chelsea Whoppers. As the site said: "This was one of the hardest sweets to track down so far. But we did it." and I'm glad they did.

Apart from purchasing my first Penny Whoppers for over fifty years, I'm also tempted by the 1960s Decade Box - "Sweets from the Swinging 60s! - What on earth do you get that 60s child who's got everything? Well ponder no more, because this is the most stunningly original gift they could ever hope for! We've been doing masses of research, and have put together this fabulous 1960s Decade Box - an enormous wooden chest filled to the brim with the most popular sweets from the Swinging 60s - if this doesn't bring a nostalgic tear to their eyes, nothing will!"

Inside it's got: Strawberry Bonbons, Sweet Tobacco, Fruit Gums, Brown Gems, Jelly Babies, Golf Ball Bubblegum, Rhubarb & Custard, Kola Kubes, Lemonade Fizzballs, Drumsticks, Flying

Saucers, White Chocolate Fish & Chips, Super Candy Whistles, Coconut Mushrooms and .....  
Parma Violets!

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When do you define someone as British? I'm asking the question because over the last month I have seen three references to Idries Shah. One of them described him as an Afghan, one as Indian and one as English.

Well, let's see. He was born in India to an Afghan father and a Scottish mother. He came to Britain as a baby and grew up in London. He then lived in Oxford until his death at the age of 72.

His publisher classes him as Afghan.

Sufi Today also describes him as an afghan writer.

The Gurdjieff Legacy site has him as a British writer.

If you listen to the interviews with him on You Tube with your eyes shut you would think you were listening to a posh upperclass Englishman.

I was about to check the Idries Shah website, but it has gone. What comes up is a notice saying it was hosted by Mobile Me which has now closed down. Presumably the webmaster is having the same problems as me in transferring it to another host.

Whatever, I have always found Shah intriguing. Did he actually exist at all? Certainly there was someone by the name of Idries Shah who wrote lots of books on Sufism. There were other authors who also published similar material. It turns out that both Jack Bracelin and Louis Palmer were fictitious persons, both being simply pseudonyms for Idries Shah himself. Rafael Lefort and O. M. Burke are also known pseudonyms of Idries Shah. But that's just for starters.

Shah was apparently a master of making up of pseudo-history, of grossly twisted facts, and proffering false provenances in support of plagiarized literary documents, often to the detriment of other people's reputations. It is even alleged that Shah misrepresented his own credentials and genealogy. Which takes us full circle.

My favourite definition of a British National is on the website of the British Embassies. It says a British National is 'a British Citizen', but doesn't define what a British Citizen is, and then goes on to say 'We can't help non-British Nationals no matter how long they have lived in the U.K.'

The British Border Agency, however defines British Citizen as: "if you were born before 1 January 1983, you became a British citizen if, immediately before that date, you were a citizen of the United Kingdom and Colonies and had the right of abode in the United Kingdom".

Under that definition Idries Shah, Jack Bracelin, Louis Palmer, Rafael Lefort, O. M. Burke or who ever he was is British, assuming that he was really born where he claimed he was and his parents were who he said they were.



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Whatever happened to the Age of Aquarius. Wasn't it supposed to be dawning back in the 1960s? Unfortunately, there are currently at least seventy dates for the beginning of the Age of Aquarius covering a range of 1500 years.

My own favourite is that it's due to arrive at eleven minutes past eleven on 21 December 2012. We know this because the Dresden Codex tells us so.

The Dresden Codex is an ancient Mayan book. There is an image contained on the last page of that book, which deals with the winter solstice and "the end of time." The figure in the middle of the page represents a mythical water-bearer announcing the end of the age. How strange is it that, coincidentally, a mythical water-bearer also happens to be the sign that announces the arrival of the new age of Aquarius? There are four boxes over her head, representing the four planets visible to the naked eye in alignment with each other on that day.... (hmmm, as in "When Jupiter aligns with Mars?") And one of the boxes looks like a wristwatch with paired elevens balancing each other out.

I have a vested interest, of course, being an Aquarian by birth. That means that I'm an interesting and attractive person. I can be shy, sensitive, gentle and patient, enthusiastic and lively with a tendency to be an exhibitionist. I am strong willed and forceful in my own way. Being very opinionated with strong convictions, I fight for what I believe in. I will argue vehemently for what I believe to be true, however, if you can show me facts to the contrary, I have little trouble altering their opinion. Apparently I am a farsighted person with an eye and ear to the new and innovative. I am generally without prejudice and quite tolerant of the point of view of others. I also have an interesting side to my nature that allows me to see a valid argument even when I disagree with it. I am quite objective and never gets waylaid by being too close to an issue or person. In other words, a truly a humane, human being. Known to be frank and outspoken, I make for a serious and genial companion. Refined and idealistic, romantic, quick in mind and quick to respond, I love activity and am quite reasonable, though difficult to get close to. I cherish and guard my independence, and am a strange mixture of caring concern and cool detachment. I will go out of my way to help when needed, but never get involved emotionally.

Actually I was prompted to this thought by hearing about the death of Eric Sykes which reminded me of an episode of Sykes where he and Hattie believe that the end of the world is nigh and congregate with their neighbours on Shepherd's Hill to wait for the end of the world - but as night falls, and after they have engaged in all sorts of debauchery, nothing happens.

I'm booking my place on the nearest hill for the evening of 21 December 2012.

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My grandmother was a great believer in the psychic phenomena. There was nothing she liked better than a good seance and more than once as a child I would sit quietly in a corner while the adults gathered round the kitchen table and someone went into a trance.

One of her 'heroes', if I can describe him as that was Edgar Cayce. Cayce was a very ordinary man, a loving husband, a father of two children, an amateur photographer, a devoted Sunday School teacher, and an eager gardener.

He had been born into a farming family in Kentucky, only received a primary education and worked in a dry goods store. In 1901 he went to a show at the local theatre and was hypnotised on stage. He then discovered that he could hypnotise himself at will and if anyone asked him to consider something while in a trance, he could produce answers, even for things which he had had no previous experience of. In particular he could identify illnesses and suggest cures. He became popular and soon people from around the Kentucky sought his advice. By the 1920's his fame had spread across America and people were asking him where to hunt for treasure, which horse would win a particular race and a cotton merchant even offered Cayce a hundred dollars a day for his readings about the daily outcomes in the cotton market. By 1925 he was a professional psychic.

For forty-three years of his adult life, Edgar Cayce demonstrated the uncanny ability to put himself into some kind of self-induced sleep state by lying down on a couch, closing his eyes, and folding his hands over his stomach. This state of relaxation and meditation enabled him to place his mind in contact with all time and space. From this state he could respond to questions as diverse as, "What are the secrets of the universe?" to "How can I remove a wart?" These answers, which came to be called "readings" were written down by a stenographer, who kept one copy on file. There are copies of more than 14,000 of Edgar Cayce's readings. This material represents the most massive collection of psychic information ever obtained from a single source.

But it was the information that Cayce revealed about the future which he is probably most known for. He provided information about the history of humanity from the very beginning to a time in the future when humans will evolve into beings with supernatural powers. He described a new era of enlightenment and peace when divinity within humans would be manifested on the Earth. But before this comes about, Cayce foresaw world events that can only be described as apocalyptic, a period of purification involving natural disasters that will dramatically alter the surface of the Earth, wars, economic collapse, and socio-political unrest. In 1924, Cayce predicted the crash of the market after a long bull run during 1929. During the mid-1920's he chronicled the rise and fall of the stock market, teaching his clients how to play the bull market and how to prepare for the crash of 1929. He even outlined what growth industries would give them the best long term portfolio after the market reached bottom. Cayce should have been quite well-to-do with endowment from a share of their speculations, but his clients did not pay attention to the readings and failed to pay heed to his warning. Six months later, they lost all they had when the great October 1929 Stock Market Crash occurred. This was also the trigger for the Great Depression which Cayce also foresaw. In 1931, Cayce foresaw that the Great Depression would lift in the spring of 1933 which it did. In January 1934, Cayce predicted that Hitler would rise in power to reign over Germany. In August 1935, he predicted that Hitler would remain in power until it will "come as an overthrow or an outside war."

On the other hand During Cayce's otherworldly journeys, Cayce would often reveal the past lives of those who would come to him for information concerning their health. A number of people who came to Cayce were told by him that they had past lives in the legendary lost land of Atlantis. In fact, Cayce revealed that a vast number of souls who lived past lives in Atlantis have been incarnating to America for a long time. He said the people of Atlantis had constructed giant laser-

like crystals for power plants, and that these were responsible for the second destruction of the land. Cayce blamed the final destruction of Atlantis and the disintegration of their culture on greed and lust. But before the legendary land disappeared under the waves, Cayce revealed that there was an exodus of many Atlanteans to ancient Egypt. Cayce attributed the Biblical Great Flood of Noah to be a result of the sinking of the last huge remnants of Atlantis.

There are still a huge number of followers of Cayce. Institutions have been founded to promote his work. You can buy his complete readings on a CD-Rom.

I'm not a believer in the psychic (too many occasions sitting in my granny's kitchen watching the adults making idiots of themselves), but I am quite happy to sit here every morning telling you what the secrets of the universe are or how to remove a wart.

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My final university thesis was on the influence of dialectics on the development of urban design, which is when I first came across Martin Buber. In my constant struggle to read books off the shelves and into recycling, in order to create more space, I've been making my way through his major work "I and Thou".

Like me, as a university student, Buber studied art history and philosophy. Unlike me he could read German, Hebrew, Yiddish, Polish, English, French and Italian, Spanish, Latin, Greek and Dutch. After he graduated he became the editor of the weekly Zionist paper Die Welt and of Die Gesellschaft, a collection of psychological monographs.

He started work on "I and Thou" in 1916 and finally published it in 1923. He then began work on a translation of the Hebrew Bible into German, a task which took him over thirty years to complete.

In 1923 Buber was appointed the first lecturer in Religious Philosophy and Ethics at the University of Frankfurt. He resigned after Hitler came into power in 1933 and Jews were banned from teaching. He then got involved in what he described as "spiritual resistance" against Nazism through communal education.

"I and Thou" is based on a distinction between two word-pairs that designate two basic modes of existence: "I-Thou" and "I-It". The "I-Thou" relation is the pure encounter of one person with another in such a way that the other person is recognised as an individual without being subsumed into a universal. In contrast to this the "I-It" relationship is driven by categories of "same" and "different". An "I-It" relationship experiences the other person as a detached thing. To perceive the other person as an It is to take them as classified and hence predictable and manipulable. In contrast, in an "I-Thou" relation both participants exist as individuals in their own right. Inevitably the Nazi's, who considered the Jews as "It" did not take this too kindly coming from a Jewish professor. Buber and his family fled Germany in 1938, relocating in Jerusalem. He took a post as a professor of philosophy at Jerusalem's Hebrew University.

Even before Israel declared independence, Buber was starting to suggest the nation could only succeed if it embraced some humanistic values. In 1942 he wrote: "There is Jewish nationalism

which regards Israel as a nation and recognizes no task for Israel save that of preserving and asserting itself. But no nation in the world has this as its only task, for just as an individual who wishes merely to preserve and assert himself leads an unjustified and meaningless existence, so a nation with no other aim deserves to pass away.”

By 1950, Buber was speaking out vigorously to defend the civil and political rights of Palestinian Arabs within Israel. Buber recognized the minority status of Palestinians within the new nation would be a problem in the future if the rights of all citizens were not protected.

When he died in 1965 he was honoured by both the Jews and the Arabs who both erected monuments to him. It’s just a pity the lessons he was teaching still haven’t been acted on.

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The heavy holiday read was Jeffrey Meyer’s biography of Ernest Hemingway.

Working on the basis that the first three things that come into my head are the main points which made an impact in the book, those would be killing things, drinking too much and his war record (which isn’t quite the same as killing things).

It seems that Hemingway started shooting and killing super furry animals when he was four years old. Allegedly he once killed four hundred rabbits in a day. When he was a little older, young Ernest had to pay a hefty fine for blasting an endangered bird to bits. He later summed up his attitude to shooting things that can’t shoot back as: “you cannot take pleasure from hunting endangered species; the pleasure comes from making them endangered.”

As far as booze was concerned he drank like a fish, (assuming that fish are raging alcoholics). According to the biography, he would guzzle—this is not a joke—absinthe, whiskey, vodka, wine, gin, tequila, and champagne for breakfast. In the evenings he would guzzle... well, pretty much the same (notice the nifty ellipsis there). On top of that was the bottle of wine with each of his meals. The editor of the Paris Review, George Plimpton said “you could see the bulge of his liver stand out from his body like a long fat leech.”

Despite the fact that he failed his army medical because of poor eyesight he became an ambulance driver for the Red Cross in World War One. When a trench mortar shell detonated near him, and despite hundreds of shrapnel fragments in his foot, knee and scalp, Hemingway carried a hurt comrade to safety, for which he won the Silver Medal of Valor. In World War Two, he once again contributed without officially enlisting. He miraculously convinced starstruck Navy officers to stock a boat with bazookas, grenades, and machine guns to hunt Nazi submarines and give it to him. He sneaked behind German lines all by himself, carrying “more munitions and alcohol than a division,” on unauthorized reconnaissance missions, for which he earned another Medal of Valor to complement the one from two decades before.

Thinking more about the content of the book, there are two main things I'll take away.

The first is Hemingway’s five tips for good writing:

- 1 use short sentences
- 2 use short first paragraphs
- 3 use vigorous english
- 4 be positive not negative
- 5 edit ruthlessly

On the last point he claimed: “ I write one page of masterpiece to ninety-one pages of shit. I try to put the shit in the waste basket.”

Perhaps his finest demonstration of these five tips was when he was challenged to tell an entire story in only 6 words:

“For sale: baby shoes, never used.”

The second is his reflection on life: " Those that it will not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of those you can be sure that it will kill you too, but there will be no special hurry."

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There are times when the internet can be a real pain. I was happily downloading stuff by Wardie Burns last night when things froze up. I checked. It wasn't the machine. I could open up a new page and work on that with no problem, but if I went back to the download site, zilch. If I closed the site down and went back in to it everything was hunky dory. Then five minutes later the big freeze again. Poor Wardie was taking an age. Then, although I was logged in properly, it started to chuck me out.

By the time I gave up I was in the mood to dash out and deep fry a mars bar for some ethnic comfort. While it is a phenomenon which seemed to speak eloquently about poor diet and the ever-increasing lengths people like me will go to to get a hit of sugar and fat, you can't disguise the attraction of the way the caramel squirts out when it is bitten. It is soft warm and sweet. Sickly sweet and fatty. What greater comfort eating can there be?

But if Mars have their way we might not be able to do that anymore. Mars have belatedly decided that deep fried bars aren't doing their image any good and scottish chip shops have received a demand from Mars for a disclaimer on their menus to make it clear deep fat frying is “not authorised or endorsed by Mars Incorporated”. A Mars spokesman said: “Deep-frying our products would go against our commitment to promoting healthy active lifestyles.” Almost as much as a healthy dollop of chocolate and caramel helps you work rest and play, I assume.

Sticking Mars bars in batter and frying them was first created at the Haven Chippie in Stonehaven in the mid-1990s and has since become a world-famous Scottish "delicacy". The chippie, now called the Carron Fish Bar, sells between 100 and 150 deep-fried Mars bars every week. Lorraine, who dunks the delicacies in the batter at The Carron said :“I was amazed when I got the lawyer's letter because I really feel they are giving me a slap on the wrist. I think it's sad that it's come to this

but I am quite happy to put a disclaimer up because my intention was not to offend the Mars bar product.”

A quick straw poll of various chip shops in one short stretch of Glasgow’s east end brought mixed results:

Ahmed at Neptune refuses to fry chocolate bars because "it turns the oil black and oil is very expensive."

But Mustapha from Denis' Takeaway is happy to oblige. He takes a Mars bar from the shelf, unwraps it, dips it in the same batter he uses for the fish and throws it in the fryer. A couple of minutes later he presents a soggy chocolate bar covered in crispy batter. He says he will deep-fry anything. "That's my job", he says.

Quigley’s will do Snickers and Twixes as well, if you ask nicely: "It's a novelty though. You will try one once but you will not be back."

I wouldn’t be too sure about that. Downloading Wardie Burns took me two mars bars and a milky way.

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In 1784 the Town Council of Edinburgh decided that it wanted to build a new University, but where to put it? The only available site was a field half way up the hill on the other side of the valley between the High Street and the Cowgate. Totally impractical, people said. People would never walk all the way down the hill and up the other side. It was too steep. Besides, how was it to be paid for?

It turned out there was an enterprising solution. Why not build a wide bridge over the valley, with shops and tenements actually built on the bridge, with a road between them. The money from the sale of the tenements could then pay for the cost of building the bridge and the university. Sheer fantasy, people scoffed, it could never be done. Others objected to the line from the Tron church and suggested a whole host of other potential sites.

The Council ploughed on with feasibility studies, using money from the rates, at which the people of Leith loudly protested. In May 1875 a special act of parliament (The South Bridge Act) was passed, which allowed the Council to appropriate the necessary land.

The new bridge was started on 1 August 1785. It was a very substantial piece of engineering, over 1,000 ft in length, almost 100 ft high and consisting of nineteen arches. The piers stood on piles which went 22 ft into the ground. It was opened to traffic in July 1788.

The total construction cost was £6,446. The Council then sold the building plots along either side of the bridge for a total of £30,000, thereby making a clear profit of £23,554, or nearly 365%. In addition they took 2% of the annual rents of all properties on the bridge as a ‘royalty’ and that went towards the running costs of the new university.

(Robert Adam, incidentally, ended up suing the Council because they only paid him half of the £1,228 7s they had promised him for his idea.)

So successful was the South Bridge that attention turned to the other side of the Royal Mile, something called The Mound. Sheer fantasy, people scoffed, it could never be done.

But, nevertheless an Act of 1816 authorised the Council to erect buildings on the Mound. The expenditure would be £152,000, but after allowing for profits from feuing the properties, the actual cost would be £24,000. Building started in 1822.

As for the suggestion in 1844 of building over the line of the railway from Waverley to Haymarket ..... people scoffed.

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Anyway, I was going to write about Walter Kirn. At long last I have managed to get round to reading 'Thumbsucker'. It's been on my 'must get round to reading' list for years.

It went on there in the first place because of the fuss generated by Tom Wolfe's review of it. The one where he denounced the book as narcissistic, trivial and "summing up most of what is bad about American fiction today." The trouble was Wolfe hadn't even read the book, but based his entire review on a plot summary which had been circulated by Kirn's publisher. He was just out to get revenge for a less than favourable review that Kirn had given one of his books a few months earlier.

Now that I've read Thumbsucker, I agree a bit with Wolfe's pre-judgement that it is trivial, but having said that, it is very funny. It's the sort of thing I'd have recommended as book of the month if we were still running the book of the month club on here. (Is it really seven years since we used to do that?)

The basic plot is about a kid called Justin who is growing up in a dysfunctional family and becomes a thumbsucker. His parents try everything to cure him of the habit and end up sending him to a hypnotist. The hypnosis cures the thumb sucking, but only by turning him into a compulsive addict in compensation. He turns to drugs, sex and religion to combat his problems. Eventually deciding that he's had enough of this excessive life style, he returns to the hypnotist who reminds him that we all have flaws, the goal is not to try to fix them, but to live with them. With this message in mind, Justin goes off to be a mormon missionary, and winds up sucking his thumb again.

If Thumsubcker was all I'd read by Kirn then I'd probably dismiss him as light weight, but it's not and he isn't.

He started writing when he was at Oxford where he noted that: "Professors and students ran around discussing the work of critics and philosophers that I doubt they'd read or understood. It was Wittgenstein this, Derrida that, and I was as bad as anyone. I started writing fiction almost by accident, when I interviewed the Knopf editor Gordon Lish for a BBC radio programme. He asked me as he left if I was a writer. I said "yes," and then I ran home and composed a short story, which I sent to him. He asked for another, then another, and soon I had a book."

But it's his reviews and essays which I think will ultimately be more important. Take this on social networking:

“ We live in the land of manic attention-getters, which is what the world's become in the age of nonstop self-revelation on the Web. Consider the wild growth of MySpace, a service that grants all who use it at least the hope of obtaining an audience for their biographies. The personal secrets that people broadcast on this and other websites far outstrip, in intrusive depth and detail, anything the government is capable of gathering. Users cough up, without ever being asked, and for the benefit of perfect strangers, every last sexual quirk, obsessive thought and grandiose fantasy that they can render in words. And then they add pictures. Sometimes naked pictures. They spill their souls onto the Web as though trying to purge themselves of loneliness through exhibitionism.”

Ring any bells?

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Strange goings on started in a north London hotel yesterday. It's the annual conference of the British UFO Research Association.

Every year dozens of UFO watchers gather to exchange sightings and listen to eminent speakers explain the political, cultural and social influences of UFOs. At the bookstall they can pick up titles like 'The Occult Significance Of UFOs', 'Reflections Of A UFO Investigator' and 'The Real Men In Black'.

These people consider themselves to be scientists and their science as Ufology. They have their own specialist fields of study too - abductions, government cover-ups - alien races. Their publicity says that their approach is "scientifically factual", distancing itself from the more esoteric and mystical wings of the movement, such as the Raelians, who believe the Earth was created by an alien race. Instead they devote their efforts to fact-checking unexplained sightings. Apparently 95% of the 500-plus sightings reported to their National Investigations Committee each year can be explained rationally.

The speakers stress the importance of maintaining an evidence-based approach and not letting one's beliefs colour judgements. But the questions from the floor tend to concern whether they think a spacecraft landed at Rendlesham Forest in Suffolk in 1980 or if they believe the American government is covering something up at Area 51 in Nevada or do they agree that the major possibilities for explaining strange things in the sky include parallel universes, extra-terrestrial life and psychic phenomena.

Judging from the photographs, most of the members are older men. One of them is the writer and film-maker Mark Pilkington whose book about UFO watchers, 'Mirage Men', has fond memories of his early days in the UFO community. "If you get into it and take it seriously, you have to learn about physics, chemistry, meteorology and so on. It can give you a really good grounding in reality, ironically."



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I watched Gary Cooper in High Noon last night. It must be at least forty years since I last saw that film. I'm not sure why it's taken so long to go back to it. Maybe it's because the whole thing is based on suspense and once you know the ending then all of that goes. Maybe it's because the concept subsequently became a cliché (all that cutting to the hands on the clock). Maybe it was Tex Ritter warbling "Do not forsake me" every couple of minutes.

Watching it again, though, it's a beautifully crafted thing, from the opening moody shot of Lee Van Cleef to the choreographed gun fight at the end, which works because it's mundane and ordinary, not because of slow motion gore and special effects pyrotechnics. Even that song is actually relevant to the plot and well integrated into the action (Which is more than can be said for "Raindrops Keep Falling On My Head.")

Basically the plot is: when the chips are down, your friends don't want to know you. Or to put that another way, when you need help in a dangerous situation everyone has a really good reason for why they can't help you.

There has been a lot of speculation on whether or not it was intended as an allegory of the experiences of Carl Foreman (who wrote it) and others when they went before the Un-American Activities Committee accused of being communists. Foreman never confirmed that either way, but Lloyd Bridges is on record to say that appearing in the film almost ruined his career.

Best to take it at face value. A straightforward story, simply told and all the better for it. For a start the characters have no back story to clutter things up. We don't know why the clearly aging Gary Cooper has married the clearly very young Grace Kelly. We don't know why he is reluctant to go off and open a general store with her. Nor do we really know why, as a quaker against all violence, she makes the decision to shoot Robert Wilke in the back. None of it matters

I shudder to think what a modern remake would do with it. For a start it would introduce the blood, gore and slow motion violence which is so obviously missing. Then we would get the love/sex element. Instead of a modest peck on the cheek after their wedding Gary would have Grace up in room 3 of the Ramirez hotel giving her a good seeing to before going off to shoot the bad guys. Oh, and the music would be by 50Cents or Jay-Z. You know, something in keeping with the action, a bit like Raindrops.

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As someone who was regularly chastised at school for using americanisms, it is interesting that there is now some consternation in America that british words are now entering the american vocabulary.

Just as every year the Oxford dictionary issues a list of ‘new’ words which it is including, Brewster’s and Webster’s do the same in the States. Of the two Webster’s is probably the more prestigious.

The first dictionary of American usage was published by Noah Webster in 1806. It was Webster’s idiosyncratic spelling which then became the definitive American spelling and became the bane of spell checks in any country but the USA. We have Noah to blame for color, honor, center, defense and their ilk. Basically the man couldn’t spell, but because his dictionary was the only one on the continent his bad spelling was accepted as the correct spelling by the rest of the nation and became the norm.

Anyway, people are up in arms about the following words now being included as acceptable usage:

Autumn instead of Fall.  
Bloody as a pejorative, as in ‘that bloody man’.  
Bum meaning posterior, not tramp.  
Chav meaning someone from a lower class background  
Cheers meaning goodbye  
Fancy meaning want, as in ‘I fancy a pint.’  
Flat instead of apartment  
Frock for dress  
Holiday for vacation  
Mate for a close friend of the same sex  
Muppet for a person demonstrating a lack of intelligence  
Numpty meaning stupid person  
Roundabout instead of traffic circle  
Row for argue  
Shag for, well ... shagging  
Skint for being bereft of money  
Wonky for a bit out of kilter.

More power to the dictionaries, I say, and maybe they’ll take back some of the ones they’ve given us that I could happily do without, like Hospitalize, Outage, Faze, Ouster and Stepping Up To The Plate.

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I really enjoyed the wonderfully named Clarissa Theresa Philomena Aileen Mary Josephine Agnes Elsie Trilby Louise Esmerelda Dickson-Wright talking about Breakfasts through the ages on BBC4 last night.

You might remember her when she ran The Cooks Bookshop in the West Bow. It was a tiny place which was a joy to visit and she was great to talk to. Unfortunately it never made money and she had to close it in 2004. This followed a disastrous spell at Lennoxlove House, the family seat of the Duke of Hamilton in East Lothian, where her catering business, Clarissa’s Company, ran a cafe. She fell out with the Duke, lost the Lennoxlove contract, was forced to fold the business and left with

debts of £25,538 connected to the venture. She had reportedly turned down £1 million for a promotional deal with a major supermarket chain because of an issue of principle.

Those sorts of problems seem to be a pattern in her life.

She qualified in 1968 as the country's youngest ever barrister. She took up drinking after both of her parents died in the 1970s and she drank heavily for the following twelve years. Then her partner Clive, also an alcoholic, died of kidney failure. She lost her job as a barrister and by 1983 she was homeless. She took a job as a housekeeper, but was fired from that because of her frequent drunkenness. That led her to join Alcoholics Anonymous and then to go into a detox centre. After leaving the detox centre she got a job in a shop which sold cookery books and was there for seven years until it folded. Then she moved to Edinburgh and The Cooks Bookshop. It was there that she met Jennifer Patterson and the pair of them teamed up. In 1994 they were spotted by a TV producer, who offered them a series talking about cooking and Two Fat Ladies was born and became an immediate success. After Jennifer Patterson died suddenly in 1999 Clarissa went on to become a tv star in her own right.

As recently as last month she appeared on television discussing the nutritional value of badgers and how to cook them after the cull.

Anyway, apart from the really greasy all day fry ups at the Ace Cafe in Neasden, the breakfast that really appealed to me was the following:

Take the flesh of a hinder part of a hare, or any other venison and mince it small with a little fat bacon, some pistaches or pine-apple kernels, almonds, Spanish or hazle nuts peeled, Spanish chestnuts or French chestnuts roasted and peeled, or some crusts of bread cut in slices and toasted like unto chestnuts; season this minced stuff with salt, spices and some sweet herbs; if the flesh be raw add thereunto butter and marrow or good sweet suet minced small and melted in a skillet, pour it into the seasoned meat that is minced and fry it, then melt some butter in a skillet or pan and make an omlet thereof; when it is half fried, put to the minced meat, and take the omlet out of the frying pan with a skimmer, break it not and put it in a dish that the minced meat may appear uppermost, put some gravy on the minced meat, and some grated nutmeg, stick some sippets of fried manchet on it and slices of lemon. Roast meat is the best for this purpose.

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The youngest Rathbonette has chosen to have tomorrow's wedding in a country retreat miles from anywhere. Which is fine, it's a nice venue and I'm sure everything will go off well. But because it is in the countryside, up miles of winding country lanes, I thought I'd better let the guests have detailed instructions on how to get there.

Almost all the responses I got were "thanks, but no thanks. I've got a satnav."

I admire their confidence. According to an AA survey sat navs have misled over 80% of UK drivers, as a result of which over half of British drivers admit to either ignoring their sat navs altogether or have ended up shouting at them. Over 2/3rds of drivers end up clocking up more mileage than

necessary due to longer journeys and 45% of British drivers confess to feeling angry and frustrated when behind the wheel and using their sat nav systems to find a new destination, a result of which is 31% end up having accidents. Due to misleading directions from sat navs, it is claimed that over £203m worth of damage has been done to drivers vehicles on UK roads.

Now I have heard the argument that a wonderful side-effect of satellite navigation in cars is that it provides living proof of one of the most remarkable characteristics of the human male – whilst they will not do anything they are told to by a woman, if a machine tells them to do something they will obey it without question. I imagine we have all heard those horror stories about satnav systems sending male drivers through a five-bar gate on to a narrow track running across the side of a mountain, with a 300 foot drop on one side. Can you imagine the man's reaction if a female passenger, holding a map, had suggested this route? But because they are told by a machine to use it, they hop out of the car like little lambs and open the gate.

But, of course, that isn't true. Paula Ceely, of Redditch, Worcester, tapped in the postcode of the address of her boyfriend, Tom Finucane , in Hebron, Carmarthenshire, before setting off on a 150-mile trip. As night fell, the machine's voice directed Miss Ceely into a country lane in West Wales. "I drove up to a large metal gate but the sat nav insisted it was the correct way so I opened it and drove through." When she got out to close the gate she heard the sound of a train's horn and noticed she was standing on tracks. She said: "I just had time to get out of the way as the train slammed into my car and carried on down the tracks. I'll never use a sat nav again."

Then there was the woman who thought she was being taken to a Chelsea game at Stamford Bridge but ended up 230 miles away in rural village of Stamford Bridge near York. Not the record for a satnav diversion though. That belongs to a truck driver. Bird watchers at Gibraltar Point in Norfolk looked on in astonishment as the truck driver drove a 32 ton vehicle down a small road towards the North Sea. When stopped he said he was trying to get to Gibraltar – which just happens to be a small island around 1,600 miles away off the coast of Spain. When questioned he said he had typed in the directions for Gibraltar into his GPS device and went off on his merry way. It is not known whether he still works in the haulage industry.

One of my favourite satnav stories is the one about the workers from the Cheltenham and Gloucester building society who decided to celebrate Christmas with a day out to France – but ended up in Belgium after driving to the wrong place. Unfortunately the village of Lille in Belgium is quite different to the city of Lille in France, but these daft workers ended up driving 98 miles off course in their fun bus. Eventually the intrepid explorers managed to get to the right destination where they only had two hours left to do their Christmas shopping.

And the one in Salzburg when the chauffeur decided he would completely trust the satnav. According to the driver, he believed that he could drive straight to the entrance of a busy shopping centre but ended up taking himself, the limo, and his boss down a steep flight of steps instead. Nobody was injured, but apparently the chauffeur now has a new career in air traffic control.

And finally the van driver who was taking his van's satnav directions as gospel whilst driving in Switzerland and ended up getting stuck up a mountain path. He was quoted as saying that "I kept hoping each little turn would get me back to the main road. In the end, it told me to turn around, but, of course, I couldn't by then". The hapless van driver had to call upon the Swiss mountain

rescue team to get him out of this one, with the rescue attempt involving a whole team of mountaineers and a helicopter.

So those guests who read this blog (and there are some), you have been warned. I will not accept the fact that you ended up in San Marino as a result of your satnav as a valid excuse for turning up late.

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My mate Roger wants a James Bond Union Jack Bulldog for Christmas. If you haven't seen Skyfall yet, it's the one that M has on her desk and which survives the explosion which destroys her office. Perhaps to Roger (and certainly the film's producers) it symbolises the resilience of the British nation. To me it just symbolises everything that I don't like about the Bond films.

Don't get me wrong, I go along and watch them, and enjoy the experience at the time, but it's a bit like acid reflux, the bad bits keep coming back to irritate me.

Just think of Roger Moore snowboarding to the sounds of the Beach Boys, Roger Moore climbing into a submarine that's disguised as an iceberg, Roger Moore climbing into a submarine that's disguised as a crocodile, Roger Moore in space. Roger Moore (do you sense a theme here?) driving a motorised gondola.

In fact that gondola scene sums up all the things I don't like about the 'jokey' bits in Bond films. It occurs in Moonraker. During a bit of the action in Venice Roger Moore's gondola turns into a speedboat. Did we really think it wouldn't? If that wasn't bad enough, it also morphs into a hovercraft and rises out of the canal, thus allowing Bond to whisk around St Mark's Square. Then things really take a detour into the doo-doo when a pigeon starts double-taking; and a diner looks first at Bond and then, horrified, at his bottle of wine. (He thinks he's had too much to drink! Do you see!?) When a waiter — distracted by the sight of a secret agent driving a motorised Gondola around the most famous square in Venice — pours vino over a customer's head, you have to conclude that even the later Carry On movies would have binned this as below-par stuff. By the way, during the gondola chase, Alfie Bass has a coughing fit on a bridge and is billed in the credits as 'Consumptive Italian.' Which says it all.

It's not just the bad jokes either, it's the absurdity of some of the plot lines. Moonraker also provides a good example of that. After crashing Rio's Sugar Loaf Mountain cable car through a wall (don't ask), Jaws — a seven-foot-two assassin with steel teeth who, until this point, has erred on the psychopathic side — is rescued from the rubble by a bespectacled blonde pigtailed poppet called Dolly. He then falls 'in lurve' with her to the strains of Tchaikovsky's Romeo and Juliet Overture. It's just wrong on so many levels.

So is the sequence in You Only Live Twice where Bond disguises himself as a Japanese fisherman complete with kimono, dyed skin, slanty eye-pieces and a Beatles-style fright-wig. Only one teensy problem: Bond, in this case, is being played by a six-foot-two Scotsman: "Yesshh... thish ish my schecond life!" and isn't fooling anybody. (apart from which it is blatantly racist).

But what I was originally going to write about is product placement, which has become more and more blatant as the series has progressed. Who can forget the exchange between Bond and the femme fatale in Casino Royale, where she looks at his watch and asks “Rolex?” and he replies “Omega”. Two loads of dosh in one exchange and no plot relevance whatsoever.

Anyway, if you’re interested, what Roger wants is a Royal Doulton Bairstow Manor Winston Churchill Bulldog, a snap at £17.99

To find that I googled Bulldog Paperweight Skyfall. Among the pages which came up was this blog review of the film from an Italian source. I’m not going to criticise because the blogger’s English is better than my Italian, but I find it charming:

“I comprehend which to be unhappy by a final action of Skyfall is to confess enthusiasm during a preceding dual hours. Grading Bond drive-in theatre is not a priority of a critic, who, similar to a rest of a world, tends to devour them similar to multi-hundred-million-dollar TV shows (with a most product placements substituting for commercials). So a single could call this a Best Bond Ever, as a small reviewers have, as well as not meant it as a top praise. Better to see it as a acquire defibrillator for a princely franchise. On a approach behind from a dead, similar to Bond, a aged dog has schooled a small brand brand new tricks.”

I couldn’t have put it better myself.

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I feel almost sorry for all those poor scouts, unable to lie any more. That slight thrill when you held up your hand and pledged a duty to a god you didn’t believe in gone forever. No more wondering if there really was an all seeing eye noting down your fib and storing it up for the day of judgement.

Originally the scout promise was based on an implicit presumption that the person making it was a Christian. Then about forty years ago it was realised that this excluded thousands of kids world wide who were not Christian and it was changed to allow Hindus and Buddhists to use the word "my Dharma" and Muslims "Allah" instead of God. Non British boys were also able to replace the phrase "duty to the Queen" with "duty to the country in which I am now living".

It now seems that they have realised that most kids today don’t believe in God, or the Dharma or (at risk of a fatwa) even Allah.

The whole thing stems from a remark made by Bear Grylls when he took over as Chief Scout in 2009. At that time he said that : "Scouting has something to offer everyone, no matter your religion, ethnicity or belief, and I'm so proud that we offer an environment for people of all backgrounds to come together and enjoy themselves." Which immediately led to the various societies who say they represent those people who have no belief to claim that he was discriminating against them and pointing out that atheist children will either be excluded or have to lie in order to be a scout.

It then turned out that the scouting movement had a policy of not employing atheists, which is presumably why they have problems recruiting and are appealing for more volunteers to come forward.

Discrimination against atheists is one of the, as yet, unchallenged aspects of our society. Polls have shown that people who profess to a religion tend to consider that atheists are immoral, untrustworthy, and perhaps even evil on some level. No atheist is likely to be elected to office at any level anywhere in America and no politicians are likely to specifically appeal to atheists' votes by defending their interests. Some, like George W, Bush even openly express bigotry against atheists.

Even in this country it has been demonstrated that judges tend to discriminate against atheists in child custody cases. There is apparently an assumption that religion, any religion, is necessary to ensure children are raised properly and that atheists are incapable of seeing to the moral and social welfare of kids. Statistically parents who regularly attend church are given greater preference over those who don't.

Religious discrimination in this country is illegal. It seems that discrimination for not having a religious belief isn't.

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Wasn't that Newsnight item on Clark's shoes last night fascinating ?

Who knew they were the real sought after status symbol in Jamaica and had been for over 30 years?

I've mentioned on here before that when I was a spotty youth the in footwear was Clark's Wallabee Desert Boots. It turns out they were also prized on the streets of Kingston. The more you own, the bigger your status. Some top-end reggae artists have as many as fifty pairs.

As a result Clarks originals change hands for tidy sums. Vendors in Kingston doubled their wholesale prices years ago. Thieves target stores that stock them. Knock-off copies cater for the bottom end of the market.

I hadn't noticed the number of references to Clarks in Jamaican music before last night, but right now I'm busy listening to reggae on my mp3 and there they are, nicely referenced by Kartel:  
"Everybody haffi ask weh mi get mi Clarks. Di leather hard, di suede soft, toothbrush get out di dust fast"

It seems whenever a song mentioning Clarks is a hit in Jamaica the sales go up, and that has an effect here. A couple of years ago there wa a particularly big surge and Clarks couldn't meet the demand for black ankle Deserts. Every pair in the UK was shipped out and you couldn't get them here for love nor money.

Apparently this cult all started back in the 1950s when the generation who had immigrated to England on the Windrush would return to Jamaica wearing Clarks, and people developed a fascination for them. It seems that the most appropriate gifts to take back to demonstrate that you

were making a success of life in Britain were a traditional Marks & Spencer string vest and a pair of Clarks. They soon became a long-standing symbol of upward social mobility.

By the time Reggae developed Clarks were the preferred footwear for Rastafarians. Rummage through LPs from reggae's golden era, and you're likely to turn up at least a few photos of rude boys with their trouser legs rolled up to reveal ankle-length desert boots.

It was in the 1980s, as the Bob Marley era gave way to rampant materialism, that the shoes gained iconic status. A lot of importance was placed on brand names. Part of the way you show that you had money was have a pair of Clarks on your feet and a gold chain around your neck. The police were able to identify gangsters because they invariably wore a pair.

Over here we tend to turn to Clarks in times of austerity. Funny, isn't it?



# POSTSCRIPT

Let's just get this misapprehension out of the way. I am not Oregano Rathbone.

I've now had to explain that point a couple of times, usually to people who didn't believe me anyway and then started berating me for being too modest. Yesterday it was to my next door neighbour, of all people, who had put two and two together and got five.

I wouldn't mind being Oregano Rathbone: I quite like his work, but not quite as much as Inky Truscadero, another person whom I've been accused of being. In Oregano's case his prose is just a wee bit too florid for my taste and I do not share his uncritical admiration for Prog Rock.

Oregano writes regularly for Record Collector magazine (as does Inky). I've often wondered why they go under pseudonyms (the other reviewers don't). Maybe they are well known journalists who are contracted to other magazines. Maybe they are just doing it for a laugh. Maybe they are the same person (though their different styles and internal evidence in the texts suggest they're not.)

Inky Truscadero as a pen name I can understand. If it's a guy, he obviously has a thing for Pinky Truscadero. You remember Pinky..... she was Leather Truscadero's big sister who always wore pink and dated Fonzie in Happy Days. If it's a woman, she also obviously has an empathy for Pinky.

But Oregano Rathbone? How do you get there? In my own case, as avid readers over many years will know, the name comes from the now demolished Rathbone House on Portobello Promenade (No.1) which was where my grandparents lived and my mum grew up. I doubt that Oregano has any connections with that. Any why a pungent green herb of the mint family?

I suppose that I could contact Record Collector and ask, but in the way of these things I'm unlikely to get an answer. People are usually reluctant to offer up their pseudonymous secrets.

So, just to make it clear ..... I am not Oregano Rathbone