

DESERT ISLAND TIMES

Sharing fellowship in
NEWPORT SE WALES U3A

No. 10

22nd May 2020



"Liriodendron Tulipifera Aureomarginata" – the U3A 20th Anniversary Tree
Photograph by Steven and Karen Lansdown in Belle Vue Park, Newport

*A MISCELLANY OF
CONTRIBUTIONS
FROM OUR MEMBERS*

View from the Chair

As we are not going to be able to publish a summer newsletter this year I thought I would nevertheless publish what would have been my contribution to that had things been normal! Clearly the content would have been somewhat different but the underlying messages are on the same theme.

Our enforced closure after afternoon groups on Friday, 13th March has, I know, been disruptive for everybody. It is, after all, an important part of our weekly routine to attend U3A at Shaftesbury Street or to meet as walkers or cyclists and I am sure we are all feeling a great sense of loss. This magazine will, I hope, have filled at least a small gap and the online activities of the groups that are able to do something is, I am sure, a boon to their participants. I still hear of new initiatives and any further ideas will be most welcome!

Desert Island Times is being circulated beyond Newport U3A – I send each edition to members in Caldicot, Torfaen, Usk, Dartmouth and Odiham (Surrey) U3As and to others who are not currently members of any U3A. Invitations have been issued to members of our neighbouring U3As to participate in our online activities – and, who knows, we may enrol some new members as a result.

On the subject of Desert Island Times, this is the tenth week of publication. We have had 50 contributors and, including front covers, a massive 218 pages! I haven't totalled the number of articles, quizzes, jokes etc but it is certainly a lot and what is impressive is the huge range of topics covered.

I was delighted to receive an email from Alan Fry yesterday – initially to forward on something he had received when he served on the committee. However, he then went on to say, "Coming back to DIT may I say what a smash the last issue was. We've been able to sit here and watch/ listen to our own concert, using the U-tube links and MP3s. The hospital howlers, the stories, and the verse all served to lighten the day, ranging from belly laugh to gentle smile. Some people must be spending hours doing preparation for our benefit - perhaps we need a readers' letter page to show our appreciation. I hope they and you can keep it up. THANKS" And thank you, Alan! We don't expect thanks or praise but if anybody would like to write a letter - on any subject - rather than an article or suchlike then please do so.

I am aiming to standardise future editions at 30 pages if possible, but this does rely on sufficient material arriving in my inbox. Please keep contributions coming – what you submit may not be published immediately, but everything will be included if at all possible. I generally "go to press: on Wednesday evening, so if you have anything that needs to be in a particular edition, please get it to me by 7pm.

I have today received some guidance from the U3A Trust on the question of reopening. I can do no better than to quote verbatim the really important guidance: "Some of you are asking about whether it is time to resume some face to face meetings. From a U3A activity perspective it is really important that government and NHS advice is followed. The U3A movement has been guided throughout this time by that advice and should continue to do so – for the safety and wellbeing of all our members.

We have been advised by our insurers that this is **crucial** from a public liability insurance perspective."

Stephen Williams has again provided a fine selection of songs (the GOOD news!); I will be sending them out on the basis of one per week (the BAD news!) We are so grateful to Steve for providing these fine recordings., but I want to ensure that you have something fresh to add to your listening library each week. As last week, please look out for a separate email which will contain the sound file.

Finally, please keep well and keep safe yourselves and keep in touch with each other.

Stephen Berry, Chairman

The Picture and Single Malt by John Murray.

The picture was bequeathed to Sir Cedric as part of his late mother's estate. How it came into her possession is a mystery lost in time. Some say she was given it by a descendant of the artist, others say it was stolen by the ne'er-do-well husband of Ruby Rich, the lady in black who knew everything about everybody, but never said nothing about nobody. People near-about were afeared of her.

It was not a large picture, it depicted a scene local to the small village of Hazlelor, the Church, some graves and a man and a woman with their small son and the family pet dog. Their dress was of the time of the mid to late 17th Century.

These many years past the picture has been at rest in an old oak wardrobe in the bedroom where Sir Cedric's mother, her mother, her mother, and her mother's mother, breathed their last. There is no knowledge of where or how their menfolk took their last breath, though stories do abound within the frightened folk hereabouts.

One day, on a whim, Sir Cedric took the picture from its resting place and hung it on the wall in the library, it looked well there he thought. That evening, after his usual bath, he retired to the library, and with an old copy of Mad Magazine and a generous glass of single malt, settled down for an evening of peace and quiet away from his loud, overdemanding wife, Lady Lucinda. He read well and to match it, he drank well, and occasionally he could be heard to guffaw at the antics to be found within the magazine. Then he dozed, not intentionally, it just happened as it did every evening. He awoke to find the magazine on the floor and his glass empty. It was during the process of replenishing his glass he gazed upon the picture. Something did not seem right. After further study he was convinced there had been a dog in the picture, there wasn't now. It must be the single malt he concluded.

He returned to the library the following evening. Still there was no dog. He poured his usual single malt and opened the newly published edition of Private Eye and began to read between sips. Again he fell asleep. On waking, he refilled his glass and took the opportunity to study the picture. The boy was now missing. How strange he thought making a mental note to change his brand of single malt.

On the third evening, he changed his McCallan single malt for a 30 year old Springbank before opening a first edition of the Adventures of Moll Flanders. Even the deliciously promiscuous Moll could not prevent him from dozing. He woke to an empty glass and Moll being given a good rodgering by the Innkeeper in exchange for a meal and a bed for the night, and the disappearance of the woman in the painting. He refilled his glass, deciding not to concern himself with the missing woman and further immersed himself into poor Moll's adventures.

He missed the fourth night on account of his meeting with Hamish Blackstone, Lord High Sheriff of the County. Over dinner he related the tale of the painting to his honoured guest, even showing him the picture in the library, he did not offer him a glass of single malt. His guest studied the picture, smiled, before commenting "how strange".

On the fifth night he returned to his routine. Another glass of single malt and more adventures of the tireless Moll. Then his usual doze. He awoke with Moll on the floor, the book that is, his empty glass and the gentleman in the painting having left the scene. "Very strange" he said to himself before noticing that the picture wasn't straight. "Even more strange" he said out loud. He was a stickler for pictures being hung properly. He corrected it and made a mental note to investigate further before joining his wife in their four poster bed. She was snoring so he did not wake her, he just kicked her, then she stopped.

The next evening Sir Cedric went through his routine again, bath, single malt, read followed by a doze. When he awoke there was a freshly dug open grave in the picture. He was now beginning to be somewhat concerned.

On his next visit to the library he went through his routine, but this time he pretended to sleep. He heard the door open slowly, whispered voices and through half closed eyes he saw his wife and the Lord High

Sheriff changing the picture. After a suitable period of time he opened his eyes and studied the picture. The grave was now full, the headstone had his name on it.

“Aha” he thought, “just as I suspected, my wife is having a dalliance with that pompous bastard Hamish. Why would he fancy her I do not know, it must be to get his hands on my money.

Hamish had been married to an extremely attractive socialite, but that union had only lasted as long as his money, which had long gone and her with it. Now all he had was his title.

Sir Cedric retired to his study the following evening, with only his decanter of single malt. From his safe he took a picture of a large woman dressed in black. “Ruby” he whispered, “I need your help.” What was said after that nobody knows.

A week later the painting was returned to the library, with all figures in place. It would require a strong magnifying glass to notice the addition of two graves with the names of Lady Lucinda and Hamish Blackstone on the headstones.

Sir Cedric smiled as he looked at the picture. “That will teach you” he said then indulged himself in his single malt and the delectable over active Moll.

What do you know about Newport?

1. In which year was Newport awarded city status?
2. Newport has the 3rd highest population in Wales. In 1950 the population was 116,824. What is it now in 2020?
3. In which century was Newport castle built?
4. What is the name of the French engineer who designed the Transporter Bridge?
5. Where in Newport would you find an extensive collection of classical and contemporary art?
6. The concrete tower of the Civic Centre is an example of which 1950s architecture?
7. How many locks were built at the section of the Monmouthshire Canal at Rogerstone, that allowed narrowboats to descend the hillside?
8. Where in Newport can you find a lighthouse that is still in operation today?
9. In which year did the Riverfront Arts Centre open? And which Welsh singer featured at the inaugural concert?
10. The ship that was found preserved in the mud of the river Usk during preparatory excavations for the Riverfront was discovered by experts to be a trading vessel of which century?
11. Which is the oldest public house in Newport?
12. Among various sculptures in the city, where would you find one commemorating a famous Newport poet, born in 1871? And who is the poet?
13. The Wave, a sculpture commissioned to celebrate Newport’s role in the steel industry, was erected in which year?
14. Where is there a plaque to commemorate the burial of 12 of the Chartist movement members killed during a protest at the Westgate Hotel?
15. What was the name of the garden designer of Bellevue Park? (It is thought that he also designed Beechwood Park.)
16. What is the name of the gardens, open to the public, which has hidden grottoes?

Answers are on page 15.

Airline Announcements submitted by Barbara Phillips

Occasionally, airline attendants make an effort to make the "in-flight safety lecture" and their other announcements a bit more entertaining. Here are some real examples that have been heard or reported:

1. Pilot: "Folks, we have reached our cruising altitude now, so I am going to switch the seat belt sign off. Feel free to move about as you wish, but please stay inside the plane till we land. It's a bit cold outside, and if you walk on the wings it affects the flight pattern."
2. After landing: "Thank you for flying Delta Business Express. We hope you enjoyed giving us the business as much as we enjoyed taking you for a ride."
3. After a particularly rough landing during thunderstorms in Memphis, a flight attendant on a Northwest flight announced: "Please take care when opening the overhead compartments because, after a landing like that, sure as hell everything has shifted."
4. From a Southwest Airlines employee: "Welcome aboard Southwest Flight XXX to YYY. To operate your seatbelt, insert the metal tab into the buckle, and pull tight. It works just like every other seatbelt and if you don't know how to operate one, you probably shouldn't be out in public unsupervised. In the event of a sudden loss of cabin pressure, oxygen masks will descend from the ceiling. Stop screaming, grab the mask, and pull it over your face. If you have a small child travelling with you, secure your mask before assisting with theirs. If you are travelling with two small children, decide now which one you love more."
5. "Weather at our destination is 50 degrees with some broken clouds, but they'll try to have them fixed before we arrive. Thank you, and remember, nobody loves you or your money more than SW Airlines."
6. "As you exit the plane, please make sure to gather all of your belongings. Anything left behind will be distributed evenly among the flight attendants. Please do not leave children or spouses."
7. "Last one off the plane must clean it."
8. From the pilot during his welcome message: "We are pleased to have some of the best flight attendants in the industry. Unfortunately none of them are on this flight."
9. Overheard on an American Airlines flight into Amarillo, Texas, on a particularly windy and bumpy day. During the final approach, the captain really had to fight it. After an extremely hard landing, the flight attendant came on the PA and announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Amarillo. Please remain in your seats with your seatbelts fastened while the captain taxis what's left of our aeroplane to the gate!"
10. Another flight attendant's comment on a less than perfect landing: "We ask you to please remain seated as Captain Kangaroo bounces us to the terminal."
11. An airline pilot wrote that on this particular flight he had hammered his ship into the runway really hard. The airline had a policy which required the first officer to stand at the door while the passengers exited, smile, and give them a, "Thanks for flying XYZ airline." He said that in light of his bad landing, he had a hard time looking the passengers in the eye, thinking that someone would have a smart comment. Finally, everyone had gotten off except for this little old lady walking with a cane. She said, "Sonny, did we land or were we shot down?"
12. After a real crusher of a landing in Phoenix, the flight attendant got on the PA and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, please remain in your seats until Captain Crash and the crew have brought the aircraft to a screeching halt up against the gate. And, once the tire smoke has cleared and the warning bells are silenced, we'll open the door and you can pick your way through the wreckage to the terminal."
13. Part of a flight attendant's arrival announcement: "We'd like to thank you folks for flying with us today. And, the next time you get the insane urge to go blasting through the skies in a pressurized metal tube, we hope you'll think of us here at US Airways."

Traveller's Tale 6 by Stephen Berry

I was, as a child, fairly adventurous. At the age of around 5 or 6 I decided I would visit my grandparents – on my own and on my small tricycle (a three mile round trip). When I graduated to a bicycle I made many journeys around the area now known as the Wetlands, sometimes on my own, sometimes with friends.

My most adventurous set of journeys was that which I undertook in August 1963 – on my own, at the age of fourteen. I had started a paper round just after my fourteenth birthday in February, earning 10/- a week. I saved some of this each week and decided that I would spend a week exploring the railways of Wales, using a “Freedom of Wales” Rover ticket – cost £2/12/6d.

As soon as the summer railway timetables were published in June I bought them and started my planning. The country had quite a few more railways in 1963 than it did just two years later and it was not possible to cover every line within the space of a week, though it was possible to cover most – given that I could persuade my parents to allow me to stay away overnight on one occasion, which was all that I could afford! My parents were quite happy, though one grandmother was not at all happy. However, my parents knew I was very capable so far as railway travel was concerned and they gave the necessary permission.

As I have said, covering every line then open was not possible. I decided that certain lines that I had travelled over recently could be omitted and I drew up a sophisticated programme for most of the remainder. My ticket allowed for seven consecutive days’ travel – and I was determined to make the most of each day. I had to plan food and drink as well as travel, but I had a willing taxi driver to take me to and from the railway station – my mother!

So, from my old exercise book in which I made my plans, here are the details of my journeys. I have converted times to the 24 hour clock for the sake of ease:

Monday 19th August 1963

I left Newport at 07:02 on the train through to Carmarthen. There was time for a cup of tea in the refreshment room before catching train to Aberystwyth, leaving at 10:35. Sharing a compartment with a local family I was able to hear about a crime wave that had hit their locality. Grandma observed, “Don’t know what to make of it. You might wake up one morning and find yourself murdered in you bed!” (*sic*) After arrival at Aberystwyth at 13:06 I went to the refreshment room for a Lyons apple pie (they came in a square box – remember them?) and a quick cup of tea.

At 13:30 I left on the narrow-gauge Vale of Rheidol train to Devil’s Bridge. The train was packed – as usual in the summer months. Unsurprisingly the line was closed in the winter as Devil’s Bridge, though a beauty spot with magnificent scenery, was definitely a place that was more attractive in the sun than the rain! Arriving there at 14:30 I spent a while exploring the beauty spots before visiting the hotel (really the only building of note in the locality) and had another cup of tea. The train returned to Aberystwyth at 16:00 and again the journey took an hour. The scenery was, if anything, even more stunning on the return journey as the valley widened towards the sea. I enjoyed a cooked meal at Aberystwyth (fish and chips) before catching the 18:00 train to Shrewsbury, arriving there at 21:25. The last part of the journey was in darkness, but I wasn’t too concerned as I would be travelling the line again during the week.

With only five minutes connection time at Shrewsbury I had to forgo a cup of tea here! My train for Newport left at 21:30 and arrived in Newport at 23:44. I slept for a good part of the journey – I needed to as I had another early start the next day.

Tuesday 20th August 1963

I left Newport at 07:03 on the train to Shrewsbury. This time I was able to get my cup of tea, as my train westwards didn't leave until 10:30. I was now able to see the section of line that had been in darkness the previous day as my journey took me back towards Aberystwyth. However, I stopped short at one of the most remote stations in Wales – Dovey Junction. I had to change trains here – and, indeed, there could be little reason for using the station otherwise! It was situated in the middle of a marsh and, even on a warm sunny day, was extremely draughty. I had only eight minutes to wait here before my train left northwards towards Barmouth and Pwllheli. The journey I was making was not going to take me to either of these places, but for much of it I was able to get some magnificent views of Cardigan Bay as the line clings closely to the coast. I changed trains again after a 50 minute journey at another fairly remote station – Morfa Mawddach – whence I was taking a train that passed along the southern shore of Bala Lake, through the Vale of Llangollen and on to Chester where I arrived at 18:05.

You may have realised that I had not managed to buy a cup of tea since around 10:00, but, fear not, I was not suffering from dehydration! Refreshments were supremely important and I knew exactly where I could refuel; and there were no opportunities whatever during the day. I therefore came equipped with sandwiches and a Thermos flask – the staple requirement for any picnic. The refreshment room at Shrewsbury had filled this with tea for me and that lasted me until mid-afternoon. I was able to get a cup of tea at Chester before catching the 18:20 train to Holyhead.

The astute will realise that, with an arrival at Holyhead at 21:22, getting back to Newport that day would have required a miracle; however, my mother had had the foresight to book bed-and-breakfast accommodation for me with a lady who was the sister of a lady at Llandudno with whom we had had a holiday some years before. Mrs Jones (who else?) was kindness itself – she lived close to the station and, while her husband met me from the train she visited the local fish-and-chip shop to buy my supper!

Wednesday 21st August 1963

After enjoying a breakfast which could have lasted me for the day I left Mr and Mrs Jones home to take the 08:10 train bound for Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwlllantysiliogogoch. I didn't *need* to make a special journey to this station as the Chester to Holyhead line passed through it, but I wanted to take a photograph of the station nameboard and I had time to spare as I had to return to the previous station, Gaerwen, to pick up a train, leaving at 09:40, to Amlwch on the northern coast of Anglesey. My train returned after a short stay at Amlwch and took me through to Bangor.

After a short stop here I set out for a trip to Llandudno and back. Another change at Bangor allowed me to have my Thermos flask filled with tea and to replenish my food stocks. I then moved westwards again on a train which took me through Caernarfon to another remote Welsh junction station at Afon Wen. Here I had to change on to a train which had left Pwllheli a short time before and which took me back to lonely Dovey Junction; from here I repeated my Monday journey back to Shrewsbury and Newport, arriving there at 23:44

This was another day of magnificent scenery as I was able to appreciate the Great Orme at Llandudno, the beauties of Snowdonia and the magnificence of the sea views across Cardigan Bay.

Thursday 22nd August 1963

After a busy time in North Wales I was ready to opt for a shorter day – relatively speaking! I set out at 09:08 and, after changing trains at Hereford, arrived at Craven Arms station in Shropshire at 11:22. The much-valued cup of tea and something to eat was available at the privately-run tea room at this station (fresh sandwiches and home-made cake were a real bonus here).

Just over an hour later my train left for a journey through Central Wales via Llandrindod Wells to Llandilo, where I changed trains to take the line through the flat Towy valley, passing through the delightfully-named Golden Grove station (where the station master was a personal friend of mine through a series of visits I had made to the station when we had camping weekends in the area) and Dryslwyn Castle.

A 25 minute break at Carmarthen – and another cup of tea! I then took the train as far as Bridgend where, though I had been unable to plan having a meal, was lucky enough to find a small café near the station. My 80 minute change time gave plenty of time for a cooked meal – and there was a roast on offer. At 19:40 I was again on board a train, this time bound for Barry via Llantwit Major. A quick trip back to Cardiff brought me into Newport at 21:25.

Friday 23rd August 1963

Again I set off westwards at 07:02, staying on the train until Whitland where, after a quick cup of tea I took the 10:44 to Pembroke Dock via Tenby. The train returned after a wait of 58 minutes, but it seemed much longer as there was nothing to do there! I was able to get a cup of tea and a sandwich at Whitland before setting off westwards to Neyland. I had just 30 minutes to explore this fascinating station. The train wound its way into the arrival platform alongside the waters of a creek off Milford Haven. Immediately beyond the buffer stops were the waters of the Haven itself; thank goodness the brakes went on in time! Coming out of the station I found myself in the station forecourt but there was no sign of the departure platform. I asked a railwayman who directed me to cross the forecourt, turn to the right and go in through a gate. I did – and there it was. Whereas the arrival platform was dead straight the departure platform was distinctly curved and I soon saw why. The engine shed was located between the two platforms and my outgoing train actually passed through the shed yard, with the building on the right and the engine turntable on the left. Certainly it was one of the most curious stations in the country.

A 48 minute run through Haverfordwest brought me to Clarbston Road station, an insignificant stop except that a local service of trains to Fishguard ran from there. After a wait of only seven minutes we were on our way to the Great Western Railway's main port for traffic to Southern Ireland. A wait of 32 minutes gave me the opportunity to have a quick meal and drink before setting off again on the homeward journey. After changes at Clarbston Road and Cardiff General I arrived back in Newport at 23:17.

Saturday 24th August 1963

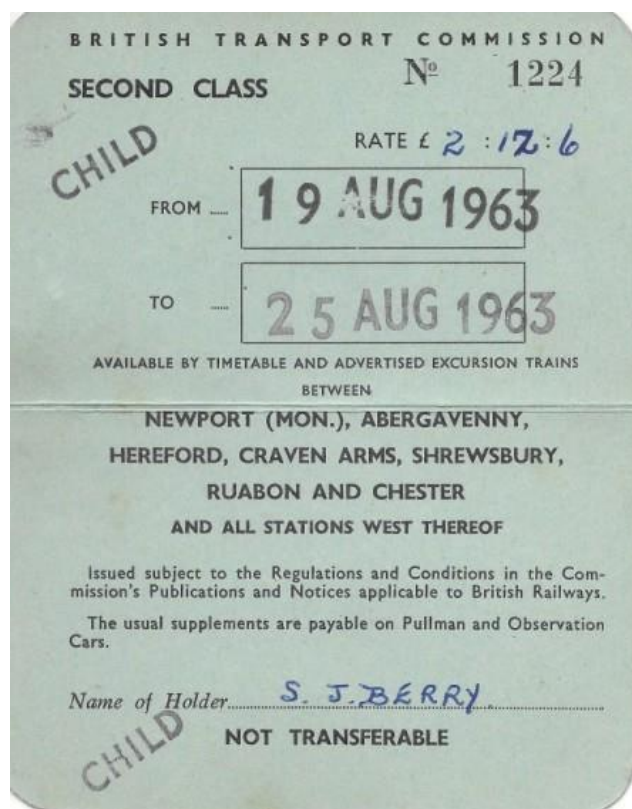
My final day of long-distance travel saw me leave Newport at 07:03 on the train to Shrewsbury. Again I was able to get my cup of tea before taking the train westwards at 10:30. I arrived at Welshpool at 11:07 and I took the opportunity to have an early meal as there was no time to eat later in the day. I also had the opportunity to see something of the Welshpool & Llanfair narrow gauge railway which had closed in 1956. It was at the start of a process of restoration and preservation, but work was at that time concentrated at Llanfair, over 9 miles distant so there was very little to see.

I left Welshpool at 12:15 for Llanymynech, where I changed into the Llanfyllin branch train. The round trip along the branch, with a 10 minute stop at the terminus, took only an hour but my return trip took me on to Oswestry without change. From there a 45 minute run took me to the end of the line from Aberystwyth at Whitchurch (Shropshire), where the line joined the Shrewsbury to Crewe line. I changed on to a Shrewsbury-bound train after a 45 minute wait (with a cup of tea and home-made cake again!). From Shrewsbury I did a “dodge”, making a return journey to Oswestry again but this time travelling via Gobowen. Leaving Shrewsbury at 18:40 and changing at Hereford I arrived in Newport at 21:09 – a relatively early night!

Sunday 25th August 1963

In Wales in 1963 there were very few Sunday trains. Travel to the north or the west would not have been possible and I decided that this day would have to be fairly local, the Cardiff Valley lines at least having some sort of a service. I actually had a lie-in as I took the 10:30 train westwards to Pyle where I changed and made the short trip down to Porthcawl. Being a sunny day I had to share the train with hoards of families making for Coney Beach, but it didn't worry me! I had only 13 minutes there – not even long enough to buy an ice cream – before I left on a through train to Cardiff. A tight connection saw me rushing to catch the train for Barry via the coastal line through Penarth, which was less crowded than the Porthcawl service but was still fairly busy. After a seven minute wait at Barry I caught an almost empty train which took me all the way to Treherbert. A wait of over an hour enabled to going looking for a café and I soon found one of those small family run businesses that always seemed to do a steady business on Sundays, there being little else to do in the Valleys on Sunday afternoons! I enjoyed a good meal and the owner filled my Thermos flask without charge – those were the days! An hour later and I was back in Cardiff, changing trains at Queen Street station for a train up to Rhymney. From here I took the return service to Penarth, thence back to Cardiff and my final trip back to Newport, arriving at 22:10.

This was a tremendous week. I travelled over most Welsh lines, some of which I revisited in similar fashion with some friends the following year. However, we did not cover the same distance, though I did manage to travel over two routes that I had not been able to visit in 1963. By 1965 many of these lines had closed and such journeys would be nothing but memories. In the week I covered **2,130 miles**, all for **£2/12/6d**. Had I travelled by booking each journey separately the cost would have been over £13. The entire week, including a night's accommodation and all meals, cost me less than £5.



The map shows the railways of Wales in the summer of 1963. Those routes shown in red are the lines over which I was able to travel during the week, those in black (two in North Wales and just a few in South East Wales) the ones over which travel did not prove possible during the week. The two lines in the north were covered in 1964, while those in the south had already been covered on many occasions and there were still a few journeys to be made over these before they too closed.

Throughout the week's holiday virtually every train was on time or at the most a few minutes late. I didn't miss one connection – and almost every train was hauled by a steam locomotive.

As Time Goes By – by Ian Lumley

I still wake up occasionally in the middle of the night and wonder how we all got here. It seems a long time ago, but I remember there were other rooms along the corridor when I first came here. The ones with an open door showed that they had a single bed and little less in them, just like this one.

I remember when Dad said we were going to get one of those new-fangled robots in the house. It was around the same time that a lot of the adults were arguing about something called Gender Equality and there were all kinds of names being bandied about. LGBTQ was supposed to mean something too, but I just wanted to keep playing with my pals outside. We argued there too, because Tom, who was our next-door neighbour and older than me, always wanted to be the Sheriff, so I ended up being the bad guy!

I suppose I was about eight or nine then, so that would make it about 2025, when Walter came to stay with our family. We were all agog with excitement. We'd heard about the new robot design which the papers were raving about. How they would carry out all the most menial tasks that we had done before, leaving us to concentrate on the more creative things that were, we were told, where our strengths lay.

By that time, most of our schoolfriends already had either Siri, or an Amazon Echo in their house to help them answer all kinds of question for their homework. Theo, my little brother, was even asking his Echo some quite complicated questions before he was at school! We didn't know what these new machines were going to look like, but Dad said we were going to be the first house in the street to get one. The other boys were ever so jealous.

As Walter walked in to the lounge on that first day, I looked at Theo and Emma, my little sister, and we all smiled. Walter looked just like us! He even had short hair like mine, so no-one would have thought it was a girl.

Those early days were really quite good fun. Walter did all the jobs around the house that Mum would have been getting me to do, like getting the milk out of the fridge for our morning cereals, and putting our clothes away instead of dropping them on the floor. I suppose it started to change after he had gone back to the factory for his first service about a year later. When he came back, the man who brought him said that there had been an update on most of his software. There had apparently, been instances with these new models where the robot had actually hurt one of the humans they were living with! It turned out that the robot was only trying to stop the little boy from hitting the baby in the house, but the factory scientist said that they had all felt that something had to be done to prevent anything like that from happening again. After all, he said, who would buy the new models if they felt they might come to some harm? It would be a bit like buying a vicious dog and bringing it into the house where it would terrorise everyone, wouldn't it?

As a result, he said, all new robots were now having instructions fitted into their brains as they were being built to make sure they couldn't hurt anyone. That seemed a good idea!

The man gave Dad a paper with these new three laws, as they were known, written on it.

1. A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.
2. A robot must obey orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.
3. A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.

What the man hadn't thought about, and no-one else had either, was what that might all lead to. To prevent those laws being ignored or interfered with by some of the human 'owners' they had been imprinted in such a way that no-one could change them afterwards. Only the robot's themselves could do that, once **they** had decided how the laws would be applied in any situation.

Over the next few years things gradually changed for us, as the robots decided what could or could not be allowed, to make sure we humans were all properly looked after. Whenever new situations arose,

they were able to communicate with each other quickly and easily over their built-in Wifi systems and agree a standard way of dealing with it.

To begin with, the changes were quite small, and understandable. They removed all furniture with sharp edges from homes because they could not physically stop babies hurting themselves if they bumped into them when the robots were doing something else. Scooters and balance bikes were taken away for the same reason. Before long we were not allowed to have motorbikes when we reached the age to drive (according to human laws) because the robots saw the injuries that could happen if a bike went off the road.

Then most of the usual Human organised meetings which took place across the world to make laws and try and solve problems, stopped happening. These were the Committees looking at climate change for example, or Security arrangements within Blocs of Countries like the EU. In due course even the United Nations, perhaps the longest lived of such meetings and certainly the most important one, stopped.

The Robots could communicate anywhere they wanted with their positronic brains and so there was no need for humans to spend time (and fossil fuels) going places to do the same thing. The robots were much more capable than human beings were in reaching logical decisions and with far less prevarication. They were after all doing all this to help us, weren't they?

When the robot 'servants' were introduced to Africa and saw the hunger that was almost endemic in that part of the world, they decided they had to do something to make things better for those humans. Increases in food production were difficult and take a long time to become effective, after all even the robots couldn't turn the Sahara into a savannah 'just like that'. They decided that a quicker way to help us was to reduce the need from elsewhere. They tried to get the humans elsewhere to stop having so many babies, but found out that this was not going to be readily accepted. Their second Law then came into force and they researched and then used a painless drug which terminated (they used the word 'arrested') the development of a foetus by the time it was four weeks old, before it was even known by the mother that she was pregnant. By this time, it was only Robots who worked in food production plants, and they made certain that that drug was part of every product which left the premises.

By this time, a lot of people were getting very angry about what was happening to their world. When they tried to storm the factory to stop the production of more robots, the third Law came into play. Very gently, but very effectively the robots controlled any violence against them. They rounded up the most violent protesters and took them away. The others, who had no-one to lead them anymore, quickly lost heart and went home.

It was still quite a shock when I discovered that Rachel, my wife, had been going to give birth three times and the drug had stopped me being a father. By the time we found that out, Rachel was too old to have babies at all. I became quite angry. I knew they were only helping other humans, but I decided that I had to at least try and do something about that.

I should have known better than to talk out loud to Rachel about my views and anger, after all I knew that the Amazon Echo in the corner of our lounge had, from the third generation, been able to listen to all our conversations and any robot anywhere could listen to what we were discussing and then decide if there was anything they could do to make us happier. That was why the other robots came to our front door early the next morning and asked me to go with them.

Now I'm looked after in this room. They make sure that I am fed regularly and that I get medical help from a robot doctor when I have any kind of illness. I can watch a visiscreen in the room, but I'm not allowed to write anything in case it gets out, and causes others to feel sorry for me. They have said that I might be able to go back and live with Rachel when the new drug they are developing is available. It will keep me happy all the time, and I won't need to feel the hurt and sadness which would have been inevitable if any baby of mine got ill. I'm sure they know best. After all, they just want to keep everyone happy, don't they?

When Grandma Goes to Court submitted by Barbara Phillips

Lawyers should never ask a grandma from a small Welsh town a question if they aren't prepared for the answer.

In a trial in a small West Wales town the prosecuting lawyer called his first witness, a grandmotherly, elderly woman to the stand. He approached her and asked "Mrs Jones, do you know me?" She replied, "Yes, I certainly do know you Mr Williams. I've known you since you were a boy, and frankly you've always been a big disappointment. You lie, you cheat on your wife, and you manipulate people and talk about them behind their backs. You think you're a big shot when you haven't the brains to realise you'll never amount to anything more than a twopenny-ha'penny windbag. Oh yes, I know you"

The lawyer was stunned. Not knowing what else to do, he pointed across the court and asked, "Mrs Jones, do you know the defence lawyer?"

She again replied, "Yes, I certainly do. I've known Mr Evans since he was a youngster too. He's lazy, bigoted, and he has a drinking problem He can't build a normal relationship with anyone, and his law practice is one of the worst in the entire county. Not to mention he cheated on his wife with three different women. One of them was your wife. Yes, I know him."

The lawyer nearly died.

The judge called both lawyers to approach the bench and, in a very quiet voice, said,

"If either of you idiots asks her if she knows me, I'll send you both down for contempt of court!"

What We Were Doing This Week 2 Years Ago by Angela Robins

On 15th May 2018 the cycling group went on a 13-mile ride along the Crumlin Arm of the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal's towpath. They left the 14 Locks at High Cross to ride to Cwmcarn on what was, so far, the best day of that year. The canal follows a high contour along the valley, according crystal clear views to the hills beyond. On the canal cute baby moorhens, looking like black woolly hat bobbles, frantically paddled after their mothers. At Risca the cyclists dismounted to cross one of the iconic hump back bridges to visit the burial ground of the miners that were killed in the Black Vein Mine in 1860.

The canal is a great legacy of the industrial era and now provides a beautiful green corridor, teeming with wildlife, for leisurely walking and cycling. The group continued to the end at Cwmcarn and into the Forest Drive Visitor Centre's cafe for a well-earned cuppa before returning to High Cross.

The Photo was taken of the group on another occasion at the Gwent Levels.



'Paris Blues' by Gerald Lee

I came across this film several years ago when I was preparing a presentation on Paris for a French course. Although it has a strong cast it is not regarded as a great film according to the usual criteria. Parts of story are slightly implausible. The cameo role played by Louis Armstrong seems an excuse to boost a thin plot. Yet despite these criticisms there is much to appreciate in the film.

Although the two main actors, Paul Newman and Sidney Poitiers, play two jazz musicians living and working in Paris, it is not a musical. In the film they go to the railway station to meet a well-known jazz musician, Wild Man Moore, played by Louis Armstrong. There they meet two American teachers on vacation in Paris.

At first the Paul Newman character, Ram Bowen, makes a play for Connie, played by Diahann Carroll, which leads to some racial banter. Then the two couples pair off on racial lines with Paul Newman having an affair with Lillian, played by his wife Joanne Woodward, and Connie with Eddie Cook, played by Sidney Poitiers.

There are few similarities to other films based around Americans in Europe and the contrasting life styles and manners. The difference is that with the main characters being American, the Paris setting is almost incidental. It leads the characters to explore their own values and loyalties in a society that like the USA is diverse, but in reality, as well as stated ideals, is free and open.

When Eddie and Connie are talking with Notre Dame in the background, Connie is impressed by the view. He is not. The monument will always be there. It is the liberal attitude to race that ties him to Paris. When he plays at 33 Club, the audience is multi-racial. When a young child calls him 'Monsieur Noir,' he is not offended. Worse things are said to him in the USA. In Paris he is Eddie Cooke, musician, not defined by his colour as he would be in the USA. Connie however argues that he has a duty to return to the USA to fight for the rights of his people. Some say in this, the film is a bit naïve, but then it is set in 1961, seven years before the deaths of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King.

The racial theme is further criticized in being too gentle and evasive. In the original novel by Harold Flender, Eddie and Lillian pair off together, and Ram with Connie. Clearly in 1961 such a story could not be put on screen. Sidney Poitiers recognized this in later interviews. Without these changes there would not have been a film to make. When Petula Clark kissed Harry Belafonte on television in a TV special on US television some stations refused to broadcast the sequence. It was a major advance for a series like 'Star Trek' to have a black American woman in a major role.

Paul Newman acts the type of character he knows best, the restless self-indulgent outsider, seeking some greater fulfilment, but not necessarily acceptance. The dilemma for him is different. He aspires to be a composer. Lillian is divorced with two children. She lives in a small town. It is the opposite to Ram's aspirations to be a great jazz composer. He is frustrated when his efforts fail even to gain Eddie's wholehearted endorsement. In a taut scene he talks to his publisher who tells him his music has positive qualities, but not quite enough to be outstanding in its own right.

At the same time, he sees how creativity can destroy. A lesser character called Gypsy, once a great musician, has resorted to drugs. Ram tries to help him, but it is doubtful if he can be helped. Ram's attempts to persuade him to seek medical help inevitably fail.

For Ram the dilemma is his need to follow his dreams despite initial disappointments. The life Lillian offers is not for him.

The film does have some outstanding features. Filmed in black and white, it gives a real taste of life for those who view Paris with nostalgia as a home to alternative cultures.

It was the city of Ernest Hemingway, Miles Davis and Josephine Baker. Stephane Grappelli and Django Reinhardt played in a jazz quintet in the Hot Club. The young Sacha Distel made his name as a jazz guitarist

before becoming a singer. Samuel Beckett, once a languages teacher in Belfast, wrote in French and English and was awarded the Nobel Prize. In one poll Petula Clarke, born in Epsom with a Welsh mother, was more popular than Edith Piaf.

Political refugees as diverse as Ho Chi Minh and Ayatollah Khomeini sought refuge there, as did the Suffragette Christabel Pankhurst.

It is a wrench for Ram and Eddie to think of returning to the USA and lose all of this. There are however some marvellous scenes. Paul Newman does not play the trombone himself, but his miming to the music is perfect. The opening moments have Newman playing his trombone almost like the sound of a steam train, then it merges into a scene inside the 33 Club where the band plays.

Louis Armstrong steals the show in another scene when he leads his musicians into the club from the street. His trumpet solo dominates the whole proceedings, before he joins in a piece with the resident musicians. It may be unrealistic and just an excuse for Armstrong to give a virtuoso performance, but it is still a great scene.

The final scenes between Woodward and Newman are extremely poignant. At one point, Ram seems ready to accompany Lillian, but then meets her at the railway station to say goodbye. Ram knows he cannot go even if his success is far from certain. Some say it is Woodward who is the outstanding actor in the film. As a parting gift she tells Ram, 'You're never going to forget me.' Somehow this matches the cynicism and self-indulgence he has in all relationships and leaves him uncomfortable.

Connie does not take Eddie back with her, but he has promised he will follow once he has completed his final commitments in Paris. She tells him year by year the struggle for equal rights is making progress. Each year is better than the one before. For many who remember the unrest of the late 'sixties in American cities this seems to justify the criticism that the film is naïve about racial issues in the USA.

Diahann Carroll was the only cast member to have a musical background. Louis Armstrong appears as a character in the film and makes two musical contributions. It was unnecessary to create the role of Wild Man Moore for him. The character is really a version of himself. The music is that of Duke Ellington. The soundtrack album by Duke Ellington featuring Louis Armstrong on two tracks was nominated for an Oscar, unusual for a film that is not a musical.

Really, the film is a romance with an uncertain ending. Although Eddie agrees to follow Connie there is still the doubt that the attractions of Paris as a city of tolerance might make him change his mind. In a classic ending as the characters go their separate ways at the railway station, a poster advertising Wild Man Moore at the 33 Club is being covered by one for Larousse, the French publishing house.

Having grown up in Belfast with its divisions, Paris as depicted in the film offers to me an alternative view of life, where cultural values are shared, and might even unite people despite their other differences.

If it had been filmed in Technicolour 'Paris Blues' would have been a completely different picture. The black and white filming suggests it is the end of an era.

In 1961 throughout the world people were beginning to recognize that the decline of empire challenged existing values. There would have to be change. There was scope for optimism, yet that was not enough. By the of the decade there were new conflicts all over the world, Vietnam, the Six Day War in the Middle East and the beginnings of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. It is an amazing fact that there were more European dictatorships at the end of the 1960's than in the 1930's.

At the same time, as many talked of progress through political change, Sammy Davis was booed at the 1960 Democratic Party Convention that nominated John Kennedy for president.

From time to time 'Paris Blues' appears on TCM. Perhaps if you see it you too will enjoy it as much as I do. Paul Newman's portrayal of Ram Bowen as somewhat cynical, but with hope and his own kind of ambition is central to the film. All in all, it is the mix of romance and indecision that leaves the big impression, plus the outstanding musical contributions of Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington.

Easyeasy Cryptic Crossword Clues No. 9 by Angela Robins

There are a dozen types of Cryptic Crossword Clues and today I'm going to revisit the Double Definition Clue which I featured in our Winter 2019 Newsletter. This is another easy type of clue, sometimes mundane, but always a good one to get a puzzle started. Look for the shortest clue which often has only two words. A straight crossword will give you a definition of the answer. This clue gives you two! They will have totally different meanings but their answers will be the same word or phrase. As always you have to ignore the surface meaning conjured up by your subconscious mind.

e.g. Potty train (4). Answer = Loco.

Now try these - the answers are on page 19.

1. Shilling hairdo (3).
2. Tease cloth (3).
3. Follow pet (3).
4. Hard group (3).
5. Lumber records (4).
6. Insect virus (3).
7. Rifle cathedral (10).
8. Autographs posters (5).
9. Aircraft tool (5).
10. Washington say (5).
11. Savings book (7).
12. Bitter Pie (4).
13. Good penalty (4).
14. Staggers bobbins (5).
15. Culdesac nearby (5).
16. Meat complaint (4).
17. Flower came up (4).
18. Deliver without charge (4).
19. Shackle retail group (5).
20. Leash metal (4).

Contact me at valdemosas2@gmail.com if you would like to receive my group's easy weekly crossword with hints and answers.

What do you know about Newport? - Answers

1. 2002
2. 316,371
3. 14th century
4. Ferdinand Arnodin
5. Newport Museum
6. Brutalist architecture
7. 14
8. In the Wetlands Reserve
9. 2004 Kathryn Jenkins
10. 15th century
11. The Murenger House
12. Commercial Street (near Primark)
Poet is W.H. Davis
13. 1950
14. St. Woolos Cemetery
15. Thomas Mawson
16. Dewstow Gardens



Stephen Sondheim: A Musical Life by Neil Pritchard

If anybody can lift our spirits in these trying times, through the medium of music, Stephen Sondheim is one of the leading candidates for that role. I'll attempt to show you why with the aid of a range of musical(s) examples. I've included music to lift the spirits and to get your toes tapping! I'll start with a Video clip from Sondheim's "The Mad Show". (The Boy From..." from The Mad Show sung by Victoria Edwards). Sondheim's great sense of humour shines through in this piece, but there are many sides to this brilliant man character which I'll attempt to portray in words and music. (You can't fail to spot the "Welsh Connection" in this song)! <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2t5FWRCdy8>

Stephen Sondheim is the foremost composer and lyricist of his generation and among the most highly regarded in Broadway Theatre history. His brilliance in matching words and music in dramatic situations, and the way he combines the serious and the humorous broke new ground for musical theatre in the 1970's and 80's. In this his 90th year I'd like to pay tribute to this remarkable composer by giving you a picture of the man and his far-reaching music. He is generally regarded as a smart, friendly and inspiring person with a great sense of humour, a strong compassionate streak and wonderful way with words and music. He is also a great internationalist who (unlike certain US figures I could name) has a very strong following around the world. He's definitely a "Mr Nice Guy".

Sondheim was born in 1930 in Manhattan, New York. In his early years he battled domestic instability, and a tough relationship with his mother to emerge as a child prodigy. His parent's divorced when he was 10. and he then lived with his mother. He had started learning piano at the age of seven and wrote his first musical when he was fifteen. His neighbour in Pennsylvania, Oscar Hammerstein II (of Rodgers and Hammerstein fame), was responsible for fostering in Sondheim an interest of writing for musicals and became a father figure to him. He taught him a lot about how best to write a musical in the broadest sense, with a strong story line, touching on personal and social issue that people could empathise with. Sondheim became Hammerstein's personal assistant, and through him gained entry into the world of professional theatre. At the age of 15, he was taken to the opening night of Carousel, Rodgers and Hammerstein's second musical together. The Hammerstein's, friends of his parents, had more or less adopted him, and that night at the theatre he was utterly transported. "I'm a great audience," he says. "I cry very easily. I suspend disbelief in two seconds." He cried so hard, he later told the New York Times, that he stained Dorothy Hammerstein's fur coat. Soon after his graduation Sondheim started auditioning his songs but struggled to get anything substantial for a few years. He faced frustration as two of his Broadway musicals were cancelled, but eventually announced his arrival with 'West Side Story'.

His friend Arthur Laurents had asked him to write lyrics for a musical adaptation of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet that Laurents was writing. This adaptation was West Side Story. Alongside composer Leonard Bernstein, Sondheim wrote thirteen songs to go with Laurents' libretto. West Side Story opened in 1957 and was a great success, running for over 700 Broadway performances. The original production was a smash, in part because of it's direct approach to the big social issues of its time: civil rights, immigration, mixed-race relationships, lack of economic opportunity and police targeting. It's generally accepted that this is the one of the finest musical ever staged, with ground-breaking music and lyrics. There followed the famous film version in 1961, and hundreds of revivals in countries throughout the world. After all these years it still makes a tremendous impact. I've chosen my favourite song from the film version: "Gee Officer Krupke." Just listen to Sondheim's lyrics. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i7TT4jnnWys>

Sondheim followed this success by working on the Broadway production of Gypsy in 1959, distinguishing himself as one of the great young talents in American musical theatre. Sondheim, intent on broadening his talents, looked for productions where he could use his musical as well as lyrical expertise. He went on to write the music and lyrics for "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum" in 1962. This was a farce based on the plays of the Greek playwright Plautus (254–184 BC). The show had an impressive run of almost one thousand performances, won the Tony Award for Best Musical, and was made into a

successful film in 1966. Here's Zero Mostel setting the scene at the opening of the film version. I can't get enough of this musical, it's an absolute "knock out". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sMrjeejmCpl>

Sondheim followed "A Funny Thing..." with two less successful ventures: "Anyone Can Whistle" (1964) and "Do I Hear a Waltz" (1965). Although both failed commercially, Sondheim contributed songs of a high quality. In 1970 Sondheim produced "Company," which once again won him unanimous praise from the critics. The production was awarded the Drama Critics and Tony Awards for Best Musical of the season, and Sondheim received awards for the best composer and best lyricist. One critic commented that Company "is absolutely first rate, the freshest in years this is a wonderful musical score, the one that Broadway has long needed".

Company is based on a series of short plays about middle-aged couples. With no linear plot Company consisted of scenes and songs organised around the character of a bachelor celebrating his 35th birthday and pondering marital commitment. Labelled the first "concept" musical (A concept musical is a work whose book and score are structured around putting over a theme or message, rather than emphasising a plot) when it opened on April 26, 1970, it enjoyed a profitable run of 690 performances, and the cast album won the Grammy Award for Best Show Album. Company opened on Broadway in April 1970 at the Alvin Theatre (Broadway), where it ran for 705 performances. Here's a performance of the finale "Side by Side" at the 65th Tony Theatre Awards in 2011. This is fantastic song and dance, to match a truly groundbreaking musical. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1f-IRZM1MAU>

Sondheim's talent derives from his ability to cross different types of music and theatre, thus offering Broadway audiences works of remarkable craft. He deals with unexpected subjects that challenge and test the form of the American musical. Sondheim, in his musicals, explores issues of contemporary life for example: marriage and relationships in Company; madness and the human condition in Anyone Can Whistle; nostalgia and sentiment in Follies; Western imperialism (the exercise of power) in Pacific Overtures; and injustice and revenge in Sweeney Todd. Sondheim avoids needless content in his lyrics. He concentrates on direct impact through clever verbal interplay (as in Officer Krupke) His lyrics are witty without ever sacrificing honesty for superficially clever rhymes.

A year after Company Sondheim produced Follies, a "look back" musical at the Ziegfeld Follies large Broadway music and dance productions of the 1920s. The composer blended the nostalgia of popular songs of the past with his own style of sentimental ballads. It presents a loving and brilliant pastiche of show music from the '20s, '30s, and '40s. Follies is a fascinating peek into a bygone era, and a clear-eyed look at the transformation of relationships over time. In "Losing my Mind" Imelda Staunton gives a moving performance of this heart wrenching song. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oUGZg4eOdvI>

From 1970 to 1981, Sondheim began a partnership with famous producer/director Harold Prince. Their first work together was the concept musical 'Company'. Over the next decade, the pair collaborated on six musicals, all of which were directed by Prince. 'A Little Night Music', which narrates the romantic lives of three couples, is their most famous musical. Set in 1900 Sweden, A Little Night Music explores the tangled web of affairs centred around actress, Desirée Armfeldt, and the men who love her: a lawyer by the name of Fredrik Egerman and the Count Carl-Magnus Malcom.

When the traveling actress performs in Fredrik's town, the estranged lovers' passion rekindles. This strikes a flurry of jealousy and suspicion between Desirée; Fredrik; Fredrick's wife, Anne; Desirée's current lover, the Count; and the Count's wife, Charlotte. (What a tangled web!) Both men – as well as their jealous wives – agree to join Desirée and her family for a weekend in the country at Desirée's mother's estate. With everyone in one place, infinite possibilities of new romances and second chances bring endless surprises.

It opened in 1973, and became a hit, running for 601 performances and winning Sondheim the Best Score Tony for the third straight year. A Little Night Music was adapted into a movie that opening in 1977. "Send in the Clowns" is a song from the musical: if there's one song by Sondheim people generally know it's this one It's a ballad from Act II in which the character Desirée reflects on the ironies and disappointments of

her life. It became Sondheim's most popular song after Frank Sinatra recorded it in 1973. Subsequently, Sarah Vaughan, Judi Dench, Barbra Streisand, Shirley Bassey, and many other artists have recorded the song, and it also became a jazz standard. This a lovely version of this song by Barbra Streisand (check out the lyrics below this video clip) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ol_nLz-rciA

1976 brought a complete change of direction for Sondheim, when he teamed up with and the playwright John Weidman to stage Pacific Overtures. This remarkable musical experience mixed elements of Kabuki theatre (classical Japanese dance-drama where elaborate costumes are worn by some of its performers) with the conventions of the Broadway musical. This was a break with the past, being a highly original, powerful, educational and surprisingly humorous theatrical experience. Considered by many to be the artistic high point of the legendary Sondheim/Prince collaborations, this exploration of culture and imperialism pushes the boundaries of musical theatre further than ever before.

Taking place in 19th century Japan, the story concerns the culture clash sparked by America's 1853 mission to open up Japan to the West. Up to this point, Japan had been an island empire living in peace for centuries, undisturbed by foreign intruders. However, once Commodore Perry and the Americans arrive, a civilisation of timeless tradition and serenity begins to unravel under the impact of new ideas. Sondheim has often been critical of his own country's past, and this is no exception. His support for liberal causes at the time (support for the Civil Rights movement and the Anti-Vietnam War protests) display his common humanity, and concern for those who are less fortunate than him. This shines through in a lot of his work including this. I've chosen the scene "Please Hello" from the original Broadway Cast 1976 as a good example, that illustrates some of the points I've just made about the composer.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z8WiudDITBw>

At this stage the best from Sondheim was yet to come. That's not to rundown his work previously, but he was now beginning to enter a new phase which would change the course of musical theatre. This would see his music influencing all the leading names in musicals up to the present day. The work that followed Follies in 1979 was a real landmark: Sweeney Todd the Demon Barber of Fleet Street. The gruesomely fascinating musical about the 'Demon Barber of Fleet Street', was one of Sondheim's greatest hits. Victim of a gross injustice that robbed him of his wife and child, Sweeney Todd sets about exacting a terrible revenge on society: slitting the throats of the customers who visit his barbershop. But things are getting complicated – a romance has developed with Mrs Lovett, the lady who runs the pie shop next door, and the disappearances are starting to cause concern. With the bodies piling up, Sweeney Todd hits upon a novel idea, and starts passing on his 'patrons' to his homely neighbour... Meat pie, anyone?

Sweeney Todd opened on Broadway in 1979 and in the West End in 1980. I saw a production by the Welsh National Opera in 2015 and was "blown away", it was one of the best shows I have seen. What music to choose? How's about this (A Little Priest) from a concert performance given by Bryn Terfel and Emma Thompson in 2014 with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. Oh those puns - very punishing!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pBvpG8oD2qE>

Merrily We Roll Along was his next musical and followed in 1981. It was expected to be one of Sondheim's most traditional scores and would generate some hits, however it performed only sixteen performances before being closed, and is considered Sondheim's biggest flop. It's a bittersweet story about youth, friendship and hope told from the present to the past. Set in the glittering world of American showbiz, Merrily We Roll Along follows the journey of three extraordinary friends as they grow up and grow apart. Beginning in 1976, their friendship lies in tatters. Frank is a musical genius who has sold out. Charley is an idealist still clinging to his dreams and Mary is a brilliant novelist who has given up writing entirely. The show traces their friendship through the decades back to 1957, the time they were young and believed they could change the world. The show ends with three young friends considering how anything is possible with the beautiful song 'Our Time'. The show has been revived many times since. "Our Time" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ajkVgyqhfwo> is given a superb performance here from the 80th Birthday Celebrations concert at the 2010 Proms. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=947_KOM6Y8k

Merrily We Roll Along opened and closed in November 1981 after only 16 performances, but that did not discourage Sondheim from the experimental Sunday in the Park with George. Inspired by the painting A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte by Georges Seurat, Sunday In The Park With George, Stephen Sondheim stunning masterpiece merges past and present into beautiful, poignant truths about life, love and the creation of art. The story unfolds in the days leading up to the completion of Seurat's famous painting, A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte. He is struggling to make meaningful art while maintaining a relationship with his lover Dot. Amid the opposition of the artistic community, Seurat's artistic ability thrives while his love diminishes. A century later, Seurat's descendant - named George and also an artist - finds himself burnt out and in search of what artistic path to follow, but he finds the answer to his future in the past.

Let's hear Bernadette Peters and Mandy Patinkin in "Move on" from the original Broadway production. (The picture quality is not quite up to scratch, but don't let that put you off)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HVC4MrUEBRo>

In 1987 James Lapine (Stage director and playwright) and Stephen Sondheim took everyone's favourite storybook characters and brought them together for a timeless rare modern classic: "Into the Woods". The story follows a Baker and his wife, who wish to have a child; Cinderella, who wishes to attend the King's Festival; and Jack, who wishes his cow would give milk. When the Baker and his wife learn that they cannot have a child because of a Witch's curse, the two set off on a journey to break the curse. Everyone's wish is granted, but the consequences of their actions return to haunt them later with disastrous results. Into the Woods is a musically sophisticated show with the opportunity to feature actors adept at dark comedy, which you'll see to good effect, in the example I've chosen. The film version, made by Disney and released at Christmas 2014, was a huge success and made over £200m at the box office. This got Sondheim's name "out there" and has led to renewed interest in his shows in this country after many years of neglect.

For over sixty years Stephen Sondheim has proved himself to be the world's leading composer-lyricist. He has achieved this reputation by never repeating himself. Each of his works has been ground-breaking and unique, he is constantly confronting new challenges and discovering new artistic paths to explore. His work grows out of established Broadway traditions, but he constantly reinvents what has come before in new and exciting ways. To end with we have the finale from "Into the Woods", featuring the original Broadway cast, recorded in 1991. Raise a glass to Stephen Sondheim!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=akzUDVDk2ww>

Happy 90th Birthday Stephen Sondheim.

(If Sondheim is 'your cup of tea', or if you are new to his delights, try the following for size. This video has recently been produced and because of the lockdown it's given online, rather than the original plan to do it on the stage. It's well worth a view and includes some of his songs that ring true for our troubled times, but also many to "lighten the heart". (If you don't fancy taking on board the whole 2 hrs 20 min, take it in "bite size" chunks - you won't be disappointed). Take Me to the World: A Sondheim 90th Birthday Celebration

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A92wZlvEUAw>

Cryptic Crossword Clues (page 15) - Answers

1. Bob 2. Rag 3. Dog 4. Set 5. Logs 6. Bug 7. Winchester 8. Signs 9. Plane 10. State 11. Reserve 12. Tart 13. Fine 14. Reels 15. Close 16. Beef 17. Rose 18. Free 19. Chain 20. Lead

Parenting by Ian Lumley

My parents raised five children
they loved each one the best.
They cared for, and nurtured them every day
before they were laid to rest.

My parents were poor as church mice
but we were as rich as could be
resplendent in their love and care
we were worshipped at their knee.

My parents had nought to give us
in terms of worldly possessions
but they gave us life and loving
which begs me to raise the questions.

Just what is it that matters most
to a child's future and well-being?
What is it that's likely to be useful
to their ability and desire for achieving?

Is it buying 'popular' music
or shoes with the fashionable name?
Would their parents rather use their 'benefits'
so they can play the latest game?

Recent riots they say were largely
because youngsters had no place to go.
That they all felt disadvantaged
with the crowd they wanted to flow.

My parents knew the answers
they proved it five different times.
But of course they had to manage
without us getting into crime.

A home, with caring and discipline.
Parents who knew how to love.
If others had had our advantage,
they'd become kids to be proud of.

Are 'benefits' the answer or the problem?
It's difficult to be precise.

Too many are able to quote the cost
without recognising it comes at a price.

Independence and courage and honesty
are values disappearing out the door.
When we try to help the needy
get their chins up off the floor.

For others will then take advantage
to fund their lazy ways
They have no incentive to change them,
when they know it's others who pay.

I wish I could tell you the answer
to resolve the conundrum 'as is'.
All I know is it lies with the parents
and the way they bring up their kids.

Biscuit Quiz submitted by Barbara Phillips

Find the name of the biscuits from the clues below

Answers are on page 24

- | | | | |
|----|---|----|---|
| 1 | Wealthy beverage | 11 | The cat likes it before a good joke |
| 2 | Italian military leader | 12 | Radio breakfast host could be mad about these |
| 3 | Could be in the golfer's bag | 13 | A tin of Birds for desert and a dairy treat |
| 4 | Turn on the stove with it | 14 | Gear for Tom |
| 5 | Citrus magic dragon | 15 | Keeps the cart moving |
| 6 | Relating to the processing of food | 16 | Rotating laxative |
| 7 | A French Riviera city | 17 | An auto surrounded by a heavenly body |
| 8 | Could be an American whisky | 18 | Michelangelo was raised as one |
| 9 | Not tall and you can't have it and eat it | 19 | Could be drunk with whisky |
| 10 | He asked for more after a soak in it | | |

Some Further Reflections on the English Language

Dearest creature in creation,
study English pronunciation.
I will teach you in this verse
sounds like corpse, corps, horse and worse.
I will keep you, Suzy, busy,
make your head with heat grow dizzy.
Tear in eye, your dress will tear.
So shall I! Oh, hear my prayer.

Just compare heart, beard and heard,
dies and diet, lord and word,
sword and sward, retain and Britain.
(Mind the latter, how it's written.)
Now I surely will not plague you
with such words as plaque and ague.
But be careful how you speak:
say break and steak, but bleak and streak.

Cloven oven, how and low,
script, receipt, show, poem and toe.
Hear me say, devoid of trickery,
daughter, laughter and Terpsichore,
typhoid, measles, topsails, aisles,
exiles, similes and reviles,
scholar, vicar and cigar,
solar, mica, war and far.

One, anemone, Balmoral,
kitchen, lichen, laundry, laurel;
Gertrude, German, wind and mind,
scene, Melpomene, mankind.
Billet does not rhyme with ballet,
bouquet, wallet, mallet, chalet.
Blood and flood are not like food,
nor is mould like should and would.

Viscous, viscount, load and broad,
toward, to forward, to reward.
And your pronunciation's OK
when you correctly say croquet,
rounded, wounded, grieve and sieve,
friend and fiend, alive and live.
Ivy, privy, famous; clamour
and enamour rhyme with hammer.

River, rival, tomb, bomb, comb,
doll and roll and some and home.
Stranger does not rhyme with anger,
neither does devour with clangour.
Souls but foul, haunt but aunt,
Font, front, wont, want, grand and grant,
shoes, goes, does. Now first say finger,
and then singer, ginger, linger.

Real, zeal, mauve, gauze, gouge and gauge,
marriage, foliage, mirage and age.
Query does not rhyme with very,
nor does fury sound like bury.
Dost, lost, post and doth, cloth, loth.
Job, nob, bosom, transom, oath.
Though the differences seem little,
we say actual but victual.

Refer does not rhyme with deafer,
foeffer does, and zephyr, heifer.
Mint, pint, senate and sedate;
dull, bull, and George ate late.
Scenic, Arabic, Pacific,
Science, conscience, scientific.
Liberty, library, heave and heaven,
Rachel, ache, moustache, eleven.

We say hallowed, but allowed,
people, leopard, towed, but vowed.
Mark the differences, moreover,
between mover, cover, clover.
Leeches, breeches, wise, precise,
chalice, but police and lice.
Camel, constable, unstable,
principle, disciple, label.

Petal, panel and canal,
wait, surprise, plait, promise, pal.
Worm and storm, chaise, chaos, chair,
senator, spectator, mayor.
Tour, but our and succour, four.
Gas, alas and Arkansas.
Sea, idea, Korea, area,
psalm, Maria, but malaria.

Youth, south, southern, cleanse and clean,
doctrine, turpentine, marine.
Compare alien with Italian,
dandelion and battalion.
Sally with ally, yea, ye,
eye, I aye, whey and key.
Say aver, but ever, fever,
neither, leisure, skein, deceiver.

Heron, granary, canary.
Crevice and device and aerie.
Face, but preface, not efface.
Phlegm, phlegmatic, ass, glass, bass.
Large, but target, gin, give, verging,
ought, out, joust and scour, scouring.
Ear, but earn and wear and tear
do not rhyme with here but ere.

Seven is right, but so is even,
hyphen, roughen, nephew Stephen,
monkey, donkey, turk and jerk,
ask, grasp, wasp, and cork and work.
Pronunciation (think of Psyche!)
Is a paling stout and spikey?
Won't it make you lose your wits,
writing groats and saying grits?

It's a dark abyss or tunnel,
strewn with stones, stowed, solace, gunwale,
Islington and Isle of Wight,
housewife, verdict and indict.
Finally, which rhymes with enough,
though, through, plough, dough or cough?
Hiccough has the sound of cup –
my advice is to give up!

WALTER'S STORY by Glyn Sutton

Now and again I take one of our older sailing club members out for a sail. Jim Cross has the beginnings of arthritis and suffers from symptoms a little like Parkinsons and has had to relinquish his own boat.

During his time as an army chaplain, Jim undertook a number of overseas postings. Whilst working in Berlin during 1980 he struck up a relationship with a German, who had fought for the opposite side during the Second World War.

As his rank was in line with that of an army colonel, Jim qualified for a chauffeur driven car. On his arrival, the partnership with Walter almost never kicked off as his predecessor was particularly bad mannered and spoke in detrimental terms about the Germans within earshot of the transport pool. The allocated German chauffeur was fed up and was on the verge of quitting. The day was saved as a stand in driver spoke highly of Jim. There and then Walter decided not to resign from the driving pool as planned and assumed the permanent driving duties.

Walter was a short, neat man with a beard and taking into account his small stature looked very much like a genial but grumpy dwarf. Nevertheless, he was popular with his colleagues and he and Jim enjoyed working together. In his guttural German accent, he would often amuse Jim with a joke or two and describe some of his life experiences up to that point.

This was an interesting opportunity to understand the complexities of the Second World War from the other side's perspective.

During the time shortly after the attempt on the life of the American president Ronald Reagan the comments from Walter were very surprising considering the ongoing vilification of the German war leader some 35 years after his demise.

Walter quite innocently declared that *nobody would have dared do that during the rule of Adolf Hitler*. At this stage he gave a valuable insight into the mind set pervading the lives of the average working-class family during the years leading up to the war.

When Hitler came to power, I was just entering my teenage years. My father was a horse butcher and the family was living on the poverty line. My sister had a post in Kreuzberg where she worked for a well to do Jewish family. Because we were so poor she enquired whether she could take some of the leftovers from their meals to help succour our family. They flatly refused. With this at the back of my mind, the week seeds of prejudice were already sown, so that when Hitler turned on the Jews I was not too upset. At this

stage we were largely ignorant of the extremes of his cruelty and persecution and neither does this mean that when we started to learn of the atrocities that followed that we condoned any of it. I guess it faded into obscurity as fully conscripted into the discipline imposed on a soldier of war, I now had to comply completely with any instructions given and could question nothing.

It is understandable that Walter did not want to open up old wounds and create further conflicts. He did nevertheless give some invaluable insight into his experiences during the conflict.

When the war broke out I was 19 years old. I entered the forces as an artilleryman and flew in fighter aircraft during the attack on Britain where I was deployed as a tail-gunner in a Junkers bomber.

Later on I was recruited into the force that began the invasion of Russia. I was an artilleryman in the Sixth Army commanded by Von Paulus as it swept on towards Stalingrad.

One small incident of war continues to haunt me. We had in our company a particularly popular young lad. The commanding officer took steps to keep the lad away from the sharp end of the conflict. On the one occasion where we camped outside a village, the lad was sent in to fill the water bottles. As he knocked on the door of a cottage to request water the old hausfrau shot him in the head. To vent our anger, the company used the field gun to shoot off the top of the village church spire. In hindsight, the Russians had ample reason to hate us. We were unwanted intruders in their country.

It is so sad that the ravages of war cause so much hate and cause hitherto god-fearing souls on opposing sides to create such atrocities.

Just like Napoleon's attempt to take Russia over a hundred years previously, the German invasion failed. In 1943 the Sixth Army was surrounded in a pincer movement by the Red Army, not allowing for reinforcements to be called up in time.

Although Hitler had ordered that the force should continue fighting until there was not a man left standing, Von Paulus capitulated. Walter was duly taken prisoner at Stalingrad. Where possible, troops were evacuated but equally many died and out of 91,000 captured only 5,000 returned home. The lives of the German soldiers were to become even more distressing as they experienced the horrors of being taken into a prisoner of war camp.

The Russians laid me flat on my back with my arm stretched out and made no secret of their intention to run a tank track over it. Only the intervention of a female officer put a halt to their actions.

The German Concentration Camps had used teams of KAPOS as guards who would be given certain privileges for their cooperation. The SS would choose these men from the nationalities of their prisoners and would take great delight in recruiting the worst criminal elements whose handling of their fellow countrymen would be appalling. This conveniently freed up SS personnel for other duties.

These Reds employed the same principle and these KAPOS or guards constantly showed us film footage of the German atrocities in Russia. There was one guard in particular who constantly reviled me calling me a Nazi pig. As a practising Christian, to be so abused by my own countryman brought to my mind a most famous bible quotation – Psalm 55 verse 12.

“For it was not my enemy that lifted his hand against me but it was thou, my own familiar friend who I trusted”.

My captivity lasted 9 years during which time I sometimes had vivid dreams depicting the damage to my part of Berlin. The truth was that it had actually been devastated and what I found on my return was very much in line with the content of my dreams. Even worse than the damage to the city was the knowledge that my immediate family had perished in the war.

I now live with a cousin back at Kreuzberg. We entertain ourselves with a model railway that runs around our living room. My dream now is to retire and buy a little cottage in the French countryside.

Walter died in 1986.

50 Mile Challenge – Usk by Mike Brown

This day out is suitable for any time of the year and Usk is very festive leading up to Christmas.

Occasionally, on the first or third Saturday morning of the month we like to visit Usk Farmers' Market in the Memorial Hall. There are some good artisan food products to purchase including Indian snacks, smoked meats, cakes, honey and preserves. In the Summer we like to stock up with some picnic items such as cheese, olives, wine and fresh bread. Occasionally we will walk around the gardens of the Castle; Usk's enchanting secret gem, across the road from the Square. It is open to the public daily from 10am (using an honesty box system) or we stroll around the shops. Sometimes it is possible to visit the Sessions House with its intact Victorian Court Room, a popular location for film and TV productions.

But usually we will make our way to Llandegfedd Reservoir by taking the road towards Caerleon and turning right just after The White Hart Inn at Llangibby. It is a Site of Special Scientific Interest with 4 miles of waymarked trails. It is now possible to walk all around the reservoir; a plan of the 6 mile circular trail can be obtained from the visitor centre. A shorter alternative is to walk in an anticlockwise direction for 20 or so minutes and then back.

There are tables provided for picnickers: an ideal spot for watching the wildlife or birdwatching. On cooler days we prefer to take our shopping home and have a tasty lunch in the visitor centre's cafeteria, where we can look at the beautiful view across the water and watch the sailing boats.



Answers to Biscuit Quiz (page

- 1 Rich Tea
- 2 Garibaldi
- 3 Club
- 4 Hobnob
- 5 Lemon Puff
- 6 Digestive
- 7 Nice
- 8 Bourbon
- 9 Shortcake
- 10 Bath Oliver
- 11 Cream Cracker
- 12 Ginger Nut
- 13 Custard Cream
- 14 Kit Kat.
- 15 Wagon Wheel
- 16 Fig Roll
- 17 Macaroon
- 18 Florentine
- 19 Water

Despair by Ian Lumley

I'm normally a very happy chap
most people who know would say.
The one who always cracks the jokes,
and smiles and laughs, come what may.

But as I've learned across the years
there's a downside to all of this.
When serious topics are discussed,
they tend me to dismiss.

They think that I have no real views
on anything that matters.
And all because I try to lighten
their lives with my usual patter.

But everyone can feel despair
and I know that I do too.
To see the world's ills around us
and not know what to do.

The need for change is everywhere
we don't have to look too hard.
It seems to be worse as times move on
as around us people are scarred.

We pretend that those that need help most
are on some far away shore.
Forgetting that often those in pain
might be as close as next door.

We see pictures of children in distant lands,
who'll get help if we pay - just a bit.
But those nearby are more difficult to see
and need us much more to commit.

I'm just as at fault as the next man
I feel guilty, I must admit.
For, while I can cry at the TV,
I need to get out – do my bit.

It's easy to say – would it matter?
Or would it be lost on the way?
But it has to start somewhere, now doesn't it?
And I've got to sleep after day.

When I make my years resolutions,
will you come and join me and pray.
That together our efforts will change things
Then once more I can start being gay.

The Trials and Tribulations of Sweet William – by John Williams

I felt so useless at not being able to do anything in the Covid-19 emergency, during my seventy-eight years I've always done stuff. Only yesterday, I was told I was too old to help feed the hungry and should go home as instructed by our wonderful Government. All I could do was to check the death toll on the six o'clock news. It was then that I saw the headline on YouTube, 'make your own face mask in ten minutes' and I knew the hospitals were short of personal protection equipment. This was my big chance to do something for the heroic care workers. I could easily make five or six in an hour that would mean three hundred masks, at least, in a week. Soon the PPE crisis would be over. I might even get a number one in the pop charts. That would get me noticed in a certain quarter.

I found an old ripe, red T-shirt I'd bought in Hong Kong some ten years ago. I'd bought two, but one had disintegrated on its first visit to the washing machine or was that my new-fangled cooker?

I cut and tore the material into a roughly triangular shape. Which is how Mr N Parker, my neighbour, would describe my walk home every Saturday night to my lonely bed. I needed two layers of cotton material and I decided to glue them together as the thread refused to pass through the eye of the damned needle. Unfortunately, the super glue found its way onto my jeans and stuck the denim to my best cushion. With some difficulty, I eased myself out of them but I'd forgotten to close my curtains. Miss Primrose, a leading light of the local church and a burning torch in my solitude, happened to be passing at the time; she screamed and promptly collapsed into a lovely sprawl on my front lawn, at the sight of my nether regions.

Mr Parker, who wore his curtains out from the inside, witnessed her distress and soon the flashing lights of all three emergency services converged at my door. I don't think I've had so many callers since my lovely Iris passed some twenty lonely years ago. My only friend was Tom, who allowed me to stroke him as he purred on my lap. Two large policemen hammered at my door, before remonstrating with me at the offence I'd caused to a respectable spinster lady. I could have told them a thing or two about the goings-on in the church between her and the vicar. Luckily the five firemen, after a ten-minute search, found an antidote to the superglue. Soon my jeans and cushion were separated. I sighed, closed my door, and went back to finishing my mask.

For years I'd gone to the church just to catch a sight of Miss Primrose. If I was lucky I sat near enough to catch a hint of her perfume which smelt like a flower meadow after rain or a glimpse of her trim ankles. Once or twice, I fancied I caught a semblance of her sweet smile as I caught her eye. I knew it could never be due to the class gulf between us. She would be invited to high tea at the vicarage whereas I maybe get paid to trim his lawn.

All I had to do was to attach elastic ear loops to each end of the mask. Then I remembered what my dear old mum did, God bless her. She used to moisten the thread and tease it into a point before attempting to thread it through the needle. At my third attempt, the cotton easily passed through the eye of the needle, my index finger and the TV times. I allowed myself a brave smile as I sowed the final earloop in place.

Then, I plunged the needle into what I thought was a pin cushion. It wasn't. It was Tom. His purring stopped, as he was transformed into a frenzy, a howling hiss of spittle-flecked teeth, and raking claws. He uttered the cry of lost souls that cats usually make at midnight, and dragged his claws across a very sensitive part of the male anatomy before he smashed through the locked cat flap. His yellow eyes narrowed aflame with hatred.

My white-haired head dropped to my chest as I mourned the loss of my only friend.

I pulled the loops onto my ears and winced as the elastic cut into the tender flesh behind my ears. I felt my ear was about to be severed like that of Vincent Van Gogh. I just needed to slacken off the ear-loops a little and all would be well.

I glanced into the mirror and thought the red material went quite well with the bloodstains and my flushed face. I decided a selfie would give me, and posterity some record of how I'd defeated coronavirus. Best of all it had only taken me two hours. I vowed to get Tom a nice piece of his favourite fish in the hope he might someday forgive my error.

Later that evening, I was aroused by a rap on my door knocker. I opened the door to reveal the glowing face of Miss Primrose on my threshold. Love shining from her every pore.

I gaped and felt I was floating feet off the ground caressed by the beautiful words of 'The first time I saw your face.' A song well remembered from my youth and what Iris and me, thought of as our song.

.As my dear old mum, God bless her used to say, it sometimes pays to show what you've got.

CARMEN - a slightly tongue-in-cheek view by Greg Varney
Programme notes from the Genoa Opera Company production in 1981

Act 1

Carmen, a cigarmakeress from a Tobago factory loves Don Jose of the mounting guard. Carmen takes a flower from her corsets and lances it to Don Jose. (Duet: "Talk me of my mother") There was a noise inside the Tobago factory and revolting cigarmakeresses burst onto the stage. Carmen is arrested and Don Jose is ordered to mounting guard on her but she seduces him and lets her escape.

Act II

The tavern. Carmen Sings (Aria "The sistrums tinkling'). Enter 2 smugglers (Ho, we have a mind in business") Enter Escamilla a Balls Fighter. Carmen refuses to penetrate because Don Jose has liberated her from prison. He just now arrives. (Aria "Slop her who comes") But there are the buglers singing his retreat. Don Jose will leave and draws his sword. Called by Carmen's shrieks the 2 smugglers interfere with her. Jose is bound to dessert. Final Chorus: "Opening Sky Wandering Life"

Act III

A rocky landscape. Smugglers chatter. Carmen sees her death in the cards. Don Jose makes a date with her for the next Balls fight.

Act IV

A place in Seville. Procession of Ballsfighters. The roaring of Balls is heard in the arena. Escamillo enters (Aria and Chorus: "Toreador, Toreador, all hail the Balls of the Toreador") Enter Don Jose (Aria: I besmooch you") Carmen repels him. She wants to join with Escamillo now chaired by the crowd. Don Jose stabs her (Aria:" rupture, rupture) He sings Oh my seductive Carmen.

Vermeer - an appreciation by Alan Barrow

Vermeer's Head of a Girl c.1665



Here is a quiet beauty
imbued with freshness
of flooding light
Here giving a clarity to colour,
a subtlety of softness suggesting
a smelling of the feminine feel
of intimacy.

Here captured
in a private moment
caught by the movement
of her young head
a trait, a sense of shyness,
a semblance of uncertainty,
yet with a cool and steady gaze,
tracking from eyes, dark and wide
enlivened by opalescent white.

Here we viewers tentative to
the balance of her hanging down hair,
which is not hair but the tail of her turban
against the upturned tilt of her head
are poised precariously
before her slightly parted lips
and creamy flesh
caught by this pearly gleaming
arresting collared pose,
certain nothing else exists.

Vermeer 1632 - 1673

Vermeer the Delft painter
with light as his clay
deftly painted
the women of his day.

there was none finer
as he fashioned them
and treated them
as delicate china

he caught them unawares
in private moments,
extolled their virtues,
exposed their cares

in so doing, Vermeer van Delft
through his painting of women
unfurled the sheer beauty of the visible world
and showed the true measure of himself.

So True submitted by Anne Hawkins

“You fell asleep in one world and woke up in another.”

Suddenly Disney is out of magic
Paris is no longer romantic
New York doesn't stand up anymore
The Chinese wall is no longer a fortress
And Mecca is empty.

Hugs and kisses suddenly become weapons
and not visiting parents and friends becomes an act of love.
Suddenly you realize that power, beauty and money are worthless,
and can't get you the oxygen you're fighting for.

The world continues its life and it is beautiful.
It only puts humans in cages. I think it is sending us a message:

“You are not necessary.

The air, earth, water and sky, without you, are fine.
When you come back, remember that you are my guest.
Not my master.”

POCKET POSITIVES
To Help Us Through This Time

Solitude is as needful to the imagination as society is wholesome for the character.

James Russell Lowell, 1819-1891 – American Poet

It is worth a thousand pounds a year to have the habit of looking on the bright side of things.

Dr Samuel Johnson, 1709-1784 – English Critic & Essayist

Make the most of the best and the least of the worst.

Robert Louis Stevenson, 1850-1894 – Scottish Writer & Poet

I have never known any trouble that an hour's reading would not dissipate.

Charles Louisde Montesquieu, 1689-1755, French Philosopher

Of all the liars in the world, sometimes the worst are your own fears.

Rudyard Kipling, 1865-1936 – English Poet & Author

In solitude we give passionate attention to our lives, to our memories, to the details around us.

Virginia Woolf, 1882-1941 – English Novelist

The best way to cheer yourself up is to cheer someone else up.

Mark Twain, 1835-1910 – American Writer

Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear, not absence of fear.

Mark Twain, 1835-1910 – American Writer

Most people are as happy as they make up their minds to be.

Abraham Lincoln, 1809-1865 – President of the United States of America

Action is the antidote to despair.

Joan Baez, 1941-2013, American Folk Singer

Books are the quietest and most constant of friends.

Charles W Elliot, 1834-1926 – American Educator

And a thought to end with

One should never count the years – one should count one's interests.

I have kept young trying never to lose my childhood sense of wonderment.

I am glad I still have a vivid curiosity about the world I live in.

Helen Keller, 1880-1968 – Blind and Deaf American Writer

Janine Gibson